Pessimism and the historical painter: Leon Golub

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Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real: A Retrospective of the Artist's Work from 1950-2000 recently at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and *While the Crime is Blazing: Paintings and Drawings of Leon Golub, 1994-1999* at the Cooper Union School of Art, closed September 11, 2001 .

Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real was an exhibition of some 35 works at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the final venue of an international tour. These expressive political paintings, many of which are mural-sized, explore issues of race, violence, war and human suffering. Viewers had an additional opportunity to view examples of Golub's recent work, including *Dionysiac* (1998), *Prometheus* (1997), *Breach* (1995) and *Like Yeah* (1994) at the Cooper Union School of Art in New York City. These two shows offer an opportunity to assess the work of an artist who took on the task of painting the history of the past half-century.

As a young painter after the Second World War (Golub was born in 1922), first in New York and then in Paris, Golub did not go the route of abstraction, although his early work shared some of the techniques and formal concerns of the Abstract Expressionists. Like Pollock, he took to pouring paint onto unstretched canvas on the ground, and then scraped it to achieve a distressed surface that mimics the appearance of ancient sculpture: broken, fragmented, pock-marked, eroded. He depicted images of colossal nude men engaged in inexplicable, timeless, ritualized struggle. These monumental figures continuously emerge from and dissolve into the surface of the paint, and bespeak a spirit of human resistance in the face of overwhelming natural forces. Golub was interested in the eternal, the quintessentially human. Hence also his frequent depiction of the sphinx, since it poses the questions: what is it to be man, what is it to be beast?

In the 1950s and '60s Golub sought to grapple with the experiences of the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the subsequent wars in Korea and Vietnam in his *Gigantomachies* series. (A gigantomachy is a depiction of the ancient Greek mythical war between gods and giants for rule of the universe.) These five frieze-like paintings (from 2.7 x 5.5 meters to 3 x 7.5 meters) recall the Great Altar of Zeus from the Hellenistic city of Pergamon as well as such Renaissance reworking of the theme as Raphael's *Combat of Naked Men* . Unlike his sources, Golub's figures in these works are brutish, static and ugly. He seeks, unsuccessfully for the most part, to convey motion through blurring the figures into indistinguishable masses of spotty skin tones. Although Golub did not answer the challenge posed by conflict-riven reality as the Abstract Expressionists did by retreating behind claims of the "irreproducibility" of the objective world, he posited a kind of ahistorical universality: mankind is predisposed to these brutal conflicts, no matter what the historical circumstances.

Much has been made of Golub's decision in the 1970s to clothe his naked warriors in American Army uniforms, hand them machine guns and have them shoot across empty or cut-out canvas at huddled, screaming Vietnamese civilians. This was an important statement in a period when most of the art world averted its gaze from the American-perpetuated atrocity. Golub seems to be protesting a hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil art, like minimalism or Pop Art and its glorification of the cheap and mundane. The idea that what was *really* going on, in an aesthetic as well as political way, was the brutal conflict in Vietnam, was certainly a welcome contribution to the artistic depiction of reality.

But Golub's was a limited statement. His painting excluded the potential of resistance, whether from the victims or the shooters. Golub's work at this time—and later—was not informed by the possibility of radical transformation of the world by the Vietnamese people or by the drafted American soldiers. What sort of people were firing at the Vietnamese? And were the Vietnamese a nation of passive victims? Despite the contribution he made to the art of the 1960s by posing the conflict in Vietnam as an essential subject, his search for the history-less universal in man was turning pessimistic.

Throughout the 1970s, Golub's work began to degenerate in content, while improving in skill. He continued to look for "universal" rather than historically specific explanations to war, brutality and oppression. He turned to examine issues of power in general, without regard to the actual social history of the powerful. First came his portraits of political and religious leaders. Selected from images in the media, these small drawing-like paintings seek to capture the gestures and the expressions of public personae, who all seem characterized by an awkward mouth. Returning to a large scale from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Golub painted the *Mercenaries*, *Interrogation*, *White Squad* and *Riot* series. These paintings must be considered the heart of Golub's work. Gangs of male figures, clad in an array of different uniforms or just generic combat fatigues, tie up, drag, shoot, beat, piss on, haul off or stuff in car trunks their usually solitary, bound, gagged victims. There is the absolute vulnerability of the nude woman blindfolded and tied at the wrists, seated with her genitals frontally exposed and being tortured by two police/soldiers, in *Interrogation III*. These images

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are no longer about conflict since the struggle is so disproportionate and the victory a foregone conclusion.

At the time he worked on these paintings, America's sponsorship of underground, extra-legal warfare, particularly in Latin America, was being brought to light by bourgeois journalists and a part of the political establishment. Golub's painting technique itself took on the nature of exposure, as he painted over the figures in layers, and then stripped with solvents and scraped to reveal them again, creating a mottled look of skin and clothing. The stripping away, however, does not reveal what historical circumstances brought forth these overwhelming displays of repression in the first place. Why are these powerless, broken figures so threatening to their tormentors? Why must they be annihilated in painting after painting?

At one point Golub said of one of his *Threnody* paintings that what he intended to portray could be either Latin America or South Africa. This lack of concreteness lies at the core of Golub's weakness as a historical painter. Golub's portrayal of the world tends to give the impression of a false universality that does not develop: humanity is characterized by an eternal use of power against powerlessness. By implication, if any of the denuded, helpless victims in Golub's world were to gain power, they too would become brutal. He examines power outside of its actual manifestation in history. Images of power are at the bottom reflections of class power; but not many artists see this. Since class power develops according to certain historical laws, the nature of class struggle and the possibility of a new order of things may be hidden or distant from the artist's consciousness. Golub's work, for the most part, seems to be a case in point.

Some of the other paintings of this period are concerned with the violent and ambiguous displays of power between the mercenary/soldiers themselves; they are more subtle, more refracted than those of torture. In *Mercenaries IV*, a white mercenary on one side of the red canvas shouts at a black one on the other side; others stand around, smoking cigarettes, edgily watching. Women, who had been all but absent from Golub's work, begin to appear in the 1980s. In the *Horsing Around* series, off-duty mercenaries lewdly paw and are pawed by mannish looking women, who, it has been suggested, are actually transvestites. In the *Threnody* series, older black women wildly gesture in a rather gruesome, static and ritualized mourning dance. In *Two Black Women and a White Man*, a central, haggard, poor woman holds her hand out in a rather limp appeal to the neatly dressed white man, who stands looking away. Women are the epitome of powerlessness, and more so when they are poor, black, old.

The 1980s also marked the first time that Golub's work gained wide attention. He began to have solo shows, first at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1982, then at the Susan Caldwell Gallery in Soho, New York in the same year. *Mercenaries IV* was bought from the ICA show by the Saatchis for their collection, and they bought at least five more paintings through the 1980s.

Golub's most recent work is increasingly bleak. His canvases mimic walls covered with graffiti; images of snarling, prowling dogs and skulls abound. It is a dark world of death, and a culture far gone in decay. The messages scrawled are anything but cryptic: "Wanted, Killers of the World." Or as a screaming Prometheus is set upon by Zeus's eagle, a disconnected figure to the side plugs his ears and his T-shirt reads, "I don't hear a thing." Perhaps the issue is not so much one of hearing as of comprehending.

Golub's artistic insight, however, seems on occasion to undercut his pessimistic and historically disconnected views of war, power and political repression. In 1988 he produced a series of four sphinx paintings—*Wounded, Yellow, Blue, and Red Sphinx.* Taking in turn the phrases of the question put to Oedipus—"What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three at nightfall?"—the paintings show a lion/beast body with a male head moving through a color-field of space. Wounded Sphinx runs on four legs, Yellow Sphinx rears up on hind legs with its back to the viewer, and Blue Sphinx is arrested in motion, seemingly backing away with one foreleg tucked up to show only three. Golub is at his best here in the realm of myth, where history is translated into a far more content-rich symbol than his overtly political paintings. These paintings revive the grace that his early monumental figures had, with their eroded but enduring forms taking shape and dissolving into their paint.

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