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REVIEW

New York City

*Donald Baechler: Painting and Sculpture*

Fisher Landau Center for Art

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*Donald Baechler: Painting and Sculpture*, on view at the Fisher Landau Center for Art in Long Island City, includes a handful of the artist's collage-paintings from the 1980s as well as a collection of recent sculpture. The two groups are mostly segregated on non-contiguous floors (painting or sculpture?), but they share an affinity for mucking around with the limits of their form's appearance. All of the work is lovely, and that should be noted in capital letters. Yet it rarely moves beyond its tyrannical commitment to surface matters and material.



Donald Baechler, *Three Tulips*, 2011; plywood, plaster and papier-mâché (back); and *Untitled (Flowers)*, 2003-2004; bronze (front); image courtesy the artist and Fisher Landau Center for Art.

This demented attention to materials is most evident in the sculptures—most cast in bronze and well over five feet tall—which depict plants and flowers. From a distance, the work looks two-dimensional. Instead of possessing the thick and robust qualities often associated with bronze, the sculptures look like sandwich boards floating in space. This far-sighted view exists in sharp contrast to what's seen up close, where the work's textural qualities take over. Such a contrast practically demands that the sculptures be viewed (and experienced) from endless sides and distances. *Three Tulips* (2011), on the other hand, is only one of two sculptures not cast in bronze. It remains in a naked state of plywood, plaster and papier-mâché, but seems more substantial than its bronze

neighbors. The plaster is meaty and sloppily applied, and its bright white color reflects the gallery's overhead light in such a way that the work appears to hog the space. Especially next to the delicate *Plant* (2003) and its anorexic stems, *Three Tulips* is positively menacing, especially when you notice the crude doodles of a skull and a stick figure embedded in its base.



Donald Baechler, *Deep North*, 1989; acrylic, oil, fabric collage on linen; 111 x 144"; image courtesy the artist and Fisher Landau Center for Art.

The eight large-scale canvases on the Landau Center's first floor showcase Baechler's signature crude-doodle style as well as his preoccupation with materials. *Deep North* (1989), with its simple trees, fading sun and balding head, is gorgeous and meditative. The painting is notable for its restraint. It reveals little and embraces sadness as its lone figure, whose face we cannot read, contemplates an infinite landscape. In *Deep North*, Baechler applies large fabric swatches to the canvas and paints over them to give the work a rough surface. He repeats this trick in other paintings, including *Coney Island* (1988), rendered in candy store colors, and *Arithmetic* (1990) with its pleasing red and white-washed-pink paint drips. In *Priceless, Wordless, Loveless* (1987-88), the fabric swatches are so evident and patterned that they almost become another figure in the image, right next to an oversized woman and a mini-tree. Rounding out the group are two enormous and chaotic collages, *Autonomy or Anarchy #1 and #2* (2003), of horse heads and gambling paraphernalia such as scattered dollar bills and dice. They are less successful than *Deep North* and *Priceless, Wordless, Loveless* because they preserve Baechler's obsession with layering, but ditch any twinge of melancholy that might approach something resembling meaning.

One of the oldest works in the show is *Untitled [globe]* (1984-85), a moody painting that is more imperfect and appealing than its younger offspring in the gallery. But like the rest of the work, it is both shallow and demanding; it insists we see it from many angles but it doesn't give us a whole lot of meat in return. Admittedly, Baechler overthrows our expectations of his chosen materials, and that's something—so is the fact that many of these paintings look great on the wall. But in the end, what's missing is what's missing: that which should exist beyond the wall, something relevant and intangible that we can't circle again and again like so many vultures.

Marie-Adele Moniot is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn, New York.