

# BOMB

Summer 2000

Donald Baechler  
by David Kapp  
BOMB 72/Summer 2000, ART



Donald Baechler, *Realists Playing Together*, 1985, acrylic, cotton, lace and Rhoplex on canvas, 88×88". Courtesy of the artist.

Donald Baechler has amassed a great inventory of worldly images. Recorded on slides and collected in the archives of his enormous Lower Manhattan studio, they are the sources for many of the compelling images in his paintings. The cast of characters, which also includes himself, come from every source imaginable, and are stamped, silk-screened, projected, drawn, painted, printed or collaged onto surfaces. Then the process begins: underpainting, overpainting, canceling, adding, subtracting, editing until the final work emerges.

Baechler was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1956 and came of age as a painter in the early 1980s when he began exhibiting internationally. His work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Centre George Pompidou in Paris.

Not only is Baechler one of the important painters of his generation, he is also thoughtful and articulate in regard to painting history and the contemporary art world. I enthusiastically accepted the opportunity to interview him with the hope of finding out more about his process, and the genesis of these restless images. We spoke on a warm March evening in the comfortable living area of his studio, surrounded by an extensive library of art books, and crowded with paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures by other contemporary artists.

---

**DAVID KAPP** If you had to choose a number one, who's the artist overall who's constantly in your thoughts?

**DONALD BAECHLER** It would be Cy Twombly.

**DK** I can go with that. Give me number two.

**DB** Number two, Giotto.

**DK** Seriously?

**DB** Seriously, Twombly, Giotto—and Rauschenberg, as well. What, you don't believe me?

**DK** No, I do believe you. I can see Twombly and Giotto; and I've always associated a bit of the New York School in your work. Donald, it was very different in the eighties when you first started showing your work. There was something different in the air. What's it like for you now?

**DB** What do you mean, "something different in the air?"

**DK** Let me put it this way, you were considered an art world prodigy, a wunderkind of sorts.

**DB** I was?

**DK** You were, and that creates a situation with a certain amount of pressure. The Tony Shafrazi Gallery, where you showed during the mid-eighties, was the center of attention with the graffiti shows. And the Fun Gallery. That group isn't around anymore. So, what's it like working by yourself?

**DB** You're talking specifically about the Shafrazi phenomenon with Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf?

**DK** Yes.

**DB** I was never really part of that particular group. I first met Tony in the eighties; he had a tiny gallery in his Lexington Avenue apartment, and was showing Sarah Charlesworth's photographs and Keith Sonnier's light installations. He had work by Joseph Kosuth and Olivier Mosset up there; cerebral, beautifully produced art that flirted with conceptualism and minimalism but seemed like something new. That's why I started talking to Tony. And when he did this 180-degree about-face and opened the gallery in Soho, showing Keith Haring—whom I first met when he was a doorman at the Mudd Club—it really surprised me. Tony obviously had some grander vision about what was going on and decided that it wasn't the end of conceptualism, but the beginning of something else. I never felt entirely comfortable showing my work there because it had nothing to do with what Keith and Kenny Scharf were doing. I wasn't part of this downtown club scene, and I had nothing to do with so-called graffiti art.

**DK** So you didn't think it was the end of one thing and the beginning of something else—you always thought of your work as more of a continuum?

**DB** I first approached Tony because I was interested in talking to him about

Joseph Kosuth, who was one of my heroes in art school, and who I met through Tony, finally. Joseph was a teacher of Keith Haring's, so I'm sure there was some type of connection between what Keith and Joseph were doing. I was showing with Tony partly because it was a place to show and partly because I respected him; there was an energy there that was great to be part of. But I wasn't central to it. We're talking about what seems like ancient history to me. . . .

**DK** I understand, but I would have associated some of your cartoon imagery or images similar to childhood art with that period. The interests seemed to be shared.

**DB** If it's shared, it's in a very superficial way. But you have to include Jean-Michel Basquiat in that group; he was supposed to show with Tony but he had an ego problem with Keith Haring and that kept him out of it in the beginning. There were a number of artists who found themselves in the same place at the same time, but I always felt a bit like a fish out of water in that gallery in those days. I had to make a choice: Did I want to withdraw completely and wait until a more comfortable context rolled around, or did I want to make do with the gallery and continue my education in public? And I decided on the latter because it seemed important for me to be engaged in showing and the dialogue that you can only get from doing things in public.

**DK** You were concerned with nuance and line in a particular way and certainly that had nothing to do with what these other artists were producing at the time. In that way, your work seemed more classical.

**DB** I hope so. If I had any intentions at the time, that was one of them. I always used to tell people, "I'm an abstract artist before anything else," and I still say that occasionally. For me, it's always been more about line, form, balance and the edge of the canvas—all these silly formalist concerns—than it has been about subject matter or narrative or politics.

**DK** Those are issues that can't really be talked about, but tend to define good painting. Nevertheless, if Joseph Kosuth—a major conceptual artist—was a hero of yours in art school, what does that have to do with painting? Connect those two for me.

**DB** That's a good question. He always used to tell me that I would be a really good artist if I just stopped painting. I never knew what to do with that statement. One thing Joseph has never really acknowledged, in spite of the fact that he's so aggressively against the practice of painting, is that he has a wonderful pictorial sense. He makes very compelling pictures, and it doesn't much matter he's not using a brush. He's involved in making pictures that appear on walls in homes and museums throughout the world. They provoke a visceral effect that's undeniable. Of course, there is the primacy of ideas with Joseph, but what first makes you think about these ideas are the visual clues that draw you in. Painting should do the same thing; draw you in and make you think. So I'm not sure that Joseph's concerns and my concerns are *that* different in terms of what we're putting on the wall.

**DK** His work also has a sense of humor to it, which you probably appreciate.

**DB** They're very deadpan, unlike Hans Haacke, for instance, who has no sense of humor at all.

**DK** I've found that some of your paintings are quite funny. That's hard to pull off.

**DB** How do you think they're funny?

**DK** There's an element about them that's absurd. You see something that's incredibly beautiful with this strong quality of line, and then it's depicting what

seems to be almost ridiculous subject matter. It hits a nerve.

**DB** I hope there is humor coming through, but they're not jokes, obviously. I think you described it very well.



Donald Baechler, *Memory & Illusion (Globe)*, 1998, acrylic and fabric collage on canvas, 111×122". Courtesy of the artist and Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

**DK** I was curious about your going to Germany to study when you were younger. What prompted you to do that?

**DB** At Cooper Union I met some German exchange students. This was 1977, and I found the whole scene at the school to be white and boring, to be honest. It wasn't what I wanted out of art school or what I wanted out of being in New York. The most interesting minds, the most interesting talents and energy came from those German kids. And they said, "Why don't you come to Germany?" The easiest school to get into was the one attached to the Frankfurt Museum. The entrance requirements were less strict, so I went with it and spent a year in Frankfurt. They were very generous.

**DK** Like in Holland, where they pay people to be artists.

**DB** Right. Once I was admitted to the school they assumed a certain responsibility for my welfare.

**DK** And were Jiri Georg Dokoupil and Walter Dahn at the school?

**DB** No, Dokoupil and Dahn were in Cologne, but that was just an hour on the train.

**DK** How did you get to know Dahn?

**DB** Through Dokoupil. They were already best friends back then. This was just when the whole German scene was starting to bubble over. It's hard to remember, but the late seventies was a time when most of us knew about Joseph Beuys, but hardly any Americans had heard of Polke, Richter, or Baselitz. Even the German museums back then didn't have much German art in them—they were full of pop art and fifties American abstraction. But there was this energy, you could sense something coming to the surface that really erupted in the early eighties. It became hard to avoid Polke, Richter and Baselitz, and the younger generations all emerged in the wake of this. Cologne was definitely a hot spot at one point, with Dokoupil and Kippenberger. It's funny how locations of energy change around the world. Now it's England. In the early eighties, it was definitely Germany.

**DK** Those German artists were hugely influential to most Americans.

**DB** You're talking about Polke, in particular?

**DK** It's some of the most fascinating work of the late 20th century. And certainly some of the strangest.

**DB** Americans are terrible chauvinists, culturally. We naturally assume that we're the best at everything, but of course that's not true an awful lot of the time. There was a point in the sixties when it appeared that we had won the art history wars in 20th-century art. We wrestled the championship away from France, and nobody expected that the ground would shift so soon.

**DK** What do you think about some of the English painting now? As we mentioned, England is culturally a hot spot.

**DB** Damien Hirst is a wonderful artist. We were talking about sense of humor before. I can't think of any art that's made me laugh so quickly. Underneath this top tier, the Chapman brothers and Rachel Whiteread, there's not much below it. A lot of the younger painters' work that's being applauded heavily by the galleries now feels like confident grad thesis shows. There's something disturbing about the whole thing. I don't know what's real, what's substance. I still think a lot of the most interesting work is being done in America—by artists such as Mike Kelley and Jason Rhoades. It's also not an original observation that the art world is becoming less and less region specific. It doesn't much matter anymore who is making the art, or where: the English, the Germans or the Americans. We have this cultural soup that is becoming a true cross-cultural "melting pot." That's a terrible expression.

**DK** If you travel enough, when you come back to New York, you feel like it's just a stop in your travels. I'm constantly picking up things from all over.

**DB** The funny thing is that I'm not that interested in seeing contemporary art when I'm traveling. I was just in São Paulo. Brazil has a very sophisticated contemporary culture, but that's not really the reason I was there. I'm more interested in aspects of the extreme poverty and crime and the fact that all those Japanese people live there. A lot of things interest me much more than going into galleries and seeing pale versions of last month's *Flash Art*. I'm more interested in traveling to places like Southeast Asia where you can still manage *not* to find contemporary galleries.

**DK** Where have you been?

**DB** Well, most recently I was in Indonesia and Thailand.

**DK** What prompted your trip to Southeast Asia?

**DB** I went to Japan in 1992 to do a very intensive print project. In three weeks we did fourteen separate editions, and some of these were seven-foot-tall lithographs. It was an amazingly productive three weeks—working with wonderful printers, but we worked 18-hour days—and it was exhausting. So I decided to spend a few weeks in Thailand, and liked it so much that when I had an opportunity to go back, I took it and then I traveled to Burma and Cambodia, and on another trip, to Vietnam, and subsequently Thailand and India, and then Indonesia. It's a fascinating part of the world.

**DK** I'm also more drawn toward antiquities than modern art. We went to Kenya and Tanzania recently. You don't encounter much modern work in East Africa, that's for sure.

**DB** Well in West Africa now you run into Miquel Barceló. Apparently, he was adopted by some village in Mali and they gave him a house. But one of the most fascinating places for me is Pagon in Burma, a plain along the Irrawaddy River where there are thousands of enormous brick constructions. For hundreds of years, every successful Burmese businessman, anyone with money, built a stupa

which contained a small room with a statue of the Buddha. And around these temples, which could be five stories tall, was a wooden city. The wooden dwellings burned down at some point. What's left now is a deserted alluvial plain with these amazing structures for miles and miles. It's a bizarre and abandoned religious city, all monuments to Buddha.

**DK** Can you go inside them?

**DB** Yes, whichever ones you can still get into. Often there are staircases inside and you can climb up to the top.

**DK** People always ask me, "What inspires you?" The question is unbelievably overrated. You can't say that anything really inspires you, it's more like something kicks your imagination off, a catalyst that feeds you in some way. However, I've got a few specific questions and I hope you're going to be fairly candid with me, because they're about some of the images in your early work. One critic called your work "vaguely menacing, looming like childhood memories of the school yard bully." Is that accurate?

**DB** Yes.

**DK** There are some childhood memories?

**DB** Definitely. In my most recent show in Paris last December, I sent over a big painting untitled. I was totally jet-lagged when I got there, and I still didn't know what to call it. I was looking at it and making associations, and suddenly it occurred to me that this painting was all about living in the suburbs. I named it *Farmstead Lane*, the street we moved to from the inner city of Hartford when I was seven. The main image is an ice-cream cone, but the background is full of teenage boys on motorcycles, footballs, and mug shots of teenage criminals. However, none of the so-called subtext in my paintings is specific or conscious, but sometimes these things creep through and something logically forces itself out.

**DK** What about the editing process?

**DB** It's all visual.

**DK** Meaning it is intuitive, in some way.

**DB** It's not arbitrary, it's visual and emotional. I mean, I wouldn't personally describe my paintings as "menacing" or "the school yard bully." Personally I wouldn't say that's what they're about.

**DK** Nor would I . . . but I thought that was a fairly provocative quote. Sometimes when I see one of your paintings, I get a very strong sense of, not exactly déjà vu, but something like it. It's comforting because it's familiar, although I can't quite put my finger on it. There's also a continual pairing of opposites in your paintings, black and white, a textural density and sparseness, something simultaneously revealed and concealed. How do you feel about this?

**DB** It's not something I think about, it's something that happens. I'm aware of it after the fact sometimes. If I thought about it . . .

**DK** Painters used to thumb their noses at academic or traditional approaches to painting. In your work, the painting itself is reduced in a sense; it's a painting of a logo, of an image, or of somebody else's image, and thus you've avoided conventional problems and academic concerns with articulation of space, light and volume. You've made an end run around academic problems. So, what kind of problems do you run into when you're painting? Or is it never difficult?

**DB** It's always difficult.

**DK** It's always difficult for me too, but *what* makes it difficult?

**DB** A friend of mine used to say that every morning he would get up and go into the studio and realize that somehow, overnight, he'd completely forgotten how to paint. He'd spend the first half hour in the studio refamiliarizing himself with holding the brush and sticking it in the paint, with how thick things should be and how thin they should be, until he very quickly relearned all of these things. I never quite believed him—that he forgot overnight how to paint, but it is a charming notion that each morning you start with a completely unfamiliar set of tools and a brand new problem. Sometimes you don't know how to make the paint go on the canvas the way you want it to. There are very sentimental problems like that.

**DK** So what do you do then? Do you take a break, or take a week or two off?

**DB** I stop and wipe it off and start over again. There is that element of alchemy in painting, sometimes things just don't work. If they did work all the time, that would make the process pretty boring. One reason I build my surfaces up is because I don't really want to know what the line is going to do. I want this built-in fracture; when I drag the brush along the canvas I don't want it to be a smooth, easy voyage—I want some problems along the way.

**DK** So one of your criteria is an element of surprise. Something should come out *not* the way you anticipate it?

**DB** I never anticipate how it's going to come out, but if you drag the brush across the canvas you know more or less what's going to happen. But my surface enforces the process of mistakes and erasure and change, it almost insists on change. Not every line goes where I want it to go, so I've got to paint it over and start again. For me this is a critical method that builds up a history, or this illusion of history in a painting. It's much more interesting to have the line go astray, and to corral it back into place. But these are very elemental painting problems.

**DK** Well, they are and they aren't. Then of course the painting speaks for itself, because that's what the painting becomes about ultimately—it's less about the invention and more about the process.

**DB** For me that's what it's about, anyway.

**DK** That's why they become abstract paintings. So then the image, wherever it's been gleaned from, whether it's something that you've seen here, abroad, or wherever, that's really just a catalyst, a visual pretext. But at the same time it's not arbitrary, you are drawn to it in some manner, it's poignant for you.

**DB** Right.

**DK** I want to ask you about a couple of paintings' titles that were particularly interesting. *Realists Playing Together*, the painting of the baby birds pecking the mother bird, did the title, the notion, or the painting come first?

**DB** That was painted in 1985. At that time I was keeping lists of titles that I would just decide to paint, sometimes arbitrarily, sometimes not. Brenda Richardson had done a show of Frank Stella's early "black paintings" at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1976, and in the catalog she did a detailed analysis of the titles of his paintings and what they meant. It emerged in this analysis that most of the titles were dreamt up by Carl Andre, who was Frank Stella's roommate at Andover. If Frank had ten paintings, Carl would type up a list of ten titles that would be arbitrarily assigned to the paintings. So I used to make title lists, along the Carl Andre and Frank Stella model. You know, I had a room full of ten paintings, I had ten titles. I would walk around the room and title the paintings. So *Realists Playing Together* was a title that came from somewhere, a newspaper headline maybe or an art history book. That painting seemed to

demand to be called that. So sometimes the titles are assigned arbitrarily, sometimes they seem appropriate to the painting. In that case, the title came long before the painting. They kind of married.

**DK** It was a good fit. It dovetailed nicely. And what about *Victims of Emigrants*?

**DB** That was graffiti I saw on a building on the corner of Bowery and Prince Street. I believe the building may have been the Emigrant Savings Bank, and someone who had probably lost their house to a bad mortgage wrote in very big spray paint VICTIMS OF EMIGRANTS. It took me a long time to make the connection between the bank and the phrase. It seemed much more mysterious to me before I found out that it used to be a bank. The painting is about something else entirely. It's about victims of emigrants, not about banks, and there are some ducks in it too. That was a period when I was really thinking a lot about titles; I spent a lot of time developing them.

**DK** They were very good titles. I'm trying to think of the names of Stella's "black paintings." I used to know them all.

**DB** *Morro Castle* is one . . . *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*.

**DK** We're talking about the pinstripe paintings.

**DB** Stella was moving at some point and one of the paintings was too big to move, so he just put it in a dumpster on West Broadway. The missing black painting; I used to dream about it. Anyway, what was the last question? Did I answer it?

**DK** Yes, you did. I have another one: You referred to your black paintings of tulips as funereal paintings.

**DB** Oh, those paintings are definitely about mourning and loss.

**DK** Were they made with someone specific in mind?

**DB** No. That was just something in the air when I started them.

**DK** If there's a system for keeping titles, is there a system as well for cataloging imagery? Do you collect images?

**DB** Yes.

**DK** And what's the criteria for holding onto something?

**DB** I hold onto absolutely everything. I would guess out of every thousand images I save, I probably use one or two. I've never actually counted. I save images in many different forms; I save them in endless file cabinets. I have slide binders with thousands and thousands of slides that I work from. But most of the things I photograph never find their way into a painting; and most of the things I save and catalog and photocopy never really find their way into a work. It's necessary to accumulate all of these things to get to the point of what's important.

*If you like this article, you might also like:*

[Shirley Kaneda](#) by David Clarkson  
[Ellen Phelan](#) by Michèle Gerber Klein