

The Independent
March 28, 2014

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE 
INDEPENDENT

*Baselitz's
bold homage
turns heads*

Georg Baselitz: Farewell Bill
Gagosian Gallery, London

REVIEW BY MICHAEL GLOVER



In the abstract: Georg Baselitz works from Farewell Bill
PHOTO JOCHEN LITTKEMANN/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

In case you are wondering, the Bill of the title of this show is Willem de Kooning, and the show itself a series of paintings in homage (of sorts) to that post-war Dutch-American Abstract Expressionist painter. When Baselitz made the great shift from East to West Germany at the turn of the 1960s, he found himself casting around for kindred spirits, artists from elsewhere who might be able to help him define himself as an artist. He had just liberated himself from the Socialist Realism of the Communist East. The West's alternative was Abstraction. Neither satisfied.

And then he saw de Kooning. Kooning's work, and especially the late painting and sculptures, had a kind of exhilarating wildness to it. De Kooning was prepared to hazard everything. He painted with his fingers. He made sculptures because he had no formal training as a sculptor. Baselitz wanted to begin again too, to invent the art of painting for himself, to create a new kind of German art for a country new risen from its own blasted reputation.

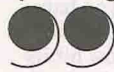
Baselitz has spent much of his long career interrogating the human body, mulling over the meaning of its constituent parts, turning it on its head, dismembering it, always very ominously.

Over in the prints room of the British Museum, you can currently see examples of his early pictures from the 1960s in which he often divides the body into horizontal segments. In that same decade, he also painted feet obsessively, nasty fleshy wedges.

There is a savagery about the way he has always painted, a kind of no-holds-barred quality. In this show, he has painted a series of human heads. They are all variants upon his own head, complete with peaked-cap monogrammed ZERO – you can probably make various intelligent stabs at the significance of that word in the context of the life history of this artist. Once again, and in common with all the bodies he has painted since 1969, they are upended, suspended upside down in the picture space.

They are heads whose forms are usually sketchily defined by riddles of black oil

The painted surface is a kind of theatre of savagery, full of nervy spatterings



paint. And yet these are also more than heads. To a degree, they are bodies entire, but the other body parts – arms, legs, for example – when you spot them at all, appear to be moving about the head in a kind of crazily jumbled, off-kilter constellation. There is much furious impasto work, much wild oscillating of the brush and the finger.

Baselitz enjoys defiling – de-sacralising if you

like – the painted surface, and here you see footprints, mug prints randomly besmirching, as if giving himself the V-sign even as he paints.

The painted surface is a kind of theatre of savagery, full of nervy spatterings. De Kooning is being half-remembered – his great portraits called *Women*, for example, come to mind when we see how Baselitz paints savagely prominent teeth, for example. Baselitz is firing off in all directions like a howling, big-booted kid.