

In Memoriam

A Tribute to Donald Baechler

(1956–2022)

Edited by Brian Belott



Portrait of Donald Baechler.

Brian Bellott

In '93 the sky cracked open and the first Donald Baechler suitcase struck me. I was in my college hallway looking through piles of discarded auction catalogues when I spied my first suitcase painting. This suitcase had a message. Its simplicity stupefied me. Red on white, it was painted wet on wet, quick like bathroom scrawl, but despite its crude immediacy it's groundwork was a full meal. For me it was a coy metawink for painting itself. Painting as suitcase, a pair of winged shoes, a portable hole.

Through pal Brendan Cass, I first met Donald at his Crosby street studio. I was shitting skittlez excited. I needed to make a big splash so I pumped-up my likability with a fake Irish accent. The entire visit I slushed through a bad brogue like a Peter Seller's disguise mustache falling off on a moving cat. Donald was not amused. Refusing to shake my hand he instead brandished his trademark blank stare and I was ushered away. My Irish imitation must have been crap because Donald was a connoisseur of good-bad imitations. For him, the bootleg of the bootleg was better than the original. He was amped by the disintegration of form and meaning in bootleg's game of telephone. Later that year I met Donald in Amagansett, this time I brought a 1960's white Samsonite suitcase filled to the guillotine with source material. I started collaging for him and never stopped.

Time Ravel is possible through that closet's backdoor. The magician's hat is a garbage can. If anyone can, the garbage can! The world throws stuff in and Artists take stuff out. They take stuff out in an attempt to wire it up and broadcast. The junk store's dumpster is a grail as big as a fountain. Non-art, bad illustration, clip art, children's art, teenage art, way-out outsider art and super-in insider art, cartoons, craft projects and found — all this detritus relegated to the trash heap was a mind mulch smoothie in Donald's hands, meaningful and meaningless, spinning us on the dance floor.



Donald Baechler in his Amagansett studio.

My apprenticeship was a rare thing. Donald's staff wasn't humongous and this gave me more time around this wonderfully eccentric Maestro. For those of you who never met him, he was an introvert who kept his shields up. Kinesics could better explain it but DB maintained his forcefield by facial and bodily cues. Donald's default locked stance was the perfect field to discharge deadpan humor from. Like Buster Keaton, this stone face only made his sentiments funnier and all the more lethal.

In SVA I fantasized about what it would be like in the gag-room on a Keaton film. How did a team cook up these baroque shenanigans? At DB's studio I got a taste of that. In his studio, the Joker was a cherished archetype that many of his visitors channeled. This cast of visitors was continuous. At the tippy top of this wildcard list would be the arcane art writer Edit de Ak and, luckily for me, she was part of the staff. Like a skeleton accordioning, Edit drew stories out of her bottomless profound mind. She could have easily been a wiser Ingrid Sischey, but instead adored the subterranean and was a happy shadow member of the DB salt mines. Edit and Donald were a comedic duo. Edit couldn't hear and Donald mumbled, almost immediately, a simple conversation slid into a word association game, sometimes generating painting titles while other times turned into a "waiting for Godot" screaming match.

Ensuring there was never a dull moment Donald perpetually invited an angel of chaos that kept everybody on their toes. This was his preferred studio setting. I wasn't around when Alfredo Martinez was an employee —Alfredo also forged Donald's paintings while he was working for him— but I was there when Martinez's recommendation for his replacement arrived. What grenade was Alfredo going to hurl at the studio now?! Lance de los Reyes! Aka RAMBO. Why did Donald accept a recommendation from an assistant that left his studio in handcuffs? Donald knew great ideas come from the edge — the edge of town, the edge of sense. The true edge is effortlessly risky.

Lance was perfect, he couldn't be contained; he was born to risk. Meaning is overheated and overrated. The Art Gods anoint few to do their bidding and those they choose encrypt the aliens message with HEART, HANDS and CRAFT. This is Lanceism. He was one of the many wild ones I met at the studio.

Hopefully, for both of us, this is my last paragraph. I've been pacing around this paragraph like a wet weasel in a Chihuahua cage. There's lots of stories but this isn't a biography. What I must say is this: I think many don't fully understand Donald's artworks. People blinded by his symbol hits—the rose, the tree and the ice cream cone—are eaten whole by its possible iconography, but most don't get DB's conceptual game. In one such proposition, Don viewed all symbols as collections of abstract marks, thus he was an abstract painter. It's why he naturally gravitated towards painting silhouettes, the shadows of symbols, to reduce the formal content to make minimal paintings. To the rest of us he was painting nameable icons but what do we know? And more importantly what does that attitude do while painting an image? Like the true GO, he flipped everyone's wigs when he turned these silhouette paintings into flat bronzes, materializing shadows. Like a true comedian, Donald was always pulling reversals, but a single joke was never the goal. Jokes and games were used as tools for rethinking and unthinking the mundane and the miraculous. Donald's jump-off was drawing and the love of unique drawing solutions. Is there anything more relaxed, raw and improvisatory than drawing? Early on, DB distrusted his indoctrinated hand so he attempted to re-learn how to draw. This led him to collect request drawings from random people he met in bars. Back in his studio these bar drawings became large-scale paintings. The untutored hand was monumentalized. Throughout his career he continued to champion naive drawing styles. He was always collecting amateur art and when his sources dried up he had his assistants produce fake found drawings. Such a storm of collection creates a need for crates not crepes, container systems, book shelves, binders. Donald built a library. His artworks wouldn't exist without the library and that library had a library behind it. The first library was source material, found everywhere these books were ground down to make a second focused library. Donald was a taxonomist building databases. He needed all the versions of candlesticks he could find in the visual culture and he wouldn't stop until had them. He also needed hundreds of other classic symbols. Through a wormhole of ephemera he sampled images turning them into slides. In his studio, shelves of slide binders presented themselves as infinite painting possibilities. This encyclopedic systemization of visual sludge was eye-opening. His processes seemingly digested the world in its entirety.

The worst part of Donald's passing is the world losing more Donalds. No more Art. We found out the globe is flat and by flat I mean no more bubbles. Donald was the fizz. He knew how to activate the dust into cymatic tortoise patterns. Donald Bach could have filled our minds with themes and variations until the Goldbergs came home. Unfortunately they came home too soon. The world isn't going to stop producing junk and now we no longer have Maestro transmuting it into absurd eleganza.



Donald Baechler with Brian Bellott in Baechler's Amagansett studio.

Taylor McKimens*Sacred Clown of the Downtown*

“Painter of Cartoonish Collages” was the unfortunate summary of Donald Baechler by *The New York Times* on his passing. It spoke more to a misunderstanding of his work than its intended description of it. The word “cartoonish” is commonly used as a dismissive art world dog-whistle. Though that statement will undoubtedly elicit defiance in many who somehow feel singled out by it, it’s an unmistakable fact to me and many artists. I had a rural working class childhood without access to museums and galleries, so it was primarily cartoon and illustrated printing that informed me when I first learned about visual art. Studying those images was how I first wrapped my head around communicating visually, and an indelible visual accent was formed. Exactly the same as when you learn to speak words for the first time, you ultimately take on the accent of those whose words you’re emulating. As a small child, Philip Guston intently copied Krazy Kat. I copied Garfield, and the language of cartoons became my visual accent just as it did with scores of artists from similar backgrounds. Graphic, illustrative, comic and “cartoonish” image-making can easily be seen as the predominant, most widespread visual accent of lower class artists born in the twentieth century. With the art world in particular being such a raging inferno of class insecurity, it’s not hard to do our own math when it comes to the question of why in post-Guston times, the art world still openly shames and disregards the “cartoonish” in art. Donald didn’t have an illustrative visual accent, and his background was not like mine. I know he wasn’t remotely as interested as I am in understanding why low class images get such a rise out of people. He knew they did though, and he used them without fear like whoopie cushions and cream pies, splat to the face of an uptight art world.

I was under the impression growing up, that art had actually ended with modern times and that comics and commercial art were the hottest and only thing going. That changed while attending an illustration department at an art school in Los Angeles where I had my first introduction to the existence of contemporary art as well as getting to actually see it in person. I was lucky to end up in front of two paintings that dramatically altered my outlook on things. One was Kerry James Marshall’s 1993 “De Style” at LACMA. It’s a large scale, dynamic painting with an unabashed graphic approach that felt very in line with trends in illustration at the time. I was inspired by how it not only held its head high among the prestigious paintings in the museum, but absolutely commanded the space. Its graphic qualities were empowering it rather than condemning it to the art world banishment I’d noticed being levied on work bearing even the faintest trace of the illustrative. It felt in line with work I was familiar with but it was grand, “elevated” and it changed my notion of what was achievable for me in art.

The other painting, I saw maybe a year later at MOCA, and it was Donald Baechler's six-foot tall, 1986 "Painting with Two Balls." It gave me an unexpected jolt, and helped me see a new possibility in art that felt considerably more empowering than the idea of aiming to "elevate" my voice. Donald was in the center of the New York art world and was using the power of the imagery to troll insiders and outsiders alike. The painting is every bit as bold as is implied by the deadpan title which is coolly self-descriptive while simultaneously poking at painting machismo. It's just a huge moronic cartoon with an equally imbecilic composition. It's a violation to anyone who holds cartoons to be holy as well as a brazen badgering of formal painting purists. But it isn't simply a goof. It's soulful imagery and real deal progressive painting.



Donald Baechler, *Painting With Two Balls* 1986. Mixed media. 75 x 75 inches.

In my art school library I was able to find the book of Donald's work from the "Art Random" series. It was edited by Edit DeAk who, along with Donald and the other artists and characters I ultimately met in his studio, would provide my real art education. Shortly after I graduated I took my first trip to New York to see what all the hubbub I'd been hearing was about, and had the single goal of trying to meet Donald. An art school friend of mine, James Benjamin Franklin, had met him previously at Skowhegan so I had one name to drop and "D. Baechler" was listed in the white pages. I'm sure my being a young boy fresh off the turnip truck helped open the door too, but it was our talks about art, and the folder I brought with scraps of drawings I had been making that prompted him to offer me a job there.

The scene at Donald's studio was made up of his friends and peers, artists, writers and poets, street kids, hangarounds and weirdos, and all manner of studio assistants whether currently employed or not. I could not have landed in a more creatively fertile place on my ultimate move to New York. Donald was far more of an enabler than an employer. He hired anti-functional teams of brilliant stooges and vaudevillian clods to slop together backgrounds and surfaces, bumping into and smashing things to the sound of slide whistles and crashing pans. It infuriated visiting gallerists, shocked collectors and confused office supply sales people who wished they hadn't rung the doorbell. It was literally impossible to get fired. Screw-ups and unprofessional behavior would often feel rewarded when Donald would yell about it briefly, then smirk with amusement and walk off. He still knew the importance of always maintaining a handful of folks that were more housebroken and able, yet unfazed by mayhem to keep the show somehow on track. I was probably seen

as having a foot in that camp due to the work ethic I formed growing up as a pair of hands in the country.

The studio had drop-ins that ran a wide gamut from Elton John popping by for a quick visit, to young artists asking for loans and handsome strays looking to scribble out drawings for 20 bucks to buy drugs around the corner. There'd be Rene Ricard looking to use the "X-Ray" machine to photocopy a manuscript, Ricky Clifton sneaking incredible furniture up the freight elevator and pioneering a kind of non-consensual "guerilla interior decoration" and Alfredo Martinez firing homemade art guns into stacks of phone books in the basement. A hangaround who was not very familiar with Pop Art once slapped a blackmail ultimatum on Donald, threatening to tell the world that his images were from found sources rather than his own hand. Though it was obviously already a well known fact, Donald paid the shocking amount of demanded hush money with suppressed excitement. It was far too good of a bad idea for his contrarian spirit to pass up. Unfamiliarity with Pop Art was definitely an anomaly around the studio, because the artists that flocked to Donald were mainly in it for the art. Conversations felt urgent and the subject never strayed too far from line, surface and paint. Donald rarely participated with much more than an interjection when he heard something he disagreed with, or to intently watch the fireworks unfold whenever things got heated. Edit was always there lighting up the scene. It was the only place she could regularly be found since she withdrew from her own legendary role as glamorous punk trickster icon, poet and champion of art world outsiders. Her sharp mind kept conversation to a high standard and her own mischief held conduct to a low one. I think Donald's Quaker upbringing may have had something to do with his acceptance of, and loyalty to the people in the storm around him as well as his grace with it all. He never seemed to feel any need to officially lead it or dominate the proceedings. It was a type of "meeting house," a kind of "chosen family" in the queer sense, a bastardization of Warhol's factory, or a combo of all three.



A quick sketch I made of Donald in 2012, and a photo of me in his studio while sketching it.

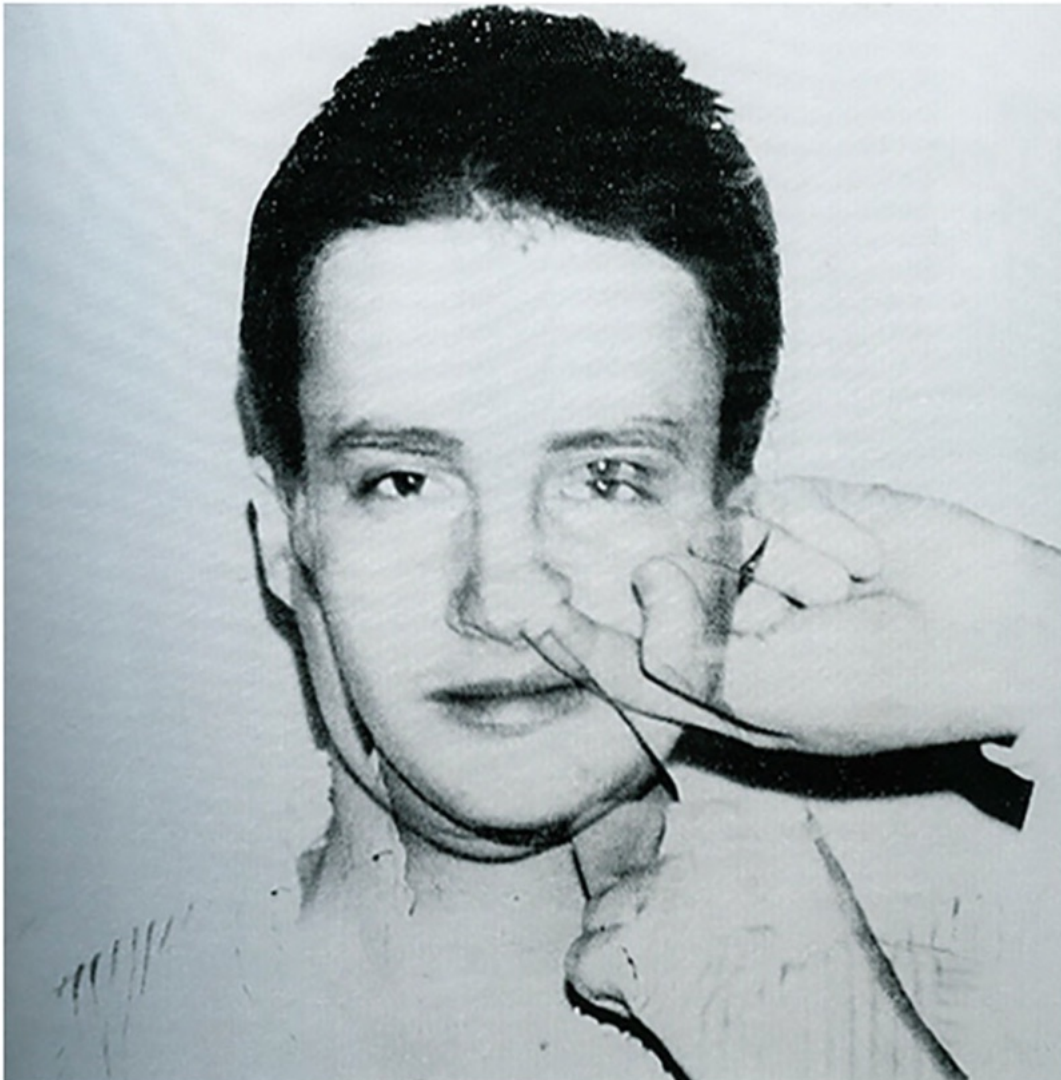
I was surrounded by a lot of kindred spirits there and came to learn that many of my other favorite artists also held Donald as one of their biggest influences or favorites. Many of the most acclaimed artists working now owe him a big debt. Joe Bradley, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Katherine Bernhardt, Chris Johanson, David Shrigley, Tomoo Gokita, Eddie Martinez, Yoshitomo Nara and scores of other artists around the world are walking on ground paved by Donald. While taking multiple trips to Japan, I came to understand what a tremendous impact his work had there. Teruhiko Yumura who is a brilliant sort of Japanese Warhol, pioneered a major movement of pop neo-expressionist drawing there, citing Donald's work as a major influence. The movement was called "Heta-Uma" which translates to "Bad-Good" and represented "bad technique" and "good soul". It was a far better description of what Donald was doing than any of the usual Western labels clumsily assigned to him such as "faux naive", "art brut", "neo-expressionist" or the likes. Yumura, or "King Terry," was Japan's uncontested leader of the movement, but in the West it was Donald Baechler and Gary Panter who were the main practitioners. They both held heavy influence in Japan but it was Donald whose work most truly embodied Heta-Uma. The art landscape in Japan was heavily impacted by Heta-Uma yet it is discredited as merely an "illustration" movement due to much the same connotations connected with "cartoonishness" that plague Western art discourse. Like Donald, Heta-Uma artists were bastard children of Pop Art and sidelined or misunderstood because of it.

I was always struck by Donald's disinterest in clearing up misunderstandings about his work. Instead he tended to fuel them. He perpetually muddled things by leaning into an aloof or confused energy when giving talks or interviews. He'd imply he didn't know or care about key issues in his work when we knew damn well that he considered every aspect intently. He steered toward intentionally unflattering results while being photographed, or while selecting images of himself to be used in print. He would relish when particular imagery in his work would receive abundant negative feedback, and he would double down on those images. His flower paintings in particular struck a nerve with people who deemed them off puttingly decorative or ingratiating. Their struggle with the imagery only prompted him to lean in harder and give the shows titles like "That Same Damn Flower" and "Enemies of the Rose." I could tell he loved people's confusion about his paintings and sculpture. His own take on them was full of conflict and contradiction.

His complex relationship with painting was largely fueled from his arriving on the scene while painting was declared dead. He spent a lot of his formative time with Joseph Kosuth and always took delight in making it known that Kosuth once told him, "You'd be a really good artist if you just stopped painting." He aligned himself with conceptual artists though he was inaccurately linked to the graffiti art scene due to his showing at Shafrazi Gallery at the same time of the rise of artists like Keith Haring.

Rauschenberg or Twombly are most often referenced as influences in Donald's work, and while correct to a superficial extent, it was pretty clear to me that it was Warhol who was his primary leaping off point. The fearless use of print and graphic pop imagery and the use of it to rile people in art, a cool painting approach informed by printing processes, imagery appropriation and a factory style studio approach all were clearly integral to Donald's way of doing things. In spite of all that, Donald was far from an imitator. Warhol's approach to making art from the mundane consisted of elevating subjects such as Campbell's soup cans and Marilyn Monroe. Things already iconic and packed with cultural currency long before Warhol presented them as art.

Though controversial at the time, they're made to feel like tame choices when compared to the absurd castoff imagery Donald foisted on art audiences on grand scale. Toilet wall scribbles, idiotic throw away drawings, ignorant clip art, ham-fisted printing and stupid decorative images that stab self-proclaimed aesthetes in the eye and rattle their classy cages. Donald's admiration for Warhol is upstaged by his clowning and indirect mockery of Warhol's Pop Art model. It was particularly clear to me that this is true by the fact that when his hero offered to paint his portrait, Donald chose to pose for the reference photos with his finger stuck up his nose. The act itself shows the defiance and audacity of a court jester speaking truth to his king, and the results felt more like collaboration with Donald's viewpoint stealing the show.



Andy Warhol, *Donald Baechler* 1986. 40 x 40 inches.

To all with an unencumbered view, it was clear Donald wasn't just playing the simple fool or punk, pointlessly riling. He was extremely articulate in painting and was an earnest connoisseur and master of the medium. The paintings have every bit of the quiet sophistication of Twombly, the command of simplicity and economy of means as Matisse, and the raw energy of Dubuffet, while teaching them all a thing or two about taking themselves way too seriously. His patch edits and pentimento displayed genuine self doubt and vulnerability. The expansive size and space in his paintings harness all the power and scope of the Hudson School. Figures and heads from the back looking out at a big expanse, but squashed flat and plumb stupid, yet still radiating with every bit of the grandeur in epic post war paintings of American sublime.



Donald Baechler, *Deep North* 1988-89. 111 x 144 inches.

They're not gags. They're powerful and they're enlightening. To some degree about Donald or about painting, but mainly about ourselves and our perceived self importance in the grand scheme of things. He wasn't "elevating" the moronic. He showed us that stupid IS divine. It's the role performed by the sacred clowns which exist in many cultures around the world and in many forms. Their role is widely similar. They reflect the absurdity of life. They contradict, provoke, poke fun, challenge and reveal us to ourselves in ways that can feel unnerving but ultimately help us grow and see a bigger picture. Many artists are seen to perform a version of this role but most fall dramatically short in comparison to Donald. Although he grew up Quaker, his family would take him to museums after Sunday meetings. It gave him one foot in both worlds, and uniquely positioned him to be both accepted and still an outsider. It was the perfect footing from which to turn loose his trickster spirit since it's always easier to take a joke from one of our own. He was an unparalleled rabble-rouser and a contrarian in every aspect of his life and work. He was the sacred clown of the downtown and he touched the core of tons of artists and outsiders who felt aligned with, or healed in some way by him. He was an insubordinate student in the pop schoolhouse and the misunderstood maestro of a vast new meeting house full of rogue artists and delinquents.

He supported many artists both creatively and with his generosity. He became a father figure to me personally as he did with a handful of others at the studio. He was there for me from my first day in New York until my last. I'm living in Los Angeles again now, back where I started out, making cartoonish paintings in his honor.



The last time I saw Donald. I had just loaded up a van with things he had been generously storing in his barn for me for over a decade. This was taken as I was just about to start my long drive west back to Los Angeles.

Lisa Rosen

March 20th 2024

“...Ave Atque Vale.”

–Catullus

Donald....there he is, the eternally youthful Donald Baechler. I see him in my mind. I hope I'll always be able to “visit” him like this.

Reserved in demeanor and always nattily dressed. A colorful plaid suit or an Austrian tracht jacket. Something out of the ordinary, special, funny.

Donald had an old world way about him. Perhaps from his Connecticut Quaker upbringing.

When introduced to someone he would give a quick nod and a slight bow with his upper torso. You could almost hear his heels gently click together.

Everything with Donald seemed gentle. He was quick witted, sharp, a very dry and wry sense of humor. He would lean his head in, delivering the killer quip sottovoce out of the side of his mouth.

I want to mention Donald's generosity. I remember his house in Amagansett. A summer camp feel with a revolving door of interesting guests: writers, poets, scenesters, assistants and artists, young and old. In the city he'd always carry a wad of roundtrip Jitney tickets. These he would hand out to people he wanted to see again or get to know better, to make sure they had an easy way to come out to visit on Long Island. Through the years Donald offered many charities: the use of his homes and studios for fundraising events. With his loyal clan of assistants and constant stream of visitors and friends he was always surrounded by creative people.

Donald, it's hard to believe that you're not reachable for some hot gossip, an hilarious volley of texts or just a damn hug.

I'm going to end with the words of the Latin poet Catullus (84 BCE to 54 BCE) from his heartbreaking eulogy (poem #101) to his beloved brother :
"Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale."

("...And forever brother, hail and farewell.")

Signed,
Lisa Rosen



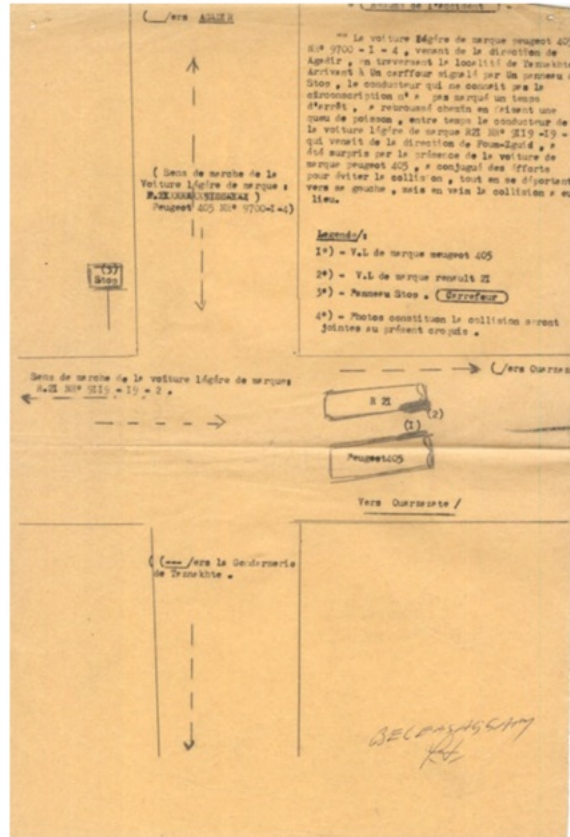
Donald Baechler, Venturi Arte Foundry in Bologna, Italy, 2006. Photo: ©Aga Ousseinov/Irina Ryjak Studio

Philip Taaffe

Vers Ouarzazate

I was driving the rental car Donald and I were using to get from Marrakech to Ouarzazate on the other side of the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco. I had turned in a dusty little village to get onto the correct road when a Peugeot came speeding out of nowhere to crash into our car on the driver's side. If I had pulled out an instant further, I would have been killed. Luckily, the impact merely blew out my window and dented the front left part of the car. This was in the tiny village of Taznakhte, and the police station was just down the street from the scene of the accident. I was able to drive the car over to the station, where we needed to fill out a report, when suddenly, a crowd of villagers appeared to bear witness to this local event. I'm sure this kind of thing didn't happen too often in those parts. As I was sitting at a desk telling the police officer my version of the story, which he was documenting very slowly on an ancient typewriter, Donald waited in another room where a local teacher was giving English classes. Donald noticed a chalk inscription on the blackboard that read: "Give me your house."

Everyone was extremely friendly, including the Policeman, who gave us a sheet of cardboard that he helped tape across our missing window so we wouldn't freeze for the remainder of our drive across the mountains. The entire village gave us a happy send-off. As we drove away, Donald and I just started laughing hysterically about the writing on the blackboard.



Accident Report from La Gendarmerie de Taznakhte. Courtesy Philip Taaffe.



Photographs by Philip Taaffe of Donald and a friend in Tangier, circa 1991. Courtesy Philip Taaffe.

Dear Donald,

I remember on several occasions, either when you came over for a studio visit, or when you were in attendance at an exhibition of mine, you told me, "I hate you," which was your manner of delivering a compliment. I knew what you really meant was that you saw something recognizably good in the work, and that you found it to be particularly challenging. You wanted me to feel proud of what I had done, and this was a way you chose to express that to me. And you know, it worked; you always managed to make me feel extra pleased about what I had accomplished.

In my opinion, your "Crowd Paintings" were the best series you ever did. I mean, they really resonated historically for me. You may not have liked this terminology, but I would call them highly civilizational. They summon vast and profound cultural territory, a kind of global convergence across time.

I feel an acute sense of deprivation that you are no longer here with us. And yet we must continue, trusting that we have learned sufficiently from one another.

My Love Forever,
Philip



Donald Baechler, *Crowd Painting*. Courtesy Philip Taaffe.

David Ramsay

APRIL 4TH

GOD PLACES US ON THE ARK OF LIFE
WE KNOW NOT WHEN IT BEGINS, AND WHEN IT ENDS
THE SEA SUPPORTS US, THE SKY OUR COMFORT
THE SUN OUR DAY, THE MOON OUR NIGHT
THE JOURNEY IS FULL OF JOY AND SORROW
THE MANIFEST IS VAST WITH ALL FORMS OF LIFE
THERE ARE SOME WE LOVE AND OTHERS THAT CAUSE US TO
UNDERSTAND
THE SOUNDS ARE MANY, SOME HARSH, BUT MOST THE VOICE OF GOD.
THE SEA THAT LAPS, THE SOUND OF SEAGULLS IN THE AIR, THE RAIN
THAT TOUCHES AND REFRESHES, THE LAUGH OF OTHERS THAT
BRINGS US JOY
TIME SEEMS ENDLESS, AND YET QUITE SHORT
THERE ARE SEASONS, AND AS WE MOVE, THEY ALL MAKE SENSE
GOD PROVIDED YOU THE GIFT OF THE BRUSH AND YOU OPENED EYES
TO INNOCENCE
THERE ARE MANY SEAS AND PORTS, BUT AT THE END GOD REACHES
OUT HIS HAND
AND GUIDES US HOME.
I HEAR HIS GENTLE VOICE
“DONALD, WELL DONE”
GOD THEN REPLAYED A MULTITUDE OF VOICES FROM THE MEETING
HOUSE
I HOPE YOUR MEMORIES WERE AS YOUR FONDEST DREAMS
THE ARK IS LOVE, AND IT WILL ALWAYS LAST



Donald Baechler Studio, "Walking Figure" in progress, 2004. Photo: ©Aga Ousseinov/Irina Ryjak Studio

Peter Schuyff

In 1980 I was fresh in New York and Donald showed me the world. He introduced me to the Germans, the Italians and to Pat Hearn. Things would be different now if not for my friendship with Donald Baechler. He had sage advice that I think about every day. Donald said I should paint with my left hand and use more brown.

Robert Wilson

donald baechler created his own
ARTISTIC universe with balloons and
ice cream cones.

His world was hands-on, with a very
personal line. Another world
made of real world images.

one could always see in his face a boy
looking at what was around from
a far.

in his painting, the background often
became the foreground and vice versa.

one way we connected was because
we both thought abstractly.

he was a quilter like his mother
he was a painter, a close friend

bob wilson

BARCELONA

3.2.24



Donald Baechler Studio, "Birds", 2019. Photo: ©Aga Ousseinov/Irina Ryjak Studio.

Darren Bader

I'm not usually someone at a loss for words, but since his passing I've had a very difficult time speaking of what Donald meant to me. And he meant—still means— plenty to me. I always, *always*, wish we'd gotten to know one another better. I think our communication styles were worlds apart. Our art interests occasionally dovetailed, at least when conversations presented themselves—I suppose that's the weird employer-employee dance. Dear Donald, with his adorable, indelible, inscrutable, inimitable smirk-smile. He helped a ridiculous kid out—as the story goes (I can corroborate it): dear David Greenberg introduced us (1997) and I effusively (certainly drunkenly) shared my love for Giotto and Donald took an interest. Man, did I botch almost every task Donald gave me back then. And I surely wasn't a sterling registrar when re-employed from 2004-2007. But hey, he kept me around, and that was Donald, generous, always. Perhaps the Quaker in him; perhaps just the taciturn, heartfelt Donald. As is widely known, he surrounded himself with a lot of dysfunction—probably thrived on it. I was likely one of the least dysfunctional of the lot, which isn't bragging rights, more like boring rights. He was always generous with the peerless Edit DeAk, with Rene Ricard too, and many others of less mythical standing. Donald was excellent; I don't know what else to say. His kindness, and playful ruses, oozed from the pursed kinks of that smirk-grin. The endearing gravel of his monotone must have been near-holy (since we who once worked for him still imitate it religiously). If only Donald and I had opportunities to speak adult to adult... the timing never seemed to work in our favor and this never fails to sadden me. I remember our last run-in. Sweet Mr. Monotone. I miss him and I hope I always will.

Nessia Pope

For Donald

It seems like a long time ago, before the Hamptons had art openings and galas. We loved organizing yard sales, and looked forward to sipping drinks in the garden with friends and strangers who would come by to browse.

Donald never missed one of these. He would linger, looking at my daughter Olympia's old toys and beat up stuffed animals. I would always say “just take it.” But he would drop the money in the jar and smile, that beautiful smile of his. I asked him once and he told me he would “use the stuff in a work, or something...”

I like to think that Olympia's childhood treasures will live on forever through my dear friend's works of art. Although we would talk for hours and there were many laughs, this is the memory I cherish the most.



Donald Baechler Studio, "Globe Head Figure" in progress, 2008. Photo: ©Aga Ousseinov/Irina Ryjak Studio.

Linda Yablonsky

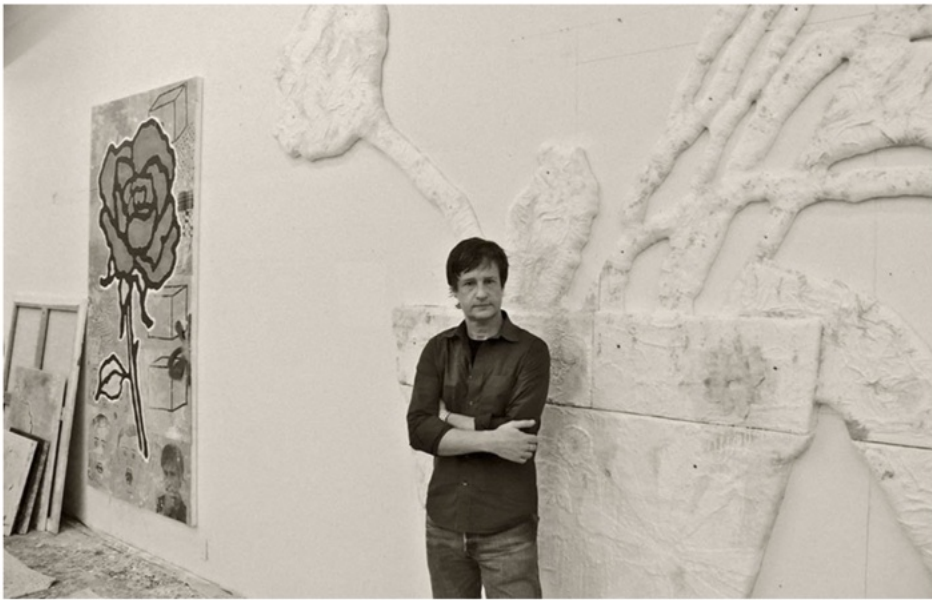
I must have met Donald at a club or party, or more likely in Cookie Mueller's kitchen, but our friendship really began the first time I went to his studio on Crosby Street. No idea when that was. Eighties? He was so droll and so sweet, and I loved his paintings/collages/drawings, the roses and the beach balls and the potted plants. That he layered them with newspaper, telephone book pages, fabric remnants, paper. That he walked on them. That he made books. He told hilarious stories about his dealers, particularly Lucio Amelio in Naples. I detected a sense of melancholy beneath his humor, and I connected to that, because we were losing so many friends to AIDS and drugs. Donald was devoted to the people in his life. How can you not love a guy like this?

Getting Donald's Christmas cards every year also made me happy. They were artworks, really. I kept them all. His holiday parties in his Chelsea studio had a dependably amazing mix of people. I also remember visiting his summer place in Amagansett, whenever that was. Nineties? I think it was a kind of farm, well over a century old. I may not be remembering correctly, but I think there were smaller buildings on the property that once had been slave cabins. Could that be right? He had a studio in the barn but the social pressures of the Hamptons got in the way of his work. He sold that place and moved to a bigger farm upstate in or near Spencertown. That was in the 2000s, I think, when he also bought a townhouse in Chelsea. It was just around the corner from the loft where I was living, so we saw each other often, by virtue of our being neighbors.

It was partly because of our proximity that I finally got the chance to work with him. This was in 2011, when I'd taken a job as the art consultant for a movie called *Arbitrage*, starring Richard Gere and Susan Sarandon. A friend of mine was the producer. The Gere character was an art collector, and my assignment was to round up art to hang on the walls of a loft he kept for his movie mistress. The location happened to be 77 White Street, an address etched into our brains as the site of the Mudd Club, where everyone we knew went in the late seventies, early eighties. The place had been so cleaned up and redone that it felt like a new building. No ghosts in the room.

When I ran into Donald in front of his house, I told him all about it. Most artworks in movies are reproductions, because of the insurance cost and the very real possibility of damage. This was a low-budget, independent production—no insurance. No art handlers, even. Yet, a few of the artists I approached trusted me with original works. Before I even asked if we could reproduce one of his paintings for the film, Donald offered to make a new rose painting free of compensation. He was so delightful! Grateful for the exposure, certainly, but also generous to the core.

Came the night before the shoot and he hadn't done the painting yet. I offered to print a reproduction of an older piece, but he insisted on making the painting. He stayed up all night to finish it, and when he brought it to White Street in the morning the paint was still wet. He installed it himself, marveling over how completely the Mudd Club had been erased. "I can't believe this is the same place," he said. It wasn't, of course, but his painting looks fantastic in the movie. I don't know what happened to it after it went back to Donald, but I wish to God it was hanging on my wall right now.



Donald Baechler, New York studio, 2009. Photo: ©Aga Ousseinov/Irina Ryjak Studio

Albert Oehlen

As I remember it Donald was hanging out in Cologne with some of the painters scene of the '80s. Walter Dahn, Jutta Koether, Jiri Dokupil and also Wilfried Dickhoff. Kippenberger was there too and I came from Hamburg to visit sometimes. We liked each other's work and became friends. He said to me that I was a good painter but that he wasn't sure if I am a good artist. I am still thinking about that. Nevertheless I visited him when I came to NY and we had interesting talks.

Patrick Fox

I REALIZE THIS IS A LONG TIME IN THE MAKING BUT THE LAST TWO WEEKS I'VE BEEN WITH MY EX (WE WERE TOGETHER FOR 20 YEARS) BECAUSE HIS MOTHER DIED UNEXPECTEDLY. WE RETURNED FROM HIS FAMILY YESTERDAY. I HAVE A WRITTEN TRIBUTE BUT IT'S ROUGHT BECAUSE I HAVEN'T BEEN QABLE TO FOCUS ON POLISHING IT. I WOULD NEED A DAY OR THREE TO GET IT WHERE I WOULD THINK IT WORTHY OF THE 40 YEAR FRIENDSHIP I HAD WITH DONALD. IF THAT DOESNT WORK, PERHAPS YOU CAN USE THIS LITTLE VIDEO. I SHOT IT AND WROTE THE MUSIC SHORTLY AFTER DONALD DIED. IT DOESN'T SEEM REALLY APROPOS. AND DOESN'T SAY HOW I FEEL ABOUT DONALD BUT PERHAPS IT CONVEY'S MY SENSE OF LOSS...

Kevin Baker

Donald Baechler was my best friend and partner for 17 years. He was brilliant in his craft, and was so dedicated to educating himself and me of artists and art. We shared studio spaces and loved critiquing each others progress with excitement. Art and artists always came first with Donald. He was truly a gift.



Crowded Room for Donald Baechler

I can't wake you up anymore
With an urgent message
From a troubled mind
I can't make you snicker
Or sigh
With an offhand suggestion
A long winded explanation
Or something simple and oh so sly
But my room is still crowded
Your elegant shadow remains
Always near
Just slightly out of reach

Julie Ryan

Donald Baechler and I met at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1994. Subsequently, when in New York I spent time living at his houses on and off for nearly thirty years. Donald and I traveled together frequently, and visited a dozen different cities for art events of every kind, most recently London in 2019 for a survey of Franz West at the Tate Modern. It was only natural to us that in the midst of a global pandemic we would have landed together, that he would protect me, and I him, so far as we were able.

Friday March 13th, 2020

It is a little after six in the morning. The phone is ringing. Donald's studio assistant, Lance des Los Reyes, calls. He sounds determined. Lance is quite vigilant about looking after the Maestro.

"Jules, you need to grab the Maestro and go up to the farm. You need to leave *now*. Call Donald. The city is going to shut down. There's going to be violence and chaos in the streets."

Lance goes on in this vein, with an escalating sense of dramatic urgency, about the looming quarantine. Neither Donald or I embraced that reality quite yet. He also had his own private drama going on, which, well. . . .

The previous night, we sat in his studio on West 27 Street talking about things, including the possibility of going to his farm in Spencertown, what that would look like, and who would go. But mostly, we talked about art.

Art was always at the center of our conversations, even that night during what would become one of the oddest times in human history. Donald was engaged with the topic of art at every level. He could talk about anything, and was curious by nature, but he loved "art talk" most of all and cared deeply about his vocation.

Donald produced an astonishing body of work. In his absence, it requires serious consideration. He was mislabeled in his lifetime as a mere cartoonist, and this erroneously chastens the complex affective matrix which begat the substantive complexity of the paintings. Within his practice, series and sequence allowed Donald freedom of movement as a *Bildmacher*, or image-maker, invested in the expressive quality of an iconography of things and themes, of faces and feelings. Each painting of ice cream cone, beach ball, tulip, and rose, or of boy, girl, woman, and man, exists as a definitive statement— that is, until the next painting was made, and the next one, and the next one.

Sitting in the studio that evening, Donald spoke about a project in Vienna, about how the sculptural properties of various things might be folded over into graphic shapes, about the relative quality of readymade canvases bought in bulk at craft stores. Despite the lively chat, these were already dark days for Donald, and the menacing heft of the pandemic was just a small part of them.

Sunday March 15th, 2020

The day was grim when we arrived at the farm: Trees bare, grass brown, and the sky a fallen grey. Donald quipped, “Now I remember why I hate to come up here in the winter.”

Monday March 23rd, 2020

We spend a lot of time trying to anticipate— *worrying about*— possible scenarios completely beyond our control. So when we see a problem and can imagine a solution, it is a good day. Donald orders an extra refrigerator-freezer for storing food, and I procure a chicken from YundWell in nearby Canaan. It's the last appliance in stock, and all the groceries, including our local Price Chopper are out of chicken and many things.

A safe porch pick-up is assigned for the bird. Donald is concerned it will not be delivered clean. A friend of his feeds her cat chicken livers, so he also has the idea that we can make food for his cat we drove up from the city.

My brothers in Milwaukee sent us six Scotch 3M N95 masks, and we instantly sent Donald's sister Margaret two of them. More were on the way.

Donald made hand sanitizer from alcohol, peroxide, and what-not ordered online. It stings.

Sunday April 2nd, 2020

Donald goes to his studio in the barn each day. I turn an extra bedroom on my side of the house into a place to paint. We settle into a routine of meeting in the kitchen around dinner time, and watch the news in limited doses.

He is great company.

Donald was always a social person which could feel disarming. He made himself available to others who sought his counsel, his time, and his largesse. He was also off-handedly generous to a fault. Ironically, Donald gets even more phone calls now that the lockdown is extended, and the universal uncertainty of our precariously slim lives has exploded. Many friends and family are safe, tucked away in their own country homes. Other people beseech him for money, and he is blowing up PayPal sending bits of cash to those who ask. However, most people keep in touch while ferreting around for an invite to the farm, looking for an escape, a reasonably peopled safe haven. Donald will have none of it, yet with a sardonic smile does find the queries amusing.

"I can't believe he called."

"They aren't even friends of mine."

"He is a terrible artist."

"They visited once— and want to bring their kids and dog!?"

In light of this, shortly after we arrived upstate, Donald entertained the idea of having an assistant here to help him in the studio, if indeed these circumstances were to continue as such. Now that we each see no clear end to it, and that this *will* go on for a long time, Donald offers no additional invites to the farm.

Admittedly, both of us are a bit stir-crazy. It feels bizarre to be away from NYC while spring is kicking in. On Saturday mornings I pick up brown paper bags of mac & cheese, sandwiches, and treats from Ben Gables, the lovely coffee shop on the small traffic circle in Chatham which is doing its best to keep their neighbors well fed.

Donald being Donald, he eats the cookies first.

Wednesday April 22nd, 2020

I placed a large order for us a week ago with Soho Art Materials, and today the truck arrived. The two delivery guys seem dumbfounded by contrasting worlds— *stricken city corona virus epicenter* versus *bucolic rural art oasis*, that which is Donald's wonderful property a million miles away from usual haunts in Chelsea, the West Village, the Flower District, and the Navy Yard.

Once the guys left, I felt a bit guilty. Donald did too, yet we were glad to receive our stuff given how fucked up things were becoming, and so quickly. Supply chains were strained to breaking for many items. Most notably, this delivery also felt like the first time anyone *real* had visited since our arrival the second week in March. For Donald, and for me, this distance from others was very unusual. And yet . . . Things were about to change, again.

