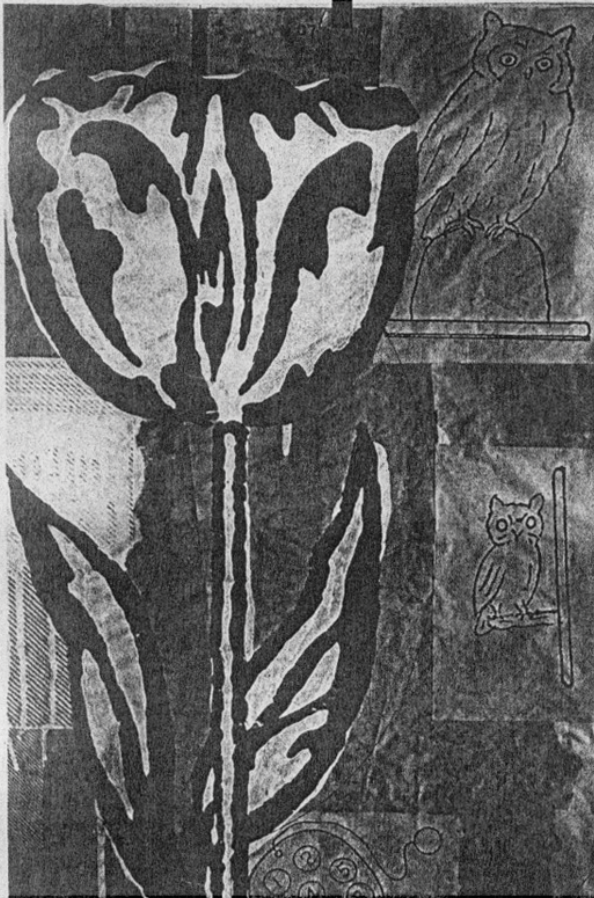


accidental purist



Donald Baechler's loft exudes a busy air of intense industry and a scuffed sort of glamour

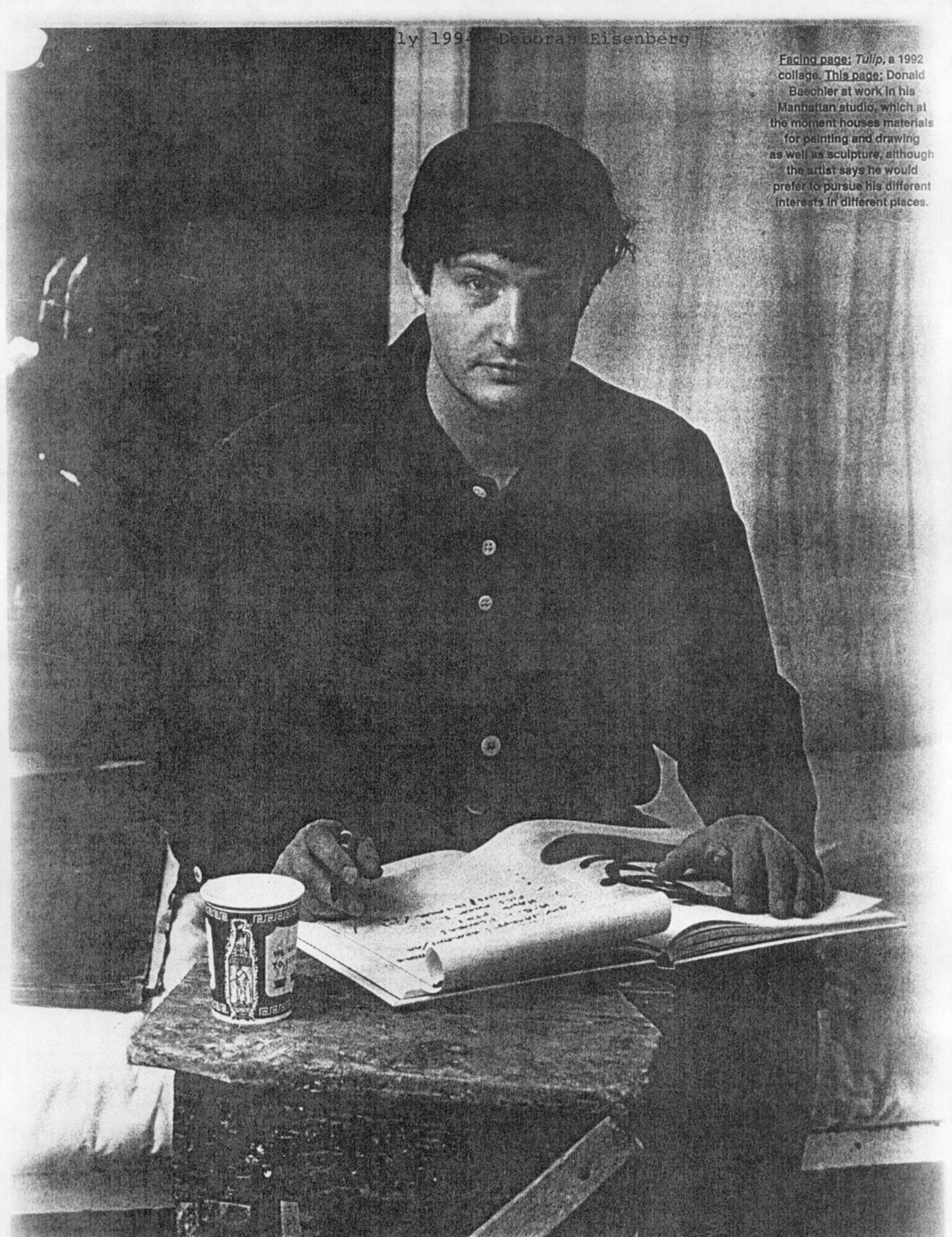
However wonderful it is to the visitor, Donald Baechler's Manhattan loft is not his ideal living situation. "I always resisted having a loft," the 37-year-old artist says. "Lofts are industrial spaces—I've never been comfortable with their conversion. And it's so conventional for an artist. But I outgrew my apartment, so I was obliged to move. You could say I'm living here more or less by accident."

Accident, at least controlled and carefully monitored accident, plays a certain part in Baechler's work. He travels a good deal for exhibitions of his work in Europe and Japan, and also usually to remote places—for research, as he puts it. But when he's searching for something specific, he tends not to find it. More often, a trip will inform subsequent work indirectly. "I looked for Islamic wall painting in Egypt, and I never found a really great one, but I found lots of other great things on the way."

As disciplined as Baechler is—he works from 10 a.m. to midnight daily—there's a certain level of tolerated fortuity even in his New York loft life. A full complement of assistants works away, friends float through, people deliver things, phones ring. The atmosphere of industry is intense, though benign, and although there's all the glamour here one could require of a loft of a successful artist, it's glamour of the scuffed sort. There are virtually no items in the place—other than paintings by Baechler himself or friends of his—that could be acquired only by a

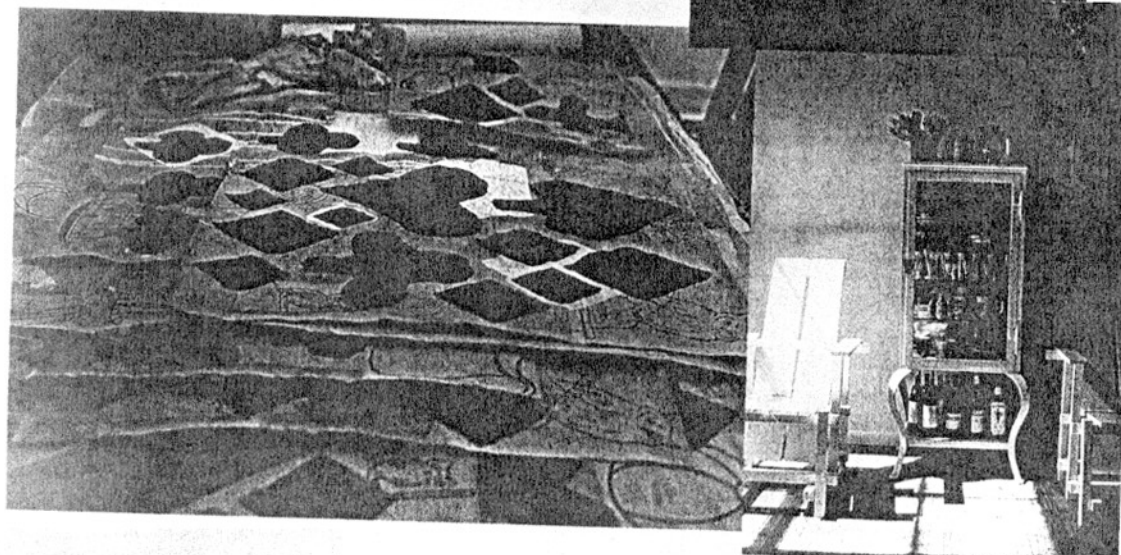
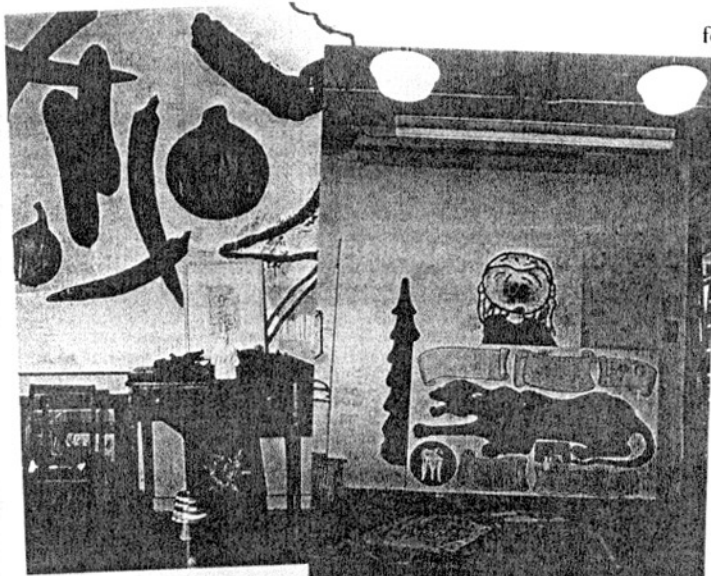
DEBORAH EISENBERG; PRODUCED BY BEATRICE MONTI DELLA CORTE; PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN KALLINA

Facing page: *Tulip*, a 1992 collage. This page: Donald Baechler at work in his Manhattan studio, which at the moment houses materials for painting and drawing as well as sculpture, although the artist says he would prefer to pursue his different interests in different places.



wealthy person.

Can Baechler work with a lot of people around? "Yes," he says. "There always *are* a lot of people around." After a moment he amends his response. "Alternatively, I could say no. Some days I have to be completely alone." Although he's cerebral and articulate, Baechler doesn't particularly like, he says, to talk about his art. Fortunately his art speaks for itself, and one quickly becomes involved in a dialogue with it. It's complicated and oblique—sometimes disturbing, usually agreeable to look at, and often all three. His canvases, built up



with bits of paper or fabric, give an impression of compressed depth with traces of successive renderings. Nothing seems too unexalted to fascinate Baechler or find a way into his overlapping visual explorations. Fortune-cookie epigrams, playing cards, papier-mâché vegetables, drawings by drunks he's encountered in bars, have all made their marks, although he rarely quotes or copies an image directly.

The studio is the back part of the loft, and houses materials for painting and drawing as well as sculpture; the front consists of a raised sleeping area and a living room. Although the living room is very much a collaboration between Baechler and decorator Ricky Clifton, it gives a

forceful impression of having generated itself. Its contents include, for example, hand-painted African tailors' signs, a pair of French 1930s leather armchairs, two metal tables of uncertain origin and purpose, wooden children's chairs from Guatemala, two enormous key-shaped metal cutouts from a locksmith. These hang like garments from the hooks of a metal stem that once had something to do with a butcher's shop. There's also a splendid pier glass and a bed of vaguely institutional character holding stacks of magazines and pictures. On the

wall there are several pictures, of course, among them two haunting Baechlers and a Warhol portrait of the artist showing him with a finger lodged rather endearingly in a nostril.

The room is a pleasant place. All the furnishings here shake off their old contexts and seem newly innocent. There's a feeling of rescue—from shabbiness, from servitude, from custom. Like children away from their families for the first time, each thing seems to be discovering that its proper role is not necessarily the one assigned to it.

Baechler accrues rather than collects; his sources tend to be flea markets and friends. "Things just arrive," he says. They're likely to be things from just around the corner—he doesn't have a taste for bargaining, and finds that items are likely to turn up cheaper near home than in their original locations.

What is it that might attract Baechler to a wooden pirate sword or a ceramic onion from Kenya? "I'm always looking for things that remind me of my own work—that will provoke me further into my investigations. There's always the vague notion that something will be used for a painting—but most of it ends up in the closet." *

Nothing seems too unexalted to fascinate Baechler: playing cards, fortune cookies, a ceramic onion

Upper left: Peppers, zucchinis, onions, all gigantically over-scale, are part of a 1989 oil on canvas. **Upper right:** *Frozen Leopard*, a 1992 acrylic on canvas, hangs beneath light fittings Baechler got from an old schoolhouse. **Above left:** On the artist's table lie a number of works in progress, all devoted to playing-card suits—hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs. **Above right:** In a sunny corner of the studio stands a turn-of-the-century medical cabinet Baechler uses to store glassware and bottles of liquor. He bought the handmade Adirondack chairs flanking it because they reminded him of Dutch designer Gerrit Rietveld's famous "Red-Blue" chair of 1918.