

Leon Golub

*I didn't say that, necessarily, this is Realism,
but I did want to get at the real.*

Leon Golub

For over fifty years Leon Golub made paintings that fearlessly represented forms of political and military power and oppression as they impacted upon individual and collective social bodies. Located himself within the great tradition of Western history painting, he depicted scenes of conflict and masculine aggression as a way of “getting at the real”; visual narratives that figured bodies—through gesture, posture, and facial expression—as bearers of meaning and truth, allegories of our contemporary world unfolding across pictorial space. It is entirely appropriate that this exhibition is taking place in the museum that houses the twentieth century’s iconic anti-war image, Picasso’s *Guernica*, and in close proximity to Goya’s *The Third of May 1808* in the Prado.

Born in Chicago in 1922, Golub recalled seeing *Guernica* as a young man when it was exhibited in that city in 1937 and, as a student attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill in the aftermath of the Second World War, he had access to the Art Institute’s extensive collection of contemporary art. In fact, Chicago was home to a powerful figurative tradition in the visual arts and Golub was closely associated with the “Monster Roster” group—artists who favored forms of grotesque figuration over the increasingly dominant abstraction of the New York school. His early influences included the French avant-garde, particularly Picasso and Dubuffet, Surrealism, frequent visits to the Field Museum of ethnography and anthropology, and an ongoing interest in the antique, elements that laid the foundation for a lifetime’s engagement with the body as the representation of conflict and relations of power.



Leon Golub,
Gigantomachy II,
1966.
Acrylic on linen,
304 x 732 cm
Courtesy of the
Estate of Nancy
Spero, Stephen
Golub, Philip Golub
and Paul Golub,
New York

This exhibition, then, traces the themes and subjects of Golub’s art from the early 1950s to his “late style,” small paintings and drawings made between 2000 and his death in New York in 2004. *Vietnam II*, Golub’s magisterial anti-war painting and response to *Guernica*, is the fulcrum around which the exhibition revolves, taking us from the early, classically inflected paintings of the 1950s–60s (here represented by one of the *Gigantomachy* series, a modern play upon the classical frieze) through the artist’s response to the Vietnam war (the *Napalm* works) and abstracts (*Shields*, *Gates*, and *Pylons*) to the paintings that re-established his reputation in the 1980s: *Mercenaries*, *Interrogations*, and other depictions of repressive and covert violence and the operations of American foreign policy. In the final decade come the scavenging dogs, roaring lions, dancing skeletons, the introduction of text, and the late drawings. However, Golub’s is not a simple or reductive practice of social or political documentary, but a complex interweaving of formal, material, conceptual, and imaginative concerns into a form of critical realism—an art of the body and space as expressions of social and psychic identity; of violence, suffering, and mortality, but also of humor, compassion, and resistance—of speaking truth to power.

After a five-year period in Paris, Golub and family (his wife, the artist Nancy Spero, and their three sons) returned in 1964 to the United States, relocating to New York where they were immediately immersed in a culture increasingly dominated by the war in Southeast Asia. Gradually Golub abandoned the paintings of classical mythology depicting the eternal battles between gods and men, turning instead to the specific iconography of modern warfare. The three *Vietnam* paintings—cinematic in scale—accurately display the dress and weaponry of troops,

mercenaries, and their opponents, with a realism dependant upon his expanding archive of photographic source material. He also deepened the psychological intensity of the narrative, paying attention to the visual exchange between the combatants and the viewer, thereby drawing us into the scene: witnesses to the action. Later, a chance resemblance between a soldier in *Vietnam III* and a photograph of the young Gerald Ford, initiated the *Political Portraits* series—political leaders, dictators, corporate directors and religious figures; over 100 life-size portraits completed between 1976–79. Based upon news photographs and other journalistic sources, and frequently documenting the subject over a lifetime, Golub’s interpretations of the changing facial expression record power as an experiential reordering of self-image: thus the *Franco* series presents the dictator’s life as a dystopian journey from an arrogantly preening general to the waxy effigy of *Franco (In Casket)*. Stripped of affect, each portrait becomes a synecdoche for a whole culture marked by the will to power. Representing lives lived in the public gaze, they deliberately abandon the conventions of the genre, emphasizing the performative aspect of identity and touching upon the cultures dreams and nightmares. “We are,” they seem to say, “what you make us.”



Leon Golub
Interrogation I,
1981.
Acrylic on linen,
304.8 x 447 cm
The Broad Art
Foundation,
Santa Monica

The early 1980s marked a turning point in Golub’s professional career with exhibitions in London and New York, acquisition of his work by both public and private collections including Charles Saatchi, and an outpouring of critical reviews that recognized his role as an elder authority in the turn to expressive figuration being made by young artists in Europe and North America. However, Golub was just doing what he had always done, exploring the underbelly

of American imperial culture through an aesthetic of the body. Unlike many of his contemporaries, his images of mercenaries, interrogators, and victims were a negation of the postmodern eclecticism of much of the neo-expressionist painting of the decade. Employing his signature style red oxide backgrounds to these dystopian scenarios, Golub formally pushed the figures up against the frontal plane, often cutting off the lower body at the knee or ankle to further imaginatively advance the action into the viewing space.

Combined with their flattened pictorial space, direct gaze, and bodily posture, these paintings created a confrontational address to our

Leon Golub

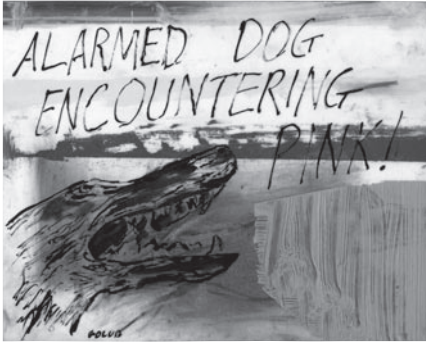
Leon Golub
*Prometheus, the
Heretic's Fork
and the Green
World*, 1999.
Acrylic on linen,
231.1 x 431.8 cm
Collection of
Harriet and Ulrich
Meyer, Chicago



deepest fears and repressions. The casual, almost jokey attitude of the aggressors just going about their work contrasts profoundly with their abject victims in scenes of painful desolation. Indeed, when the photographs taken in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq began to appear across the global media it was impossible not to associate these jarring indictments of American (and British) foreign policy with Golub's scenes of torture and interrogation, not only in the gesture and pose of aggressor and victim, but also in the visual exchange between abusers and the camera; the viewer is caught looking at what is usually hidden from view. Following these harrowing visions come the *Horsing Around* series in which the space of conflict is transformed into settings for uneasy sexual play and gender ambivalence, where the brutality of the narrative is subverted in the ordinariness of the action: what do these guys get up to on their day off but go to a bar and pick up a girl (or a boy)? Then, as if a space has to be made from this excess of suffering, these are followed by a time for reflection and the *Threnody* paintings of mourning women.

The paintings of the 1990s mark a break with the compositional and technical procedures of the previous series. Now space is disjointed, the visual narrative episodic. Backgrounds carry the impress of the brickwork of his studio wall and the arduous scraping back and distressing of the surface gives way to a more graffiti-like style of image construction, with accidental paint effects spattering the canvas. Golub's cast of characters expands as the mercenaries and victims are replaced by howling and snarling dogs, prowling lions, cavorting skeletons, and nihilistic aphorisms, together with scrawled texts that offer ironic commentaries upon these fragmented visions. Increasingly and uncomfortably aware of the ageing process,

Leon Golub
Alarmed Dog
Encountering Pink!,
2004.
Oil stick and ink on
Bristol paper
20.3 x 25.4 cm
Coutesy Ronald
Feldman Fine Arts,
New York



Golub's late paintings bear the burden of loss, separation, and the body's frailties and mortality, but never descend into melancholy. He also raids his own archive for themes and characters, in particular a fascination with hybridity—the sphinx and the cyborg as signifiers of contingency and alterity—and a return to his earlier interest in the Greco-Roman world. Eventually, the physical demands of working on large paintings proved too much for Golub. He had, in fact, begun a series of small works in 2001, a return to the format of the political portraits, which he envisaged as small manifestoes reminiscent of

the posters and notices appended to wall surfaces that are part of the visual landscape of most cities. These paintings replay themes of the 1980s but in a compressed form that retains the clarity and impact of a direct message: “This Could Be You” and “We Can Disappear You.” However, it is Goya's great series of anti-war etchings, *The Disasters of War*, that are the obvious point of reference in both scale and subject matter.

If the *Disasters* are the historical precedent for this series, it is Goya's companion set

of etchings, *Los Caprichos*, that shadow the final works of Golub's oeuvre—small oil and acrylic drawings on vellum or board that occupied the years between 2000 and 2004. An aesthetic of the carnivalesque in its most radical and subversive aspect invades these erotic imaginings, a lexicon of satyrs and centaurs (and she-centaurs), beasts, skulls and skeletons, villains and victims, and playful formal experimentation that together constitute Golub's *Alte Stil*—his “late style.” An ironic comedy of errors, transgressions, foibles, and desires, these small intense drawings, although marking the end of Golub's practice, are resistant to any suggestions of morbidity: in few they display a lightness of touch as they move adroitly between the comedic and the tragic, *eros* and *thanatos*. In the work that occupied his final years he continued to probe the fears and fantasies that dominate our political and personal identities, experimenting to the end both technically and pictorially in a commitment to maintain the strangeness and truthfulness of his art.

Activities

Talk

[Colloquium between Jon Bird,
Samm Kunce and Satish Padiyar](#)

May 6, 2011. 7:30 p.m.
Nouvel Building, Auditorium 200

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Palacio de Velázquez

Parque del Retiro, s/n
28009 Madrid

Hours

From April to September:
Every day from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
From October to March
Every day from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Closed Tuesdays

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Monday to Saturday
from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Sundays from 10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close 15 minutes
prior to Museum closing

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