

An abstract painting featuring a central, dark, vertical brushstroke that dominates the composition. This stroke is surrounded by a dense, textured background of white and red brushstrokes, with some blue and black accents. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and layered complexity.

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GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC

LONDON PARIS SALZBURG



Georg Baselitz
Blauer Elkekopf [Blue Elke-Head], 1979-80
Oil on canvas
200 x 161.3 cm (78.74 x 63.5 in)
(GB 2273)

For Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac's debut at TEFAF New York, we are proud to present one of Georg Baselitz's finest portraits of his wife Elke. *Blauer Elkekopf* (1979-80) was painted during a period of intensive formal innovation, during which Baselitz moved towards a freer, more expressionist application of paint and use of colour, resulting in works of astonishing vigour and formal power. This painting was a central work in the celebrated exhibition *A Focus on the 1980s* held last year at our London gallery.

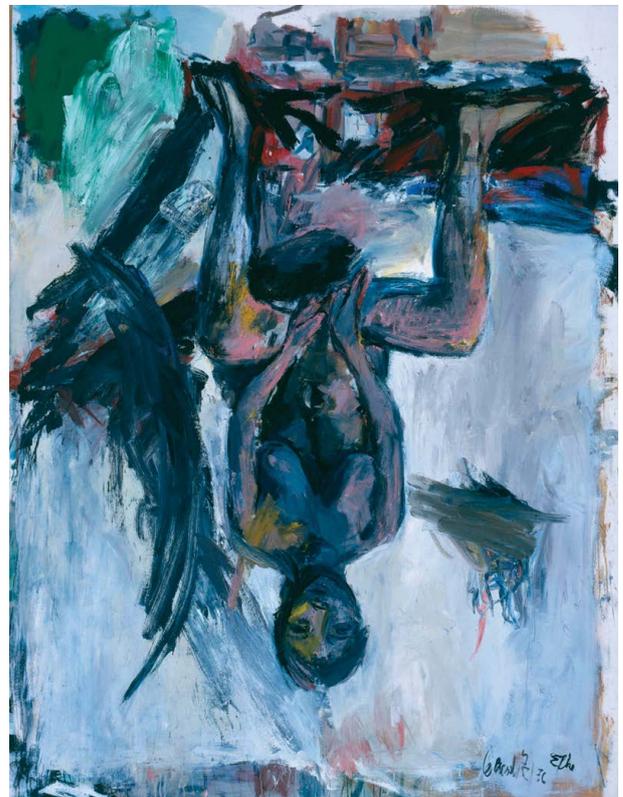


Elke and Georg Baselitz, 1965

Elke Baselitz has been the artist's model, muse and a recurrent motif in his work since his first upside-down portrait, which he painted of her exactly 50 years ago, in 1969. In the intervening years, she has repeatedly appeared in the form of portraits and nudes, sometimes alongside her husband, and in various degrees of recognisability. Baselitz's paintings of Elke constitute the largest single group of his portraits and it is possible to trace the radical formal evolution of his style through these portraits alone. The earliest Elke portraits, while inverted, are relatively representational and more traditional than his later depictions, in which her features are expressively distorted, as in *Blauer Elkekopf*.

As Michael Auping describes this formal evolution, 'In portraits from the mid-1970s forward, Elke's body becomes increasingly mutable and at the mercy of the artist's intuitive distortions. A tremendous plasticity sweeps everything together so that blunt cursive gestures, filigree strokes, drips, splatters, broken scumbles, and opaque overpainting run into one dancing optical medley. The potency is in the allusiveness. The figure turns into ground, imagery becomes abstraction, and vice versa. The model and the painting have become one.'

Other works from the series are included in prominent museum collections, including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, which organised a travelling exhibition devoted to Baselitz's portraits of Elke in 1998.



Georg Baselitz
Elke, 1976
Oil on canvas
200 x 190.5 cm
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas



Rudi Fuchs, art historian, writes:

‘A wonderfully taut and bold painting was completed in 1980. It is called *Blauer Elkekopf* [Blue Elke-Head], and has also been known as *Die Holländerin* [The Dutchwoman], even though it is a portrait of Baselitz’s wife, Elke, who is from the German city of Dresden. That is what happens with paintings, and that is how painters think, in all directions, as if during the making of a painting all kinds of things begin to wander through their minds. But I, looking at the work, would call the painting more tight. The figure stands practically in the centre. Maybe there was a photograph lying around in the studio (an almost accidental motif, then), of Elke with that lovely, coquettish nose. Here, it is red. Perhaps it was winter and it was a photograph that had been taken on a trip to the Netherlands. The painting is dated 1979–80, which suggests the winter. The figure is wrapped up warm; it is chilly, and her nose is red because of the freezing cold. Now I am making up stories, just as the painter makes up stories around his motif.

Of course I do not know for certain if it is true, what I am saying about the photograph in the Netherlands, but that does not matter. In a painting, everything becomes true because the painter paints it that way – and because I see it. But there is something else in *Blauer Elkekopf*, and that involves the way in which the painting was conceived and painted with brush and paint. That is the method, said Baselitz. The painting is a little taller than it is wide. But perhaps because the figure, from the right, is standing towards the middle, the work seems almost square. That is why I described it as tight. The true glory of the painting is the way that, on a background of red and brown, the space is filled with sturdy strokes of white, at angles over one another. That rough white turns the surface into a curtain of paint through which the figure of Elke moves inward. Surrounded by restless movements of paint, as should be the case with paintings. The painting has a methodical character that has been disrupted by unforeseen impulses.’





Georg Baselitz

Zeichnungen zu den Strandbildern [Drawings for the Beach Pictures] (38 drawings), 1981

Black chalk, pencil and blue ink on paper

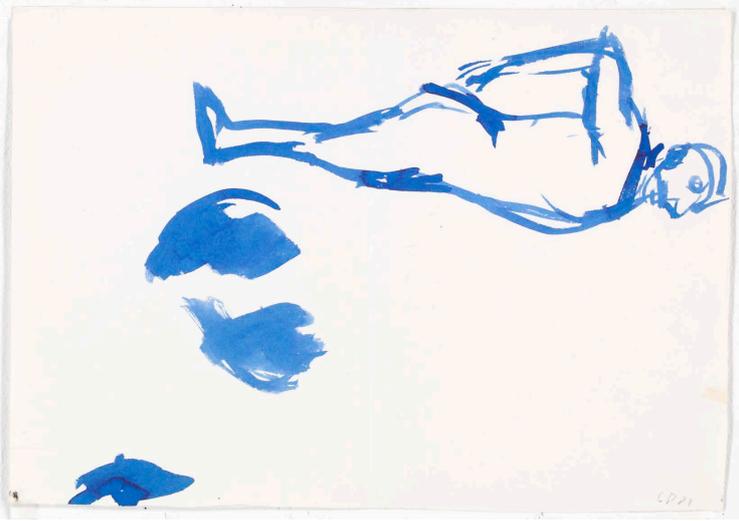
Each: 29.5 x 42 cm (11.61 x 16.54 in)

(GB 2309)



Georg Baselitz's suite of 38 *Zeichnungen zu den Strandbildern* [*Drawings for the Beach Pictures*] from 1981 are related to his series of *Strandbild* paintings from the same period, which feature lone figures in prone or seated positions, sometimes as part of an implied beach scene or staring out of a window. Many of the drawings correspond to specific *Strandbild* paintings, including *Frau am Strand – Night in Tunisia* (1980; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) and *Rückenwind – Strandbild 8* (1981; Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden), but the drawings are not preparatory studies.

Instead, they are the direct traces of the artist's thought processes, bearing witness to his experimentation with different figural positions and compositional strategies. As Baselitz explains, 'I never do preliminary drawings on the canvas. I paint in layers, and a preliminary drawing would hinder that process. I often do drawings or graphic works parallel to the paintings [...] to clarify the details on formal questions.'





Georg Baselitz's *Ohne Titel [Untitled]* from 1988 is one of five works from this period that feature a lone seated woman, here rendered in contrasting tones of lemon-yellow and grass-green. The chair upon which she sits is summarily suggested by a few orange-brown strokes of pastel. The female nude is a recurrent theme in Baselitz's work, as are portraits of his wife Elke, but the anonymous woman in this drawing appears as an archetype rather than an individual. Her positioning bears some relationship to Baselitz's *Mutter und Kind [Mother and Child]* paintings from 1985, but she appears here as a solitary sculptural presence, the stolidity of her monumental form reminiscent of his sculptural figures. The decisive graphic lines and strong contouring in Baselitz's drawings also reflect a close affinity with his sculptures; both show direct traces of the artist's hand, whether as strokes of pastel and charcoal on paper or the marks of chisel, axe and chainsaw used to carve his sculptures from a single block of wood. Baselitz links the two mediums: 'In sculpture, using the saw is an aggressive process which is the equivalent of drawing. It's a linear signal. For example, when you can see the ribs, this hasn't got an anatomical significance, it's not justified by anatomy, but it is a fascination that gives life to the body.'



Georg Baselitz

Ohne Titel [Untitled], 1988

Pastel and charcoal on paper

Frame: 197 x 170 x 7 cm (77.56 x 66.93 x 2.76 in)

(GB 2276)

Baselitz had begun inverting his compositions in the late 1960s, a novel technique that allowed him to navigate between the two poles of abstraction and figuration, emptying form of its content and revolutionising a medium then regarded as irredeemably conventional. As he described, 'I soon realised that I can only make a good drawing if I demolish, to the greatest extent possible, what is already known, what was already available somewhere, that is to say, if I attack both form and content'.

Art historian Andreas Franzke has described how Baselitz 'often uses charcoal and smudging techniques to emphasise corporeality, whereas his pencil drawings feature stark, intransigent networks of lines, jagged fractures, and ornaments veering off into the abstract.' Both textures are evident in this work, with diffuse areas of smudging used across the background in contrast to the sharply emphatic strokes of charcoal that define the woman's outline and grimacing facial features with a jagged line of teeth. Describing Baselitz's figures from the 1980s, Kinga Bódi argues that these 'are only in the rarest instances "portraits", in the classical sense of the genre.

More commonly they are aggressive, expressive and hideous "facial landscapes", based on asymmetry and disharmony.' The notion of expressive disharmony is central to Baselitz's work from the period, and to this drawing in particular, most notably in the clashing yellow-green tones and the female figure's snarling mouth. As Baselitz describes, 'When one sits down to do a drawing, one's inclination is to do it in a very harmonious way ... I can only get my artistic result by breaking away from the harmonious drawing, by being very attentive, highly disciplined and aware that I am working against all that, that I am going against the grain.'

“I bought a picture by Emilio, his Universal Manifesto (1957) [...] as a document, my first view through the west window in Berlin, an abstract [...] and all the heart could desire. With regard to this picture, people kept telling me Franz Kline was better – but he isn’t! [...] Emilio loved ambushes, he was a partisan, he loved the revolution, the grand gesture, Expressionism, and me. But I’m not an Expressionist, and I despise the revolution; at best, we can produce paintings, maybe even some good ones. I used to make fun of him, and he’d look at me in bewilderment.”

Georg Baselitz, 2007

The artists Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) and Emilio Vedova (1919-2006) first met in Berlin in the early 1960s. At that time, Vedova had received a grant from the DAAD [German Academic Exchange Service] and was working on his 7-part installation *Absurd Berlin Diary* (1964), an installation of free-standing, shaped panels. Baselitz and Vedova shared not only a long-standing and close friendship, but also an appreciation of the other’s artistic approach. Baselitz had purchased a work by Vedova in 1957, from his first solo show in Berlin, as he recounted.

Following Vedova’s death in 2006, Baselitz created a series of black-and-white tributes to his friend, which were first shown in the Venetian Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale alongside a late work by Vedova. The two artists were exhibited together at the Berlinische Galerie in 2008 and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg in 2015. To mark the centenary of Vedova’s birth this year, Baselitz has curated an exhibition of his work at the Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova in Venice, on view until 3 November.



Emilio Vedova and Georg Baselitz, 1982



Emilio Vedova

Untitled, 1983

Acrylic paint, pastel, sand and oxide powder on canvas

230.5 x 253.5 x 4 cm (90.75 x 99.8 x 1.57 in)

(EMV 1094)

The Venetian painter Emilio Vedova (1919-2006) was associated with French *Informel* and later Action painting and the resurgence of expressionism, yet he has always defied categorisation. A politically engaged artist who believed that art needed to be abstract in order to be revolutionary, Vedova pushed painting into new territories with his visceral and gestural works that engage the viewer and redefine the space they inhabit. The vivid red, monumental size and expressive brushwork of Vedova's *Untitled* (1983) are characteristic of the works he produced in the 1980s, a period that has been widely recognised as the acme of his career. In 1980 Vedova had travelled to Mexico, where the colours and immensity of the landscapes made a lasting impression on him. He was also struck by José Clemente Orozco's politically-charged *Murales* and their bold colours, as he wrote in a letter to Rudi Fuchs: 'All at once the kaleidoscope of emotions, of wide American spaces, of scents and colours was right back [...] The clashes were immediately very harsh. A new geography of immense "horizontal" spaces. My feeling is that of being an ant'.

Upon his return, Vedova broadened his colour palette, combining his distinctive contrasts of black and white with brighter colours. The gestures behind the process of painting are made evident in the traces and trails of black and red that reveal the artist's movements across the canvas with his brush. Vedova rejected the Renaissance concept of space that held the viewer at a certain distance from the scene, instead encouraging direct contact between viewer and artwork. His aim was 'to turn spectators-no-longer-spectators into an active third party, with more active participation'. By denying the viewer a fixed focal point, forcing the eye to wander along the various pathways of colour, Vedova ensures that the viewer becomes an active participant in the dynamic painted surface.



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