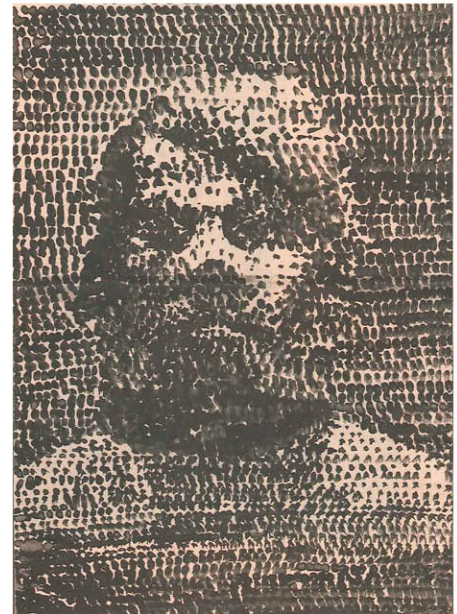


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



In graphic detail

Jackie Wullschlager



Above, from left:
An untitled 1967
watercolour
by AR Penck;
'Partisan' (1965)
by Georg Baselitz;
an untitled self-
portrait by
AR Penck (1975)
Right: 'Monument
– dithyrambic' by
Markus Lüpertz
(1976)



A generous donation of art from Germany illustrates the difficult history of the divided postwar nation.

In winter 1945, the Russian army marched west, the map of central Europe was redrawn, and thousands of Germans fled their homes, never to return.

Among them was a one-year-old baby called Christian Duerckheim. His mother took him from the family castle in Saxony – the Duerckheims are ancient German aristocracy, documented since the Middle Ages – on a train that was held outside Dresden during the two-day bombing of the city. They eventually reached Bavaria, where Duerckheim, like many German boys his age, grew up playing in the rubble of his devastated country.

“We were refugees; we had nothing. It takes you a long time to settle if you have nothing. But I was very happy in my ruins – it was thrilling when we found weapons,” the 70-year-old businessman, a slight, balding figure with grey moustache and rimless glasses, tells me in deliberate, accented English when we meet in the British Museum’s print room.

Within two decades, Duerckheim went from childhood refugee to collector – “you want something for yourself” – and began amassing a significant collection of 1960s-1970s German art. Then he turned philanthropist: he is giving me a tour of his lavish donation of graphic work, going on show next week in *Germany Divided: Baselitz and his Generation*.

At a stroke, the gift transforms the museum’s German holdings – strong in the Renaissance (Dürer’s “Rhinceros”, Holbein, Cranach) and also boasting modernists (Kirchner, Klee) – bringing it up to date with stellar, rare examples of drawings, watercolours, gouaches and woodcuts by Georg Baselitz, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, AR Penck, Blinky Palermo and Markus Lüpertz: works that brilliantly interpret the difficult history of the postwar divided nation.

“The exhibition and collection,” Duerckheim says, “is a story of change and movement, of life in progress. I have always felt this constant change and have gone with it.”

At the core of the donation is Baselitz, shown in all his periods, beginning with an expressive charcoal drawing of a deformed, half-human figure – “like a monster that has come up out of the earth”, Duerckheim suggests – and the “Hero” series, featuring an oversized, huge-limbed figure, the parody of a soldier, unable to carry

his own weight. In the finely executed etching/drypoint “The Trap”, the figure has a small head and enormous hands with fingers trapped in the ground – “the hero who can’t do anything against his fate. He is doomed to do what the gods expect, he has to do his job and then he must fail.”

The motif continues in sombre yellow ochre gouaches called “A New Type”, depicting an ungainly astronaut-like creature, floating, falling, with outstretched arms; and in monumental woodcuts where a giant slumps into a charred landscape – “someone lost in the world, very sad, a refugee”, Duerckheim suggests. “I always think an artist has to get rid of something. Baselitz must have been haunted all these years. You paint it and paint it and then” – he waves his hand in the air – “it’s off!”

Baselitz is, par excellence, the artist who found a language for German trauma, for the sense of physical and psychological destruction and collective guilt. Duerckheim’s donation includes fractured pictures such as “Two Stripes”, symbolic of division, and upside-down compositions, including “Downwards by a Tree” – calling to mind St Peter’s inverted crucifixion – and pared-down pastoral images as in “Birch Trees”.

By turns aggressive and nostalgic, all are redolent of German fairytales. “When you are a refugee, you think of your home,” Duerckheim offers. Baselitz grew up in a Saxon village close to Duerckheim’s birthplace, resulting in a particular affinity.

“It brings us together... Saxony is always a bit haunted... The spirit is so very important... Baselitz painted the forest of his home in Saxony but he couldn’t go there. When you see pictures of the forest in his paintings, it’s beautiful, but behind the beauty is desire for home, and behind that is communist power and misuse of it. His heart was crying.”

All the artists powering German postwar art were, like Duerckheim, born in the east in the 1930s-1940s and ended up in the west. “Our identity was lost in translation,” Duerckheim

says. Polke, from Silesia, Lüpertz, from Bohemia, and Palermo, from Leipzig, were childhood refugees; the others, trained in the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), migrated after refusing to accommodate to socialist realist demands. “They had to make a completely new start, come to a completely new system, rethink completely,” Duerckheim says. “They all found their own way to express what they wanted to express.”

For Richter, experience of authoritarian regimes created a distrust of the image and a resistance to ideas of absolute truth, manifested in his blurred, ambivalent surfaces and a life-long slipping between genres. For Polke, the way was satire – Duerckheim’s gift includes a sketchbook of drawings mocking the western economic miracle – while Penck reduced images to sets of signs, cave paintings-meet-cybernetics stick figures, showing primal human behaviour. This art of protest left him isolated in the GDR; he survived by smuggling his paintings to exhibitions in the west, and finally crossed the border, on foot, in 1980.

By this time, Duerckheim felt that his collection was nearly complete. “You can’t carry on, going from the 10th to the 11th Baselitz or Richter painting – it’s just money. I wanted to do something else.” Within a year of German reunification in 1990, he revisited Saxony – “The old landowners didn’t get anything back, someone else bought our castle, now you can get married there. I bought some countryside, 600-700 acres, not too bad but not a fraction of what we owned” – and at the same time began a fresh collection of photography and film “with a social context”.

This includes work by Damien Hirst, the Chapman brothers and Theaster Gates, and turns on the new global reality: “What is power, terror, religion and how we lose religious feeling and spirituality – when comes in the evil again. The message of the work – that is much more interesting than just collecting. The next generation is living in such a fantastic world – they forget the dangers. People who met Saddam Hussein said he was well-educated, courteous, and at the same time he was gassing his people. It happened before with Hitler, it will happen again. I want to say, ‘Be aware, it’s always around, masked by advertising, movies, mobiles.’ My preferred title for my planned exhibition of these works is from Ecclesiastes, ‘Behold all is vanity and vexation of spirit’.”

It seems to me that the German historical experience still defines Duerckheim. “There is always a Baselitz picture hanging in my house,” he admits, but he sold most of his German paintings in a landmark sale in 2011 at Sotheby’s, which the auction house called “the night German art went global”. He retained the drawings – “they are harder to get, and easier to keep” – and the cream of those are now in London.

“When you give, be generous,” he says. “Now other collectors will try to do the same. I offered at a very high level; everyone else will have to get to this level or go home. For me it is a hallmark on my collection, a stamp, to show at the British Museum.”

‘Germany Divided: Baselitz and his Generation’, British Museum, February 6-August 31, britishmuseum.org