

## ARTS



Dinner in Dresden, 1983 – a world turned upside down. The muscular force of Baselitz's painting contrasts sharply with the smooth polish of Pop Art

## A triumph of terrifying energy

George Baselitz

ROYAL ACADEMY, UNTIL DECEMBER 9

It has happened at last. Or rather, just in time. An exhibition of George Baselitz in London is long overdue; however famous he has become in Europe, we have not paid enough attention to this artist in England. The result is a surprise and a sudden challenge. Baselitz is shown to be the most important and original painter since Vincent van Gogh 120 years ago. There is no doubt in my mind that he also overtakes Picasso as the greatest painter of our time in Europe. Comparisons are odious, as we all know, but the vastly spread-out exhibition at the Royal Academy of Baselitz's enormous pictures confirms the total authority of the artist. We have to thank Sir Norman Rosenthal, the secretary of the Royal Academy, for having achieved such a complete exhibition.

Why is Baselitz so "important" – if one can use such an expression? The plain answer is that he is not important in the usual art history categorisation. Although there are intelligent and well researched essays in the exhibition catalogue (which is very well produced), they do not, ultimately, go to the depth needed to assimilate and understand his unique vision. As luck would have it I was reading the horrifying and truthful diaries of Friedrich Reck-Mallezewski, called *Diary of a Man in Despair*, billed as "a non-fiction masterpiece about the comple-

hension of evil". This diary is a week by week analysis of the endemic and irreversible evils of Nazism from 1935 to 1944. The description of the psychological and spiritual pressure on the German jugular vein, month by month, year by year, as illustrated in this book, cannot be dismissed. It is in the reading of this book that our mind is set towards the stage of the final destruction of Germany in 1943, 1944, and 1945, culminating in the bombing of Dresden, where Baselitz was a child of six. The horrific destruction of so innocent a target has affected the German psyche ever since.

But that was not all. The invasion of eastern Germany, together with the utter destruction of social patterns, religion, economics, personal freedom and the expectation of life, that came with the arrival of Soviet Communism had – and has – a permanent deadly effect on the whole character of German self-assurance.

Something very definite concerning this is described in passages of the book *Gentle Regrets* by Roger Scruton. In the chapter called "stealing from the Church" he describes the collapse of humanity; on the one side by over-zealous Left-wing certainties of "making the world anew" by destroying the remains of the old, as he saw in post-war Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany; while, on the other side, West Germany (like the rest of our Western economy) was faced with the growth of a confident market economy and the reliable

managerial society that we all, now, experience daily in the supermarket and on television. It is the total scepticism concerning all these smooth, money-enhancing activities that Baselitz has built into the foundations of his superficially destructive art. But, with this painter, the real presence is that of a resurgent humanity which is indissolubly linked with the soul – within the reality of the body. It is the horrifying, negative, destructive morass of hopes abandoned, promises unfulfilled and

*Baselitz's expression of corporeal degradation and dismemberment actually confirms our faith in human endeavour*

certainties lost that Baselitz has grasped – and, in the quality of his images and the texture of his paint, has done so much to reverse. How is that so? By the destruction of the flesh – in images that are brought about by the very exercise of that same flesh. The sheer muscular energy that supports the gesture of painting is in complete contrast to that smooth, pliant polish of the art of America and the West, influenced by Pop Art and its derivatives – an art that managed to destroy the self-confidence of the whole art scene in post-war Paris by a sort of cultural strangu-

lation. Certainly since the early 1980s we have not heard of a single French painter, sculptor or architect that has been an internationally recognised authority.

The rejection of non-figuration by Baselitz is attached to the re-assertion of humanity through the illustration of the terrible effects of personal energy in the use of paint. No matter that the message comes over by way of inversion, distortion, destruction and dismemberment. It is, in the end, the message of the Resurrection. Our bodies, our souls, however much dismembered and devoured by infernal circumstances, taken together, in a total unity, form a message of continuity and survival throughout the ages and from generation to generation.

It is this extraordinary persistence of hope through the expression of corporeal degradation, distortion and dismemberment which, in Baselitz's handling of paint – using Munsie, fingers, brushes and even mallet and chisel – actually confirms our faith in human endeavour. The vibrancy of the painting, the extreme sensitivity of colour, the sense of scale and the terrifying, unremitting energy shown in all the art in the Royal Academy exhibition is a triumph of humanity in the face of the evil of destruction. In this the whole exhibition is a statement of hope. And it is this that makes it unique in our experience of art.

Patrick Reyntiens

## Why Tarantino should be banned

FILM REVIEW  
Freddie Sayers

### Death Proof

18 CERT, 114 MINS

I know the correct strategy is to remain silent. I know that by explicitly condemning someone like director Quentin Tarantino you fan the flames of his publicity and end up helping him. I know that the best reply to empty-headed sensationalism is to ignore it. But some things are too important to remain unsaid, and this newspaper must not remain silent.

Mr Tarantino's latest offering, *Death Proof*, is vile. Yes, it is base and artless and imbecilic, but it is also morally irresponsible and potentially dangerous. In it, Mr Tarantino reveals himself to be what some of us have known him to be all along: a disturbed man, erotically attracted to violence, ignorant, arrogant and totally without a moral compass. I do not hesitate in saying it: his movies should be banned from the cinemas.

Artistically, *Death Proof* is almost totally without merit. Until this film I hadn't realised that it was possible to be disgusted and bored at the same time. It tells the story of a psychopath called Stunt Man Mike (Kurt Russell), who kills groups of girls by using his virtually indestructible "death proof" stunt car and who eventually gets his comeuppance.

We spend the first half of the film in Austin, Texas, with a group of girls who are eventually killed, and the second half in Lebanon, Tennessee, with another group of girls – this time, two of them turn out to be stunt women and the wrong targets for Mike to pick on. His numerous attempts are thwarted and the girls end up wreaking revenge on him.

This basic plot is padded out with the usual Tarantino nonsense. First there is the pointless decision to film the whole thing in a 1970s style, replete with crackly screen and overdone jerkiness, despite it being set in the present day. There is the same big string guitar music, the same obsession with beautiful, weird-looking women (and their feet). Then there are the pointless B-movie references, which are so often mistakes for wit: the space of a scene from *Reservoir Dogs*, the reappearance of corrupt sheriff Earl McGraw (from *Kill Bill*) – and worst of all – the appearance of Tarantino himself, jutting chin sticking proudly into frame as Warren the barman.

Most tiresome of all is the over-long, cod-philosophical dialogue – the same stuff that fills all of his movies and that movie buffs all

across America are probably learning by rote as we speak. They talk about films, and 1970s cars, and act out little stupid scenes. At one point, in what appears to be a rare moment of self-knowledge, one of the girls reacts to a particularly odious bon mot by rolling her eyes and saying: "Oh, is that cowboy wisdom?"

Not even, is the answer; it is just meaningless, Dadaist guff. Boredom begins to turn to disgust after spending a while with these groups of girls. Their conversation is so empty, they seem so ignorant and their lives so sad yet the director does not appear to notice; you get the horrid impression that we are supposed to think they are cool. Swear-words rain down on you, interspersed between semi-intelligent musings that are simultaneously upbeat and depressing – "I don't know what futuristic utopia you live in, but in the --ing world I live in, a bitch gotta carry a gun".

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That is what is so sick: Tarantino makes us care for them before revealing in their brutal murder. Their friend accepts a lift with Stunt Man Mike and he locks her in the plexiglass box in the passenger seat of his stunt car and starts driving like a maniac until she is so bushed around that she dies. He then drives head-on into the car carrying the other girls, at 160mph. In the most hideous scene I have ever witnessed, Tarantino re-plays the moment of impact from all different angles, time and time again, openly relishing the blood and broken limbs.

The ending is worse still. By an idiotic coincidence, the second group of girls contain two stuntwomen, one of whom likes to ride on the bonnet of a 1970 Dodge Challenger while her friend drives at full speed, with the third brutal friend (and young mother, in a typical Tarantino detail) in the rear seat. The "death proof" car goes for them, and with high-energy rock playing we then have a 20-minute cat and mouse game as each car tries to kill the other. The naked revenge that takes the girls to their final, jubilant, violent punishment in Stunt Man Mike adds the nasty flourish of which Tarantino is so proud.

This is not art; it is not culture. It teaches nothing but hate and revenge, and appeals to nothing but the darkest instincts. It is the pornographic fantasy of a mildly talented sicko and should never have been allowed into the cinemas. Ban Tarantino.

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## Not for Beckett purists

### THEATRE REVIEW

#### Fragments

YOUNG VIC

Peter Brook's stark, minimalist production of five fragments by Samuel Beckett lasts just 55 minutes and takes surprising liberties with the texts. The most famous piece is an elegiac lullaby in which a lonely woman, prematurely old, sits in a darkened room by a window in a rocking chair, listening to her pre-recorded voice. Slowly going out of her mind, she rocks away her life until she dies. As acted by Kathryn Hunter, who speaks directly to the audience and has no rocking chair, the monologue does not have the hypnotising impact it can have.

Three old ladies sit on a park bench, saying nothing. But whenever one of them briefly leaves the stage, the other two whisper some horrifying secret about her. The whispers are inaudible but presumably all three have some incurable disease. The sketch is completely riddled by playing by two of the women played by men, which immediately invites unwanted laughter.

These fragments, which also include a meeting between a cripple and a blind man and an incomprehensible 20-word libretto without the music, are strictly for Beckett aficionados, but not for

Beckett purists. The only enjoyable item is a music hall routine in which two men get out of bed, get dressed, go to work, come home, get undressed and go to bed. One man is miserable; the other is happy. It's all in mime, it's very simple, it's perfectly done and very funny.

#### A Disappearing Number

BARBICAN

A mathematician, like a poet and painter, is a maker of patterns in which everything is connected to everything else. Maths has never been my strong point. And as for pure mathematics, forget it. The opening scene with a professor filling a blackboard with unintelligible numbers is a witty way to put people off mathematics for ever. How does one make sense of the concept of infinity? What does it mean to say there are different types of infinity? Where will it all end?

In 1913 Professor Godfrey Harold Hardy at Cambridge University received a letter from a self-tutored 26-year-old Indian clerk containing fantastic theorems about prime numbers, one of the great mysteries of mathematics. Hardy invited him to come to Cambridge, which meant the Indian suffered rejection from his caste, friends, neighbours and family. Brahmins are forbidden to cross the seas. The romance and confrontation between East and West is not sufficiently

developed in Simon McBurney's pictorially imaginative production, which spends far too much time on a fictional couple, a young professor and her American-Asian lover.

#### The Burial at Thebes

BARBICAN PIT

Sophocles's tragedy has always been topical ever since it was performed in Athens circa 442 BC. Seamus Heaney's version is inspired by George Bush and the war in Iraq.

The translation is crystal clear but unexciting. The performances are inadequate and the production is poor. The chorus, dressed in flowing robes, tries to behave like a Greek chorus of old with unfortunate comic results.

#### The Ugly One

ROYAL COURT

German playwright Marius von Mayenburg has written a short, sharp, funny, but not wholly successful satire on identity, promotion and plastic surgery. An unappealingly ugly man is transformed into an Adonis and finds himself desired by one and all in bed and in the market place. The surgeon, delighted with his success, repeats the operation and soon there are many men who look exactly like him and he quickly loses his popularity and marketability – but not a jot of his narcissism.

Robert Tanitch

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