

Media Release

WHISPERS OF JAPAN – Luciano Castelli

21 November 2025 – 15 February 2026
Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger | KBH.G

The Swiss artist's lifelong fascination with Japan unfolds in a new exhibition of painting, photography, and immersive performative energy.

Renowned for his sweeping gestural painting, multimedia experimentation, and boundary-breaking performances, Swiss artist Luciano Castelli has occupied a unique position in European art since the 1970s. *Whispers of Japan*, on view from 21 November 2025 at Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger | KBH.G, presents his most ambitious project to date in his long-standing engagement with Japan. The exhibition combines earlier works inspired by Japanese culture with newly created works, Butoh-inspired photographs, and expansive paintings that transform the exhibition space into a dynamic dialogue between tradition and experimentation.

Although Castelli has engaged intensively with Japanese themes since the early 1980s, he travelled to Japan for the first time only in 2024—an experience that crystallized his decades-long fascination. The exhibition stages a dialogue between Castelli's early Japan-influenced works and large-scale photographs dedicated to *Butoh*, the haunting “dance of darkness” that addresses themes of impermanence, transformation, and the human condition. These are complemented by powerful new paintings in Castelli's unmistakable gestural style—including eight monumental folding screens (paravents), each measuring 1.8 x 4.5 meters, created especially for this project in collaboration with a traditional master craftsman in Tokyo.

The *byōbu* folding screens, deeply rooted in centuries-old Japanese tradition, are reinterpreted by Castelli as monumental, contemporary painterly environments. With sweeping strokes—at times applied with a broom rather than a brush—that verge on the calligraphic, he fuses performative energy with the precision of Japanese craftsmanship. The most spectacular of these screens, entirely covered in gold leaf, stands among his most ambitious and technically demanding works in this series.

These works are not confined to the wall: they conquer the exhibition space, continuing Castelli's legacy of breaking conventional boundaries—from painting entire interiors of Berlin's Kaufhaus Jahndorf to his transformation of the SPSI Art Museum in Shanghai.

Born in Lucerne in 1951, Luciano Castelli rose to international prominence in the 1970s as a central figure of Berlin's *Neue Wilde* movement and as muse to Franz Gertsch, who—alongside Patti Smith—made him one of the most important protagonists of his paintings. A painter, photographer, sculptor, performance artist, musician, and provocateur, Castelli challenged notions of gender and identity long before such discussions entered the public arena. From the punk-glam performances of his band *Geile Tiere* to his *Revolving Paintings* in Paris, Castelli has continually reinvented himself, slipping between roles and art forms with chameleonic ease.

Japan has remained a continuous thread in his practice—apparent in his self-portraits of the early 1980s and in his fascination with masks, ritual, and theatrical role-play. The dark beauty of *Butoh*—its vulnerability, its discipline, its confrontation with mortality—resonates directly with Castelli's lifelong engagement with transformation.

Alongside folding screens and photographs, visitors will also encounter new and revisited self-portraits spanning decades, as well as immersive spatial interventions, including the film *The Bitch and Her Dog* (1981). This is a multimedia project in the fullest sense—one that embodies KBH.G's mission to present art that tests the boundaries of form and context.

“Luciano Castelli has always been an artist of transformation—of himself, of space, and of the medium itself. In *Whispers of Japan* he brings together his lifelong engagement with Japanese culture in a project that unites discipline, beauty, and enigma, while remaining unmistakably his own.”

— **Raphael Suter, Director, Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger | KBH.G**

About the Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger | KBH.G

The Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger | KBH.G was founded in 2019 by philanthropist Sibylle Geiger (1930–2020), who named the foundation after her grandfather, Swiss pharmacist and entrepreneur Hermann Geiger (1870–1962). The foundation's mission is to provide a unique platform for art and culture to the city of Basel and its residents and visitors. All the foundation's activities aim to add a new dimension to Basel's already rich cultural offerings. The foundation plans to hold two to three independent art exhibitions each year, with free admission and catalogues.

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Exhibition Details

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Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger | KBH.G

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Admission and publication are free

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