



transformation
Günther Baechler
works 2018–2021



**from peace diplomacy
to art about peace**



In Autumn 2017 Maren and I opened our “Kunsthof” (“art farm”) in the historic farmhouse of the Haartje family in Holm, located in the marshlands of the river Elbe basin between Hamburg and the North Sea (www.kunsthof-holm.de). Here in this exciting corner of the woods I relaunched my career as a painter, which had ended abruptly back in 1980 when I enthusiastically decided to engage in the promotion of world peace. Today I look back – more realistically – on forty years of professional experience in conflict research and international peace diplomacy. It may seem quite a shift to go from teaching high-school art and art history to working as a mediator and diplomat, but it is not as big a step as it may look. For the young student at the Art Academy Basel (now FHNW Academy of Art and Design Basel), art had always been the foundation of peace, and peace – especially after World War II – was always the necessary basis for the free production of art in a liberal and open society. Indeed, Basel, my beloved home town, always aimed to be – and actually is – both: a centre of art (Art Basel) and a city that promotes peace (Basel Peace Forum).

Many short and long-term missions in areas of humanitarian crisis have deeply influenced my worldview. After the end of the Cold War in November 1989 I became aware of numerous cases of internal conflict, civil war and social unrest, predominantly affecting developing countries in Africa and Asia. In the 1990s it was already becoming obvious that climate change, and the pressure on environmental resources, correlated with some of the major crises of that decade (e.g. Rwanda). Based on my action-oriented field research in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, I stated in my thesis that “[t]he degradation of renewables – land and freshwater – worldwide leads to conflict over access [to] and/or distribution of these resources.” (see bibliography).

Over time I learned that even in midst of the worst catastrophe and the most painful armed conflict there is always space for humanitarian relief, societal visions, and peaceful transformation. Victims and war-affected people always strive to identify the good among the evil they want to escape from. The hope of those trying to survive under inhuman conditions is what motivated me to start painting again after so many years. I felt the need to visualize many impressions from “the field”. Producing art, not writing academic articles or political reports, has become my preferred medium for expressing what I want to say or, rather, to show. The paintings of the last three years reveal my biographical tracks and traces insofar as they transfer empirical knowledge via personal experience to the sphere of visual art. Viewers might see in them my individual narratives about the contexts I was working in; such an approach could also be labelled “biographical realism”. This kind of realism is a means to establish a close relationship between a viewer and an artist with a long biography outside the world of art. I would like to share, and exchange views about images that concern people around the globe in one way or another: images of war and peace, natural events, and human beings affected by catastrophes. The challenge is to condense my long experience in a new series of paintings in such a way that viewers can discover those traces and make sense of them in their own ways. The readiness of the viewer to make up her or his own mind counts at least as much as the intention of the painter.

There are countless images indelibly engraved in my memory; there is no button to delete them. Instead, I feel the need to work actively with these images, to recall and transform them, creating new compositions. In this process, some fundamental internal struggles also emerge. How can I address all the critical issues we experience as “the human condition”? Is a painting just an illustration of a specific context? How closely should art zoom in to particularly painful events? What is the artistic narrative of a genocide and its aftermath? Is it acceptable to make visualized sensations out of cruelty, gross human rights violations, crimes against humanity, and war crimes? What should I do with the unbearable and brutal videos I received on almost a daily basis from the bloody war in Cameroon? I am convinced – especially in the light of my professional background as a mediator – that an artist is neither a war reporter, nor a historical painter, nor the producer of a documentary. Modern art is a different story; art is something else. In what sense is art “something else”? I will attempt some answers.

In 2010 I helped Dagmar Reichert from the Zurich University of the Arts to create a foundation that deals with “Art as a foundation of peace”. The artasfoundation (ARTas) (www.artasfoundation.ch) aims to establish a centre of competence for art in the context of conflict mediation and peacebuilding. Together with local partners we started to initiate art projects in conflict-affected regions during, or in the aftermath of, an armed conflict. Art is a human need and offers a specific avenue for relating to the world. Art allows us to communicate experiences that are difficult to put into words. Recognizing this, we brought together people of different cultural and political backgrounds and created spaces of creativity beyond everyday concerns and fears. One good example was the work we did in camps with internally displaced people in Georgia; another was a project with young people in Abkhazia. Abkhazia is under Russian “protection” or “occupation”, depending on one’s viewpoint.

In conflict-affected contexts like these, works of art and working at art became incubators for change, for sharing experiences and exploring viewpoints, for expressing grievances and hope. Hope was the main driver of all who participated in the projects – across the divide.

In 2020, against the backdrop of these activities, ARTas organized an international congress on the theme of “Art at risk”. At the Kunsthof Holm we organized a discussion on the question: “What is art doing in a conflict zone?” Some of my subsequent works incorporate issues raised at this and similar events. For example, the painting “We did not cross the border – the border crosses us” reflects the hardship experienced by divided communities along a de facto closed border across Georgian territory, what is called the “administrative boundary line”. It separates the “territory administered by Tbilisi” from the “Tskhinvali region” – the region also called South Ossetia by both Russians and South Ossetians. This is a good example of how bureaucratic and militarized language ignores the real burden borne by the people in their daily life.

the paintings

The paintings produced between Winter 2017/18 and Summer 2021 broadly fall into three thematic categories: The first of these (mainly from 2018) can be summarized under the heading “Human-nature relations at risk”. These large-format paintings engage with impressions of degraded landscapes, potential risks, or future environmental calamities in the mountains, the sea or the African context.

The second category (2019/20) reflects impressions from various conflict-affected areas, such as Darfur, Western Sudan and the Southern Caucasus. The concept of “militarized borders”, “lines of contact” or “dividing lines” secured by barbed wire in the 21st century irritated me most. If there is one area where even weak or failing states can demonstrate strength and brutal behaviour, it is their state borders.

The third category (2020/21) is less clearly defined than the others. This is basically due to a highly unexpected crisis that hit us all: the historic Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdowns, quarantine, and myriads of measures heavily affected me and my work. In particular, the closing of borders with a rigidity unknown before in modern Europe was an overwhelming experience. Even travelling between “our” countries, Germany and Switzerland, turned into an odd experience, one we had almost forgotten and that harked back to the cold war, when we would travel from the West to the Soviet GDR or Berlin. Because my wife Maren and I were virtually locked in at our Kunsthof (not the worst thing that could happen to us, I must admit), we were able to avoid contracting the Coronavirus. During otherwise difficult days this motivated me to work on some impressions from the natural environment, shaped by the river Elbe and the nearby North Sea. In a way these paintings draw on the works of 2018 but are more colourful and lighter. I suspect I wanted to create a counterpoint to the predominantly pessimistic outlook generated by the repeated “waves” of the Coronavirus pandemic and the way it was handled.

My paintings do not try to explain anything to anybody. Perhaps the works will provoke a variety of explanations, and individual ways of reading and understanding them. They might evoke strong emotions and even astonishment. They might raise questions about the works themselves on the one hand, and the painter and his intentions on the other. Unlike words, a painting plays with selective perceptions, with symbolic dimensions of signs, and psychological aspects of the colours and materials used. Historic events can be de-familiarized; contextual narratives can be represented in a generalized and abstracted manner. Real persons do not have to appear, nor does a real situation have to be analysed in quasi-forensic terms. On the contrary: the viewer is challenged by situational

structures and clouds of significance rather than naturalistic descriptions. The paintings do not mirror objectivized truth the way social realism suggests they should. The source of my paintings is autobiographical, which means they are expressions of subjective narratives and sentiments. Untethering the paintings from naturalistic representation enables them to mirror a radical change of perspective, one that approaches a bird’s-eye view. The perspective from above dissolves the landscape into elements of earth structures as they may appear from a high altitude. I would call it, accordingly, “earth-scape” rather than “landscape”. This view allows me to compose quite paradoxical images – for example, painting the alpine region in confrontation with the rise of the sea in times of extreme drought (“Glaciers are melting – sea levels are rising”).

Another element of my paintings is the use of natural materials such as sand, stones and wood. I use these as structural elements, visual markers that combine form and colour. The use of these materials is not a substitute for the process of painting. I see them as an integral part of the artwork itself. Material is colour, and colour (oil or acrylic) is material. There is no distinction between the two. Together they create a space that unveils the material structure of a degraded “earth-scape”. See for example, the painting on page 22 „abandoned“ from the Sahel region (Sudan): the straw, the stones, the wooden pieces and the red of the sand immediately evoke the image of a highly overused and degraded piece of earth. Where have the people gone? we might ask. This is also why I chose a relatively large format for most of the paintings. Only a certain size reflects the structural space that I want to show. The visualization of a violated “earth structure” urges the artist to use formats that enable the viewer to be drawn in and to immediately gain a deep impression of how this environment has been altered. Of course, any chosen format will always be too little by far. Imagine if we saw the earth as a giant, priceless work of art, to be treasured and protected like the Mona Lisa. Would this stop us from the continued destruction of our entire living space? Right now, this seems inconceivable. However, I believe we can only protect the global natural world sustainably through cooperation, trans-societal solidarity, and worldwide peaceful solutions to devastating violence and human-made catastrophes. I see us all walking a tightrope between the peaks of a high mountain range.

I suspect only optimists still believe human ingenuity will find ways to climb down safely to reach solid, fertile ground. Let’s join them!

Holm, october 2021

2018

the low tide reveals it

oil, sand, wood ("Sprockholz") on canvas
200 x 200 cm



2018
glaciers are melting – sea levels are rising
oil on canvas
200 x 200 cm



2018
where's the glacier gone?
oil on canvas
200 x 160 cm



2018

will there be a storm flood?

oil, sand, wood ("Sprockholz") on canvas
160 x 200 cm

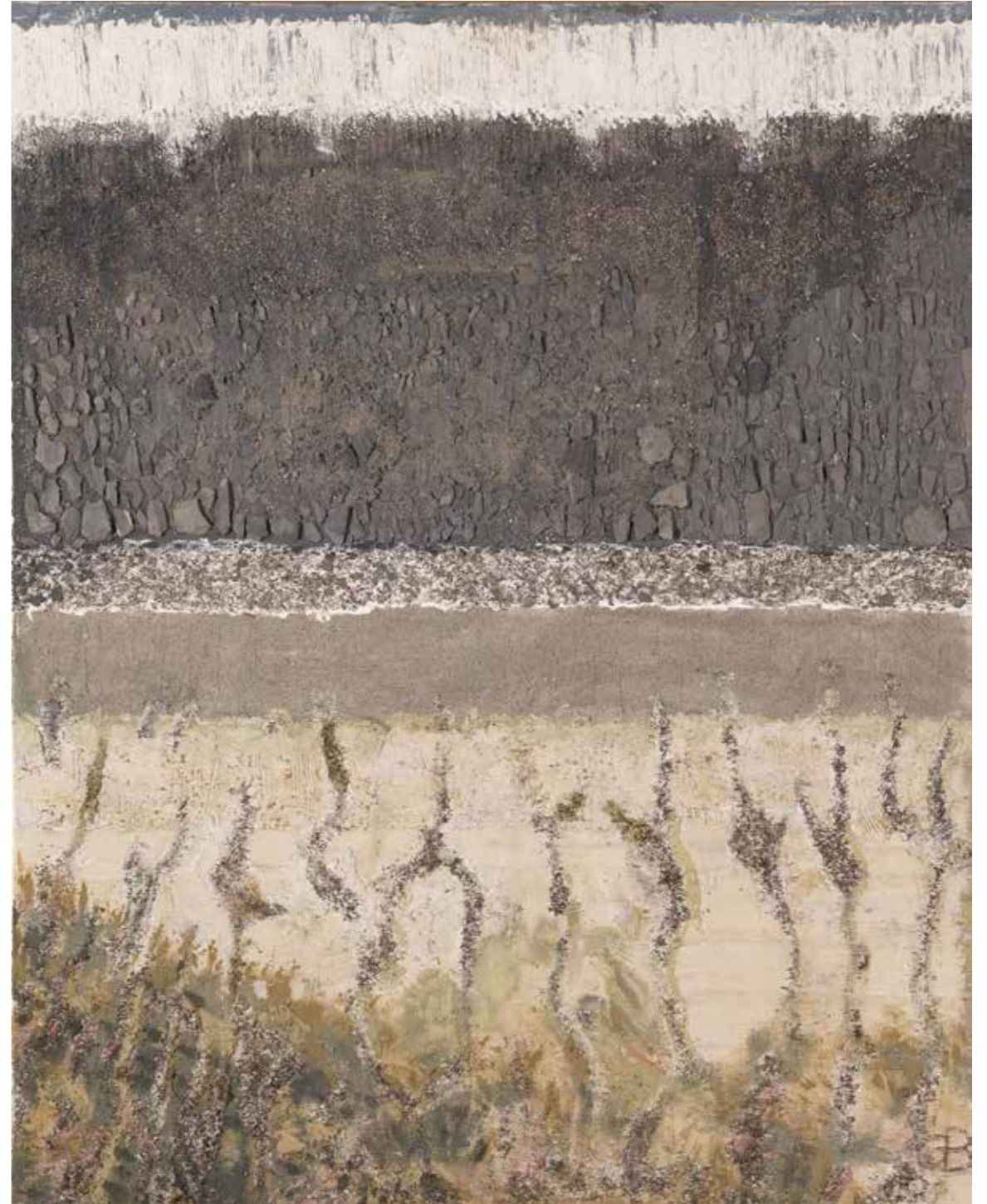


2018

crest of a wave – as strong as stone

oil, sand, wood, alpine slate on canvas

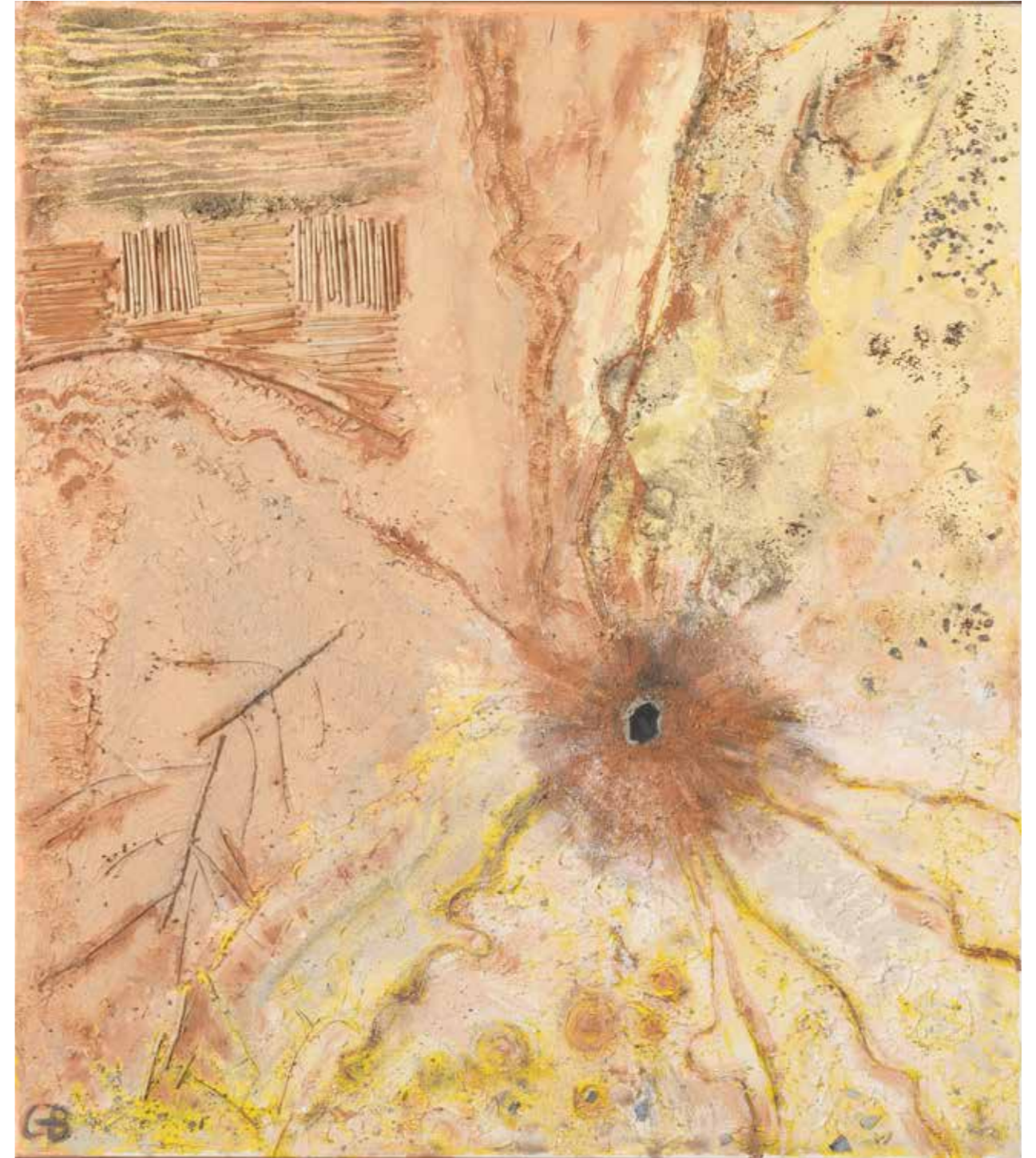
200 x 160 cm



2019

watering point with a stone

oil, sand, mixed techniques on canvas
160 x 140 cm



2019

crustifications, worldwide

oil, marble, mixed techniques on canvas
160 x 160 cm



2019
abandoned (where have they gone?)
oil, sand, mixed techniques on canvas
160 x 200 cm



2019

scorched earth (Darfur)

oil, sand, charcoal, mixed techniques on canvas
180 x 240 cm



2019
"habub" over Darfur
oil, sands on canvas
180 x 100 cm



2019
"dividing line" in Georgia (Sarkatvelo)
oil, charcoal, barbwire, mixed techniques on canvas
240 x 190 cm



2019
**incidents at the "dividing line" in Georgia
(Sarkatvelo)**
oil, mixed techniques on canvas
190 x 360 cm (triptychon)



2019
bee fall
oil, beeswax on canvas
160 x 120 cm



2019

"line of contact" (black garden)

oil, marble, mixed techniques on canvas
190 x 230 cm



2019

"we did not cross the border, the border crosses us"

acrylic, marble, barbwire, mixed techniques on canvas

190 x 230 cm



2019
"mare nostrum" (boat people)
oil, acrylic on canvas
190 x 470 cm



2019
"be like water!" (umbrellas in Hongkong)
acrylic on canvas
250 x 190 cm



2020
the world is aflame
acrylic on canvas
6 x 120 x 120 cm (hexamerous)



2020

trying to ignore bad news

acrylic, oil, mixed techniques on canvas
160 x 120 cm



2020
corona in the air
acrylic on canvas
180 x 260 cm (two-parts)



2020

do not enter! (protected area)

acrylic, mixed techniques on canvas
120 x 160 cm



2020

1.5 meters (social distancing)

acrylic, mixed techniques on canvas

160 x 120 cm



2020

at irregular intervals

oil, acrylic, mixed techniques on canvas

130 x 180 cm



2020
tracing (out of the blue)
oil and acrylic on canvas
190 x 230 cm



2020
deep sea, wrapped in plastic
acrylic and clingwrap on canvas
190 x 130 cm



2020

by-catch (North Sea)

oil, sand, fishing net, mixed techniques on canvas
190 x 170 cm



2020
five persons (three households)
acrylic on canvas
190 x 160 cm



2020

circular interdependence (cosmic dancers)

acrylic, oil, mixed techniques on canvas

160 x 170 cm



2021

danse macabre (inspired by Albrecht Dürer, 1493)

acrylic, mixed techniques on canvas

160 x 170 cm



2021
endemic species (mutations)
oil and american razor clams (ensis directus)
on canvas
200 x 230 cm



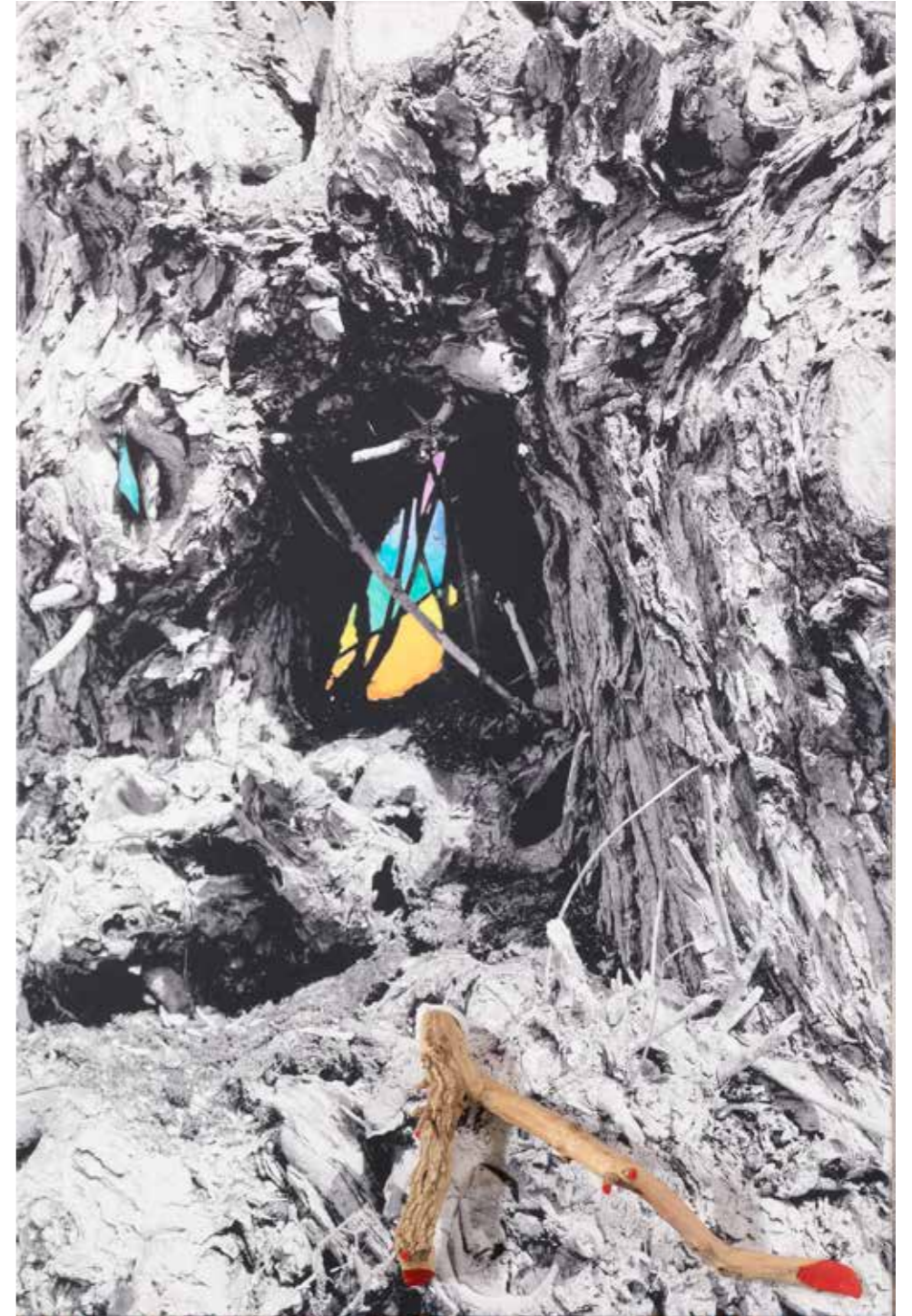
2021

aus der Mitte (eccentric)

photography, water colour, wood on canvas

150 x 100 cm

2021



2021
DELTA
acrylic, mixed techniques on canvas
200 x 360 cm (triptychon)



in summer 2020, the Corona measures motivated us to invite spontaneously for an exhibition in the garden







1953

Günther Baechler was born on 15 July in Basel, Switzerland.

1975–1980

student of art and history of art at the Academy of Art Basel. Diploma as a high school teacher. Internships and teaching at high schools in Basel.

1980–1986

student at the Free University Berlin in history and political science with a focus on international relations, arms control, conflict research, the East West conflict, and development studies. Diploma in Political Science at the Free University Berlin.

1986–1988

research fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg. Studies on “democratic peace”.

1988–2000

founding director of the Swiss Peace Foundation Bern (swisspeace), a think tank in the field of conflict studies, peace promotion, and mediation. www.swisspeace.ch

activities in peace research and diplomacy

1993–1996

head of the International Environmental Conflict Research Project (in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETHZ), financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

1996

sabbatical; research fellow at the Centre for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge MA; training in mediation and negotiation in the framework of the Harvard Negotiation Programme.

1997

PhD in political science (summa cum laude) at the University of Bremen, with Prof. Dieter Senghaas. Thesis on “Violence through Environmental Discrimination. Conflict Model and Rwanda Case Study” (published by Kluwer Academic Publisher International).

1997–2003

lecturer on peace and conflict research at the Institute for Political Science, University of Bern.

1999

founding president of the Swiss Federal Association for Mediation; development of standards for both mediation and training of mediators in Switzerland.

2001–2005

head of the newly established Division on Conflict Prevention and Transformation, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department for Foreign Affairs, Bern.

2005–2007

Special Adviser for Peace Building in Nepal for the Political Division for Human Security, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, with a mandate to facilitate the Nepalese peace process. Co-facilitator of the Comprehensive Peace Accord.

2008–2010

Special Envoy for Peace Building in Sudan with a focus on the mediation in the Darfur conflict; supporting the UN Chief Mediator in the Doha Peace Process, Qatar.

2011–2015

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Switzerland to Georgia; with a side-accreditation in Armenia and head of the protection mandate of Russia in Georgia.

2014

Senior Mission Leader Training of the United Nations, Buenos Aires, Argentine.

2016

Special Representative of the German Chairman in Office of the OSCE for the South Caucasus (Frank-Walter Steinmeier). Co-Chair (together with UN and EU) of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) on the conflict in Georgia.

2017–2018

Special Representative of the Austrian and of the Italian Chairman of the OSCE for the South Caucasus.

november 2019

Special Envoy of the Swiss Federal Council for Cameroon. Senior facilitator in the conflict in the Anglophone regions (North-West, South-West Cameroon or former Southern British Cameroon resp.).

activities in art

2011

co-founder of the Swiss based ARTas Foundation (Art as Foundation of Peace) together with Dagmar Reichert, University of the Arts Zurich (ZHdK). www.artasfoundation.ch

september 2018

together with his wife Maren, opening of the Kunsthof Holm, Studio and Art Gallery in Holm near Hamburg.

june 2019

first exhibition at the Kunsthof Holm, paintings from 2018/19: "Waves as hard as stone". www.kunsthof-holm.de

november 2019

second exhibition at the Kunsthof Holm: "What is art doing in the conflict zone?".

july 2020

third exhibition at the Kunsthof Holm: "Corona in the air", new paintings exhibited in the garden and at the façade of the farmhouse.

october 2021

"Transformation". Exhibition at the "Elbgalerie" Winter, in Hamburg. www.elbgalerie-winter.de

october 2021

fourth exhibition at the Kunsthof Holm: "The fourth wave. Paintings in black and white".

forthcoming

exhibition, together with Elke Werner, at the Galerie Drostei, Pinneberg. www.drostei.de

selected publications

1992 Günther Baechler, (ed.) Perspektiven. Friedens- und Konfliktforschung in Zeiten des Umbruchs, Zürich (Verlag Rüegger).

1993 Conflict and Cooperation in the Light of Human-Ecological Transformation, ENCOP Occasional Paper No. 9, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology / Swiss Peace Foundation Zurich, Bern.

1995 Desertification and Conflict. The Marginalization of Poverty and of Environmental Conflicts. In: J. Puigdefabregas with T. Mendizabal (eds.), Desertification and Migrations, Logrono (Geofoma ediciones), pp. 185–224.

1995 The Anthropogenic Transformation of the Environment: A Source of War? In: Kurt R. Spillmann with Günther Baechler (eds.), Environmental Crisis: Regional Conflicts and Ways of Cooperation. Proceedings of an International Conference at Centro Stefano Franscini, Ascona, Switzerland, 2–7 October 1994. ENCOP Occasional Paper No. 14, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology / Swiss Peace Foundation Zurich, Bern, pp. 11–27.

1996 with Volker Böge, Stefan Klötzli, Stephan Libiszewski, Kurt R. Spillmann, Kriegsursache Umweltzerstörung. Ökologische Konflikte in der Dritten Welt und Wege ihrer friedlichen Bearbeitung. Band I, Zürich (Verlag Rüegger).

1996 with Kurt R. Spillmann (eds.), Kriegsursache Umweltzerstörung. Regional- und Länderstudien von Projektmitarbeitern. Environmental Degradation as a Cause of War. Regional and Country Studies of Research Fellows. Band II, Zürich (Verlag Rüegger).

1997 Violence Through Environmental Discrimination. Causes, Rwanda Arena, and Conflict Model (Social Indicators Research Series, Vol. 2), Dordrecht et al. (Kluwer Academic Publishers).

2002 with Kurt R. Spillmann, Mohamed Suliman (eds.) Transformation of Resource Conflicts: Approach and Instruments, Bern et al. (Peter Lang European Academic Publisher).

2008 with Nilamber Acharya, Peter Dammann, Renu Rajbandhari, Bishnu Raj Upreti, Nepal. Building New Roads to Peace (English and Nepali), Lalitpur (Jagadamba Press).

2008 Adapt Facilitation to Changing Contexts. In: Nepal. Swiss Peace Policy No. 1/2008. Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, Bern, pp. 14–51.

2015 with Guy Jost, Building Democracy. Essays and Images from Georgia; Cézanne Printing House Tbilisi, Georgia.

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