

## Leon Golub



**Mercenaries IV** (Mercenarios IV), 1980  
Acrílico sobre lienzo  
304,8 x 584,2 cm  
Colección Harriet y Ulrich Meyer

<b>DATES:</b>	5 May – 12 September 2011
<b>PLACE:</b>	Palacio de Velázquez, Retiro Park
<b>ORGANISED BY:</b>	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
<b>CURATED BY:</b>	Jon Bird
<b>COORDINATED BY:</b>	Lucía Ybarra

Museo Reina Sofía presents, at Palacio de Velázquez, an exhibition devoted to the figure of Leon Golub (Chicago, 1922 – New York, 2004). This is the first major exhibition by this artist in Spain, and a unique occasion to approach his body of work. The retrospective will gather a hundred works that cover Golub's entire career, from his first 50s creations until the last series he made in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. These works include paintings —some of which are large scale— and drawings.

His very recognisable style embraced the relationships between figure and background, poetic abstraction, mass media and pop iconography. During his wide artistic career, Golub defended the need to perpetuate a historic tradition of historic painting, using the pictorial drama as a narrative and symbolic means of expressing political issues, and how those power relations have a visible effect in the human body. His praxis is not at all simple. Jon Bird, curator of the show, affirms “it is a complex interweaving of formal, conceptual and imaginative preoccupations”, a form of “critic realism, [...] of speaking the truth before power”.

The show will be mainly chronological, and will articulate from a specific work that will act as a thematic nexus: ***Vietnam II***, made in 1973 as a response to *Guernica*, which had a decisive impact in him after seeing it in Chicago. Thus, he joined the strength of *Guernica*'s antiwar message and adapted it to the conflict that he was living in his own country.

Golub's body of work during the 50s and 60s show the iconography and themes inspired in ancient Greece and Rome: ***Gigantomachy*** (1966) is a modern revision of the classical frieze, whereas the ***Napalm*** series (1969) shows one of his many replicas to the Vietnam War.

In the early 70s Golub approaches abstraction, making ***Shields, Gates*** and ***Pylons*** (1970–1971). These works appear in the exhibition and have been rarely exhibited before. In the last years of this decade he went through a process of both stylistic and thematic change, as the ***Political Portraits*** series show (1976–1979), a combination of busts of political leaders, dictators, religious figures and corporation presidents: natural scale portraits that tell power as a realignment of an image of the self. In ***Mercenaries***,

one of his most important series, created between this and the next decade, the artist depicted once more the brutal acts committed under the shadow of repressive regimes.

In the 80s Golub had achieved international recognition and had become an authority for the generation of younger artists that cultivated figuration in both sides of the Atlantic. His work, nevertheless, hadn't changed: he was still exploring the weaknesses of imperialistic culture in North America through the comprehensive study of aesthetics of the body. In his works the observer can identify mercenaries, interrogators and torture victims, provocatively approaching the fears and repressions of our society: the distressing *Horsing Around* (1982) is a clear example. It is a widely discussed series in which the artist portraits, in a day to day scenery, a perturbing sex game with gender ambivalence. The *Threnody* series (1986) was made at the same time, and its protagonists are suffering women. Other series that delve again in the effects of power, violence and repression are *Interrogations* (1981), *White Squads* (1982) and *Riot* (1983).

The following decade carried a breach in the technical and composition procedures previously used by the artist: less paint density and a nihilistic and humoristic use of the language probably inflicted by his wife, the also artist Nancy Spero. His last works imply, without melancholy, the feeling of loss, separation, the fragility of the body and our own mortality. In these late works, the artist shows a fascination for the hybrid —using the sphinx and the Cyborg as paradigms of alterity—, and a renewed interest for the Greco-Roman world. *Prometheus, the Heretic's Fork and the Green World* (1999) is one of the works from that period that will be on display.

In the 21st century, Golub didn't have the vigour that had allowed him to paint the large canvases he was working with during his previous career. In 2001 he began a series of small drawings in which he retook political portraits, little manifestos that remind of posters and notes attached to the walls, such as *This Could Be You* or *We Can Disappear You*. *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (Disasters of War), a series of engravings made by Goya, is a clear influence in these works in both theme and scale. Between 2000 and 2004 he made carnival drawings filled with mythological characters that

alluded transgression, excess and desire: satires, centaurs, beasts and villains were mixed in a formal experimentation that entered within Golub's own artist game.

The works present in the exhibition come from the artist's personal collection, preserved in New York, and the other main Golub collections in America: the Rick Meyer Collection in Chicago and the Eli Broad Collection in Los Angeles. Some of the pieces will also come from other museums in the United States, Canada and Europe.

### **About the artist**

Leon Golub studied in the Institute of Arts in Chicago after the end of World War II. He followed the figurative tradition of the School of Chicago, which would later combine with the influence of the grotesque universe provided by the Monster Roster, a group of artists to which he belonged, that used a very intimate, existential and occasionally scatological figurative imagery. In his first paintings he used aspects of both tendencies, but he always kept a critical dialogue with other manifestations of the American avant-garde after the war. In 1959 Golub and his family moved to Europe, under the belief that the old continent would be more receptive to the work of both artists (Golub himself and his wife, Nancy Spero), who dealt with issues of political and sexual power, so uncomfortable in the United States. In 1964 they went back to New York, by the time the Vietnam War began to escalate. Under his perspective, big human catastrophes, the conflicts that left a horror gesture in all faces, take a human shape in those sceneries of abuse, inequality and violation of human dignity.

There are two main narratives that baste Leon Golub's body of work and at the same time structure the exhibition. In his early beginnings, one of his obsessions, which he eloquently put in his works, was incarnation: how the figure is a symbol of identity, both social and psychic. At the same time, he also explores the allegoric meanings of the social space. For the artist, the "work" of painting, beyond denying the autonomous spaces of modern abstraction, has been a counter-narrative in which a figurative frame of action-reaction, where one looks and is looked at, inscribes and articulates subjects of power.

In words of the retrospective curator, Jon Bird, Golub made “paintings that depicted [...] the forms of power and political and military oppression, such as its impact on social bodies, both individual and collective, [...] created scenes of conflict and masculine aggression as a means to ‘approach the real’” and his bodies were “carriers of meaning and truth, allegories of our contemporary world”. The artist himself said so: “To me, figuration is a way of entering the world”. Shaping “reality”, the way he understood it, with visual and critical sensibility, to build a pictorial world that would ideate conflict scenarios and, at the same time, explore the patterns of violence. To Bird, Leon Golub always kept “a commitment [...] to the body as a representation of conflict and the power relations”.

## **CATALOGUE**

On the occasion of the exhibition Museo Reina Sofía and Turner will publish a catalogue with texts by the curator, Jon Bird, and experts in Golub’s work: Jo Anna Isaak, Satish Padiyar and Serge Guilbaut, and an article by the artist about historical painting and mass media.

**For further information:**

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