

## GAGOSIAN



### Georg Baselitz in Venice — a show that deepens our understanding of the artist

*Works on display at the Gallerie dell'Accademia celebrate the way tradition can become inspiration*

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*Georg Baselitz's 'BDM Gruppe' (2012)*

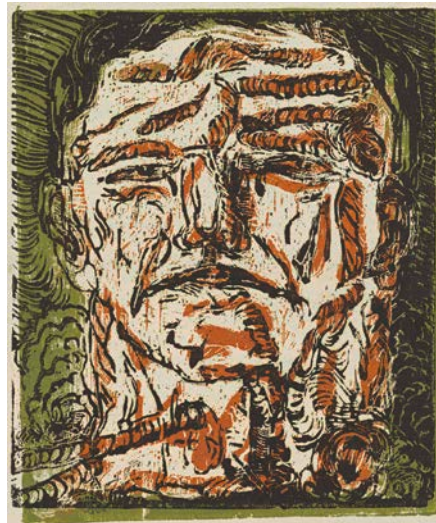
In 1955, Russians queued at Moscow's Pushkin Museum to bid farewell to the masterpieces — Raphael's "Sistine Madonna", Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus" — looted by Soviet soldiers from Dresden during the second world war; then Germans, including schoolboy Georg Baselitz, crowded to visit the pictures returned to the Gemäldegalerie. Four decades later, Baselitz painted "A Domestic Scene", his response to the "Sistine Madonna", replacing the figures with a loosely rendered tumble of golden dogs and transforming the sweeping curtains into fluttering blue wings.

This large, comic, touching painting is a rush of energy, light, uplift movement, echoing the Madonna's forward surge and incongruously repeating, across Baselitz's dashed, pigment-flecked surface, elements of Raphael's formal structure. Baselitz and classicism are not words that usually go together, but who can show in Venice without classical allusions leaping into play? Opening with "BDM Gruppe", a trio of clumsy three-metre female figures, huge-footed, jagged-limbed, in patinated bronze imitating charred wood, Baselitz Academy, the Gallerie

dell' Accademia's first ever exhibition of a living artist, is revelatory, and engaging even beyond its immediate subject.

Baselitz's brutalist "Three Graces", the title referring to the Bund Deutscher Mädel, the girls' version of the Hitler Youth, and "A Domestic Scene", are among many provocations/homages to the Renaissance ideal — the spark coursing through the show. Baselitz's 1960s "Heroes" series, for example, tattered, bedraggled parodies of grandeur — the delicate/savage woodcut flailing figure "Partisan", the lumpen imploring "Spekulatius" with tiny head and elaborate codpiece signed "GB" — vehemently refute classical heroism. They articulate postwar feelings of defeat and bewilderment, yet their solemnity and eloquent monumentality depend on classical models.

By selecting a thoroughly German artist whose 60-year oeuvre has always been about destabilising the image, most notoriously by turning it upside down, the Accademia deepens our understanding of a familiar artist — Baselitz emerges here more nuanced, playful, wider-ranging than expected — and also celebrates the infinite possibilities by which tradition becomes inspiration.



*Georg Baselitz, 'Grosser Kopf' (1966)*

Who guessed that Baselitz's "Red Flag" series — featuring a woebegone figure with torn, fallen flag, an empty symbol — adapts the motif from a drawing in the Accademia, Raphael's "Naked Bishop with Banner", where by contrast the flag of faith soars? A group of rhythmic dense black drawings of baroque forms trembling into being are virtuoso ink reworkings of Francesco Pianta's silent walnut-carved figures in Venice's Scuola Grande di San Rocco. "Kopf", a bloody/bruised wooden head, lying face upright, open-mouthed, on a high plinth, summons to mind the head of John the Baptist held aloft by Salome in a mosaic in St Mark's.

The show is non-chronological but nonetheless establishes a looping narrative of Baselitz's development. Limpid early 1960s watercolours after Pontormo's "Visitation" show him mastering continuous economical line and splashes of colour to capture movement, working out relationships between body and space. The long-necked pale figure on crimson ground, "Idol" (1964), boldly appropriates mannerism, heralding experiments by which Baselitz translates Pontormo's tight compositions into his own linear calligraphy and colour fields. Most vibrant of his inverted figures are mid-1970s nudes where mannerist legacy converges with dynamic abstract expressionist brushwork: "Männlicher Akt", "Elke im Lehnstuhl", "Sitzender

männlicher Akt — Marokko”, their verticality resonant with the towering columns of the Accademia’s exhibition spaces.



*Baselitz's 'Ankunft' (2018)*

Later paintings rarely reach such expressive heights, but the Accademia showcases a fine exception: “Ankunft (Nackte Ankunft, Piazzale Roma, Venezia)”, and “Ankunft”, depicting Baselitz, and his wife Elke, twice life-size and upside down, as fragile pink nudes negotiating a ghostly outline of the steps at Venice’s bus station. The rosy impasto is redolent of de Kooning, the subject reprises Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase”, the vigorous painterly manner contradicts the depiction of frailty. Painted last year when Baselitz was 80 and installed here like altarpieces in a gallery that was a former chapel, they salute Venice and triumphantly conclude an engrossing, thoughtful show.