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Georg Baselitz Celebrates Heroes at Städel Museum

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Portrait of Georg Baselitz (Courtesy Städel Museum)

Frankfurt's Städel Museum is showing 70 paintings and works on paper from German artist Georg Baselitz's famed "Heroes" series in an exhibition which runs until October 23.

Baselitz embarked on the series — which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2016 — after he saw prints by the Italian Mannerists in Florence. Following this, he began working on these paintings of men that he described as "rebels, shepherds or new types." Visitors, however, may be more inclined to see them as soldiers, due to his frequent portrayal of military uniforms within these works.

However, that is not to say that these works are straightforward depictions of triumphant hero soldiers. Instead, Baselitz's "Heroes" exist within those quotation marks (as David Bowie, a fan of Baselitz and other German Expressionists, would do a decade later). As a press release from Städel states, "his monumental 'Heroes' in their tattered battle dress evince an accordingly contradictory character [...] Heroism and its one-time exponents had been called into question by the war and the postwar period."

"In a staggering act of self-assertion and identity definition that ran contrary to the prevailing currents of the time, [Baselitz] reflected on his own position vis-à-vis the society in which he lived."

He also reflected on his position as an artist. In addition to looking towards the Mannerists, his images show a curdled take on the traditional view of the artist as a rebel hero — a role many saw Baselitz in after his first solo exhibition in 1963 turned out to be a scandal.

Attacking Romanticism, contemporary society, and even viewers through their jagged aggression, these works only grow in impact when displayed collectively, as in this exhibition.