

Georg Baselitz: The Heroes

Hurt by their past, alienated from their present, with just the option of being outsiders to
face their future

In 1965, working feverishly as an artist in residence at Villa Romana in Florence, Baselitz began the series of works known today as "*The Heroes*" or "*The New type.*" Oils, drawings, and prints depicting colossal, solitary figures with small heads standing against a desolate background. Wounded, mutilated, and dressed in faded, tattered military uniforms, these figures seem to emerge from the destruction of World War Two with a sense of alienation. There is nothing conventionally heroic about them, they are survivors counting on their physical presence to confront the unrecognisable new world they inhabit.

Baselitz was 1 years old when World War Two began; its atrocities did not strike him closely, yet they affected the collective memory of Germany where he grew up, studied and has been living on and off until 2013. "My work is completely inconceivable without history" - he argues. A comment which might explain why his heroes appear to us now as witnesses of the European dramatic past, but also as reflections on life infused with an existential sense, a rebellious energy, and a longing for a new place (in art as in life) to belong to. "I am interested in my biography"- he says.

At 27, when he started "*The Heroes*", Baselitz had reasons to see himself as a survivor; he had overcome several negative experiences in his short life. The expulsion from his Art Academy in East Berlin, his move to the Academy in West Berlin (just 4 years before the wall was erected) where he graduated going through a period of isolation mainly to protect himself from the surrounding culture of consumerism. After his first exhibition at the Galerie Werner & Katz in 1962/63, his paintings: "The Big Night Down the Drain", "The Naked Man", and "Sex with Dumplings", were declared immoral and obscene and his art was disputed in court. Even his residency in Florence was the outcome of a string of adversities. As a private association, Villa Romana was dependent on its patrons some of whom had asked for the reconsideration of Baselitz's residency, due to his bad reputation. The artist had never applied formally (he had been approached by members of Villa Romana instead) which paradoxically saved him from the expulsion. Eventually, there he was, with his recently married wife, his first child, the financial

security of the fellowship and a supportive director (Michael Harro Siegel) who gave him the largest available studio looking into the garden to ease his urge to experiment with big canvases.



The Rebel, 1965, Oil on canvas, 162.7 x 130.2cm

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Photo: Friedrich Rosenstiel, Colonia

162 x 130cm, these the standard dimensions of *the Heroes* which in 1965 were just coming into being and nobody, the artist included, knew much about them. There was no theme, no intention of displaying them together, nor any conscious desire to create a series. Among the people who were following their progress closely, Siegel spotted some similarities. He described the animal pictures as: *brownish-red, rusty-red, blood-red, orange-red, brick-red, earthy-red, fuchsia-red, pink and flesh coloured, whitish, yellowish creations grew and swell high across the walls; heads of mutttons, calves and pigs peered out of these, at times with small piercing eyes, at other times,*

with eyes wide open in fear and astonishment; threads, plucks, creeps, trippa alla fiorentina; and in between the rhymes and the accents of shoes and boots and small chairs” Had Baselitz also realised that his colour scheme was going into the direction of the earth and blood? That he was responding to the influence of the Florentine Mannerism with its distortions of proportions and its refusal of the ordered, the classical and beauty? Was he aware of his interest in the chaotic side of life expressed on the one hand through the energetic, messy brushstrokes which delineate the figures, but also and maybe more importantly, in the gestural rendering of the backgrounds?

It probably crossed his mind that with his art, which was somehow acknowledging the predominant artistic trends of the time, he was deliberately (as much as he had done as a student at the academy) rejecting these trends. The American abstract expressionism, the French *informel*, the legacy of the social realism in the return to figuration, the Zero group, his images (simultaneously abstract and figurative) avoided all of them, unfolding simply around recurring motifs: a man with his tools, a landscape with its symbols, a tree as a metaphor of the German soul.



The Tree, 1966, 162 x 130cm

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Photo: Jochen Littkemann, Berlino

It was just almost a decade after their creation, that the first comprehensive exhibition of some of these extraordinary works was held at the Galerie Neuendorf in Hamburg under the title the “New Type”. Then, after people saw the works exhibited as a group, these came to be known also as: “*The Heroes*”.



Untitled, 1965, 101 x 80cm

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In retrospect, speaking about the years which infused this series, Baselitz said: “I was born into a destroyed order, a destroyed landscape, a destroyed people, a destroyed society. And I did not want to re-establish an order: I’d seen enough of so-called order”.

Georg Baselitz, The Heroes is a travelling exhibition previously shown in Frankfurt and Stockholm, which is on view until 18th June in Rome, followed by Bilbao.



The Modern Painter, 1965, 162 x 130cm

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Photo: Frank Oleski, Colonia