

Press release

Georg Baselitz

La boussole indique le nord

22 January—27 May 2023
Opening Sunday 22 January 2023, 2—5pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Paris Pantin
69, avenue Général Leclerc, 93500 Pantin



Georg Baselitz, *Der Kompass zeigt nach Norden*, 2021
Oil, dispersion adhesive, fabric and nylon stockings on canvas
300 x 210 cm (118.11 x 82.68 in)

La boussole indique le nord is an exhibition of recent works by internationally renowned German artist Georg Baselitz. Filling the gallery's Paris Pantin space, the exhibition brings together five series realised between 2020 and 2021, in celebration of the artist's 85th birthday. The works on view span *Tulips* with pared-back compositions and contrasting colours, three series of portraits with vivid palettes, and a series of more melancholy portraits on dark backgrounds. The works on canvas are accompanied by a group of ink drawings. Characterised by an unprecedented integration

of fabric and by a transfer method that marks a significant recent development in Baselitz's technique, the works create, both conceptually and materially, a distinctive universe where the logic of collage coalesces with painting.

Baselitz's wife Elke has been a constant subject of the artist's work throughout his career, ever since he first painted her in 1969. Showing her from the waist up, her head resting on her hand, the group of new portraits in the exhibition pays homage to Baselitz's very first depiction of her, which is today part of the



Georg Baselitz, *Menti senti*, 2020
Oil on canvas. 300 x 250 cm (118.11 x 98.43 in)

collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Those from 2021 also feature a new element in Baselitz's visual vocabulary: a disjointed pair of nylon stockings affixed to the upside-down portrait of Elke, like fragile, disembodied legs. Existing on a different plane to the oil-painted figures, they give the canvases a third dimension, expanding them into the realm of collage to evoke the work of German Dadaist Hannah Höch, who employed cut-out legs to construct mismatched bodies in her pioneering photocollages. Interviewed in the *NZZ am Sonntag* in 2022, Baselitz said: 'Some two years ago I remembered Hannah Höch and her stocking pictures. I had never dared to make collages before. I found the technique wonderful. But the question was: how could I use this technique in my painting? Then I had a dream about the stockings.'

With a touch of playfulness, the stockings recall the feet and legs that have been a recurring theme since the artist's very early works. For Baselitz, they are the symbol of a tactile connection with the earth: the same connection he fosters by working with his canvases on the floor. Interviewed by Martin Schwander in 2017, Baselitz explained that, as a

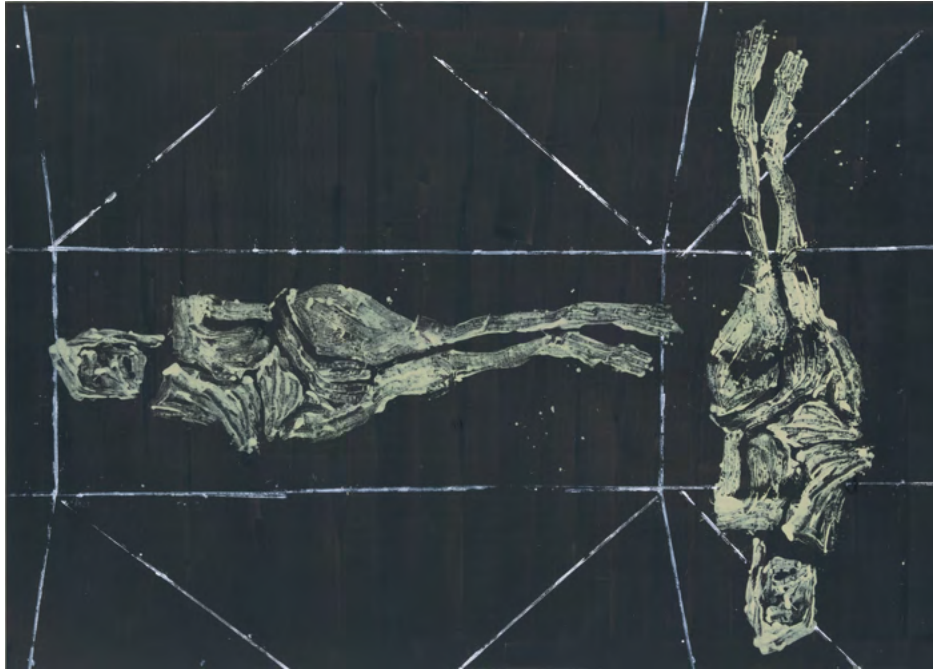
'north-of-the-Alps man', his contact does not reach heavenward: 'The Mediterranean peoples [...] told us about angels in Heaven. I don't believe in that. So, when I'm painting on the floor, the contact downward – feeling for what is under it – is really important.' As the artist added in 2021, 'people living north of the Alps are in search of their own story', grounded in their own earthy mythology. The exhibition, whose title translates as *The Compass Points North*, might be viewed in light of this reflection.

As if in defiance of the ambiguous sensuality of the garment, the empty stockings on view seem to confront us with absence. This sense of evanescence is mirrored in the sparsity of the painted surfaces among the works in the exhibition, which contrast with the dense impasto for which Baselitz has long been known. Across the works on view, the artist uses a monotype printing technique he has developed in recent years. He paints the composition onto a piece of unstretched canvas before pressing a second canvas against it while wet, to create a mirror-image impression. Here, compared to previous works, Baselitz's 'figures dissolve more and more', remarks art critic Gerhard Mack. 'The colour becomes transparent [and the] figures are almost floating, porous'.

Baselitz takes his monotype technique a step further in his intensely chromatic portraits with stockings, transferring the figure of Elke onto a piece of fabric which he then affixes to the canvas. Allowing the



Georg Baselitz, *Wirft die Frau den Stein? I*, 2020
Oil on canvas. 250 x 300 cm (98.43 x 118.11 in)



Georg Baselitz, *Wo ist die Gitarre*, 2021
Oil on canvas. 300 x 420 cm (118.11 x 165.35 in)

creases of the fabric to mirror the delicate folds of skin, this unprecedented technique brings to mind the imprint left by Christ's body on the Shroud of Turin. Impregnated with her form, the printed fabric implies an imagined contact with Elke's body, turning painting into, as art historian Philippe Dagen writes in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, 'not an image [...] but the material manifestation of a presence'. The disarming corporeal intimacy this creates is echoed in the delicate depictions of Elke found in the group of ink drawings on view, in which slight outlines wind across the exposed paper like veins laid bare. Across the exhibition, Baselitz associates this bodily vitality, expressed through jubilant colour and gestural energy, with the fragility of his representation of a beloved figure in all her vulnerability, to create portraits in which vigour is tempered with tenderness.

The exhibition is dominated by the vibrant palette of the portraits in effervescent colours on white grounds, as well as those painted on powder blue. The latter evoke the blue backgrounds of German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder's portraits, as well as the cyan environments characteristic of Pablo Picasso's Surrealist nudes from the 1920s and 30s, bearing witness to Baselitz's constant engagement with the history of

painting. Such bursts of works in intense colour are always matched in the artist's practice by periods in which a more subdued palette dominates. The series of monumental canvases on impenetrable backgrounds of black brushstrokes bears witness to this duality.

On these darker works, Baselitz transfers the same monotype figure twice in a composition that references Picasso's *L'Aubade*. In this melancholy 1942 painting, Picasso took a sombre approach to the traditional female nude, which Baselitz alludes to in his own take on the theme. As Philippe Dagen writes, in each of Baselitz's works, the first impression of the figure depletes the paint for the second impression, so that it is 'stripped of a part of its substance, the second painting being like the ghost of the first'. With this monotype technique, Dagen continues, the artist brings the paint 'to a point close to exhaustion and disappearance,' a visual effect that embodies the sensitivity of his approach to painting Elke.

Since the early 2000s, Baselitz has been returning to the key phases and motifs of his own past oeuvre in a series of paintings known as *Remix*. The *Tulips* on view in the exhibition are a remix of the flowers he painted at the very beginning of the 1980s. In this

group of works, the subject leans in from the left of the canvas to interact with the emptier right side. This creates a taut relationship between subject and background and a compositional equilibrium that, in the words of Diane Waldman, curator of Baselitz's 1995 retrospective at The Guggenheim in New York, 'recalls the balanced asymmetry that Piet Mondrian achieved in his *Compositions* of the 1920s and 1930s'. Baselitz titles these paintings, whose floral subjects are themselves inextricably linked with the Dutch Old Master tradition, 'Greetings from Holland', 'If Piet had stayed in the country' or 'Piet has gone to NY'. In doing so, he evokes Mondrian's journey from the Netherlands to the USA, and corresponding transition from figuration to abstraction. It is this space between the two traditional poles of painting that Baselitz has navigated throughout his career, confronting them at times, at others circumventing them to forge his own singular path.

According to museum curator Bernard Blistène, Baselitz 'works from the very conventions of painting, and yet [is] perhaps the painter who has most destroyed these conventions.' This has been the case since he first inverted a canvas, a compositional play he has now been employing for more than 50 years. In the new works, through previously untried experiments with collage and novel mark-making techniques, it is the conventions of painting's materiality that Baselitz tests, bringing his innovation up to the threshold of his 85th birthday. Yet the layers of allusion and material, and the destabilisation of representation and narrative that they imply, never alienate the painter from his work. Instead, they serve as an invitation for the viewer to bypass the 'sterile questions' of representation within painting. As the artist says: 'they make it possible for me to realise what I have wanted all my life.'

La boussole indique le nord will be accompanied by an exhibition catalogue with a text by Philippe Dagen.



Georg Baselitz, *Wenn Piet im Lande geblieben wär*, 2020
Oil on canvas. 300 x 230 cm (118.11 x 90.55 in)

About the artist

Georg Baselitz has had a profound influence on international art since 1960 and is indisputably one of the most important artists of our time. He shaped a new identity for German art in the second half of the 20th century; in reaction to the trauma and tragedy of the Second World War, he developed an artistic vocabulary which draws on the work of his forebears, whilst remaining unique and wholly individualistic. Since then, Baselitz has constantly renewed his practice through formal developments, drawing upon art history and his own extensive oeuvre, never allowing himself to become restricted by a single, identifiable style.

Baselitz has been painting his compositions upside down since 1969. This novel format was a way for him to empty form of its content, navigate between abstraction and figuration, and revolutionise a medium that was then regarded as irredeemably conventional. His directly tactile method of painting with his fingers in the 1970s encouraged a freer use of colour and material that would come to the fore in his expressionist colour fields of the 1980s. This was a seminal decade for the artist, opening with his selection to represent Germany at the 1980 Venice Biennale alongside Anselm Kiefer, which marked his first foray into sculpture.

The urge towards constant innovation has been present throughout Baselitz's career, as in the *Remix Paintings* he has been creating since the 2000s that re-examine the iconography of past works. By revisiting his own motifs and integrating subtle references to art history, Baselitz offers a reflection on the significance of painting itself. Asked about this self-referentiality, he stated: 'I kept sinking into myself, and everything I do is being pulled out of myself.' In recent works that feature the figures of the artist and his wife Elke, Baselitz engages in the struggle of representation, the inescapability of subjectivity, and the representation of the self through a significant other.

Baselitz, who has worked with the gallery for over 20 years, lives between three different locations: Lake Ammersee in Bavaria, Salzburg, and Imperia in Liguria, Italy. Early in his career, his work was included in documenta 5 (1972) and 7 (1982). Following the 1980 Venice Biennale, he participated in a series of influential exhibitions: *A New Spirit in Painting* (1981) and *German Art in the Twentieth Century* (1985) at the Royal Academy of Arts, London; and *Zeitgeist* (1982) at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, presented his first comprehensive retrospective in 1995, which toured to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Further significant retrospectives were organised by the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, in 1996, and the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 2007. In 2006 and 2007, the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, and the Albertina, Vienna, were the first to present his *Remix* cycle.

A retrospective of Baselitz's sculptures was held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (2011–12) and his Avignon series was presented at the Venice Biennale in 2015. His *Heldenbilder (Hero Paintings)* and *Neue Typen (New Types)* were shown at the Städel Museum, Frankfurt (2016), travelling to the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome; and Guggenheim Bilbao. To mark the artist's 80th birthday in 2018, comprehensive solo exhibitions were held at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France. In 2019, he was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and became the first living artist to have an exhibition at the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, followed by his largest retrospective to date at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 2021–22.

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