

GEORG BASELITZ

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MAIN GALLERIES

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION
FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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WRITTEN BY PAUL BRANDFORD

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FRONT COVER

Cat. 89

Detail

Eagle in Bed (Adler im Bett),
1982

Private collection
Photo Frank Oleski
© Georg Baselitz

BACK COVER

Cat. 94

Detail of 20th panel
'45 (Forty-Five), 1989

Kunsthaus Zürich
Photo Frank Oleski
© Georg Baselitz



INTRODUCTION

Georg Kern was born in 1938 in Deutschbaselitz. 'Georg Baselitz' was born twenty years later when, as an art student, Kern moved from East to West Berlin. During a career spanning fifty years, the painting and sculpture of Georg Baselitz has created imagery that deals unflinchingly with his position as a post-war artist. While emerging from the all-pervasive American influences of Abstract Expressionism and, later, Pop Art, Baselitz was forging a renewed German cultural identity in the wake of an enforced Nazi classicism, a twentieth-century attempt at the historical ideals of unity and purity in art and architecture, and Soviet-inspired socialist realism.

Within all his work, traces of the Second World War make themselves apparent. Although his commentary is never explicit, Baselitz has, from the beginning, challenged the philosophy of fascism, which we might define as an imposed conformity demanding blind loyalty in thought and action, creating an environment intolerant of contradiction or fallibility. In the face of this, Baselitz celebrates the uncontrolled, the partially formed, the vulnerable, the violated and the inspired loner.

In responding to contemporary experience and exploring his own painterly instincts, Baselitz creates symbols which reflect deep-rooted human dilemmas and concerns. Like Philip Guston (1913–1980), an artist he greatly admired, Baselitz refuses to rule out the ugly, the difficult, the ridiculous or the distasteful in pursuit of a personal progress, which has seen him develop and then disregard numerous seemingly definitive or conclusive achievements. Purity of expression and commitment to the development of a purposeful painterly language has compelled Baselitz, as far as possible, to allow the paintings to become themselves so fully that they stand out not as products of any given time, but as timeless as cave paintings.

BEGINNINGS

The predominant art form that Georg Kern left behind in East Berlin in 1958, three years before the Berlin wall was begun, was Socialist Realism, in which artists functioned not as individuals but as extensions of the state, producing propagandist imagery whose visual properties were all but bankrupted by stylistic conformity. In West Berlin there was freedom: freedom to create what became known as Art Informel, the European subspecies of American Abstract Expressionism. Sensing yet another orthodoxy, Baselitz began to follow his own inclinations, and began to take an interest in the art of the mentally ill. In 1959 he hitchhiked to Amsterdam where he saw Chaim Soutine's (1893–1943) ox carcass (fig. 1), and in 1960 he visited Paris, where he went to public museums and private galleries.

In 1961 and 1962 Baselitz staged 'Pandemonium' exhibitions with Eric Schonebeck, another promising and uncompromising young artist who, unlike Baselitz, did not enjoy a lengthy career in painting. These exhibitions, along with their related manifestos, generated sufficient attention for Baselitz to be seen as an authentic artistic force in West Berlin. During this period the overriding philosophical influence on Baselitz was Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), a playwright and poet who advocated social therapy by means of what he termed 'Theatre of Cruelty', in which the grotesque and challenging would violently disengage the audience from the false reality of social conformity. By awakening a more passionate and convulsive conception of life, which recognised inner as well as outer realities, a moral purity would be achieved, putting humanity back in touch with its truer self. Much of Artaud's work glorified flesh, excretion and most things

Fig. 1

CHAIM SOUTINE

Carcass of Beef

c. 1925, oil on canvas

140.33 × 107.63 cm

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo,
New York

Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1939
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007



bodily, although he did however eschew masturbation or indeed any sexual activity as a drain upon creative energy. Although directly linked to this phase of Baselitz's output, Artaud's suspicion of accepted patterns of language and a desire to communicate from somewhere 'between thought and gesture' have stayed with the artist across the span of his career.

'Without an element of cruelty at the base of all spectacle, theatre is impossible. In our present state of degeneration metaphysics will come into the spirit through our skin.'

ANTONIN ARTAUD

PROVOCATIONS

Cats 8, 10, 14, 17 In the *P.D. Foot* series, Baselitz seemingly turns towards a kind of symbolic naturalism, where we might find parallels in certain still-life works by Théodore Géricault (1791–1824), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) or Francisco de Goya (1746–1828). Each of these artists used paint to achieve a physicality and a luminosity that went beyond illusionism, creating the sense of flesh actually being present. There does seem to be a strong connection with Géricault, who also depicted body parts. However in Baselitz's case the paintings are not purely studies after nature. They possess a poetic freedom generated by the atmosphere he creates with the paint (both within the flesh of the feet and beyond them) and the associations we derive from that atmosphere. The way in which the paint is applied indicates the rawness of flesh unprotected by skin, providing a catalogue of scrapes and penetrative injuries and suggesting through colour the rancidity of decay or future decay. The areas around the feet are often animated by flecks and strokes which echo the activity within.

How do these flecks provide the foot with its sense of monumental scale?

What is Baselitz prompting us to feel?

Cat 8 BELOW LEFT

Fifth P.D. Foot – Russian Foot (Fünfter P.D. Fuß – Russischer Fuß), 1963

Oil on canvas
130.8 × 81.8 cm

Crax Collection, Zurich
Photo Martin Gubler
© Georg Baselitz

Cat 10 BELOW

Eighth P.D. – The Hand (Achter P.D. – Die Hand), 1963

Oil on canvas
100.5 × 81.5 cm

Crax Collection, Zurich
Photo Martin Gubler
© Georg Baselitz



The average canvas size in the series is 120 x 90 cm. Would the effect be the same if the depicted feet were closer to the actual size of a foot?

Apart from depicting the foot in a given state or condition, the brushstrokes also have a more autonomous function. They are inclined to either cluster or scatter, implying gravitational pull within each cluster and freedom or partial freedom beyond it. Like the decay of unstable isotopes, this aspect of pictorial structure indicates a disintegration of form over the long term, which Géricault, Rembrandt or Goya would never have built into the core of their structures. Both Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) were interested in the concept of the bodily fragment. Clearly, the presence of a part implies the existence of the whole and the question of that whole's destruction. These parts are always invested with an energy or life-force which in reality the dismembered limb could never possess, since it has no connection to a nervous system, blood supply or motivational forces such as emotion and desire.

Who in particular might these feet have belonged to?

Does Baselitz wish us to find these answers or is it enough that we make the attempt?

It would be easy to connect these images to the Second World War. (Giacometti claimed that his leg and arm sculptures were made partly in response to the carnage he directly experienced when attempting to flee Paris in 1940.)

Could it be argued that these paintings are more universal than specific in terms of their references?

Cat. 14 BELOW
Sixth P.D. Foot (Sechster P.D. Fuß), 1963
Oil on canvas
100.5 x 81.5 cm
Crex Collection, Zurich
Photo Martin Gubler
© Georg Baselitz

Cat. 17 BELOW RIGHT
Third P.D. Foot (Dritter P.D. Fuß), 1963
Oil on canvas
130.5 x 100.5 cm
Crex Collection, Zurich
Photo Martin Gubler
© Georg Baselitz





Cat. 3

The Big Night Down the Drain
(*Die Große Nacht im Eimer*),

1962–63
Oil on canvas
250 × 180 cm

Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Ludwig Donation
Photo © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne
© Georg Baselitz

'At one time it was very daring to make a figure red or blue; I think now it is just as daring to make it flesh coloured.'

WILLEM DE KOONING, 1960

'Certain pictures whether modern or ancient transform the map of the human body and thereby get lost amongst the surreal platitudes of the beliefs the spectator holds concerning his own image. Thus these works force him to reinvent understanding for just one moment through the aesthetic momentum produced by their visual subversion of banal perception – in other words they force the spectator to reinvent his intimate discourse about himself and his world of objects.'

J. GUILLAUMIN

'The task of the artist is to make the human being uncomfortable and yet we are drawn to a great work by involuntary chemistry like a hound getting a scent; the dog isn't free, it can't do otherwise. It gets the scent and instinct does the rest.'

LUCIAN FREUD

Cat. 3 Although the feet of the character in *The Big Night Down the Drain* are not shown, in this case we can assume that Baselitz is presenting us with a whole person whose feet are present but not visually available to us. As with the *Foot* paintings, there is something that looks a little like naturalism but isn't. In this case though, we are presented with a portrait that has often been regarded as a self-portrait. The brushstrokes are employed to construct the figure but at the same time the very same strokes act to disrupt, confuse or even partly destroy this descriptive interpretation. Making and unmaking go hand in hand.

Why might Baselitz adopt such an approach?

It could be argued that the confrontational nature of the manner of the painting emphasises the subject matter. This may be partly true but there may be wider purposes for Baselitz's paint handling. No artist ever works in cultural isolation. The 1960s in Europe were dominated by local interpretations of Abstract Expressionism and later Pop Art. At this time, to create a picture of significance based upon a single standing figure would require ambition and invention in terms of its execution.

The structuring of the paint within the legs makes them appear highly unlikely as the support of a body of that proportion. Anatomical sense is not one of Baselitz's priorities here, nor anywhere else for that matter. Within the torso there is a network of brushstrokes which assert themselves purely in terms of painted surface (a ploy often used by Edouard Manet [1832–1883] to pull our attention out of the illusionistic environment and back to the physical reality of the picture). As we focus upon the relationship of the brushstrokes, our sense of the whole is lost (particularly within a painting of this size). It is the brushstroke that describes how Baselitz likes to paint: his preferred language, his personal handwriting. The activity of the brush marks also endangers our reading of the head in terms of our usual understanding of heads: features that are so dominant in conventional portraiture are on the verge of disappearance. Where we expect an ear to be we are overwhelmed by a range of conflicting information; the mouth is all but lost. Only the eyes seem immune from this approach, but unlike those of most portraits they are inert, neutral and disconcerting in their scale and placement. This touching and retouching of painted strokes onto the figure conveys a sense of anxiety both within the represented character and also within the artist, whose activity with the brush could be seen as some kind of compulsive ritual.

What is more disconcerting, the figure's penis or the alarming lack of fingers in either hand?

Is the overall effect of the image more threatening, pathetic or comedic?

What is the function of ambiguous objects behind the figure?

In 1963 the authorities confiscated the painting, as they felt that the depiction of masturbation was an obscenity. It took Baselitz two years to secure its return. A similar fate befell drawings by Egon Schiele some fifty years previously, and American museums were faced with funding boycotts when they exhibited *Sensation*, an exhibition of contemporary British art of the late 1990s.

Does this image pose a danger to public decency?

When is the state justified in intervening?

FORGING IDENTITY: THE HERO PAINTINGS

In 1965, Baselitz spent six months in Florence on a scholarship and became interested in the Mannerist followers of Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), such as Parmigianino (1503–1540) (fig. 2). He worked on a series of symbolic figures representing lone heroes, often in the act of travelling over a landscaped terrain. With titles such as *The Shepherd, Rebel* and *The Great Friends*, these 'New Types' move away from a threatening and pessimistic vision towards something more optimistic and possibly spiritual. The nature of their production also changes. The dense clumps of brushstrokes lose that intensity of cohesion which often bound them within the form, and so the whole environment comes into play through the inclusion of symbolic landscapes. As the series progresses, there is less reliance upon a dramatically staged lighting. As a result, colour and tone are liberated and the boundaries between form and space become less defined, allowing the subject and its environment to breathe and interact together and creating images with a much less insular atmosphere.

Although comparatively modest in scale, the figures achieve monumentality through the use of low horizons and diminished heads, encouraging the spectators to place themselves towards the base of the painting looking upwards. Symbolic attributes are often used to suggest the role that each character might fulfil: handcars and flags are regularly included. Boots, knapsacks and uniform jackets also predominate, implying the transient experience of the nomad or men who have just walked away from the battlefield. A good number of the characters have boots but choose to walk barefoot. Perhaps Baselitz is promoting the notion that these figures represent prophets or saints, spreading some kind of message, bearing hardships and getting by with the bare minimum of possessions.

Cat. 23 In *The Shepherd*, the figure itself is much more thickly painted than the broken wall which frames it.

In reality, brickwork is more enduring than human flesh.
What might Baselitz be implying by this seeming contradiction?

The shepherd is surrounded by tiny animals that presumably he might protect, but of greater significance are the symbolic items in his hand.
Why might Baselitz be suggesting that agriculture is the way to heal the wounds of war?

Having created a number of these so-called *Hero* images, Baselitz goes on to disrupt the unity of his characters by devising a strip format in which the canvases are subdivided into horizontal bands. Within each band the representation is skewed in terms of scale, content and viewpoint.

What might be gained from this experiment in disruption?

Our perception of the illusion has been challenged: if we wish to gain the whole, we must mentally readjust the information in each strip until each one conforms to a notion of unity. We are also given the option of seeing each zone for what it is without attempting to reconfigure the puzzle. The painting becomes much less about illusionism and consequently more to do with the nature of what Baselitz is doing with his brushes and the characteristics of his paint quality – his visual methodology.



Fig. 2

PARMIGIANINO
*The Madonna and Child with
Saints John the Baptist and
Jerome, 1526–7*
Oil on poplar
342.9 × 148.6 cm

Presented by the Directors of the
British Institution, 1826
Credit: © The National Gallery, London.

Cat. 23

The Shepherd (Der Hirte), 1965
Oil on canvas
162.5 × 131 cm

Friedrich Christian Flick Collection
Photo Christian Schwager
© Georg Baselitz





'There is the canvas and there is you. There is also something else, a third thing. In the beginning it's a dialogue – between you and the surface. As you work, you think and you do. In my way of working I work to eliminate the time between my thinking and doing. Then there comes a point that some other being or force is commanding you ... You also become in those moments more critical, hence more objective.'
PHILIP GUSTON, 1966

Cat. 79
Finger Painting – Eagle
(*Fingermalerei – Adler*), 1972
Oil on canvas
249.5 x 180.3 cm
Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen,
Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich.
Wittelsbacher Ausgleichsfonds, Prinz Franz von
Bayern Collection
Photo © Bayer&Mitko/Artothek
© Georg Baselitz

OVERLEAF
Cat. 91
Supper in Dresden
(*Nachtesen in Dresden*), 1983
Oil on canvas
280 x 450 cm
Kunsthaus Zurich
Photo Frank Oleski
© Georg Baselitz

THIS WAY UP

In 1969 Baselitz made the decision to create and/or display his works upside down. Considering that his pictures are painted on the studio floor so that the painter can walk around or even over the image, approaching the work from any given angle and any given orientation, it is not correct to say that a work is painted the correct way up and then inverted. As in his sectioned paintings, Baselitz is keen to disrupt the visual expectations gained from our everyday experience in order to force us to see the pictorial qualities of his performance. What could be seen as a trick or gimmick has a serious intent: it is designed to exploit the gap between seeing and thinking. If we wish to see something in a new light we must first disengage our expectations built around existing conceptions of reality so that our experience is not informed by what we believe we know. The only problem is that what we already know nags away at us, obstructing our freedom to discover by reorientating the image to what is already known, and mentally correcting the apparent fault.

What effect does this 'inversion' have upon how you see an image from a distance?

When closer to a picture and observing details of the paint structure, are you mentally aware of Baselitz's approach?

Should the pictures be best viewed on the floor rather than on the wall?

Cat. 79 Baselitz has had a lifelong interest in birds. As a boy he assisted the wildlife photographer Helmut Drechsler to seek out subjects for ornithological pictures. Birds have always been used as symbols representing the freedom of limitless potential or great majesty and strength. The ancient Romans, the Aztecs, the United States of America and Germany have all used the eagle to represent their aspirations. Birds however also have an awkward attitude when not in flight and can represent stupidity: 'bird brained', 'dead as a dodo', 'burying your head in the sand'. They have a social dimension, a group mentality, individuality within conformity. Baselitz has represented birds in all of these aspects, beginning with, in the early 1970s, the eagle. While being unable to separate it from its historical connotations, he seems to emphasise the eagle as a part of the natural world by showing it in flight – flight that is seen as something physical requiring effort from the bird and effort from the painter. The bird is not soaring majestically, but exerting itself in an almost scruffy way. Gestural paint marks animate the picture surface while at the same time representing feathers in movement. The eagle is not overly burdened by ornithological correctness. What Baselitz is after is the character of flight – the character of an individual painting made through instinct. Without such aids to recognition as eye or beak, the eagle could well be seen as an explosion of dark shards against a sky, with more density than atmosphere.

MARKET FORCES

Artists' careers are often shaped not by the work that they create but by how curators and patrons construct a sense of cultural value for that work. The prevailing tastes for conceptualism and minimalism during the 1970s meant that Baselitz was perceived as not very fashionable. However, in 1981 the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, *A New Spirit in Painting*, launched what became known as Neo-expressionism onto an ever-expanding world market. This exhibition has since become the stuff of legend in its reorientation of attitudes towards the works of Picasso and Guston – the strengths within their respective





late works had previously been largely overlooked, dismissed or ignored – as well as its underlining of Baselitz's continued significance.

Not everyone was convinced, however. Baselitz's paintings of the 1980s fell foul of conservative critics like Robert Hughes, who saw instinctive brushwork as ill-disciplined and escalating prices as symptomatic of a society addicted to novelty for its own sake. 'The size of this sector of the new art audience, the gratifying uniformity of its taste, and its insecure obsession with mutually recognisable signs of status produce many consequences for artists. One of them is that the race is not necessarily to the swift but more likely to the voluminous ... How many pictures does Georg Baselitz, that sturdy German fountain of overwrought mediocrity, paint a year?' (Robert Hughes, *Art and Money*, 1984). The instinctive compulsion to produce large numbers of works, often in challenging visual form, is not however limited to the artists of the 1980s. Artists as diverse as Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), Rembrandt (1606–1669) and Titian (c.1485–1576) have all followed this pattern. Contemporary commentators often viewed their works as deliberately awkward and thus aesthetically debased.

The works produced by Baselitz during this period are distinctive for their intensity of colour and rapidity of execution. This was interpreted in some areas as a wilful exploitation of market conditions.

Do you feel that this approach is a natural extension of what has gone before or something more cynical or calculating?

Cat. 91 The term Neo-expressionism implies a connection to the first wave of distinctively expressionist output which also occurred in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1983 painting *Supper in Dresden* alludes to the 'Die Brücke' painters such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), who, through painting their experiences of studio, city and landscape, sought to fuse the elemental force of African and Oceanic carving with individual painterly expression. Baselitz portrays these artists not at work but at a table. Without the title we might believe that the picture is a depiction of something more religious – a last supper of sorts. Unlike the balanced groupings in *The Last Supper* of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), the characters on each end of the painting are agitated and in energetic movement. The way in which the heads have been painted (almost carved out of a simple volume with slashes of paint, eye sockets virtually hollowed out) seems related to the wooden sculptures that Baselitz began producing seriously in the 1980s. The depicted characters are stripped of any real indication as to exactly who they might be. They are elemental: they eat, they drink, they follow the rituals attendant on the passage of life and death. It is at this stage that Baselitz, through the universality of his figures (although a number do refer to biblical incidents), becomes most akin to the shamanistic cave painters of the distant past.

The original German Expressionists would never have painted so vigorously. The outcome of the image is constantly in flux and often at risk as forms are made and destroyed in an ongoing process. Neither was there a market for canvases of such proportions.

Do you think Baselitz might be asserting kinship with the original German Expressionists or is he asserting his differences from them via his 'Neo-expressionism'?

A number of Baselitz's works were included in the Royal Academy's exhibition, *German Art in the Twentieth Century* of 1987. In conjunction with this, he delivered a lecture entitled 'Painter's Equipment': 'Are the painters still those

'DS: Could one put it like this? – that you're trying to make an image of appearance that is conditioned as little as possible by the accepted standards of what appearance is.

FB: By some accidental brush marks suddenly appearance comes in with a vividness that no accepted way of doing it would have brought about.'

DAVID SYLVESTER

AND FRANCIS BACON, 1973

'Each time he begins a picture, says he, he plunges headlong into it, and feels like a man who knows that his surest plan to learn to swim safely, is, dangerous as it may seem, to throw himself into the water.'

MALLARMÉ ON MANET

painters who are painting the great cave? Do they paint the buffalo on the wall as hunger, the eagle as freedom, and the woman with the big bottom as love? Have they meanwhile left the cave, cleared out of the community and forgotten all of those universal, comprehensible agreements. Have they traded the cave for some other place? Propagandising about needs, "What does man need?", feeds upon a yearning for freedom and the fear of death and entices us into taking another way, off the painters' course.'

TOWARDS A NEW ARCHETYPE

Cat. 89 *Eagle in Bed* comes from a group of paintings depicting figures against schematic grounds. The organisation of this picture makes it difficult to identify the bed's position with any great certainty. We may be looking down at the figure from above, or the bed may be represented by the painting's uppermost portion. This eagle, however, is a long way from the earlier depiction. It is more of a birdman with legs and possibly arms (something like an Aztec warrior or shaman of some kind). It is unclear whether this is a black picture on a white ground or a white picture on a black ground. This inter-changeability (black/white, man/bird, egg/pillow) weakens the literal interpretation while strengthening the visual resonance of the whole image. Traces of black are excavated by or echoed within strokes of white; further applications of white build a dense surface reminiscent of parquet flooring and bathroom tiles. Against this the eagle's eye, beak and egg make their dramatic entrance, but more disconcerting still is the creature's fleshy bottom lip painted in a single pink stroke. This presence of colour within the monochromatic environment lends a sense of the organic to the bird: it is

Cat. 89

Eagle in Bed (Adler im Bett),

1982

Oil on canvas

250 × 250 cm

Private collection
Photo Frank Oleski
© Georg Baselitz



conscious, alive. Where we might look for a wing we find a network of white strokes, whose function is not to create surface but to fracture it: these brittle yet energetic bursts can imply feathers but equally might suggest shattered glass, splintered wood or cobwebs in a doorway. Thicker, fuller, creamier strokes of white over dry black echo this activity by creating a series of dark fragments and strands which seem to chase the egg like a comet's tail or sperm racing to fertilise.

What function do the dreamlike images fulfil?

In the age of computer-generated imagery why might such creations still be necessary?

SCULPTURE

Cat. 1 Baselitz came relatively late to sculpture, in 1979. He became drawn to it through a desire to create the actual, imposing upon us a confrontation with something awkward and animated. The title *Model for a Sculpture* implies that the thing we see is in fact not entirely the statement the artist was after and instead is something more exploratory or provisional. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans and also, to some extent, Kirchner and Giacometti, Baselitz is inclined to view his sculpture as something paintable.

In *Model for a Sculpture* the upper torso seems, on completion, to have been given further definition or visual energy with bold strokes of colour that accentuate both an idea of movement and a host of minor cuts biting into the figure's body. The figure's legs, however, remain trapped within the original woodblock and are suggested by paint in advance of any possible sculpting. This kind of emergent form is not a twentieth-century concept. It has been employed by both Michelangelo in the sixteenth century and Rodin in the nineteenth; it indicates a sense of birth or becoming as well as death, decay and a subsequent return to the earth. The attitude of this particular work is perhaps the most ungainly to be found in Baselitz's sculpture: the figure is caught half way between lying and sitting, which is in reality a considerably strenuous position and highly improbable. The raised arm (for Germans at least) creates its own issues: the figure may be reaching for help, waving a greeting or, as was once thought by some commentators, giving a Nazi salute (which in Germany is illegal). The position of the hand, however, suggests that the latter is not the case.

Wood has always been Baselitz's material of choice as it 'enables avoidance of any attractiveness of form, any craft like or artistic elegance ... Objects made in wood are unique, simple and unpretentious.' The types of wood that Baselitz prefers are those which are workable but also offer resistance so that working on them requires effort. Many of his sculptures are made from ash, limewood or cedar. Over two decades the way the wood is worked has evolved, as Baselitz explores the use of tools and the visual language that those tools create. Earlier sculptures tend to be chiselled, later ones chain-sawed. The artist is never concerned with hiding or retouching the signs of each piece's creation. Instead their wounds are essential to the birth and so are displayed as depictions, as saints reveal their stigmata.

DIVISION AND UNITY

In the 1945 allied bombing of the city of Dresden, bombs were carefully dropped in order to create the biggest possible inferno. Imagine a birthday cake with a hundred candles: by lighting only those around the edge of the cake, air is sucked inwards igniting the rest to create a much greater intensity than one hundred

Cat. 1

Model for a Sculpture (Modell für eine Skulptur), 1979–80
Limewood and tempera
178 × 147 × 244 cm

Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Ludwig Collection
Photo © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne
© Georg Baselitz

'The same problem can be addressed more directly in sculpture which is less hedged about with qualification than painting. It is more primitive and brutal ... A thing like a ghost, less encoded than paintings, more direct, much more legible. Perhaps also more stupid.'
GEORG BASELITZ



candles, individually lit, could possibly achieve. Tens of thousands of civilians were incinerated for little obvious advantage. This event took place close to Baselitz's boyhood home.

Particular events of the war are never pinpointed in Baselitz's work, but if the 'New Types' can be seen as former soldiers, could the female faces in later works be civilian survivors of Nazi oppression, allied bombing and Russian occupation?

Why is it often artists who are left to give a voice to the forgotten or the silent?

A key feature of Baselitz's work from the 1970s onwards is something he refers to as 'ornament'. It is a function that takes his pictures away from a naturalistic form of representation towards something more overtly decorative and liberated. Forms and spaces are not separated but there is an interplay between figure and field in which one dominates the other in turn. The result is something that may at times look disorientating or even crude (as the large-scale paintings of Henri Matisse must have looked to many in 1913), but within them hold something deeply satisfying not to the intellect but to one's inner visual sense. This feeling of visual rightness (rather than correctness) is fought for and all elements amplified to their fullest magnitude, thus by-passing accepted Western trends.

Baselitz employs a number of strategies to achieve this: strokes build up on the surface creating dense fields; other strokes are used to excavate into existing paint as if to carve out or unearth something of independence or vitality. Bands or blocks of simple colour run across the entirety of the canvas, forcing subject matter back into a shallow space. Net-like grids are also employed to enmesh subject matter or again to subdue it spatially. Many of these pictures have no specific viewpoint or orientation and so can easily be likened to carpets or wall hangings, or even to medieval heraldry.

These paintings are often taken from real-life situations, but are presented to us in a form that is rarefied and deeply symbolic, each one having been sought through the process of its own making rather than conceptualised in advance and then merely fabricated. It is the sense of struggle that brings life to these paintings and prevents them from simply being mere decor.

Cat. 94 During 1989 Communist control of East Germany collapsed, as the Soviet Union had lost the political will and the financial ability to control the countries it had occupied and governed by proxy since 1945. For all Germans at this point there must have been an immense awareness of historical significance resonating both backwards to Germany's division and forward towards a unified and free German nation in the foreseeable future. Within this context, Baselitz painted '45, one of his grandest and strangest productions.

In addition to the sheer size of this undertaking, it is the bringing together of pure visual essences which underpins the work's authority. The scratching, clawing or gouging that each panel bears like wounds to the body or the passage of time on a cell wall speaks of anxiety, obsession or sanity's fragility under extreme circumstances. Overlaid on to this (the scratching is rarely used to re-draw the heads or imprison them further) is the buttery richness of fat as the paint takes on a warm fleshy presence. The paint soothes the wounds upon the panel (but not entirely), calms the itchiness and provides something of optimism.

The panels mostly show women, or perhaps one single woman many times over. Faces are on show; they communicate. Facial features can often refine a message further but here they retain an ambiguity. As in his sculpted heads, Baselitz is predominantly interested in the material fact of the head's presence and the feeling it provokes within us and not so much with illustrative definition.

'There is always an element of the unclassifiable about great pictures so that when we're standing in front of them quite often our first reaction is that everything that everybody's said about this picture and this painter is wrong. Good paintings attack fact from an unfamiliar point of view. They're bound to look genuine, and in some way rawly and actively repellent, disturbing and itchy and not right.'
FRANK AUERBACH, 1978

RIGHT
Cat. 94
17th panel of
'45 (Forty-Five), 1989
Oil and tempera
on wood
200 × 162 cm
Kunsthaus Zurich
Photo Frank Oleski
© Georg Baselitz







Cat. 94
'45 (Forty-Five), 1989
Oil and tempera
on 20 wood panels
200 x 162 cm
Kunsthaus Zurich
Photo Frank Oleski
© Georg Baselitz

Giacometti always felt that so-called primitive sculpture was far more life-like than the work of the ancient Greeks. An idealised finely crafted marble figure seemed dead to him: the energy within an encounter with something living simply was not there.

The scratches are definitive. We can see exactly what they are, where they begin and end. We can also imagine how they might have been gouged out (either with a tool or with the fingernails). The heads, however, are like apparitions, either in the process of forming or dissolving. The paint is certainly there but the image that it creates is unstable – not spatially or anatomically certain, sometimes moving, turning either toward or away. The black used in many cases behind the heads might imply a charring or scorching, to which somehow these heads have been resilient. This might represent a sense of survival, hope or fortitude. One panel suggests a watchtower, another shows rabbits on a grassy clump. A rudimentary hut is scratched into another.

What kind of narrative might Baselitz be intending?

Would the work's meaning change greatly if men were included?

There does seem to be some kind of spiritual force behind the work.
In what ways might it represent a religious statement?

REMIX

Over the past ten years the manner of Baselitz's painting has taken on another form. There is still this sense of over-painting and excavation through the use of the brushstroke, but now there is a growing liquidity and luminescence within the

Cat. 21 DETAIL OVERLEAF

The Great Friends

(*Die Großen Freunde*), 1965

Oil on canvas

250 × 300 cm

Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Ludwig Donation
Photo © Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne
© Georg Baselitz



paint, as if the larger works have taken on the qualities of his much smaller studies. This liquidity has gained the prominence that was once given to purity of colour and, before that, to subtlety of tone and substance. It speaks of a refreshed enthusiasm for what paint might achieve.

Baselitz, as always, when identifying a quality, also seeks out its counterpoint. In this case it is the use of thin, black strokes that take on an itchy, graphic property like bristles from a broom or hair caught in soap. Often these strands begin with a small bud of paint like some kind of root. In terms of subject matter, we might often find that family photographs or pets have been used as inspiration for these works.

Cats 21 and 116 Very recently Baselitz has attempted something strangely fascinating and quite possibly doomed to failure: he has embarked on a series of paintings that revisits the work he completed over forty years ago. *The Big Night Down the Drain*, the *Foot* and the *Hero* series have all been remade or translated in this breezier manner. Images that required great deliberation and fortitude on the maker's part in their first incarnation are now spat out in an almost carefree way as if all the battles have been won and some kind of celebration is called for.

Cat. 116 DETAIL OVERLEAF
The Great Friends (Remix) (Die großen Freunde (Remix)), 2005
Oil on canvas
300 x 400 cm

Private collection
Photo © Jochen Littkemann
© Georg Baselitz

In Remix Great Friends what might this new language add to the image that the original approach possibly lacked?

Arguably these images lack that intensity of purpose. What is to be gained by reliving the past? Might this be something to do with what has happened within Germany between then and now?





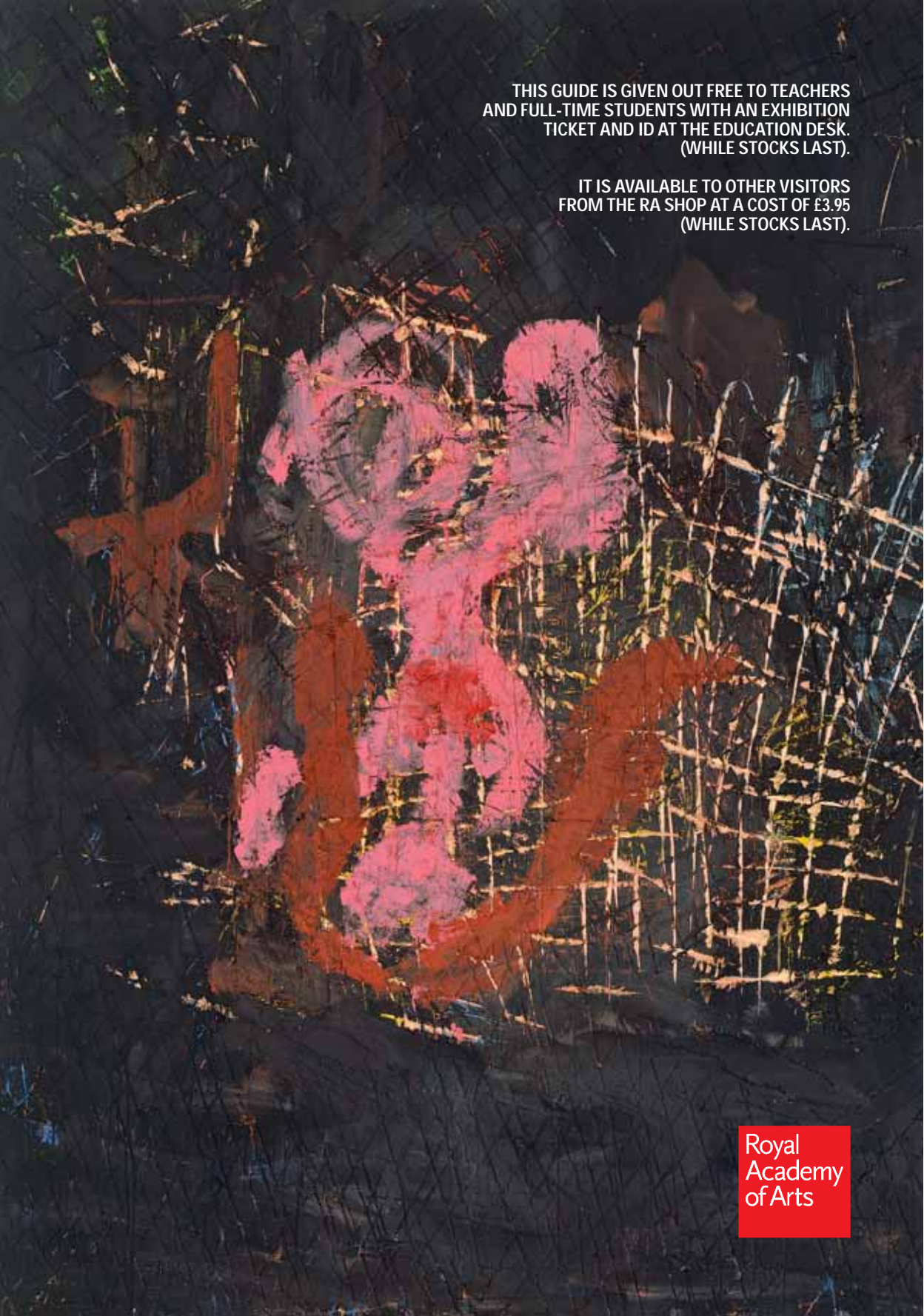


CONCLUSION

Words will always struggle to unlock fully what it is at the heart of painting that both appeals (or not), and brings renewed vitality to the processes of seeing and feeling. The means available to the painter are limited only by his sense of taste or propriety. The painters who stand the test of time are those who are not afraid to be deemed untutored, inept or uncouth by the majority. Neither are they afraid of sensitivity towards their materials or their subject matter. Baselitz may well be one of those painters. Over a period of fifty years he has undertaken a remarkable journey through painting, creating both poetic resonance and an engaging dialogue between our intrinsic humanity and the times in which we currently find ourselves.

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An abstract painting featuring a dark, textured background. The composition is dominated by vibrant, expressive brushstrokes in shades of pink, magenta, and burnt orange. These colors are layered and blended, creating a sense of depth and movement. A prominent feature is a grid-like pattern of thin, light-colored lines, possibly white or pale yellow, that crisscrosses the right side of the image. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and complex visual texture.

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