

Obituary shared by Georg Baselitz's family

Written by Robert Isaf

Georg Baselitz, the Saxon-born artist who defined German visual art for a generation, profoundly influencing artists around and after him and the international world of art, has died peacefully at the age of 88.

A son of schoolteachers, raised amid war, ruin, and occupation, soon turned exile in his own fractured homeland, Baselitz grew to embody the fullness of the post-war European experience. This is true not only of his expansive artistic legacy, distinct to us now and embedded in the cultural epic of mankind, but in a life led honestly, insistently, and well.

Born on January 23, 1938, Hans-Georg Bruno Kern only adopted the name of Baselitz in 1961. The choice honoured Deutschbaselitz, the village of his birth, known for natural beauty that continues to draw wildlife photographers and plein-air painters. It was by them that the young Hans-Georg was first introduced to the craft of human artmaking; the birds and landscapes of the Upper Lausitz served as his earliest education of what art could be.

He left East Germany in 1957, after rejection from the Art Academy of Dresden and suspension from the Weißensee Academy of Fine and Applied Arts in East Berlin, facing increased political pressure and the prospect of coerced labour in a coal-mining collective. By 1961, the same year of an early manifesto and a joint exhibition, it was clear that he was not only an outsider to the strictures and expectations of East German art, but to West German trends, too, neither a social realist nor an abstract expressionist, artistically as ideologically uncategorisable.

Branded in the East with formal accusations of 'sociopolitical immaturity,' Baselitz's first solo exhibition in West Berlin, in 1963, was labelled pornographic by the press. Two of his paintings were confiscated, the show was shuttered, and he was fined by the police. Within two years, Baselitz was in Florence, on scholarship. It was there that he created the *Heldenbilder* – the *Heroes* – a pivotal series of paintings which came to be recognised as masterpieces. By the end of the 1960s Baselitz had arrived at the technique for which even the most casual art-going public today will recognise him: the inversion, the practice of creating and exhibiting his paintings 'upside down'.

What elevates Baselitz to the status of era-defining visionary is not his command of contour, for instance, or shadow, but of relationship – that is to say, the relationship between viewer and viewed. It is an often and easily overlooked dimension of artistic creation, but one whose relevance in the modern age cannot be overstated. Baselitz manipulates this dimension of relationship with an unmatched ease and mastery. It is the central and defining feature of his entire oeuvre, from the first 'pandemonic' impulses of his West Berlin graduate years up to the *Eroi d'Oro*, his final, otherworldly gold-ground series of paintings. The techniques he employs in this are manifold. One period finds him fracturing his subjects and motifs, physically splitting them across the canvas; in another, he offers only severed limbs and parts, grotesque and blown up large and unsupported by any context; here he sands down the shapes and features of subjects he titles with evocative precision. His landmark 1980 appearance for Germany at the Venice Biennale – one of two institutions, alongside documenta, with which Baselitz has become uniquely intertwined – came in the form of a sculpture he titled *Model for a*

Sculpture, unmistakably and almost scandalously unfinished, as though daring festival-goers to challenge it.

It can be expected that a little more time and distance will need to pass before Baselitz frees himself, in his *nachleben*, from all unsought labels. The formal aspects of his work quickly gave rise to comparisons with various expressionist strains of the early twentieth century, and many observers have shorthanded him as emblematic of a rather undefined movement of German Neo-Expressionism. If his art appears formally to follow the grammar of Expressionism, he himself as artist is, if anything, identifiable as Pop; it is, after all, Pop Art which most fully among contemporary movements could be said to take up manipulating the dimension of viewer relationship as its core concern.

Definitions like this are not entirely wrong, and so far as formal grouping goes they can serve their purpose. A focus on expressionist resemblances rather misses the crux of what makes Baselitz important to the point of immortality; recalibrating to Pop likewise makes it hard to imagine Baselitz outside the mid-century he took his first giant steps in. The final shock of the artist is how, almost to spite the frantic success of his earliest years, his truest genius unfurls at the end of his time spent with us.

Baselitz has created an extraordinary body of late-period work, a series of series spanning a decade, which coalesces and reconsiders all the themes and motifs of a lifetime. It begins with 2015's dark, swaggering *Avignon* series, in conscious reference to Picasso's own late stage. Announcing to the world that he intends to match Picasso is audacious, but ten years later the audacity is borne out. It is not worth trying to assign Baselitz belonging in one movement or school or another because he is, at days' end, a figure and vision entirely his own. The Paris retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, from 2021-2022 – opening with his initiation into the Académie des Beaux-Arts – made that singularity, the completeness of this vision across the full sweep of his career, clear. The late-period works, the last decades of series from *Avignon* on, allow that vision to reach its full potential. The eagles, the orange-eaters, the bare everyman form all reappear, but confident and indelible in a way that makes the earlier years look in hindsight like a long exploration, a master at work producing studies, preparing for a later, greater masterpiece.

What emerges in the series that follow is, above all, a unique meditation on a life spent in partnership. Baselitz met Elke Kretschmar, a student of graphic design, soon after moving to West Berlin; they hitchhiked and troubadoured their way through Europe together in the early thin-penny years, from *documenta*'s second instalment to the formative museums of Paris and Amsterdam, scrounging a simple life from political refugee grants and odd jobs, working beer barrel deliveries, painting bars. They married in 1962. She is not the primary subject of his early works. We encounter Elke long after Georg does, after the love story is fully formed and self-assured. She can only become the primary subject of his craft, perhaps, once he has grown confident of what his craft is; this is no young man's flickering passion in paint but a flame settled into the groove of its wax. We watch her as she ages along with the man in the self-portraits, her partner and fullest confidant. It is an astonishing achievement for an artist to bring his life and his life's work to a close with such poetic force, but Baselitz, in a last master stroke, has prevailed. *Eroi d'Oro*, his final series of paintings, is presented, at this moment, alongside the Venice Biennale, to staggering effect. His ultimate subject is and will always have been Elke. His final paintings, his portraits of him and her, honest, unflinching and profoundly human, come to terms with all of what this means. They float suspended, inverted, among golden eternity and the many gilded worlds and lives they've lived together.