

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.



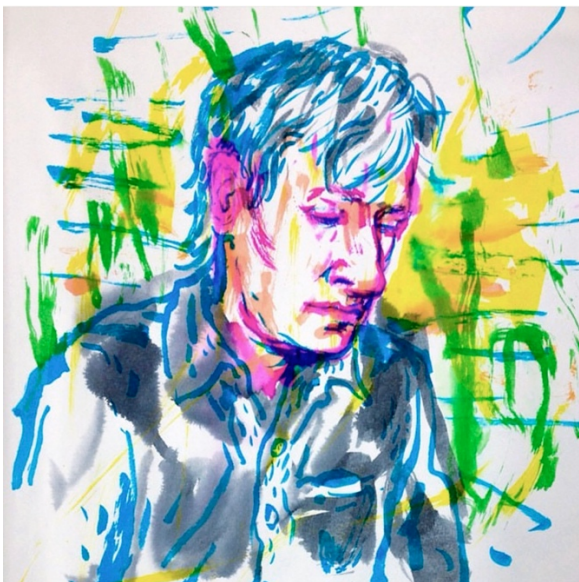
Donald Baechler, "Painting With Two Balls" 1986, 75 x 75 inches

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 offputtingly 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.