

## "LEON GOLUB: PAINTINGS, 1950-2000"

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART

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Cruelly truncated in its Brooklyn hanging after its inaugural run at the sprawling Irish Museum of Modern Art, this exhibition was hardly a retrospective—but I'll forgive it that for starting things off with a fine mess. Spat out roughly midway along the triumphant march that led from Jasper Johns's 1954-55 *Flag* to Barbara Kruger's 1991 version emblazoned on the exterior of the Mary Boone Gallery in New York, Golub's *Napalm Flag*, 1970, desecrates à la Dubuffet. If the trajectory traced from Johns to Kruger transformed the avant-garde's target from individual myth to the mass media, one realizes that this has been Golub's trajectory too. *Napalm Flag* marks the turning point. The flag was summarily painted and then ripped apart. Its fragments are sutured back together, but clumsily, the seam's mismatch all too evident. And then the surface is attacked with broad stains of red, excrescences of muddy brown and asphalt black, congealing there like the puke and rot of the body. *Napalm Flag* is a symbol of unity given over to the condition of the fragment. Despite its stubborn anchoring in the Vietnam War, the work revels in all the interference to communication that painting can muster. If that's not the lesson you expect from Golub, you really should look again.

"Badly painted," William Rubin once fumed, faced with Golub's work. I have no desire to disagree with him. Indeed, perhaps painting can only be this bad in bad times, and at moments it has seemed that Golub needs bad times to thrive. As the exhibition proved, the Vietnam years were good to Golub (the moment of his "Gigantomachy," "Napalm," and "Vietnam" series). Early Reagan, fantastic (the "Mercenaries" and "Interrogations"). Carter and Clinton, now that's a more complex matter.

In the mid-'70s, in fact, Golub almost gave up on painting. Instead he gave up only his monumental scale and churned out more than one hundred small portraits of political leaders of all stripes. These haggard sketches give the lie both to the

acquiescence of Warhol's celebrity portraits and to what Benjamin Buchloh called the "figures of authority" implicit in the return to painting; Golub's series calls out instead for a comparison with Richter's *48 Portraits*, 1972. For if these are crisis pictures, the crisis seems to be Golub's sudden inability to repress the fact that his painterly practice would come to be based on photography, on the types of momentary images—a wanton pucker here, an involuntary sneer there—that one can seize from the media and turn to other uses. And yet a photographic principle, however subterranean, has operated at the basis of Golub's project from its earliest moments. It is there in the strange effect of doubling that structures a painting such as *Colossal Heads I*, 1959, two ghostly faces seemingly formed by folding the wet canvas in two. This structure would be echoed later in compositions organized around the stark juxtaposition of twinned figures, like the soldiers gazing at each other across the void of *Mercenaries III*, 1980. And of course such later paintings are formed through a complex pro-

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cess of tracing and recombining a vast archive of media images.

Today, the awkwardness of the "Mercenaries" and "Interrogations" series evokes the illusionism of digital photography more than anything else. I think of this when gazing at all the images of the Sphinx painted by Golub over the years, a motif that seems to signal nothing else but a melancholic acknowledgment of the hybridity of his practice, in terms of both his support (unframed, gravity-stricken canvas that settles halfway between the frayed antiquity of tapestries and the slick modernity of the cinema screen) and his painterly technique (an affair of meat cleavers and solvents as well as brushes, leaving the surface prey as much to the relief effects of sculpture as to the depthless tracing of the photograph).

The untimeliness of Golub's hybrid combinations accounts for the great success of his work of the early '80s. In the "Interrogations" series, for example, all the resources of painting foreclosed by modernism erupt in images of the repressed



Top: Leon Golub, *The Blue Tattoo*, 1998, acrylic on linen, 7' 4" x 11' 1 1/2".  
Bottom: Leon Golub, *Interrogation II*, 1981, acrylic on linen, 10' x 14'.

underbelly of American imperial power; here a formal repression opens up the potential to image that which cannot be imaged. And after the brightly colored, Ben Shahn-inspired failures of Golub's painting in the late '80s, it is this untimeliness that has programmed the chilling gloom of his magnificent recent work. Color saturation has given way to black, dry scumbles spread like dust from end to end of each painting. In a nod to the work of his wife, Nancy Spero, language erupts. "GETTING OLD SUCKS!" and "GUARANTEED COLLECTOR-FRIENDLY," the paintings snicker. There is laughter here, in the tradition of *humour noir* stretching from Picabia to Pettibon. The compositions have become atomized, the recombinations obvious. "TRANSMISSION GARBLED," Golub finally admits.

"I am a force of the past," Pier Paolo Pasolini was fond of saying, while modernizing poetry in the realm of cinema. Golub occupies a similar position now. He refuses to relinquish whole traditions

of imagemaking trampled by postwar American culture—WPA projects, mural art, documentary investigations. He insists, even in the face of his own inability to pull it off, that painting can continue such traditions by assimilating itself to the very phenomena that have destroyed and fragmented its worldview (photography, television, and now the morass of the digital). Golub's master in the end, it seems, is neither Dubuffet nor Picabia, but another great assimilator, Picasso—the Picasso of *Guernica* (a model of painting's public function), but also the Picasso of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (a painting as trauma). Think of all the Golub images that freeze traditional history painting into a single iconic scene of figures staring directly out at their viewers. Ultimately, the model of trauma may be Golub's model, if he has one—for as Freud famously understood it, a trauma always arrives too early, or too late. □

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