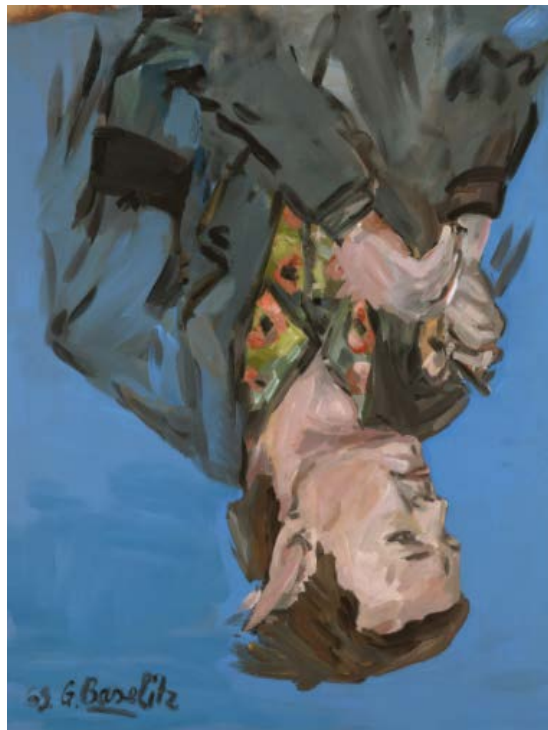


## GAGOSIAN



### Georg Baselitz: *Pivotal Turn*

Phyllis Tuchman



*Georg Baselitz, Da. Portrait (Franz Dahlem), 1969. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Baselitz Family, 2020.  
© Georg Baselitz 2021. Photo: Jochen Littkemann.*

In 1969, Georg Baselitz, then a 31-year-old artist based in southwest Germany, began painting people, places, and things upside down. Over the course of the following decades, his art changed considerably. Nevertheless, he still inverts his subjects. This practice, coupled with existential themes, remains the hallmark of his art.

Recently, Baselitz and his wife Johanna “Elke” Kretzschmar, to whom he has been married for almost 60 years, donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art six portraits he executed during the eventful year of 1969; they are on view in the Robert Lehman Collection wing until July 18. These solo figures include depictions of his wife and two art dealers, which are placed against somber, austere grounds. Five of the works feature the heads and upper torsos of friends. A supersized head appears on the sixth panel. Two of the men sport funky, distinctive shirts typical of a period associated with the term “flower power.” Someone else wears a pair of glasses. And there’s a fellow clothed in coveralls accompanied by a dog. They are all based on photographs.

For many observers, the orientation of the images is no longer disconcerting, much less novel. After all, it's been fifty-some years since Baselitz embarked on this journey. But stand in the gallery with these portraits for just a short time, and people will come in who are unfamiliar with the artist's oeuvre. They are the ones who immediately try to turn their heads in order to glimpse the figures right side up.



Georg Baselitz, Fifties Portrait - M.W., 1969.  
Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of  
the Baselitz Family, 2020. © Georg Baselitz 2021.  
Photo: Jochen Littkemann.

At the Met, I was most struck by Baselitz's broad, luscious paint strokes. They're the sort of aspect that don't show up well in reproductions, which is mostly how we view this German's work in the United States. (At a retrospective held at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, three years ago, I was dazzled by the paintings that had previously stayed abroad and never crossed the Atlantic Ocean.) Previously, the artist had been painting with oils on canvas. With this group, he began to use *dispersionsfarbe*, a synthetic resin. It's a matte house paint that dries quickly. I was also surprised that nothing about these works transformed them into abstractions. Both the shapes and the colors, just to cite two formal properties, adhere to representational qualities. In the end, it seems to be the differences and similarities of these seemingly ordinary people rendered on the same size canvases that are most compelling.

In July 1970, several months after Baselitz painted these portraits, I travelled to what was then West Germany to research an article published in *Artforum* in November

1970. With Blinky Palermo as my guide and driver, I visited the studios of Gerhard Richter, Klaus Rinke, Ulrich Rückriem, and Joseph Beuys. For years afterwards, I scratched my head whenever I saw Richter's work. He had shown me a group of disappointing grey abstractions. Until I visited a retrospective of his art in Paris during the mid-1990s, I didn't understand how he had become so famous. It took me decades to discover that he, too, had realized how terrible the grey canvases in his studio in July 1970 were. According to his catalogue raisonné, he destroyed all of them.



*Georg Baselitz, Portrait of Elke I, 1969. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Baselitz Family, 2020. © Georg Baselitz 2021. Photo: Jochen Littkemann.*

I bring this up because Baselitz seems never to have faltered. To wit, the portraits from 1969 on view at the Met: they're fresh and vibrant. Once the artist, who had also made his way to the West from East Germany, found a signature style, he developed it in countless ways. I, for one, am delighted that I'll have a chance to repeatedly visit these initial portrait paintings. Now New Yorkers deserve a full dress retrospective.