

# A painter of raw nerve: Leon Golub, 1922-2004

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Leon Golub, the most important political painter in the United States in the postwar era, died in August at the age of 82. An honest and innovative artist who was deeply concerned with the lives of beleaguered human beings, Golub's art stands out from the confusion, self-absorption and sycophancy of the contemporary American art world.

Golub was born in 1922 in Chicago and received a BA in art history from the University of Chicago in 1942. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill (he was a cartographer in the Army) from 1947 to 1950.

He began to paint figuratively, eschewing the dominant trend in American painting toward abstraction. In 1951 he married the painter Nancy Spero. With other Chicago artists he founded the Monster Roster Group, "who believed that an observable connection to the external world and to actual events was essential if a painting was to have any relevance to the viewer or society" [1]. This was a credo that he would adhere to for the rest of his career.

From 1954 to 1959, he and Spero lived in Paris, where he was able to study at firsthand historical painters such as David, Ingres and Courbet. Golub began to paint on larger canvases and switched from lacquer to acrylics. He closely followed the progress of the Algerian war of independence and the accompanying French atrocities.

After his return to the United States, he continued his attempts at more monumental paintings, depicting human bodies wrestling with one another. This work was a search for a generalized approach to the human condition that was influenced by Greek mythology, and sharpened no doubt by the Etruscan and Roman art he saw on a lengthy trip to Italy in 1956. The most important of these paintings were the "Gigantomachies" of the mid-1960s, whose theme originates in the ancient Greek poet Hesiod's battle of gods and giants for control of the universe.

The escalation of the Vietnam War, however, provoked a crisis in his work that demanded an intellectual-aesthetic solution: "The contrast was glaring," he said in 1992. "TV and photo coverage of the war and the 'Gigantomachies,' huge paintings, men in struggle, nude, no weapons. In war, men are clothed! They kill with guns and rockets. It took until 1972 to work out a solution that had contemporary relevance and

historical resonance. (Given the national and international art worlds such historical ambitions were of little or no interest.) In 1969 I did 'Napalm' paintings, nude figures with napalm wounds. Certainly more relevant, but still nude and in a generalizing mode." [2]

The problem of clothing was not incidental. Nude men represented the species, a purer and truer human existence. The desire to paint in a manner that stresses what is common to all humans can be powerful and noble: to erase differences of race, nationality, even gender is to posit equality. The problem is that this view cannot account for history, which is filled with differences of the most acute kind—in particular, the struggle between the social classes, which manifests itself in daily social life and individual events. Golub came to understand this. As he said later about his painting during that period:

"I worked in a 'universalizing' mode and I wasn't sure I wanted to spend time on details.... Immediate, objective, factual designations were problematic at first, difficult to conceptualize and implement.... I was then very uncomfortable with the gap between my work and the current political circumstances" [3].

His solution was to face the daily events of history head-on. He began to paint the atrocities of war during the Vietnam era and created his most powerful work in the 1980s, depicting the torture and terrorism of armies and death squads from Zimbabwe to El Salvador. He examined aesthetically the psychology of both the sadist and his victim, of the oppressed and the oppressor (these notably in his series of portraits of men in power).

Golub wanted his art to be an active factor in society: "The kind of thing which is emblazoned in a big way on the walls of a culture. Take, for example, 'Interrogations'—a painting that is 10 by 14 feet. Perhaps that's not public art in the conventional sense as torture scenes are usually hidden from view and are not ordinarily celebrated on public walls. At the same time it is an ordinary fact that in many countries torture is a day-to-day reality, people are yanked off the streets, jailed, and tortured. In that sense, to put out an Interrogation is to make a public statement." [4]

But a further problem was raised. How is the painter to remain attached to a belief in the human essence and social progress in the midst of massacre, torture and barbarity?

Golub's solution to this was formal; he found in the faces and body language of his subjects their common fear and unease. He "distressed" the paint on his canvases with knives. But the expressiveness of his human forms cannot counter the fact that Golub's work during and after the 1980s seems hopeless and pessimistic.

A number of critics today have made a virtue of this. Grace Glueck in the *New York Times* called him a witness "to the inhumanity of the human condition" and "to the evil workings of the world."

Adrian Searle in his obituary in the *Guardian*, agreeing with Golub's basic perspective, says that the painter "saw little difference between the oppressors and the oppressed: they were all, equally, victims. He painted how coercion worked. Certain images might now remind us of the trophy photographs which have come out of Abu Ghraib jail. Golub knew that some things never change, that suffering is perpetual."

Of course this view tops Golub's pessimism: it is distinctly (and cheaply) despairing. Both Golub's initial stance and Searle's response reflect an impressionistic view of history that isolates the depravity and cruelty of humans to each other from a larger historical context.

The productive forces, including technology and culture, provide the potential basis for a harmonious human existence. Existing social relations stand in the way. In the ruling elite's defense of these outmoded social relationships lies the source of organized violence and cruelty. As Trotsky noted, "The bourgeoisie does not want to die. It has transformed all the energy inherited by it from the past into a violent convulsion of reaction. This is precisely the period in which we are living." If conditions are made odious enough, or if a progressive outlet to society's crisis is blocked, human beings will turn on each other. That's not an indictment of humankind, but the condition in which it finds itself.

These truths are not obvious at every historical moment, not to Golub and not to many painters radicalized by the events in Vietnam. Golub became active in a period when the antiwar movement was dominated by middle-class protest politics. He was influenced by circles in which a thoroughgoing appraisal of the historical circumstances of the Vietnam War and its aftermath was absent.

Golub's deep-going concern for oppressed human beings, and his ability to discover new emotions and concepts in the circumstances he painted (the blank eyes and animal mouths of his torturers, for example) were compromised by a non-historical view of social conflict.

It was often the case that his most powerful work hearkened back to the Greek myths that had moved him so much in the mid-sixties. His "Sphinx" series of 1988 is particularly valuable.

The past two decades, with their heavy dose of social reaction and stagnation—Reaganism, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent triumphalism, the decay of the traditional

labor movement—proved difficult for Golub, and not only for him. His work tended to become chaotic and confused. He, and artists in general, needed to understand that a quarter-century of social retrogression—during which time, in any event, crucial changes in economic life took place that would prepare the basis for a new revolutionary upsurge—had not compromised the general progressive swing of human development. The victims of his paintings were bound to reassert themselves, on a new and higher basis.

Golub's work remains essential for all those who are coming into struggle against the status quo. The sense that art is an active participant in history, a molder of feeling and thought, a revealer of the world, was never absent from his work. As he said to a class of graduating art students:

"Without the visual arts, without Vorticism, Suprematism, Dada, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-Expressionism, etc. etc. etc., the modern world would be immeasurably impoverished. The visual arts give us our look, the look of the modern world, and they are crucial in helping to analyze and define whatever it is we are experiencing!... Artists manage extraordinary balancing acts, not merely of survival or brinkmanship, but of analysis and raw nerve." [5]

See: <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa534.htm> for examples of Golub's work

#### Notes:

[1] News Release, Brooklyn Museum of Art, November 2000. <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa534.htm>

[2] October 19, 1992, interview with David Procuniar. *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 1995.

<http://www.procuniarworkshop.com/home/index/article/19.htm>

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[3] *ibid.*

[4] *ibid.*

[5] MFA degree catalogue, Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1986.

<http://www.procuniarworkshop.com/home/index/article/40.htm>

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