

Art in America

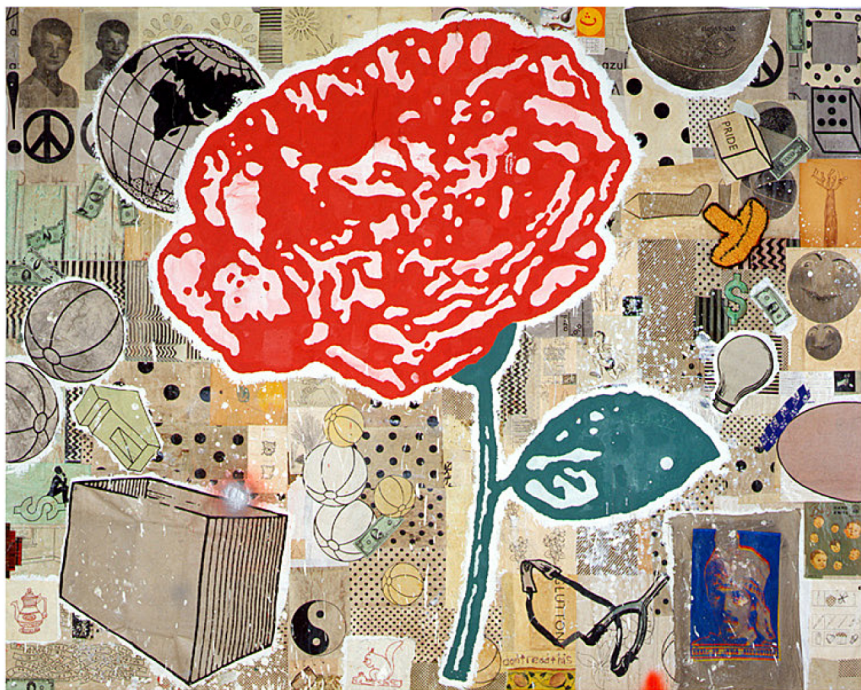
September 2003

Donald Baechler at Cheim & Read

Donald Baechler extends the outer limits of his practice as a painter in five recent patchwork grids of acrylic, paper and fabric collage mounted on paper, linen or canvas, each centrally figured with monumental emblems. Roughly 8 to 10 feet on a side, these large-scale works are slathered with paint and characteristically adorned with a superabundance of found signs.

Baechler collages a paper image of a large, stemmed, hot-house-red carnation at the heart of *The Trouble with Constants* (2002). Recalling the artificiality of Armistice Day lapel poppies, the familiar carnation hovers on a collaged field of beach and basketballs, globes and lightbulbs, yin-yang and peace signs that tumble over and through sheets of paper printed with dots and bars, in the midst of photocopied currency, dollar signs and images of dice, one of them marked only with the word "pride."

These remedial lessons in the representation and naming of things are offered at the intersections of meaning and chaos. *A Better Way to Go Bust* (2002) sports a central rose of paper and paint presiding over a field of paper scraps printed with images of dice, a paintbrush, pages torn from children's books, an antique coin, boxing speed bags and a scrap of quilted fabric. *Sing with Less Music* (2003) displays a



Donald Baechler: *The Trouble with Constants*, 2002, mixed mediums on linen, 96 by 120 inches; at Cheim & Read.

recumbent tulip, pages from a child's bestiary, more dice, other things. The printed word gives voice within this cacophony of images, addressing the viewer with a buttonlike sign that reads "Ask Me. I Live Here." *Anatomy of Anarchy #1* and *#2* (both 2002) were pushpinned directly to one wall, side by side, their surfaces dusted with white flurries of thrown paint. Emblazoned with the facing busts of black-and-white ponies on pastures of signs, the paintings are dense with floating balls and piles of dice stacked up like building blocks to climb. Pushing the messy, decorative limits of these

chaotic forms, Baechler scatters his surfaces with the detritus of childhood, portraying the adult today through the images of a past not quite left behind.

Elsewhere, he revisits the painterly, Rorschach-shaped silhouettes that are a contemplative part of his practice. These smaller collages of acrylic and fabric on canvas include a pitcher holding a few flowers and several tree- or leaf-shaped icons. In the gallery's privileged, chapel-like space just beyond the entrance, he installed *Stack* (2003), a bronze column 20 feet high. The towering work consists of six gesturing figures, each standing on another's shoulder like ancient acrobats in some strange and uncompromising posture out of Otterness and Rodin. —Edward Leffingwell