

Collecting

Galerie Knoell: beyond the razzmatazz

The Basel family business has built a reputation for shows that mix past, modern and contemporary masters with expertise



Le Corbusier's 'Figure à la porte jaune' (1937) © Galerie Knoell

Rachel Spence JUNE 23, 2017

A few minutes' walk from the razzmatazz of the recent [Art Basel fair](#) lies a very different world. On the pin-drop quiet street of Baumleingasse stands Galerie Knoell. Opened in 2009 by Carlo Knoell, it is building a reputation for shows that mix past, modern and contemporary masters with sensitivity and expertise. Recent exhibitions have included *Melancholia: from Kranach to Baselitz*, which brought together those artists in addition to practitioners as varied as Artemisia Gentileschi and Jean Dubuffet.

Currently a remarkable assembly called *Collector's Eye* gathers paintings, sculptures and works on paper by, among others, Van Gogh, Giacometti, Picasso, Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol.

There could be no better setting for such distinguished encounters. With the basement still sustained by the original 14th-century wooden pillars, the four-storey residence has been modified over the centuries but the wooden panelling, decorative stuccowork and magnificent stone fireplace testify to the care successive generations have taken over its maintenance.

The house's most illustrious resident was a tenant. Just before his death in 1536, Erasmus of Rotterdam paused in Basel while preparing to move to Brabant. Already sickly, he was drawn to the suite of rooms on the first floor of the Baumleingasse house in the hope that the blaze of the hefty fireplace (an earlier version) might ease his pains.

Although his apartment's gracious proportions are untouched, Erasmus might be surprised to find a suitcase bearing his name in the centre. Together with a map of the world on the wall, it makes up "Erasmus", an installation by Belgian artist and poet Marcel Broodthaers (1924-76). Other companions include "Knives" (1981-82), a trio of blades silk-screened by Andy Warhol with typically unsettling clarity.

The gift for blending old and new is in his blood, says Knoell. "My father built up the framing business that has been in our family for generations," he explains, tall, trim and so youthful it is hard to believe he presides over such important works. "My mother was an artist. We were fully into art!"



Marcel Broodthaers' 'Erasmus' (1974) © Galerie Knoell

A passion for Old Masters saw Knoell work in various auction houses, followed by a spell at Michael Werner's contemporary London showcase. When he returned to Basel he was convinced that his long-held desire to be a dealer — "I wanted it since I was 15!" — was not misplaced. When the opportunity arose to take on the Erasmushaus, as the Baumleingasse building is known, he jumped at the chance. *Collector's Eye* proves he was right to take the risk.

The downstairs gallery is home to a magnificent selection modern master paintings, many hidden away in private collections for generations. No one visiting Basel should miss the opportunity to see a rare oil painting by Le Corbusier, who is of course better known as an architect. His semi-Cubist "Figure at the Yellow Door" from 1937 shows him blend his graphic skills with gauche yet potent slabs of yellow and red, as his contorted protagonist splits open the door dividing him from the sea.

Giacometti was also exploring unfamiliar territory when he painted "Apples on a Chest of Drawers" (1950-51). The unusual decision to add dabs of rose and green to his signature chalky monochromes bestows an unexpected vitality on this lovely still life.

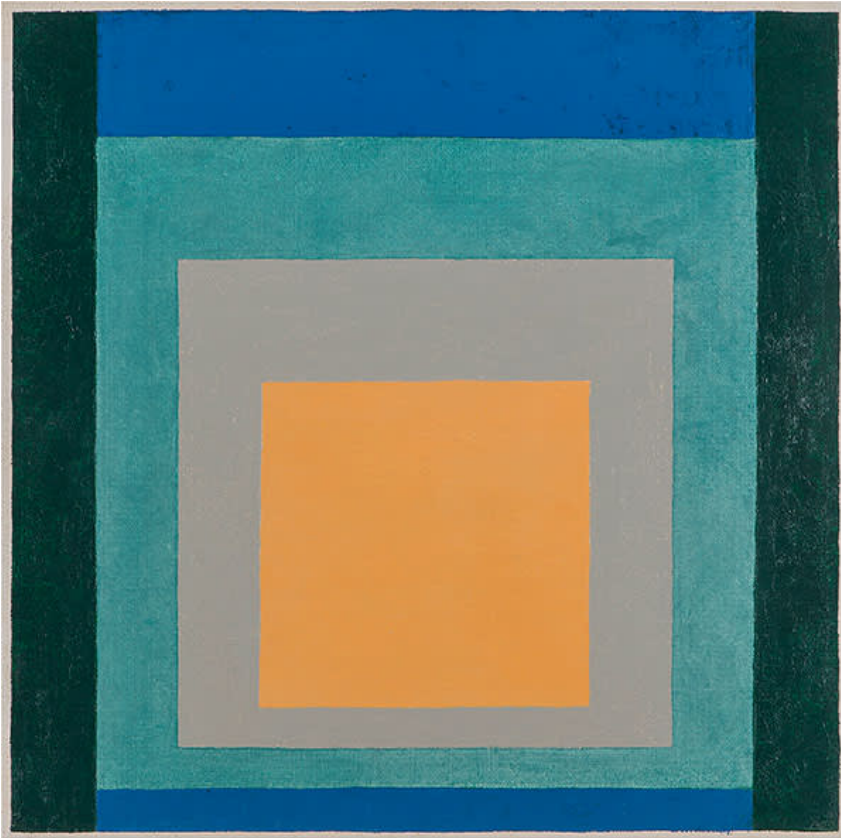
Dominating all, however, is a 1952 painting by Picasso, "Vallauris Landscape at night". Created as Picasso's relationship with Françoise Gilot entered crisis, it locks the viewer into a suffocating death-grip of spiky black palms and midnight-blue sky set ablaze by bursts of phosphorescent light from moon, stars and flowers as the painter maps his own despairing passion on the canvas.

In the upstairs galleries, where Erasmus lodged, a calmer mood prevails. Works on paper — by Giacometti, Jean Dubuffet and Joseph Beuys among others — share space with paintings that include the cut-out canvases of neglected Italian female modernist Dadamaino and sculptures by Jean Arp, Max Bill and AR Penck. Considered in these peaceful rooms bathed only in natural light, they testify to an era when artists could explore big issues — humanity, infinity, order, chaos — without sacrificing intimacy of scale.

Most works here are further empowered by their frames. The Picasso landscape, for example, is

encased in a dark wood Renaissance cassetta frame with a delicate gilded moon motif. The effect is to heighten the painting's inky darkness while also boosting the brightness of its spots of light.

The wizard behind such choices is Knoell's father, Thomas, who he says reframes 95 per cent of the works that come into the gallery even when they are on loan. "We always ask first," Knoell says, adding with a smile that he can't remember anyone ever refusing.



Josef Albers' 'Variation on Homage to the Square' (1958) © Galerie Knoell

Fit and bright-eyed, perhaps thanks to his daily habit of swimming in the Rhine, Thomas Knoell explains that both his grandfather and his father were framers: his father often made frames for the renowned dealer and collector Ernst Beyeler whose [foundation](#) is one of the fulcrums of artistic life in the city.

Initially Thomas, who collaborates with institutions including London's National Gallery, had doubts about joining the family business. But gradually he realised that framing brought him "close to sensitivity, interesting people and interesting materials. You have colours, glues, old-fashioned things that still work," he muses with the unaffected wisdom of a true craftsman.

On the stairs down to the basement, where scores of handsome antique frames hang on racks and a beguiling cache of works on paper by American Abstract Expressionist Mark Tobey is displayed in a back room, Thomas explains that the secret to finding the right frame is to "enter the painting".

With Old Masters, such as a work by the Florentine Mannerist Pontormo, Thomas takes great care to find a frame of the right era and region. "Or I will make a reproduction," he says. But with modern paintings he can be a little more playful. One of Tobey's abstract drawings is encased in an 18th-century frame whose blue tone picks up the flecks of blue in the painting. Thomas Knoell's subtle yet confident eye is of a piece with this gallery's unshowy dignity.

To July 8. galerieknoell.ch

Photographs: Galerie Knoell