

Georg Baselitz  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 70

University Art Museum  
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Untitled, 1983



The rupture between modern Germany and its past caused by the Third Reich and the subsequent division of the German people into two nations profoundly affected the life and art of German Expressionist artist Georg Baselitz.

The postwar period in West Germany was characterized by the ascendance and eventual domination of nonobjective abstraction (called "Tachism"). Tachism not only derived stylistically from American abstract expressionism, but also was identified with the West and with freedom. East German artists, on the other hand, were forced to adopt a social realist style based on Soviet models.

Baselitz, who moved to West Berlin after his expulsion from art school in his native East Germany, is the senior member of a group of artists who were adamantly opposed to the nonobjective styles of the 1950s and 60s. In angry and iconoclastic manifestos Baselitz proclaimed his aversion to formalist abstraction. During this period, Baselitz met A. R. Penck, another emigré artist from East Germany. Along with Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorff and others, this group developed figurative styles related to those of such early twentieth century German Expressionists as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Oskar Kokoschka, but expressive of uniquely contemporary political and personal anxieties. Though they received some recognition in Europe during the 1970s, it was not until the recent international resurgence of interest in imagist painting that their art became known to American

audiences. Baselitz achieved instant notoriety for the upside-down images that have appeared in all his canvases since 1969.

Although Baselitz has always worked with specific imagery (portraits, nudes, animals, landscape), he professes equal interest in pure painting--in problems of shape, color and line. He conceives of the image as a motif, rather than as a symbol. It serves as a point of departure in much the same way the horse and head function in paintings by the contemporary American artist Susan Rothenberg (MATRIX 3). Baselitz seeks a tension between figuration and abstraction, rejecting the notion that the two are antithetical.

In 1966 Baselitz invented a type he called "The New Man", a distorted heroic figure inspired by those found in sixteenth century Northern Mannerist engravings. During the next three years, the figure became increasingly fractured until it finally was turned entirely upside down. Since the late 1970s the inverted human figure has predominated in Baselitz's paintings. (He actually executes these works upside down; he doesn't merely invert the canvas.) By freeing figures from conventional associations, Baselitz concentrates attention on the abstract elements of the painting, such as the hatched network of lines that surrounds, defines and penetrates the figure in the linocuts and woodcuts on view. It has been suggested that the flipped image may also refer to the topsy-turvy condition of the modern world.

Although Baselitz has made prints since the mid-1960s, he initially used the etching and woodcut media primarily to reproduce images from his paintings. In his first "Eagle" portfolio of 1966, he began to use the print to develop his style, employing a variety of block printing techniques, including woodcut and wood engraving. Baselitz enjoys the struggle involved in carving the wood block, and he uses the evidence of this battle, along with the texture of the wood grain, to expressive advantage in the prints themselves.

In 1977 Baselitz made his first linocuts. The pliable linoleum surface allows for a more fluid line than is possible in making a woodcut. By working on a scale equal to the massive dimensions of his paintings (previously unknown in the linocut medium) and by using oil paint rather than printing ink, Baselitz has blurred the boundaries between printing and painting. He finds graphic media particularly suited to his method of developing a work. His paintings emerge from the superimposition of many layers of paint in a gradual, unplanned manner, each layer obliterating the next. In his prints Baselitz is able to record the various stages of the evolution of his work by pulling an impression at any point. He often paints on top of the finished work, so that many of the prints are actually unique examples (monoprints).

Baselitz made his first sculptures in 1980. At first glance, the blocky, crudely painted figures hewn from tree trunks resemble sculptures made 75 years ago by Kirchner, who in turn was inspired by African and

Oceanic examples. In common with Baselitz, Kirchner's reputation is based primarily on his paintings. Both artists have translated figure types from their paintings into sculptural forms--as well as using these three-dimensional images as models for other paintings. In 1911 Kirchner wrote, "There is a figure in every trunk, one must only peel it out." The process of hacking away at the wood to reveal a figure is similar to the gouging of wood in block printing; in both cases, the physically demanding process is exposed in the finished work. Contemporary German artists (Penck, Immendorff and Markus Lupertz also make wood sculptures) view the earlier German expressionist works as both an inspiration and a challenge. Baselitz's figures are made with chain saws and axes; they are more butchered than carved, and their primitive look belies their sophistication. They confront the viewer with the scars of their violent birth, victims of the modern age.

Baselitz was born in 1938 in Saxony which later became part of East Germany. He changed his surname from Kern to Baselitz after the name of his village, Deutschbaselitz. Since 1975 he has lived and worked at Derneburg Castle near Hildesheim, and in 1982 he was named professor at Hochschule für Bildende Künste, W. Berlin.

The University Art Museum, Berkeley presentation of this exhibition was made possible by generous support from Quay Gallery, San Francisco, the Goethe Institute, San Francisco; and the Cutter Foundation, Emeryville, California. It was originally shown at the Los Angeles

County Museum of Art, where it was organized by Stephanie Barron, curator of twentieth century art, but it has been augmented in Berkeley by woodcuts lent by Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

Constance Lewallen  
Associate Curator

Works in MATRIX: All works lent by Galerie Neuendorf, Hamburg, W. Germany, unless otherwise noted.

Akt mit drei Armen (Nude with Three Arms), 1977, ren linocut on white paper, 104½" x 62½".

Gebückter (Stooped Figure), 1977, black linocut on white paper, 85" x 43½".

Faustkämpfer (Fighter), 1977, black linocut on white paper, 86½" x 59½".

Untitled, 1982, painted wood, 82½" x 26" x 29½".

Untitled, 1983, painted wood, 98½" x 35½" x 23½".

Gebückter (Stooped Figure), 1981, black woodcut on white paper, 34" x 24". Lent by Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

Adler (Eagle), 1981, black woodcut on white paper, 34" x 24". Lent by Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

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Selected one-person exhibitions:

Galerie Werner & Katz, W. Berlin, '63, catalogue; Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland, '70, catalogue; Galerie Neuendorf, Hamburg, W. Germany, '73, '83; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, '79, '81, catalogues; Kunstverein, Braunschweig, W. Germany, '81, catalogue; Xavier Fourcade Gallery, NY, '81, '83.

Selected group exhibitions:

Akademie der Künst, W. Berlin, Junge Generation, '66, catalogue; Kassel, W. Germany, Documenta 5, 6, 7, '72, '77, '82, catalogues; Cologne, W. Germany, Westkunst, '81, catalogue; Royal Academy of Arts, London, A New Spirit in Painting, '81, catalogue; Martin-Gropius-Bau, W. Berlin, Zeitgeist, '82, catalogue; The St. Louis Art Museum, MO, Expressionism: New Art From Germany, '83, catalogue with extensive biographical information, traveled; The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Monumental Prints, '83, (brochure).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Gachnang, Johannes.  
"New German Painting," Flash Art (Milan), Feb. - Mar. '82.  
Gohr, Siegfried.  
"In the Absence of Heroes: the Early Work of Georg Baselitz," Artforum, Summer, '82.

Faust, W. M.  
"Appearance of the Zeitgeist," Artforum, Jan. '83.  
Kuspit, Donald.

"Acts of Aggression: German Painting Today," Art in America, Jan. '83.

Russell, John.  
"Art," New York Times, June 3, '83.