

A Giant Among Men

Monumental. Timeless. Universal. Rarely do these words conjure up the work of contemporary painters. Most often they belong to another time and place in the history of art—the sculptors of ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, or the Renaissance masters they inspired.

One current exception is painter Leon Golub, who for the past 50 years has been creating large-scale canvases on the themes of war, power, aggression, and man's inhumanity to man—works that can easily be described as monumental, timeless, and universal, though they express the darker side of our nature. Thirty-five pieces are now on view at the **Brooklyn Museum of Art** in **Leon Golub: Paintings, 1950-2000**, May 18-August 19.

Educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago under the G.I. Bill, Golub quickly hooked up with a group of artists who shared his belief that, if art is to be relevant, it should address actual events. From these beginnings with the so-called Monster Roster, Golub went on to create paintings of searing power around the nation's hot-button issues. Best-known are his gargantuan paintings on the conflicts in Vietnam and El Salvador—sparse compositions that are taut as a spring and loaded with the suggestion of imminent violence. Though their precise actions are sometimes ambiguous, as in *Mercenaries IV* (1980), the brutish and cavalier character of these armed men is unmistakable.

In addition to Golub's major large-scale works, the retrospective includes a series of 20 portraits painted in 1976, depicting key players on the world's stage, from Alabama governor George Wallace to Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, from Richard Nixon to Nelson Rockefeller. Also of interest are Golub's most recent paintings, which continue to touch on the arrogance of power. One canvas depicts the mythical Prometheus—who stole fire from the gods—as a guilty Titan, still astonished by his fall and punishment. "F**k, I didn't expect this," he says in a caption scrawled nearby. But then, as world history proves, few titans do.

Brooklyn Museum of Art



Leon Golub, *Mercenaries IV*, 1980