

ArtSeen

Georg Baselitz: *Drawings*

By **Jonathan Goodman**

Georg Baselitz, now in his 80s, continues to produce remarkable expressionist art, usually of figures seen upside-down. Born in Eastern Germany and educated in several art schools there, he moved to West Germany, where he first encountered abstraction. In 1969, he showed, for the first time, a painting with an inverted figure. Since then, this motif has been a signature element of his style. His work ushered in the Neo-Expressionist movement that gained international force in the late 1970s. Though that orientation in art no longer has much currency, Baselitz has continued his striking mix of improvisation, rough handling, and emotional expressiveness to this day, a consistency exemplified by the excellent drawing exhibition now on view at Anton Kern Gallery. The drawings, in red and black ink, were made by the artist in one sitting in the summer of 2021, and most take as their subject Baselitz himself or his wife Johanna Elke Kretzschmar. Of a medium size, these ink on paper works consist of loose skeins of activity, with, as always, the figure inverted.

Placed as a group on the second floor of the gallery, this sequence maintains the untrammelled energy and improvisational design of an artist who was central to the re-invention of expressionism in the second half of the 20th century. With only a couple of exceptions, the 14 drawings mostly are less involved at the top of the composition, often depicting legs, while the lower part of the work is denser and most often suggests a person's head. Baselitz is very much a painter of feeling, someone who has wanted to re-invest German art with a heroic outlook but found himself frustrated because of the terrible legacy of the Nazi regime. So the heroic figure paintings he created, relatively soon after the defeat of Germany, are necessarily mixed memorials. The group of recent drawings presented here, are less equivocal: we see Baselitz late in his career, as active and energetic as ever, drawing strength, perhaps, from his long marriage to Elke Kretzschmar.

There is one drawing in red—all the works are untitled—which presents two thick legs at the top of the composition, with three inchoate, bright red blots roughly in the middle. The torso and head, given without definition, are not as densely drawn as the legs. Looking at it quickly, for the first time, the viewer might well experience the drawing as an energetic abstraction. But further study reveals the rough outline of the figure, endowing the work with a palpable humanism. Perhaps we can understand Baselitz's art as held between a realism not always easy to discern and a real interest in abstraction. We cannot say



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outright that the drawings are fully realist or fully nonobjective. But their major trait is one of declared feeling.

Two black drawings in ink exhibit a near spider web of connected lines, but both have a recognizable head, found at the drawing's lowest part. They might easily be likened to a movement Germany did not participate in heavily: Abstract Expressionism. Think, for example, of the black paintings Pollock created from 1951 to 1953, which combine abstract composition with a hidden figurative component. Expressionism in Germany was always very much a matter of broadly rendered figurative art, but a figure like Hans Hartung, whose life spanned most of the 20th century, did much work in abstraction. Also, the non-objective pioneer Wassily Kandinsky, originally from Russia, spent his later life in Germany, where he had a major impact. And now, the kind of abstraction suggested in Baselitz's paintings is a distinctly worldwide phenomenon.

There is one work on paper, drawn in black ink, that is very clearly a study of a head, upside down, and an upper torso. The eyes and the head are clearly evident and take up a good amount of space, while the top of the work is devoted to a raised right arm whose hand reaches up to the face, while the other arm is bent before the person (presumably Baselitz). The artist has often stated that he paints the figure in inverted fashion to "irritate" his audience, believing they will pay closer attention to what they see. It is clear that Baselitz's unusual practice, performed for more than half a century, is neither an eccentricity nor a tic. Instead, his use of inversion introduces an abstract element to our response, a quality that makes his art both more eloquent and more original. This wonderful show proves that Baselitz has in no way lost his abilities or compromised his point of view. And the sum of the series is greater than the individual efforts that make it up: their effect as a group is solidified by the artist's particular style and feeling. It is clear that Baselitz has a lot more to say.



Georg Baselitz, *Ohne Titel*, 2021. Ink on paper, 25 7/8 x 19 3/4 inches. © Georg Baselitz. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

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Jonathan Goodman is an art writer and poet who focuses on modern and contemporary art, often from the Far East and particularly on sculpture.