

*Georg Baselitz and his relationship to Swedish artists Carl Fredrik Hill, Ernst Josephson, and August Strindberg.*

The idea for the current exhibition of Kalmar Konstmuseum is to illuminate the relationship between German artist Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) and the Swedish artists Carl Fredrik Hill (1849-1911), Ernst Josephson (1851–1906), and August Strindberg (1849-1912). Baselitz is among the most prominent figures of post-war German art and has had a great influence on later generations of artists, especially in Germany. Today he is unquestionably a significant point of reference for European cultural history.

The connection between Baselitz and Hill, Josephson, and Strindberg may be traced back to the early 1960s. Since then the younger artist has returned repeatedly to the work of these three predecessors for inspiration. Baselitz has bought paintings by each of them for his own collection and published a book about Hill's work. He was initially interested in the three as artists who had gone their own way. Like many German artists of the post-war generation, Baselitz found himself in a difficult cultural climate in which the symbols and references had been substantially compromised by National Socialism. It was a cultural trauma, and created for Baselitz a sense of alienation. Some artists sought to escape the burden of German culture by looking further afield, for example to pop art, but a remarkable number did not break with their cultural history—and perhaps that would not have even been possible. Instead, most tried to take on that history, however difficult it may have been. It was under these conditions, in the early 60s, that Baselitz began to study other artists who worked as outsiders but had developed over a time a personal approach that nevertheless was tied to the reference apparatus of cultural history. Encountering Hill, Josephson, and Strindberg helped Baselitz find his own way of going forward. The fact that the first two of these produced much of their notable work during what were considered periods of illness was not of crucial importance to Baselitz.

Baselitz's relationship to the others may be discerned on three different levels: choice of subject, composition, and execution. Their subjects often include men, nature plays a large role, and many times the scene refers to historical events that are given a kind of archaic treatment, such in Josephson's gallery of mythical characters in the drawings *Njord*, *Domalder*, and *Odins intåg i Sverige* [Oden's Invasion of Sweden]. There are also compositional similarities, including the use of landscape and the importance of trees to the composition. The treatment of the human figure is similar, even in details such as the shape of the feet. All of them make use of considerable drama in their compositions.

In addition to the similarities of composition and subject matter, there are connections in the way the artists execute their work. Their drawing lines and painted brushstrokes suggest quickness, energy, and attitude, which heightens the drama of the work. Baselitz's paintings are physical. The drama of his paintings is commonly found in Strindberg's work, and occasionally in Josephson's. For example, Josephson's oil study *Skiss till näcken* [Sketch for the Water Sprite] (1905, Nationalmuseum) is executed with a greater physicality and directness than the several final versions he painted of the Water Sprite, which are somewhat more careful. In an interview with Donald Kuspit, Baselitz said his aggressiveness comes from a sense of being (forcibly) displaced, of landing in the midst of a trauma his generation had not caused but still had to atone for. That frustrated energy found a physical outlet in his painting, but Baselitz's work is also energized by the fact that dealing with his country's history has provided an escape from that wretched state.

Baselitz was not the only German artist to take on his country's complex history; others include Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, and A.R. Penck. That approach has continued in later generations of artists such as Neo Rauch, Jonathan Meese, and Norbert Bisky. The differences between Swedish and German art today are due in part to divergent economic and sociopolitical conditions following the Second World War, but in my view just as much to the fact that the German artists never lost contact with their cultural tradition or their cultural reference system. Many other contemporary Germans besides Baselitz, including Neo Rauch and Jonathan Meese, make liberal use of cultural and artistic reference material taken from their country's cultural history. Using such references is still both possible and appreciated in contemporary German art because there still exists a relatively broad public knowledge of their cultural history. Baselitz often tells his students of the importance of developing a personal approach to making art that is based on oneself, one's own history, one's own generation.

Because of its official neutrality during the Second World War, Sweden had no trouble leaving the war years behind and moving forward. The country's attitude toward Germany changed after the war, with profound consequences for Swedish culture. Its ties to Germany were to be hidden away from the collective memory. After the war there was a *realpolitik* paradigm shift in Sweden away from its previously close association with the Germanic language cultural sphere to becoming one of the most Anglicized countries in Europe. As early as 1946 the school system switched from German to English as the primary foreign language to be taught. The abrupt shift in alignment created something of a cultural vacuum and caused Swedes, in contrast to the Germans, to lose contact with a great deal of their cultural heritage and cultural historical reference system, which until then had shared so much with its Germanic counterpart. One could argue that the Swedish culture and art

scene have been impoverished—perhaps even amputated—as a result of this self-inflicted renunciation of such a significant part of the country’s cultural heritage.

This leads us to another aspect of the exhibition: Baselitz’s works may be seen as interpretations of three important Swedish artists. A great deal of the reference system within which Hill, Josephson, and especially Strindberg worked has in some respects been forgotten, has ceased to exist. Baselitz’s art can give us a perspective on what was lost, since he has worked in a reference system that in many respects has more in common with that of previous generations of Swedish artists than with the reference system of contemporary Swedes. Of course there are connections between individual contemporary Swedish artists and their predecessors. But it’s worth noting that it took a long time for the field of art history to acknowledge both Hill and Strindberg as significant artists.

Our hope is that this exhibition will provide new opportunities for interpretation and new angles of approach that work in two directions. First, the exhibition introduces Baselitz’s art from the perspective of the Swedish artists Hill, Josephson, and Strindberg, who have been so important to him. And second, Baselitz’s works may be seen as contemporary interpretations of the work of the three Swedes, who together represent a significant portion of Swedish art history. Baselitz can serve as a link between the earlier history of Swedish art and a broader European context—because I believe that comparing his work to the three Swedes reintroduces a lost cultural reference system. Baselitz fills a gap in our understanding by making the connection between the art of Hill, Josephson, and Strindberg and the context of cultural history in which they were created. In this sense his work is a key to rediscovering something we’ve lost.

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Martin Schibli, Curator

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