

Donald Baechler

FISHER LANDAU CENTER FOR ART

Like Buster Keaton, Donald Baechler nimbly treads an elegant path between the banana peel of the obvious and that of the obscure; one slip and his work falls into comedic bathos. But, by the merest breadth, Baechler is always saved despite an often cloying imagery of cartoony faces, toys, and children's-book illustrations. And, then, after what could easily be an awkward face-off between the artist's self-reflexive subject the viewer's awareness of its purely pretextual role, the work alights without fail on the side of refinement and tact.

Baechler first attracted attention in the early 1980s as a member of the East Village phenomenon, a manifestation much influenced by contemporaneous German developments. Indeed, he participated in the neo-expressionist/Neue Wilde transatlantic exchange more directly than many of his peers, studying at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, in 1978 and 1979.

While maintaining his attraction to the scale of Abstract Expressionist painting, Baechler yielded to the appeal of children's drawings and the range of imagery associated with American folk art. Yet there is nothing of the "outsider" in his work, even if the edgy recognition of the faux-naïf is ever present in our minds—a kind of warning signal never to take his works too seriously, however serious their execution may be. Typically, Baechler labors his surfaces in a staid, even grimly purposeful and insistently coercive way, texturing the canvas with, among other possibilities, pieces of terry cloth. Such grounds function like broad grayish expansions, dignified formats indifferent to the possible attractions of color, a component strikingly missing from his coyly captivating corpus.

Baechler renders his childlike imagery ever more homely (it seems to me) by carrying it through several generations of degradation. A rudely executed drawing is repeated, at times becoming more awkward or deformed while never losing touch with its initial subject. Sometimes, specificity gives way to images that skirt the edge of abstraction, their outlines having grown thicker, darker, weirder, though arguably more disarming—platonic degeneralizations of animals, trees, heads, or doll-like figures. This residuum also provides the subject for Baechler's often charming sculptures. Take, for example, the large bronze *Tree*, 1989, a succession of funnels set one within another. The sculpture is based on the homely, expressive *Priceless, Wordless, Loveless*, a figure painting made between 1987 and 1988.

Other estimable imagery from this show includes the researched red outline of the figure in *Painting with Balls*, 1986–87, or the two jigsaw puzzle-shaped trees beside the tonsured head in *Deep North*, 1989. The earliest work shown is *Root Hound*, 1983, in which a profile of a nondescript fellow is countered by the image of a free-floating candle. The painting's ambiguity suggests the younger artist's encounter with, say, David Salle's scavenged array of rootless images typical of the day's postmodern rejection of explicit meaning.

This impressive exhibition is crowned by a broad selection of large-scale, sculptural still lifes portraying flowers and leaves of touching simplicity. Some are plywood silhouettes at which plaster and papier-mâché have been tossed, the result being an effect oddly reminiscent of sculpture by Cy Twombly. (Or at least their method of creation brings Twombly to mind.) Others are cast in bronze, conjuring heroic floral gingerbread cookies. Yum.

—Robert Pincus-Witten

Donald Baechler,
Deep North, 1989,
acrylic, oil, fabric
collage on linen,
9' 3" x 12'.

