



Donald Baechler, *Rationalism versus Empiricism (Globe)*, 2002, and *Untitled (Bust)*, 1989, at the Fisher Landau Center for Art



"Donald Baechler: Painting and Sculpture," Installation view with *Tree*, 1988, in foreground, and from left, *Arithmetic*, 1990; *Pnceless, Wordless, Loveless*, 1987-88; and *Untitled*, 1984-85



"Donald Baechler: Painting and Sculpture," Installation view with *Hat*, 1990, left, and *Deep North*, 1989



Donald Baechler, *Flowers (Cut Sides)*, 2007, Installation view at the Fischer Landau Center for Art

## Donald Baechler THE WINSOME NEO- EXPRESSIONIST by Julie Ryan

[+](#) Share | [✉](#) [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) 0

In a well-appointed French restaurant in Zurich, a similarly well-appointed collector is sharing foie gras ice cream and espresso with the artist **Donald Baechler**. The collector has several large Baechler works in several of her large homes, and is now turning her attention to the Chelsea Hotel in New York, where Baechler has been a resident since the late 1990s. Entertained by the landmark's notorious history, she invited herself over to see Baechler's apartment there, and asked how he entered the building.

Bemused, Donald answers that he enters through the front door. No, she insists, there must be another *private* entrance for some residents. Indeed there is not, Donald said. But surely, she presses on, **Philip Taaffe** and the other more illustrious residents have their own entrance? Again, Donald says that they all use the front door. She then wonders out loud, but you *do* have your own elevator, don't you?

Many years have passed since that lunch in Zurich and I have had the privilege of seeing Donald's work both in his studio and in many private collections, where his work shares the wall with Warhols, Twomblys and a Kippenberger or two. One such patron is Emily Fisher Landau, and she has now put on view her collection of Donald's sculptures, paintings and drawings, complemented by several additional loans, on two floors of the Fisher Landau Center for Art in Long Island City. Out of all the countries and all the homes (floating ones and islands included), this mini-retrospective in Queens is especially sweet and strong.

Baechler is nothing if not a winsome artist, who regularly gives his artworks a veneer of simple-minded happiness. His image bank includes ice cream cones, beach balls, smiley faces and even rows of socks. His paintings are all about boyhood fascinations, here at the Landau Center things like horses, men with bald spots, Christmas trees, faces made from numbers and world geography,

But Donald's work is descended from Art Brut. His



"Donald Baechler: Painting and Sculpture," Installation view with *Untitled (Flowers)*, 2003-04, left, and *Three Tulips*, 2001, right rear



Donald Baechler, *Autonomy or Anarchy #1 and #2*, both 2003, at the Fischer Landau Center for Art



Donald Baechler, *Bather (Large Version)*, 1997, in the courtyard of the Fisher Landau Center for Art



Donald Baechler at the Fisher Landau Center, December 2011

pictures are awkward, childish, primitive, even disabled. Do they signal mental disorder, the anxiety of the powerless in the face of that which cannot be mastered? Is this the strange affect we know from *Rain Man* and *Being There* and Benjy's narrative in *As I Lay Dying*? Baechler is definitely a Neo-Expressionist, and unlike so many of his colleagues a subtle one -- because there is nothing more crestfallen than a single scoop of ice cream on a cone or a lone flower.

Back in the 1990s, Donald exhibited a series of huge paintings of blackened bouquets of flowers in vases at Tony Shafrazi Gallery in SoHo. The AIDS epidemic was still very present and the heft of those precarious times is still carried by this motif. The Landau Center's second floor is dedicated solely to Baechler's freestanding flowerpot works, flattened cut-out images (in bronze, or painted papier-mâché waiting to be cast) that are gray or white -- like ghosts -- as well as black. In *Flowers (Cut Sides)* (2007), the edges of the sculpture are chopped off, suggesting the page or drawing that the image originally came from, like a life cut short. The room is a seemingly single-minded meditation on an arranged garden.

The first floor is a cagey mix of sculptures and paintings. The large bronze top *Hat* (1990) is placed on the floor in front of the painting *Deep North* (1989), which features a man's balding head, in a cunning extension of the narrative from wall to floor.

Outside, at the foot of the ramp leading to the front door, Baechler has placed a life-sized sculpture of a round-headed creature who looks as if he were made of clay. Titled *Bather* (1997), it is a witty turn on *Manet* and *Cézanne*. This man, or boy, or child, sits in a large bucket, filled with water up to his chest. That look on his face -- is anyone there?

"Donald Baechler: Painting and Sculpture," Dec. 10, 2011-Apr. 1, 2012, Fisher Landau Center for Art, 38-27 30th Street, Long Island City, N.Y. 11101.

**JULIE RYAN** is an artist who writes on art and lives between Vienna, Austria and New York City.