

Georg Baselitz
22 September - 9 December 2007, Royal Academy of Arts, London

Big Night of Baselitz

Greeted by a brutishly carved giant of stern jaw, right arm in-motion salute, legs waiting to be released from the lump of wood, I arrived with great anticipation. And I wasn't disappointed. Surely the Friday late evening slot at the Royal Academy is one of the best times to visit.

This is a Retrospective fully aware of its own reflection on the beginnings of Baselitz's career. *Model for a sculpture, 1979-80*, his hacked surface reminiscent of the tradition of German woodblock carvings, is centred in the entrance hall and surrounded by emblems of huntsmen, shepherd, red flag. In this context, the sculpture is suggestive of a perverse traffic warden at a junction between the past, mid, and present. Rooms face each other. The remix paintings stare questioningly at their ancestors. I have a choice, where do I go?

And so, I follow the chronological route of artistic development. I head to the gloppy swipes of the beginnings of Baselitz's career. Thick brushstrokes, tonally perceptive and although brightly coloured, they are not crass. There is an urgent joy in the heavily painted marks, and yet this elation is tainted by the dark memory of the undeceived that Baselitz is determined to fix.

Large studies of deformed feet, grouped together, floating in angst and suspense. Figures planted in old master backgrounds of rich shit browns and Venetian red blood, rooted in an abundance of sexual overtones and political references. Slashings of image, fragments of body, style over content, hung upside down: what does it mean to be German after the 2nd World War? Even the sculptures still carry the aura of sweat and physical backbreaking effort required to realise them. And yet the awkward lumpy and wooden bodies emit a helpless, almost tragic comedy, whether they be painted or violently hacked into being.

Baselitz himself describes the remixes as having a 'ghostly presence', and they are indeed ghostly when viewed after the gut weight of his early work. As such these painterly apparitions are hard to take seriously and I had to admit, as time was precious, I swiftly returned to the authority of the early paintings.