

GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

Georg Baselitz
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

Carroll Dunham



Georg Baselitz, Waldarbeiter (Woodsmen), 1967–68, charcoal and synthetic resin on canvas, 97 7/8 × 78 3/4".

GEORG BASELITZ came to the attention of US audiences in the early 1980s as part of the cohort of German painters who seemed to appear from out of nowhere with an onslaught of exhibitions in New York’s most prestigious and cutting-edge galleries. Within the international (non) movement referred to as “neo-expressionism,” Baselitz was among the few who were actually reconsidering German Expressionist approaches to painting; he was also “the one who turns his paintings upside down.” His inversion of his subjects set him apart, but without context or a clear sense of his development it seemed like a gimmick. Since that time, Baselitz has regularly exhibited in New York—the Guggenheim mounted a large survey of his work in 1995—and has been widely collected. While he is hardly unknown, his agenda and its significance remain obscure; his concerns don’t fit neatly into the narratives of contemporary art generally embraced in America, and his partisans’ writing has tended toward rather steamy hyperbole, which hasn’t helped the situation much. “Baselitz: Six Decades,” a recent exhibition curated by Stéphane Aquin with assistance from Sandy Guttman at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, wasn’t complete enough to fully make the case, but it did provide viewers a welcome chance to reflect on his project in light of the dramatic changes that have overtaken the art world, and the real world, during his extremely productive career.

By the time he became known internationally, Baselitz had been infamous, and then famous, in his native country for roughly two decades. He grew up in East Germany and studied social realism in art school there, but he was expelled in 1957 and moved to West Berlin to study at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste. Pieced together from anecdotes and interviews, a portrait emerges of an exceptionally intelligent, ambitious, and proud young man with a talent for self-promotion, some fairly deep-seated issues with authority, and a lot of balls. He first gained notice in the then-insular Berlin art scene in 1961, when he mounted a two-person exhibition with his colleague Eugen Schönebeck, for which they cowrote *Pandamonisches Manifest I, I. Version* (Pandemonium Manifesto, First Version), a turgid screed in the form of an exhibition poster. (A sample from Baselitz's contribution: "In me there are prepubertal enclaves [the smell when I was born]; in me there is the greening of youth, love in decoration, the tower-building idea.") Baselitz's early work seems provincial now, but it must be understood as his rebellion against both the political and the academic proscriptions of his art education under Communism and among the timid postwar abstractions then being made in a still thoroughly traumatized Germany.



Georg Baselitz, *Schlafzimmer (Bedroom)*, 1975, oil and charcoal on canvas, 98 3/8 × 78 3/4". © George Baselitz.

His first solo exhibition, in 1963, at Galerie Werner & Katz in Berlin, caused much controversy. The paintings were self-consciously "disturbing," pictorial fever dreams of fetid carnality and decay with mystical allusions. Works like *Die grosse Nacht im Eimer* (The Big Night Down the Drain), 1962–63, a murky and clotted rendering of a dwarflike being with a massive hard-on who inhabits a dark abattoir, offended the civic conscience of Berliners. Authorities condemned the exhibition as indecent, confiscated two of the paintings, and had it closed. The gallery took the case to court and the show was reopened, but this classic dynamic of "radical art v. the Man" became a creation myth for Baselitz, setting him against the public in a way he seems to have wholeheartedly embraced.

Baselitz's work changed enormously in the late '60s. The canvases grew much bigger, and he began working with dispersion paint, a flatter, more declarative medium than oil. He opened up his approach: The paint was less congealed, the palette brightened and diversified. His subject shifted to the natural world, inhabited by hunters and the occasional animal, but Baselitz

sabotaged any folk-loric associations. In *Waldarbeiter* (Woodsmen), 1967–68, one of the figures is inverted, “upending” any narrative and pointing to imminent developments in his work.

On the face of it, turning the subjects of paintings upside down because of some philosophical idea is idiotic, a mere cartoon of “radical” modernist thinking, and it’s doubtful that when Baselitz first explored this strategy he anticipated how fertile it would be. The first pure example of his use of image inversion, *Der Wald auf dem Kopf* (The Wood on its Head), 1969, is a loose reproduction of a work by the nineteenth-century German painter Ferdinand von Rayski, whom Baselitz had admired as a young artist. Over several years, he made numerous upside-down landscapes, but the cutting edge of his thinking was soon embodied in his portraits from 1969 and in the nudes he painted in the ’70s of his wife and of himself.

This suite of portraits, partially reunited at the Hirshhorn, is at once flatly legible and utterly strange. The works as pictured in one’s mind appear straightforward, but in the flesh they lose any sense of normalcy. They are painted from photographs—color snapshots of intimates composed like yearbook pictures—then rendered upside down with loose yet earnest verisimilitude. The drips make clear that they were painted in the orientation in which they are hung. Other than Picabia’s late works based on “girlie” magazine illustrations (which might have been an influence on Baselitz), it is hard to think of paintings that so thoroughly assert the negative of what they appear to be. They have a sunny mood that could be attributed to the fact that the artist was depicting friends and loved ones, but they yield absolutely nothing as true portraits. He has said that the rotation of the images was a way to achieve a greater degree of abstraction, but this seems disingenuous; they are never not what we know them to be. Regarding them is like trying to engage with a person standing on his or her own head and insisting that things should just carry on normally: The conversation will be irritating and amusing, but how can you not respect that dedication to continue as though everything were as it should be?



Georg Baselitz, *Porträt Elke I* (*Portrait of Elke I*), 1969, synthetic resin on canvas, 63 3/4 × 51 1/8". © George Baselitz.

Throughout the first half of the ’70s, Baselitz continued to make paintings of himself and his wife, Elke, naked, both together and alone, more or less life size, and always upside down; he also explored finger painting as a way to further unsettle the indices of the maker’s hand. Elke is frequently rendered in gray tones, while his skin is closer to the color of his own flesh, likely a formal device to unbalance the two halves of the painting, though to defer here to formalism is

not to rule out other motivations. And yet, tempting as psychological interpretations are, the meaning remains opaque. *Fingermalerei—Weiblicher Akt* (Finger Painting—Female Nude), 1972, which depicts Elke alone and naked in front of a clothesline on a beautiful summer day, is an extraordinary work. Here, she appears in the flush of health. The atmosphere conflates GDR Aryan physical culture and a homey photo-album vibe in a way that's both raunchy and innocent. It is challenging conceptually and sexually: Her triangle of pubic hair occupies the top center of the canvas where, in a traditionally oriented portrait, you would expect to see her face.

By the late '70s, Baselitz seems to have given in to the pull of his own Germanness as it concerned the history of modernism. At this point, his debt to artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde (and Edvard Munch, the Norwegian master) is impossible to ignore. The palette and paint handling often make reference to these earlier artists. He returned to brushes around 1977, and began to consciously subvert, and even ignore, the armature of subject matter in relation to the painted mark. *Orangenesser* (Orange Eaters), 1981–82, is a series that achieves a new level of expressive directness. These works depict the upper bodies of spiky-haired humanoids (likely male, though their gender isn't explicit) devouring a fruit whose name is also a color.

From the mid-'80s until late in the last century, the artist appears to have settled into a groove, accepting largeness, upside-downness, and a loosely gestural facture as givens in his paintings. It was a shortcoming of the Hirshhorn exhibition that there wasn't more of his work from that time, which might have revealed greater diversity or specificity in his pictorial goals. The earlier Guggenheim retrospective, which also traveled to the Hirshhorn, ended during this period, giving a slightly confusing impression as to how his art evolved. Despite the luxury of hindsight, the current exhibition left one with a similar visual smear.



Georg Baselitz, *Fingermalerei—Weiblicher Akt* (Finger Painting—Female Nude), 1972, oil on canvas, 98 3/8 × 70 7/8". © George Baselitz.

However, it was during this period that Baselitz began his vigorous involvement with sculpture. His ideas seemed to emerge fully realized and to always follow the same basic playbook: savagely crude carvings, made with an axe or a chain saw, with some color applied to the surfaces, most of which represented the human body or certain of its parts. Numerous painters of the modern era have made sculpture, with varying degrees of seriousness and success. Like those of Picasso and Jean Fautrier, two artists Baselitz has studied closely, his own objects both critique and expand what we mean by sculpture. (Kirchner's totemic carvings are also a clear and

influential precedent.) He has claimed that the medium is more direct than painting, less involved in artifice, and this is certainly true of his own.

His first effort, *Modell für eine Skulptur* (Model for a Sculpture), 1979–80, a large seated male figure with a raised right arm, roughly carved in limewood and lightly enhanced with tempera paint, was shown in the German pavilion at the 1980 Venice Biennale as part of a two-person exhibition with Anselm Kiefer. Somewhat predictably, controversy erupted over what was perceived as the figure's Nazi salute, an interpretation the artist dismissed. It would have been beneficial to see more of his sculptures in the Hirshhorn exhibition, but sadly many of his best were not here. A later pair of larger-than-life carvings, *Meine neue Mütze* (My New Hat), 2003, and *Frau Ultramarin* (Mrs. Ultramarine), 2004, represent, respectively, the artist in cute shorts and a strange white cap, and his wife in a little blue sunsuit. At once monumental and endearingly ridiculous, they look like tourists from another planet, here to check out Earth's beaches. Baselitz's self-parody and his affection for human vanity, obscured in many of his canvases by his relentless painterly rhetoric, are on full display in these works.

Since the late '90s, Baselitz has actively interrogated his own aesthetic evolution while exploring a much lighter and more graphic manner influenced by his extensive drawing and printmaking. By 2005, this had become codified in a series called "Remix," 2005–, for which he repaints motifs from his earlier work in this newer, airier style. Thus described, the project sounds masturbatory, but it has resulted in several wonderful paintings. Some, like *Grosse Nacht* (Remix) (Big Night [Remix]), 2008, clarify the spirit of the original, here with the addition of a Hitler-style mustache. Others, like *Adieu* (Remix), 2006, are fresher and more challenging than the template.



View of "Baselitz: Six Decades," 2018. Floor: *Meine neue Mütze* (*My New Hat*), 2003; *Frau Ultramarin* (*Mrs. Ultramarine*), 2004. Wall, from left: *Adieu* (*Remix*), 2006; *Ein Grüner kaputt '67* (*Remix*) (*A Green One Kaput '67* [*Remix*]), 2007; *Beginging*, 2011. © George Baselitz.

Baselitz is exemplary in his willingness to follow the implications of his own work wherever they lead him, and this process clearly isn't over. His most recent paintings take another turn, characterized by the predominance of the color black and surprising paint-handling that looks like spray painting. In *Wir fahren au* (*We're Off*), 2016, the faint, X-rayed appearance of a corpse-like figure, beheaded, floating in a beautiful interstellar field by the left side of the canvas, is a touchingly frank musing on the end of corporeal existence, but the artist's total lack of nostalgia jams this seemingly obvious interpretation. Baselitz has also been making smaller paintings of heads that strongly echo the abstractions of Fautrier in their scale, centralized composition, and atmospheric physicality. The muscularity he expressed in his work as a younger man has been replaced by a visual analogue to the more mental and reflective concerns

of later life, and while it is too soon to know how this phase will be evaluated (“great late” or only “late”?), it is inspiring to see such honest and self-aware manifestations of his painterly drive.

In 2007, Norman Rosenthal, writing in the *Guardian* about a Baselitz exhibition that he had recently curated at the Royal Academy in London, declared: “For me he is the greatest painter of our day still working in the great European tradition.” Last June in the *Washington Post*, Sebastian Smee reviewed the Hirshhorn show under the headline “Georg Baselitz Is an Overrated Hack. Art Collectors Fell for Him—but You Don’t Have To.” While every word in Rosenthal’s sentence is open to contextual clarification, and Smee’s hysterical negativity makes one wonder who the “hack” really is (the guy has won two Pulitzers!), these contrasting opinions plot a rather hope-less axis of evaluation. In the spirit of the artist, let’s turn the discussion on its head. While Baselitz is unquestionably a consequential figure in the history of recent Western art (“upside downness” is the kind of contribution very few artists get to make), whether he is “great,” only “good,” or really “terrible” is a question far less interesting than the fact that a life in art like his even happened. Unlike Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, Baselitz insulated himself from the late-’60s crazes for American Pop art and Minimalism. In the ’70s, when Joseph Beuys loomed like a colossus over the German art scene (influencing such peers as Kiefer and Jörg Immendorff), Baselitz and a few others—notably Markus Lüpertz and A. R. Penck—looked to northern European art and culture for a frame within which to explore their considerable ambitions, allowing them to make deeply original paintings and sculptures without sliding into the international argot of the time.



View of “Baselitz: Six Decades,” 2018. Floor: Modell für eine Skulptur (*Model for a Sculpture*), 1979–80. Wall, from left: Orangenesser (IX) (*Orange Eater [IX]*), 1981; Orangenesser VI (*Orange Eater VI*), 1981; Orangenesser I (*Orange Eater I*), 1981; Orangenesser VI (*Orange Eater VI*), 1981. © George Baselitz.

Artists of Baselitz’s generation were born at the end of the Nazi era and spent their early years under the dictatorship of the German Democratic Republic, where art’s potential was strictly circumscribed and politicized. But they were left with a sense of art’s power and the necessity of its anarchic independence. “We can paint whatever we want!” Lüpertz recently said. “Every artist that has let himself or herself into politics has promptly been betrayed by the politicians. Nobody’s survived it.” Today, the relentless insanity of events leads many artists to think that they have a particular responsibility to react in their work, but it is not at all obvious what the right way to respond might be. When imagining “the resistance,” we would do well to remember postwar Germany, which, after a dark chapter of lethal madness, split its national personality in

two: one part a bastion of bourgeois consumerism, the other a fortress of political orthodoxy. Baschwitz seems to have found both options intolerable. He has been a badass for a long time, and his extraordinary career gives us one example of what real resistance looks like.