There is a rather typical way that Baer has been introduced in articles and interviews over the last years. Yes, the 83-year-old artist was successful with her Minimalist art and hard-edge abstract paintings in the 1960s. Yes, she moved to a castle in Ireland and then via London on to Amsterdam, and in the ’80s she wrote, “I am no longer an abstract artist,” denouncing a style that had lost its power and become too decorative. Since then she has been known for works combining animals, bodies, objects, and erotic images found in early cave paintings. But in the end, what Jo Baer is and does
are more than these oft-repeated tropes. She comes across as fearless but confides to being very anxious; she knows perfectly well what she does and why she does it but is still looking for the right words to capture it. Maaike Lauwaert met with Baer at her Amsterdam studio to talk about her two current shows, one at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum through September 1; the other, focused on older works, at Museum Ludwig, in Cologne, Germany, through August 25.

Maaike Lauwaert: Can you tell me what you are planning to show in the Stedelijk Museum this summer?

Jo Baer: There will be six new paintings. I started them in 2009 and then picked them up again in 2011. I have lately done only one painting a year. Finishing these paintings was very difficult and very hard work. I couldn’t go anywhere, didn’t see anybody. These are real big, honest-to-God paintings.

ML: Can you tell me about the stone with the hole depicted in the paintings?

JB: It was standing in a field close to where I lived in Ireland. It is a big, squarish stone with a perfect hole in it. It’s 8,000 years old! Why would there be a hole in it?

ML: And this stone was the starting point for all six paintings?

JB: Yes, I remained intrigued by this stone and went back to study it. There could be so many reasons why the stone is there. It could be the door of a tomb that no longer exists; it might be a border, a boundary line, a sign-post. There’s even somebody who wrote about it saying it’s a fertility thing, so there are pictures online of a man who put his penis in the hole. I think it’s so funny.

It’s a long story. The stone was part of a big traffic scheme: If you put your ruler on the map and draw a line from the stone and see where it goes, it goes all the way up to where the first farmers came to this part of Ireland, where the first and earliest tombs
were built. And there are many more stones, a major river ford, and connections along its way. It marks an important highway. It’s very intriguing.

**ML:** So it began with this fascination with the stone.

**JB:** Yes, the result of this fascination, this mystery, is a series of modern paintings. It is not figurative work, mind you. I don’t know the words to use to say what these paintings are. If you want to make up an idea, a word for what I’m doing, please feel welcome, because I have heard everything from meaning art to Neo-Constructivism.

**ML:** You no longer use the term radical figuration that you coined?

**JB:** Ditch radical figuration; it’s a 1980s phrase. I don’t like the term anymore because it has the word figuration in it, and when you talk about figuration, narrative is never far away. My paintings are not narratives; they have a story, that is true, but they don’t tell that story in the way a narrative does. My paintings are made of constellations, but they are not assemblage or collage. Young people know what I am doing; they are doing it, too, now. It’s not portrait art, it’s not landscapes, it’s not pictures. Maybe it’s closer to abstract art—only with content and meaning.

**ML:** Are these new works different from the radical figuration paintings?

**JB:** Yes, I think these six paintings are very explicit. The ones from the previous 35 years were much more open and less formal, more layered as well. I decided to try to close the circle a little bit with this series. To some extent I am going back to the Minimalist look, giving more space to things, making the paintings less complicated, simplifying them. That was a deliberate choice. I looked at the paintings and felt I should hold back a little.

You see, the images used in the new paintings are from a distant past and they’re very mysterious. Since they are not so easily recognizable, I spread them out. I simplified. It’s not an aesthetic thing—it’s to do with their content and meaning.
ML: Your work has been hard to pin down, to frame.
JB: Yes. I wrote an article in the '80s about why abstract art broke down. The main reason was that in the late '60s and '70s the vocabulary on which abstract art depended was destroyed. We lost our common language; we no longer shared one language that people understood. And once that happened, you had to go look for another language. Advertising, journalism, and Pop art became a new, shared language for a lot of artists. I wasn’t going that way. I am not interested in decorative or conceptual art’s propagandas.

ML: What drives you to make paintings?

JB: When I’m upset about something, it’s not very concrete. But if I am upset about something, there is always this drive to want to know more about it. I don’t know why I want to know this or that, and frankly I don’t care why. Why the hell would I want to make paintings about an Irish stone? A lot of people can’t make the sort of art I make, and I do not understand why I can, but this is a strength that emboldens me. Anything you can hold in your hand (or in your mind) can be the material to make beautiful, nontrivial paintings. The world is a rich and compelling place.

ML: You come across as very strong.

JB: I’m not strong. In fact I have a certifiably weak ego. I think probably all good artists are badly crippled in some way. If you think of me as brave, strong, and all those things, it’s not true. I don’t have a choice. It’s just the way it is. And I’m still alive and even sometimes happy.

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