

Basel's Art Bounty

SWITZERLAND'S COMMERCIAL HUB IS ALSO A MUST-SEE, VISUAL-ARTS MECCA.

BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ



TUCKED INTO the very northwestern corner of the country, bucking up against its borders with France and Germany, Basel is Switzerland's second-largest city and one of the most prosperous commercial cultural centers in Western Europe. Tidy, compact and refreshingly non-congested, with fewer than 200,000 inhabitants, Basel has a long history of supporting intellectual inquiry and the arts. Erasmus, the Dutch humanist and theologian, is buried in its main cathedral; historian of the Renaissance Jacob Burckhardt and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche taught at the University of Basel, Switzerland's oldest institution of higher learning.

Henri Matisse, "Nu bleu 1" (above), 1952, paper cut-out with gouache on paper on canvas. The Rhine river winds its way through the city center of Basel.







The facade and entrance to Fondation Beyeler (top), a museum on the east bank of the Rhine showcasing the art collection of dealer Ernst Beyeler and his wife Hildy.

The America Room (above), at the Fondation Beyeler.

Bisected by the Rhine, a majestic river that informs the city's soul, stately Basel owes much of its affluence to the chemical and pharmaceutical corporations that are based here and whose patronage has aided its cultural institutions. For art lovers, Basel offers numerous commercial galleries and, it seems, even more museums to explore. Residents work hard but are known to celebrate equally hard each February at carnival time, known locally as Fasnacht, when colorful parades and open-air performances attract masked revelers from across Europe for a three-day celebration in the streets.

Basel reveals its unique blend of *gemütlich* (cozy) and cosmopolitan characteristics each June when it becomes the backdrop to Art Basel, the international modern and contemporary art market's most high-end fair. Switzerland's UBS, the world's largest private bank, is this mega-event's main corporate sponsor; this year, its 39th edition will take place June 4–8. Its venue is Messe Basel, the Swiss Exhibition Center, a complex of easily accessible buildings in the Kleinbasel district on the Rhine's east bank.

Visitors to Basel during the fair—hotel rooms should be booked well in advance—always have plenty to see and do at Art Basel and its numerous, related events, including panel discussions on market



Robert Gober, "Prayers are Answered,"
1980-81, mixed media, at Schaulager.

trends and collecting- and exhibiting-related topics; artists' talks and book-signing receptions; and film and video presentations. Within the structure of the fair, the "Art Statements" section will focus on some 30 galleries that are considered emerging venues around the world for contemporary art, each of which will present work by a single artist. The "Art Premiere" section will feature more than a dozen mini-exhibitions organized by various art dealers who will be participating in Art Basel. Each presentation will examine the work of two provocatively juxtaposed artists. In the "Art Edition" part of the fair, publishers of limited-edition prints, multiples or other works will display for sale the results of their creative collaborations with a range of art-makers.

Beyond Art Basel, for those with only a little time to take in some of the city's other art offerings or for travelers planning short stays at other times, at least a few of its superb museums should not be missed. The

first stop should be the Kunstmuseum Basel, in the Stadtzentrum (town center) on the west side of the Rhine. Basel's municipal museum is a trove of masterpieces dating from the 15th century to the present. What makes a visit here so memorable is that so many of its treasures are revelatory or unexpected. "The Garden of Daubigny," an 1890 canvas by van Gogh, for example, is a psychedelic riot of luscious greens and blues brushed on with gooey enthusiasm like cake frosting; it still looks as fresh as it must have the day it was finished.

Also at the Kunstmuseum: "May Morning" (1910), an abstraction by painter Augusto Giacometti (sculptor Alberto Giacometti's cousin), with an explosion of purples, greens and whites that suggests a thicket of flowers seen through the refracted light of daybreak; Pablo Picasso's "Women on the Banks of the Seine, After Courbet"

(1950), which depicts a group of languid creatures soaking up the sun—and the Cubist master's thick oil paint—as he surrounds them in their lazy leisure with random patterns of boldly outlined forms; and "St. Christopher," an oil-on-oak-panel painting from the early 1400s by Konrad Witz. One of the first artists to realistically portray landscapes in religious scenes, here, the German-Swiss Witz shows the red-robed saint trudging knee-deep through a pond with a little ragamuffin poised awkwardly on his shoulder. It is, of course, Witz's rendering of St. Christopher carrying the Christ child, a theme Hieronymus Bosch would also interpret decades later.

Across the street from the Kunstmuseum, the Basel Museum of Ancient Art & Ludwig Collection presents a pageant of artifacts from the ancient world: bas-reliefs, statues and pottery from Greece, Cyprus and the Roman Empire, and Etruscan goddesses' heads that look out across the ages from their wall-mounted perches. Walking west, away from these two museums into the next block, look for banner-like signs identifying the Kunsthalle Basel and, in the same building, the Architecture Museum. A venue for temporary, contemporary-art exhibitions, the Kunsthalle maintains no permanent collection; its bookstore is well stocked with titles on the latest art, design



Pablo Picasso, "Femme en vert (Dora)," 1944,
oil on canvas, at Fondation Beyeler.

and architecture trends. The Architecture Museum offers focused, thematic surveys examining particular issues in the fields of contemporary building design, construction techniques and urban planning.

Heading north into the heart of the Stadtzentrum, search out the various galleries that dot its narrow, winding side streets. [To find them, look for a free gallery map, like the bimonthly *Kunst in Basel* (*Art in Basel*) brochure, at museums and hotels.] Hilt Galerie offers affordable works on paper by a range of European artists. Graf & Schelble Galerie's stable includes the Iranian-born painter Mojé Assefjah, who makes semi-abstract landscapes with big, broad, watery strokes, and such Swiss artists as Lucia Coray and Margarit Lehmann, who create delicate abstractions on paper. Beyeler Galerie is one of Basel's legendary—and top-priced—outposts for modernist and contemporary art; its past-exhibitions list reads like a summary of modern art's biggest names. In the hilly section around Spalenberg, a shop-filled lane, Galerie Carzaniga Basel shows emerging artists' works in the a renovated, historic building, and Stampa Galerie, a contemporary-art venue, also houses the best-stocked art-books store in town.

Time permitting, head across the Rhine, past the Kleinbasel district on the river's east bank, to the Fondation Beyeler, a short tram ride away on the outskirts of Basel. Opened in 1997 in a building designed by Renzo Piano, this museum is a showcase for the collection of dealers Ernst and Hildy Beyeler of Beyeler Galerie fame. On view: Works by such modernist masters as Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Henri Matisse, Jean Dubuffet, Francis Bacon and many more; the museum also presents original, temporary exhibitions, like the recently closed "Action Painting."

Also a short tram ride from the city center: the Museum Tinguely, named after and built for the quirky, experimental—and much loved in Basel—work of the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925–91), whose "machine art" sculptures made of old tires, industrial parts and plain junk whiz, whirl, blow smoke and sometimes make paintings



Angela Bulloch, "Blue Horizon," 1990, mixed media, at the Tinguely Museum, named after the much-loved Swiss artist Jean Tinguely (1925–91).

or drawings themselves, or, dramatically, self-destruct. This popular museum was designed by the Swiss architect Martio Botta. Architecture fans will find plenty to savor in Basel. Other important structures include the first building on drug-maker Novartis's new research campus designed by the architects Diener & Diener and Gerold Wiederin, and the artist Helmut Federle, with a dazzling exterior screen of colored-glass panels. Also, in Münchenstein, just south of Basel, the Schaulager, an avant-garde warehouse masquerading as a museum, houses the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation's collection. It is a must-see for admirers of Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron.

As rich as all of these attractions are, for its size, Basel still offers much more for art lovers of all stripes. Like a *Räppli*-throwing (that's confetti) Fasnacht reveler, the

best thing to do may be to say, in sweet-sounding Swiss-German, "*Ufwiederlüge!*" ("See you again!") and simply vow to return. After all, the art world's mover and shakers come back, devotedly, every summer. Why not join them? 

New York correspondent Edward M. Gomez grew up in the Swiss capital, Bern, and returns to Switzerland often for work and pleasure.

**Basel Museum of Ancient Art
& Ludwig Collection**

011.41.61.201.1212 antikenmuseumbasel.ch

Beyeler Galerie

011.41.61.206.9700 beyeler.com

Confiserie Bachmann

011.41.61.261.3583 confiserie-bachmann.ch

Fondation Beyeler

011.41.61.645.9700 beyeler.com

Fumare Non Fumare

011.41.61.262.2711

Galerie Carzaniga Basel

011.41.264.3030 carzaniga.ch

Galerie Hilt

011.41.61.272.0922 galeriehilt.ch

Graf & Schelble Galerie

011.41.61.261.0911 graf-schelble.ch

Kunsthalle Basel

011.41.61.206.9900 kunsthallebasel.ch

Kunstmuseum Basel

011.41.61.206.6262 kunstmuseumbasel.ch

Museum Tinguely

011.41.61.681.9320 tinguely.ch

Schaulager

011.41.61.335.3232 schaulager.org

Stampa Galerie

011.41.61.261.7910 stampa-galerie.ch

Swiss Architecture Museum

011.41.61.261.1413 sam-basel.org