



photograph by Sari Goodfriend

# In the Mix

Artist **Donald Baechler** talks about his process, what the deal is with all the flowers, and why he still feels he hasn't yet "made it." (Even though, of course, he has.)

by *Sue Hostetler*

**GOTHAM: You've been part of the Downtown New York City art scene since the early eighties. Was this the best place to be as a young artist at that time?**

**DONALD BAECHLER:** I'm originally from Hartford, Connecticut, and came to New York to go to Cooper Union in 1977, but stayed for just a year. I also spent a year in school in Germany. At the time, Germany had an amazing energy as well—there was a big painting eruption going on and artists like Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger were just starting to get attention, so it was all very exciting. When I was living in the East Village I also had a studio in Hamburg and went back and forth, until I eventually ended up in New York full time. To be quite honest, there was an awful lot of crap floating around the East Village back then. We all remember the success stories—like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat and a few others—that seemed to embody the spirit of that moment, but most of it sank without a trace.

**G: Which artists have had the greatest influence on you and your work?**

**DB:** Definitely Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol. Warhol was an amazing draftsman. His drawings from the fifties, sixties, and seventies were, and are, very significant to me.

**G: Was there a defining moment when you said to yourself, "Wow, I've made it"?**

**DB:** No. I still don't feel like I've made it. I don't think any artist feels that way. To be totally satisfied with what you've achieved would mean complacency, and I don't know a single artist who isn't discouraged about something.

**G: Do you consider yourself an abstract painter even though your works incorporate silk-screening, projection, stamping, drawing, printing, and collage?**

**DB:** I do. I'm fascinated with the issues of painting, the nuances of painting, and sometimes the imagery takes a backseat to the paint application. It's not so much about what's being painted as how it's being painted. On the other hand, the

iconographic program is really important to me at the same time. I've been collecting images for 30 years now and have a picture file of thousands and thousands of categorized images. I always start new works by browsing through my own image archive.

**G: Many well-known people, like billionaire investor Ronald Perelman, collect your work. What type of person is attracted to your art?**

**DB:** Mr. Perelman has been a big supporter. He collected my early work and has hung onto things, so I'm very appreciative. Peter Brant and Stephanie Seymour have also been collecting as long as Mr. Perelman has and in as great depth. I honestly don't know who else owns my work. Elton John has a few pieces and bought something as recently as six months ago, but he's also a friend. You kind of have to count on your gallery to sell to people who really appreciate the work—who aren't just speculating and planning to flip something at auction immediately.

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**G: You have studios in the city and in Columbia County in the Hudson River Valley. Do you enjoy working up there more than in the city?**

**DB:** It's just easier to work there. It's a 120-acre former dairy farm and it affords so much privacy and space—especially for sculpture. It also just happens to be where [fellow painter and sculptor] Ellsworth Kelly lives.

**G: The image on the cover of this magazine is from your celebrated flower series. You**

**once said that "the history of art is all about flowers." Can you elaborate?**

**DB:** If you look at any historical period in the art world, there are always flowers. It's one of the common things that you see, whether it's folk art, Dutch and Flemish still-life painting, porcelain, fabric design, or Pop Art, like Warhol's flowers. When I started painting flowers in the mid- to late eighties, it was always an individual flower. For me, these individual flowers were surrogates for individuals. They weren't portraits, but there was a vague connection between humans and flowers. They were sort of anthropomorphic.

**G: And this cover piece?**

**DB:** It's a brand-new work from my current show at Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery in Paris. I'm starting to try to re-imagine my collage process. Recently, I've been going back and introducing images clipped from magazines and culled from scrapbooks that I buy on eBay. It's bringing a more complex color to the works, for one thing. But my work used to have a very definite beginning, middle, and end, and now I never know when anything is finished!

**G: What are your thoughts on the current state of the art world? The stratospheric prices, the attention, the increasing lot of insatiable collectors....**

**DB:** It's puzzling, isn't it? Of course, I benefit to a certain extent. But I'm not an artist who's ever gained from immense highs, and I've never suffered the downturns, either. There are always artists who ignite a sudden frenzy, and then five years later you never hear their name again. I've never been that guy.

**G: Is New York City still the best?**

**DB:** I think so. Everyone likes to say it's not what it used to be, but I think it's still where the best art can be seen. You can actually meet the artists at their openings. The center of artistic energy has dispersed to places like Brooklyn a bit, but New York is still where it all happens—not just for the billionaire art collectors, but for the young kids, too. [G]