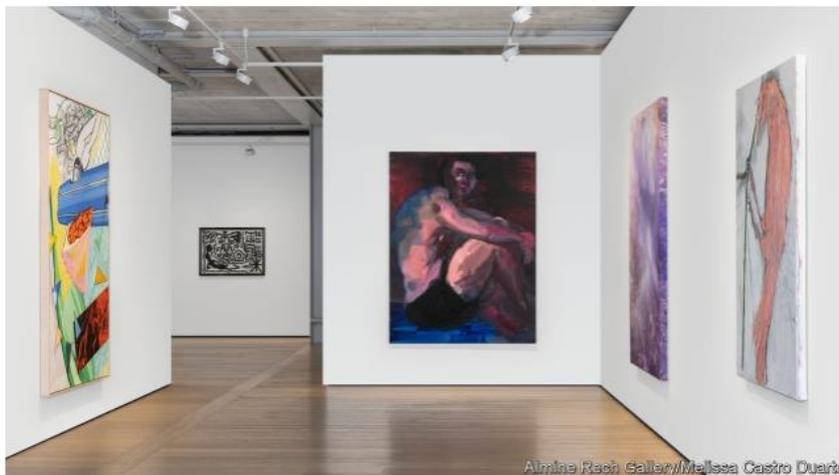


**The Economist:** 'Revisiting Norman Rosenthal's "A New Spirit in Painting"', by Jane Ure-Smith, October 24, 2018

The  
Economist

## Revisiting Norman Rosenthal's "A New Spirit in Painting"

*In a new two-part exhibition, the curator looks back at his seminal show in 1981 and the art world then*



Almine Rech Gallery/Melissa Castro Duarte

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Oct 24th 2018 | by J.U-S.



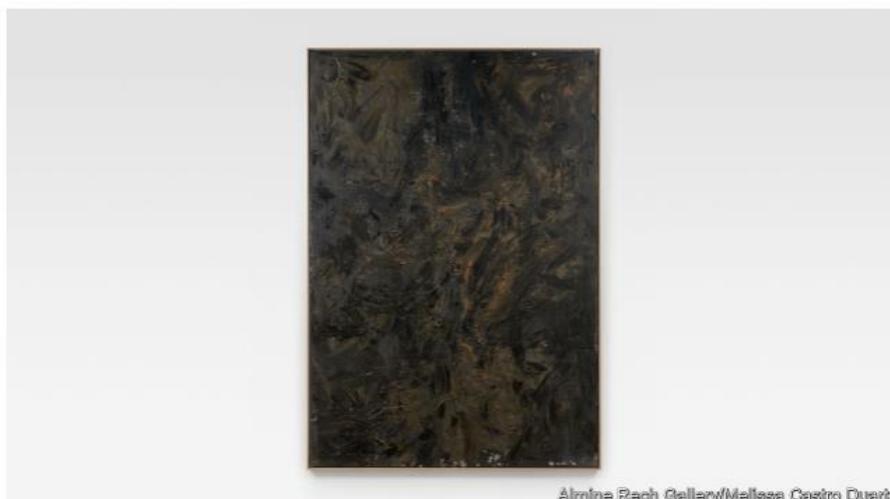
IN A small new show of 15 paintings, three works stand out. Pablo Picasso's "Man in a Straw Hat" (1964), part of a series of intense self-portraits from his last 10 years, seems to have little in common with a dramatic, semi-abstract work by Georg Baselitz or a precariously perched pink raven by Susan Rothenberg. What unites the three is their emotional power—and that is testament to the keen eye and curatorial talents of Norman Rosenthal.

In 1981, while settling into his role as exhibitions secretary at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (RA), Mr Rosenthal assembled a show entitled "A New Spirit in Painting". With photography gaining ground as an artform, the exhibition was a riposte to those who declared painting dead. Mr Rosenthal, along with co-curators Nicholas Serota and Christos Joachimides, set out to challenge both the notion that painting was an anachronism and the prevailing orthodoxy (forged in New York) that, to be any good, it had to be abstract. Without turning its back entirely on abstraction, "New Spirit" presented a diverse set of mostly figurative works, and brought to light now-famous German artists such as Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke and Mr Baselitz, whose work was little known at the time in either New York or London.

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The press was taken aback. “One surprise is the preponderance of German painters...perhaps reflecting the financial assistance of the West German government in organising the show,” wrote Susan Heller Anderson in the *New York Times*. “It was not a critical success,” notes Mr Rosenthal, words that he attributes to Marina Vaizey, an art critic, still etched in his memory: “The intentions were laudable; the results lamentable”. “That sounds like me,” Ms Vaizey recalls today, much amused. “I do remember thinking it was really incoherent. But it is one of those exhibitions that, with hindsight, one sees changed the game.” That is true: the term “New Spirit” subsequently entered the lexicon as a label for the resurgence of painting in the 1980s.

So last year, when Almine Rech, a gallerist with spaces in Paris, Brussels, New York and London, wanted to do an exhibition of figurative painting from that period, she thought immediately of Mr Rosenthal. She invited him to revisit his “New Spirit” show, and the result is an engaging, two-part exhibition. Mr Baselitz, whose astonishing burst of creativity around his 80th birthday this year continues to win him new admirers, is the star turn; his trademark upside-down figures speak to the disorder of our times. Mr Baselitz is for Mr Rosenthal “the greatest painter since Picasso—without question, *the* painter of the post-war epoch”.



In New York, in May, the first part of the show highlighted a handful of artists in the original “New Spirit” exhibition. Part two, which opened this month in London, centres on works by the same artists made since 2000. There are exceptions. Picasso, for example, is included in both shows even though by 1981 he had been dead for eight years. The Spanish artist’s then much-derided late works, Mr Rosenthal felt, were ripe for reassessment.

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The appeal of the new exhibition is that it invites viewers to compare the art world of today with the art world of the early 1980s. What a parochial world that was. If post-war British artists looked to Europe, it was to France rather than Germany. Cultural landmarks such as Documenta, a quinquennial show, or the buzz around Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf went largely unnoticed. Opposition from the RA's academicians—some of whom, Mr Rosenthal claims, accused him of being in the pay of a German art dealer—almost prevented “New Spirit” from opening. The show must have felt “very foreign”, says Ms Vaizey.

It was male-dominated, too. Both Ms Heller Anderson and John McEwen, a critic for the *Spectator*, noted that there were no women in “New Spirit”, but it was hardly an issue then. “There probably were a lot of women painters,” says Mr Rosenthal, “but there *seemed* very few.” He has included both Maria Lassnig and Ms Rothenberg in the current exhibition.

Mr Rosenthal's new “New Spirit” show begs the question of painting's place in contemporary art today. A stroll round New York or London galleries provides evidence of the medium's continuing strength, not least in the hands of Chinese artists such as Zeng Fanzhi, Liu Wei and Liu Xiaodong, who riff on the Western tradition with relish. Painting is in good shape. But as Tim Marlow, the RA's current artistic director, notes, there is a paradox. If “New Spirit” helped painting to reassert itself, it also “made it clear that painting was one of a number of potent visual media,” he says. “It was no longer the dominant one.”

*“A New Spirit Then, A New Spirit Now, 1981-2018” is at the Almine Rech Gallery, London, until November 17th*