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Georg Baselitz at eighty

A major exhibition in Washington DC surveys over sixty years of work by this towering figure of post-war German art. Although Baselitz rejects the label 'neo-Expressionist', twentieth-century German art provides a telling context for understanding the work of a painter who is still energetically developing new artistic approaches.

by CHRISTIAN WEIKOP

GEORG BASELITZ'S EIGHTIETH birthday has been marked with many exhibitions, the most important of which is a major retrospective, *Baselitz: Six Decades*, organised by the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, in partnership with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington (to 16th September).¹ From the very outset of his career, Baselitz proved himself to be a champion of the grotesque, an artist provocateur who has so often challenged conventional ideas of harmony or beauty in art with an aesthetic of compelling ugliness. He sees this 'disharmony' or 'dissonance' as characterising his Germanic artistic heritage, from Albrecht Dürer via Caspar David Friedrich to Emil Nolde. And yet his paintings are often more explicit and confrontational than anything else to be found in the German canon. He is a self-proclaimed painter of 'bad pictures', which seems like damning self-criticism until you realise, to borrow a lyric from the hip-hop group Run DMC, he is implying: 'Not bad meaning bad, but bad meaning good!'²

In Basel, where this reviewer saw the show, the calm of the Beyeler's light-filled rooms was disrupted by many markedly phallogocentric early paintings. Among these was the notorious *The big night down the drain* (1963; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; cat. no. p.69), depicting an indistinct abject figure masturbating, the display of which in Berlin in 1963 resulted in legal proceedings against the Galerie Werner & Katz on charges of obscenity. In 2005 Baselitz initiated his Remix series with a light and swift reworking of this painting, in which the onanistic figure is more clearly defined as Hitler (private collection). At the Hirshhorn, *The big night down the drain* is replaced with the equally scandalous *The naked man* of 1962 (p.67; Fig.2), a painting also seized by the public prosecutor from the exhibition in 1963. Evidently times change, and in a less censorious 2018 Baselitz was wholeheartedly welcomed in Basel as the grand doyen of German art. Nonetheless, rather like the more explicit works of Egon Schiele, his paintings, despite some being almost sixty years old, retain a taboo-breaking impact. Indeed, Baselitz has commented on his difficult reception in America, that he 'struggled a lot for acceptance, though not in terms of the art market, which took to me immediately'.³ Now that the retrospective has opened in Washington DC it is clear that his challenging

1. *Man in the moon – Franz Pforr*, by Georg Baselitz. 1965. Canvas, 161.9 by 129.9 cm. (National Gallery of Art, Washington; exh. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

2. Opposite *The naked man*, by Georg Baselitz. 1962. Canvas, 114 by 146 cm. (Private collection, Seattle; exh. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).





work can still inspire polemical arts journalism, as a recent vociferous review by the *Washington Post* art critic Sebastian Smee has shown.⁴

In the first rooms of the Beyeler, fleshy phallic forms – sometimes attached, sometimes not, or ‘growing’ independently – are everywhere in evidence, from the sprouting appendages of *P.D. Stalk* and the uncanny *Tear sac* (both 1963; pp.71 and 73), and the detached phallus visible in *The cross* (1964; p.81) to the unusually elongated necks and tapered quartet of heads in the extra-terrestrial *Oberon* (1964; p.79, Städel Museum, Frankfurt). There is also the massive member of his comical *The fool of San Bonifacio – or Ludwig Richter on his way to work* (1965; p.85). Baselitz has said of the picture that ‘Ludwig Richter is always kitsch [...] and a Richter reproduction hung in every school in Saxony. I wanted to have a little fun with that!’ For the Washington iteration, this Richter painting is replaced by the distinctly mannerist *Man in the moon – Franz Pforr* of 1965 (p.84; Fig.1), which depicts the Nazarene artist with an attenuated neck, tiny head, huge torso and bulbous red penis, all connected by strange swirling tulip-like forms. Both the Pforr and Richter representations are carnivalesque subversions of German Romantic hero figures, heroes he sought to confront rather than place on any kind of pedestal. In keeping with the excessive Artaudian spirit of his and Eugen Schönebeck’s *Pandemonic Manifesto* (1961), Baselitz’s

contortions of ‘cocks’ pushed the idea of figurative painting to some kind of absurd limit. Phalluses even surface, albeit more surreptitiously, in his semi-abstract painting *Summer morning* of 1965, merged with other fleshy tones, in a strange ascending pile of farm animals, wood logs and a pine tree.

In 1966 Baselitz moved to Osthofen near Worms where he was particularly engaged with rural subject-matter – shepherds, cows, woodsmen, hunters and hunting dogs – images often triggered by memories of his Saxon *Heimat* around Deutschbaselitz. A distinctive arborealism is evident in his work from this point: wood becomes both motif and material in his paintings and expressive woodcuts. He would paint the bare, broken and bleeding specimen of *The tree* (1966; Froehlich

1 The exhibition was at the Fondation Beyeler 21st January–29th April. Catalogue: *Georg Baselitz*. By Rudi Fuchs, Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, Stephen Henry Madoff, Eva Mongi-Vollmer, Norman Rosenthal, Stéphane Aquin and Georg Baselitz. 208 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Hatje Cantz, Stuttgart 2018), \$85. ISBN 978-3-7757-4387-7 (English); 978-3-7757-4388-4 (German).

2 Run-DMC: ‘Peter Piper’, from the

album *Raising Hell*, New York 1986.

3 Interview by the present author with Georg Baselitz at his Ammersee studio, 2nd May 2018. All further citations from Baselitz in this article are from this interview.

4 S. Smee: ‘Georg Baselitz is an overrated hack. Art collectors fell for him – but you don’t have to’, *The Washington Post* (24th June 2018), www.washingtonpost.com, accessed 6th August 2018.



Collection, Stuttgart; p.90), a work that might be seen as a de-romanticising response to Friedrich's *Lonely tree* of 1822 (Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin), an anthropomorphic specimen that is suggestive of some kind of national disorder or atrocity. It is an important painting that appears to have influenced Anselm Kiefer's idea of a 'wounded landscape' as seen in his bloody *Winter landscape* (1970, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). *The tree* also prefigures Baselitz's fracture technique, a painterly device of spatial and perspectival distortion that he used to remarkable effect between 1966 and 1969. His disharmonious representations of Meissen foresters, several of which are in the Hirshhorn exhibition, provide the best example of this visually arresting approach. The disruption and displacement of the pictorial field, of elements of the icy blue sky, brown



3. *Meissen woodsmen*, by Georg Baselitz. 1969. Canvas, 250 by 200 cm. (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

4. *Orange eater IX*, by Georg Baselitz. 1981. Oil and tempera on canvas, 146 by 114 cm. (Skarstedt, New York; exh. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

5. Below *The Brücke chorus*, by Georg Baselitz. 1983. Canvas, 280 by 450 cm. (Private collection; exh. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

cut timber and green earth, fragmented and superimposed on bodies, is exemplified by *Meissen woodsmen* (p.101; Fig.3). In another fracture painting, *Woodsmen* (1967–68; Museum of Modern Art, New York; p.99), two shredded foresters appear in front of trees. One of them is 'upturned' in a manner that anticipates Baselitz's next and best-known pictorial device, an approach he has retained to the present, namely that of 'inversion'. Collectively these works with an arboreal theme convey disturbances, often violent, in the mythic forest locale of German identity, signalling a country turned upside down and inside out by terrible historical forces.

In the modern spaces of the Beyeler, there were many such historical 'highlights' and some intriguing curatorial arrangements. Shown here and also in Washington is Baselitz's infamous *Model for a sculpture* (1979–80; p.143), originally displayed alongside works by Kiefer at the West German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1980, an installation that generated a critical furore. The outstretched arm of the figure and black and red pigments on the wood led some critics to interpret the work as a presentation of a *Sieg-Heil* salute, although apparently the inspiration for the sculpture lay in African Lobi sculpture.' When it was exhibited in a dramatically lit room of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2007, the work did seem brutal and Gothic, but in the light, airy spaces of the

6. *My new hat*, by Georg Baselitz. 2003. Cedarwood and oil paint, 310.5 by 83.5 by 107 cm. (Pinault Collection, Venice; exh. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

Beyeler, juxtaposed with his *Finger painting – Female nude* (1972; p.119), the wooden figure appeared far less aggressive.

Baselitz was just seven years old when Dresden, thirty kilometres from Deutschbaselitz, was almost completely annihilated by Allied bombing raids. In February 1945, huddled in a village schoolhouse, he witnessed the devastating bombardment, the fire storm that followed and the terrible, traumatising aftermath. At the Beyeler, the monumental yellow carved heads of *Women of Dresden* (1989–90; p.175) were shown, sculptures roughly hewn from different tree species with a chainsaw and other tools, a tribute to the 'Trümmerfrauen' (rubble women) of post-war Germany. One of these heads, *Karla* (Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart; p.177), stares across the room at the large composition *The Brücke chorus* (pp.160–61; Fig.5), isolated on one wall, the viewer's sightline is steered from sculpture to painting through the bold yellow paint that unites the works. In the canvas, this yellow is used to form the central open-mouthed figure, an unmistakable allusion to Edvard Munch's *The scream* (1893).

During the early 1980s Baselitz's interest in Munch and the Dresden-based Brücke, the first group of German Expressionists, was made more explicit in paintings such as *Edvard's head* (1983; private collection) and *Supper in Dresden* (1983; Kunsthau Zurich, p.137). In some quarters of the art press this galvanised the idea of him being a 'Neo-Expressionist'. This restrictive, contentious, although occasionally useful appellation, was really the invention of American rather than German critics, a category that served the burgeoning art market of 1980s New York in particular. It is a label Baselitz dislikes, recalling that, for him, 'Neo-Expressionism' was a 'dirty word, [...] no praise!' This may be because of the negative connotations of the prefix 'Neo', which conveys an idea of rehashing an older movement. And yet what is so striking of *The Brücke chorus* and its companion *Supper in Dresden*, is the way in which the artist synthesises various artistic sources, from Emil Nolde to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Munch, in order to create something completely new. Of course, this creative magpie approach was very much a feature of Brücke art too, but in *The Brücke chorus*, Baselitz's motifs are 'turned on their heads' and the figures are terrifying clown-like marionettes, seemingly pointing to some kind of aesthetic and ideological break, rather than any direct line of continuity between the Brücke and his own work.

Baselitz's art-historical forebears are also invoked in the Tate's limewood sculpture *Untitled* (1982–83; p.159), connecting to a tradition extending back to the late Gothic woodcarving of Tilman Riemenschneider (c.1460–1531). Baselitz's work is rather more *brut* than anything from the fifteenth century, however, closer in kind to the sculptural *œuvre* of Kirchner, especially the large-scale carvings he created in the Swiss alps during the last twenty years of his life. Indeed, Baselitz is keen to profess his admiration of Kirchner's sculptural work, enthusing, 'I think it's fantastic how he did it'. Baselitz's *Untitled* (sculpture drawing) (1982; Kunstmuseum Basel), a dynamic representation of a figure breaking out from a trunk like a butterfly from a chrysalis, brings to mind a similar preparatory *Sketch for a sculpture* (1912; Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur) by Kirchner. The latter artist wrote of the carving process that it was 'a sensuous pleasure when blow by blow the figure grows more and more from the trunk. There is a figure in every trunk, one must only peel it out'.⁶ In their respective



5 S. Behr, in exh. cat.: *Georg Baselitz: A Retrospective*, London (Royal Academy of Arts) and Naples (MADRE) 2007, p.46.

6 Letter from Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Gustav Schiefler, 27th June 1911,

transl. in S. Barron, ed.: exh. cat. *German Expressionist Sculpture*, Los Angeles (County Museum of Art), Washington (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden) and Cologne (Josef Haubrich Kunsthalle) 1983–84, p.114.

approach to wood, however, there is a key difference. Baselitz's proclivity for chainsaws and a certain aggressive 'confrontation' with the organic material, makes for a rawer surface of crevices and indentations than anything seen in Kirchner's work. Other sculptures by Baselitz are crudely polychromatic, as in *My new hat* (p.200; Fig.6) and *Mrs Ultramarine* (2004; p.201), and here the garish colours deliberately confuse any sense of an atavistic form previously evident in *Untitled*.

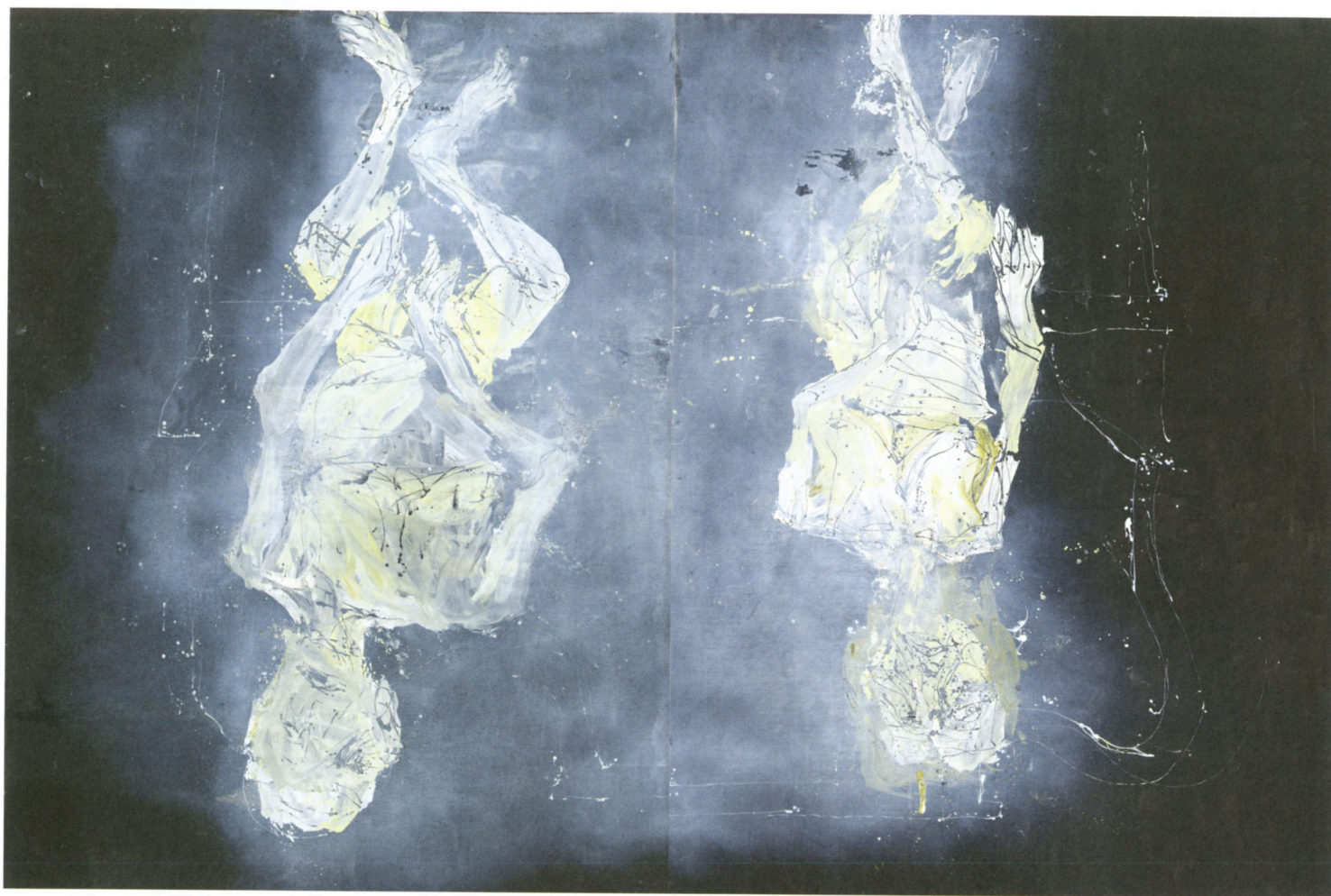
At the Beyeler, the Tate sculpture is surrounded by a number of vibrant Orange eater paintings (pp.144–47; Fig.4) that were first shown at the Xavier Fourcade Gallery in New York in 1981. There is a certain hip-hop quality to this series, which speaks of the emergence of a New York urban subculture at this time. The series could be understood as Baselitz confronting the challenge presented by the graffiti-like paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, especially the compelling stylistic reductions of the human figure of the former's work. Both artists would go on to participate in Diego Cortez's important 1982 exhibition, *The Pressure to Paint*, at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, a show that also included Kiefer, Rainer Fetting, A.R. Penck, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Julian Schnabel and many other rising European and American painters, consolidating a transnational idea of 'Neo-Expressionism'.

In 2005 Baselitz developed the idea of 'remixing' as a visual device, creating unusual variations of many of his earlier compositions, to a degree following Munch, who often repeated a single motif over time in order to rework it. The word 'remix' is again suggestive of the sampling

of older rhythms and breaks that once defined the New York hip hop scene. This association is only strengthened by the jaunty way Baselitz wears a baseball cap in a number of paintings (pp.234–37), larger-than-life sculptures (pp.181 and 200), as well as photographs: a true German and now octogenarian B-boy. The ZERO motif on his cap stands for the name of the manufacturer who once supplied him with art materials, but in a wider German context ZERO recalls the *Stunde Null* (or 'Hour Zero'), the desire to erase the traumatic past after the war, a clean slate 'fallacy' according to Baselitz. Additionally, it could be interpreted as him thumbing his nose at those German artists who founded the ZERO group in the late 1950s, who pitched themselves against the New York School and Art Informel, by advocating that art should be void of expressionistic gesture and colour. Baselitz wears the ZERO cap in his Farewell Bill series from 2013, paintings that have a Day-Glo graffiti quality. The series is a homage to Willem de Kooning, whose gestural paintings so impressed Baselitz as a twenty-year-old art student when he saw MoMA's touring show *New American Painting*, simultaneously with a MoMA retrospective on Jackson Pollock, both staged at his Hochschule für bildende Künste, West-Berlin, in September 1958. Baselitz recalls that 'All of these Pollocks hung in the foyer of my school and of course no visitors were interested, but for me it was like a bomb dropping when I saw that. I thought there was no culture in America, no culture and no paintings, and then these Pollock canvases arrived and I was just blown away!'

7. Georg Baselitz's studio, Ammersee. (Photograph courtesy Georg Baselitz Archive, Munich).





8. *Dystopian couple*, by Georg Baselitz. 2015. Canvas, 400 by 600 cm. (Courtesy the artist and White Cube; exh. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

For Baselitz, like some of his art school peers, first-generation German Expressionism would become refracted through American Abstract Expressionism, so their 'image of Munch was galvanized by de Kooning [...] their image of Kirchner filtered through Pollock'.⁷ It is instructive to compare the relative 'stasis' of the Brücke-motif canvases from 1983 with the light and highly fluid style of the *Supper in Dresden remix* (2006; private collection). Baselitz reflecting on the 'originals', says that he does not want to 'paint more pictures like that, but I did want to create an "illustration", as it were, of what I made earlier [...] And I almost used a caricature method, drawing on only two or three colours and painting very quickly. I wanted to ensure all the faces were clearly recognisable as Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, Munch and Kirchner'. The *Remix* series is less akin to Nolde than Pollock in the application of paint. The rapidly rendered figures of the Brücke are formed from spermatozoa-like squiggles and ejaculatory splurges, and it is worth noting that, like Pollock before him, Baselitz paints on the floor, or more recently on a wooden platform. The facial features of the Brücke artists are more distinct than in the 1983 'originals', following the process of other 'remix' paintings in intensifying physiognomy. Baselitz continues to engage with the Brücke artists, as seen in some recent paintings leaning against the wall of his large studio (Fig.7), which looks over the Ammersee in Bavaria, a building designed by the Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron.

One notable longstanding feature of Baselitz's *œuvre* is the double portrait of himself and his wife, Elke. Again 'couple portraits' are particularly prevalent in the Expressionist tradition and one immediately thinks of those by Kirchner of himself with his partner Erna (Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin), of Otto and Maschka Mueller (Lehmbrock Museum, Duisburg), and Oskar Kokoschka's of himself with Alma Mahler (Museum Folkwang, Essen). Particularly important to Baselitz is Otto Dix's *Portrait of the artist's parents II* (1924; Sprengel Museum, Hannover), a constant source of inspiration. More often than not, Baselitz presents himself and his wife naked, with bold glowing colours, as seen in paintings such as *Bedroom* (1975; p.127), but more recently his seated couple images have become muted and almost apparitional, drained of colour and painted from dark shades of sooty grey through to anaemic whites, although at other times also with a rosy hue, expressing the reality of the human form changing with age. Paintings such as *Dystopian couple* (pp.242–43; Fig.8) and *Who all? What all?* (2016; p.247) appear almost spectral, occupying a liminal space between this world and the afterlife. In the former, the ghostly, floating, aged bodies are surrounded by a misty white aura; the figures are insubstantial but seemingly fixed, looking as if they have already resisted being wiped out by an old-fashioned blackboard eraser. Baselitz is currently preoccupied with the late stages of life, and we will have to wait another decade to see what he produces for his ninetieth birthday retrospective. It could be very surprising. His capacity to reinvent apparently has no bounds.

7 W. Schmied, in K. McShine, ed.: exh. cat. *Berlin Art 1961–1987*, New York (Mus-

eum of Modern Art) and San Francisco (Museum of Modern Art) 1987–88, p.43.