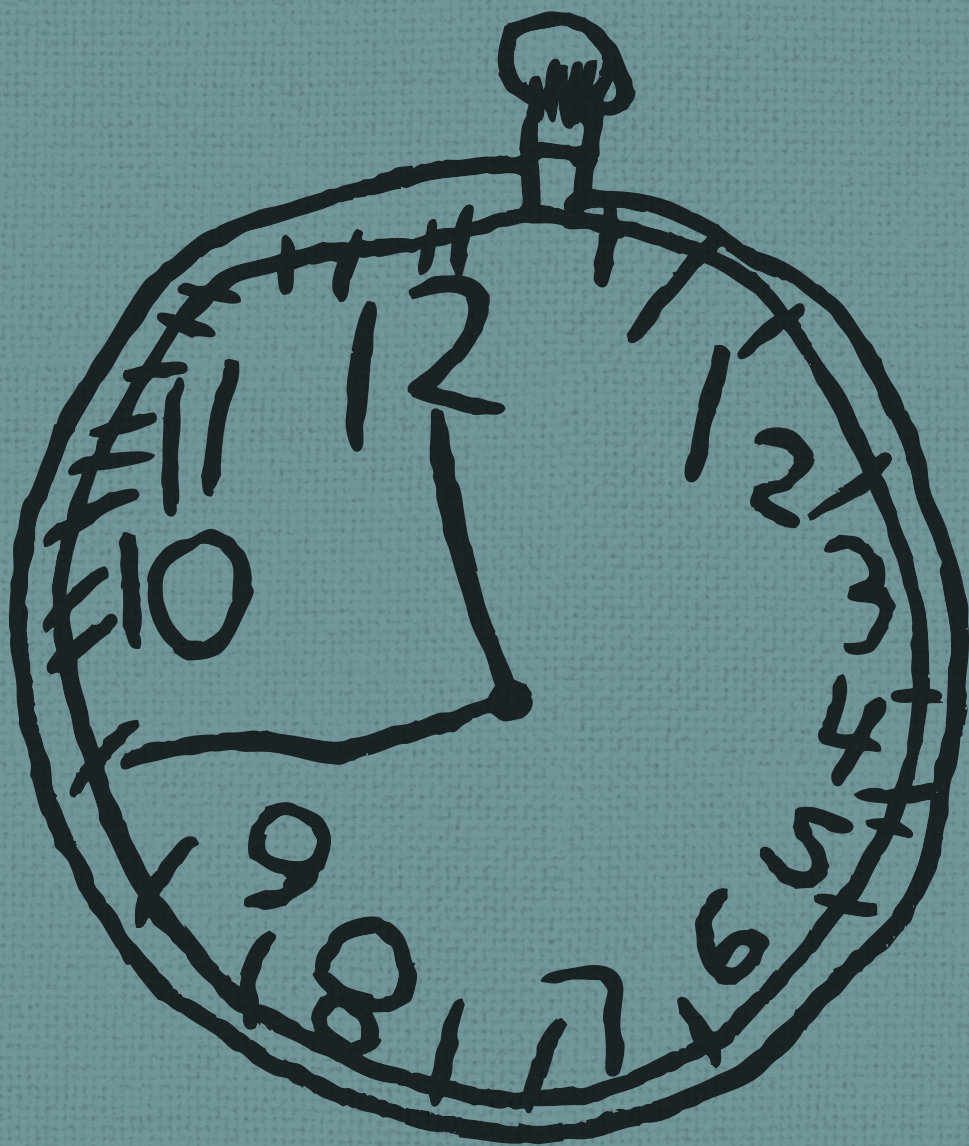




**DONALD BAECHLER**

New Works











# Donald Baechler

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*Essays by Michael Wilson and Katya Tylevich*



# Donald Beachler *New Works*

## Essay by Michael Wilson

“The isolated ice cream cone, for me it’s a kind of melancholy thing, it’s not really a happy thing. In some sense it’s a surrogate for a self portrait . . . and I think the flowers are as well, it’s the lone individual in the universe.” <sup>1</sup>

Donald Baechler is well known for making use of the outwardly simple imagery of childhood—and the cartoonlike aesthetic with which it is often associated—yet there’s more than straightforward nostalgia at work in the American artist’s distinctive paintings and drawings. Tom Briedenbach identifies in his imagery and style a “trepidation and debilitating eroticism definitive for so many of early life.” And while less overtly confrontational or comic than the work of other artists who reanimate juvenile iconography—Yoshitomo Nara, say, or David Shrigley—Baechler’s images reveal a mutual respect for the power of representation unadulterated by academic training or the strictures of taste. They embrace formal crudeness, yet are far from crude themselves.

Baechler was born into a Quaker family in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1956, and has lived in New York since the ’70s. He studied at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and Cooper Union in New York before spending a decisive year at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, during which his approach was colored by Germany’s then emergent Neue Wilde tendency. One of the first artists to be represented by storied New York dealer Tony Shafrazi, he rose to prominence in the early ’80s alongside such luminaries of the East Village post-Pop scene as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Baechler has remained continuously active since those formative days, forgoing the white heat of early celebrity for sustained productivity.

And while still best known as a painter, he has branched out into sculpture, creating such large-scale public projects as 2004's *Walking Figure*—which bestrides a field in Westhampton, New York—and an installation for the atrium of 590 Madison Avenue in Manhattan.

A list of the subjects of the works in the present exhibition—astonishingly, Baechler's first major outing in the Netherlands—gives little idea of their cumulative power. Alongside numerous floral variations are a clock and a vase, a Coke bottle and a bag of popcorn, a lamp in the shape of a leg and the aforementioned ice-cream cone.

There is a bird, a dog, a horse, and two children wearing skull-emblazoned T-shirts. There is also, alarmingly, a man who appears to have had one side of his face sheared off. Most are rendered in gesso, Flashe, and paper collage on paper; a few use acrylic and fabric collage on canvas; and the rest are simple graphite drawings on paper. Each boldly delineated subject, surrounded by a white outline that lifts it away from its background, is set against a field of pattern, color, imagery, or, in the case of the graphite drawings, smudged gray-white space. The look is immediately recognizable as Baechler's; it's effortlessly memorable, yet at once more expressive and harder to pin down than any quick account makes clear.

It is, of course, not only Baechler's exacting selection of subjects—he continually accumulates and catalogues photographed and photocopied sources, finally making use of just a tiny percentage—that counts toward this complexity, but also his formal and material approaches. Writing on Baechler's flower paintings, Carter Ratcliff describes the artist's images as “battered . . . desperately debilitated and bereft,” depicting “the very idea of picture-making in a state of ruin.”<sup>2</sup> The surface of a typical Baechler painting is built up from pasted-on and part-painted-over fabric or paper patches.





These add a formal density—establishing a fertile ground for the work’s bigger, bolder, more simplified, and often black-and-white central motifs—and kickstart an open-ended conversation between thematic elements too. In both material and conceptual terms, these surfaces—which are as much enriched by this treatment as they are “bereft”—remind us of the works’ less than fully planned nature, conveying a degree of improvisation and reworking, a visibly eventful journey to a final form that, while completed, never feels closed.

Ratcliff also points to the “pastoral” quality of Baechler’s oeuvre, linking the peculiar quality of his hand to the instinctive nature of children’s art. Yet the artist’s influences and references are of course far wider than this suggestion of aesthetic innocence might suggest; Baechler has often reiterated his admiration for Giotto, for instance, alongside the perhaps more expected Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, and Abstract Expressionists (the last specifically for their formal energy and embrace of grand scale). He has also been inspired by American folk art, graffiti, and the drawings of psychiatric patients (creations still habitually excluded from the art historical canon, but endowed nonetheless with a potent psychic and cultural charge). Ultimately, Baechler’s imagery comes from anywhere and everywhere, from the entire visual field of his daily life, and this diversity is hinted at in poetic titles that open out onto just such an innately unpredictable and interconnected world: the profile of a blonde-haired man, for example, is dubbed *The Whispering Game*, a pale pink carnation becomes *Ode to Pure Departure*, and a colorless rose is *Weakness of Darkness*.

If all this is beginning to sound rather somber, another look at Baechler’s work is more than enough to restore one’s faith in its maker’s wry wit. There’s a strong hint of English cartoonist Glen Baxter’s aesthetic in the artist’s more carefully drawn images in particular, a shared evocation of illustrations unearthed from

1930s and ’40s-era adventure comics, treated to various more or less bizarre reworkings. In Baxter’s drawings, the everyday realms of school and family—as well as a fantasized-about Boy’s Own parallel universe of cowboys and explorers—are consistently thrown off course by visual and verbal absurdities. Something of the same collision between the conventional and its polar opposite infuses Baechler’s work, even without the weird narrative set-ups found in Baxter. The slightly clotted quality of Baechler’s painted line also suggests enlargement from an imperfectly printed original—think too of another distinctive and arguably related mark: the blotted ink line of Warhol’s early fashion illustrations.

All these associations remain active in Baechler’s newest work on paper, as does his tendency to alternate between the iconographies of the playground and the historical collection. In this exhibition, the floral imagery again helps to lift Baechler’s project away from its specific time and place, functioning as a flexible combination of loaded symbol and blank formal slate. (Here we might also think of another British artist, painter Gary Hume, who has been making flower paintings in a not dissimilar style since the early 1990s.) And as elsewhere in Baechler’s oeuvre, it is not only the subject of the image, but also its imperfection and isolation—its proud/pitiful status as “lone individual in the universe”—that makes it stick.

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<sup>1</sup> Zachary Keeting and Christopher Joy, “Donald Baechler, March 2015,” *Gorky’s Granddaughter*, April 3, 2015, <http://www.gorkysgranddaughter.com/2015/04/donald-baechler-march-2015.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Cater Ratcliff, “The American Pastoral of Donald Baechler” in *Donald Baechler: Flowers*, ex. cat. (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1997), 6.







## *The ease with which everything is difficult*

### Essay by Katya Tylevich

First, the elephant in the room. Or rather, the walking bag of popcorn.

This reoccurring imagery in Donald Baechler's work — along with ice cream cones, puppies, and flowers — it isn't actually 'childlike,' though the adjective appears across pages of critical writing about Baechler's art. The descriptor is vague and imprecise. It is categorically unlike the art itself.

Baechler's cast of visual characters (and their cousins, such as horses, birds, and asymmetric faces) are defined and deliberate. They do not look like something drawn by the hand of a child. Instead, they come from an adult supposition of what will make a child engage and respond. Baechler refers to the graphics of kids' books and advertising, cereal boxes, and ice cream trucks.

This visual language gives the surface appearance of effortlessness and pleasure, but has the deeper intention of, at best, focusing a short attention span (as should a children's book) or, more frequently, manipulating and seducing it (as should an advertisement). In essence, then, it isn't Baechler's artwork that's childlike, but the initial reaction to it.



A person just entering a Baechler exhibition will gravitate toward a flower, miss the background for the foreground, imagine a simplicity, be duped at first sight, but likely not second.

‘Nostalgia,’ another word repeated in interpretations of Baechler’s art, implies a longing for the past, a warmth and delight in it. Of course, no monumental discovery here, but nostalgia tends to tap into imagined or desired memory; at the very least, memory that has already been through countless rounds of heavy mental redaction and editing.

How it could have been, not how it was. There’s little room for accurate recall of boredom, frustration, and distress in sweet recollections. If Baechler’s work has the effect of evoking this particular sentimentality, then perhaps it is the consequence of a fantasy, not reality. Illusion is a comfortable recliner from which to observe fact.

The sophisticated and layered processes by which Baechler creates his works parallel his art’s psychology. The works are the result of compulsive research, collection, and exhaustive editing. He often incorporates fabrics, silk screen, and embroidery into his Gesso and collage work. Again, while the result may give the illusion of simplicity, the progression toward it is complex.

His are tactile works, which can be aggravating in a gallery setting, where one is asked to keep sweaty hands off of the art, no matter how seductive its physical qualities. The attraction to something out of reach is likewise an illustration of nostalgia.

Baechler’s mother was a ‘frustrated quilter,’ as he puts it. A hobbyist, she made stuffed animals for children. When she passed away, she left behind an ‘unbelievable quantity of fabric scraps and unfinished quilts’ that she had collected and made over years of her life.





Baechler has incorporated the residue of her efforts into his own works. For the unknowing viewer, this complex and personal connection presents itself as a cheerful texture. Characteristic of Baechler's work is a density of heavy meaning and emotion, organized in such a way as to appear light. His work demonstrates a process of selective memory: making a whole of disjointed parts, allowing the eye to focus on many scattered sights at once, across a range of scales. These elements confront the viewer carefully and quietly. They are available only to those who care to see them.

The titles of many of Baechler's works, poetic and thoughtful, are also a construction made of disparate parts. Much in the way he intensively collects images from different sources, then edits and allocates parts of accumulated information to his works, he also scours historical books, magazines and newspapers for words and phrases that draw his attention. He keeps these hoarded texts in loose-leaf books and doles out titles to completed series. Baechler says he was inspired by a very early collaboration between Frank Stella and Carl Andre, in which Andre titled Stella's Black Paintings. A deep knowledge and esteem for art history is fundamental to Baechler's approach.

The exquisite corpse that results when words meet image shape Baechler's artwork and its interpretation. The artist is attracted to 'oddness and ambiguity' when he does his research, but the end result is actually very familiar and clear. The artworks are reserved in their easiness, the compellation of an enormous and difficult process, driven by sober intuition. The works are like an old memory – dusted off and categorized to calm a central thought. But in the periphery, the messy and unknown.

*Works on Paper*

























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NORMAND 23  
NICOLE 38

BASE ET MOBILE

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MEN - I - II -

GRANBY









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