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A Hostile Witness to the Inhumanity of the Human Condition



Political images: Left, a large detail from a 1980 work by Leon Golub, "Mercenaries IV" (1980). Right, his "Mission Civilisatrice," from 1996. Both are in "Leon Golub: Paintings, 1950-2000," an exhibition now at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.



Brooklyn Museum of Art

By GRACE GLUECK

No one has ever accused Leon Golub of painting pretty — or, for that matter, painting pretty well. But for him such niceties are hardly an issue. Substituting social awareness for the artier mainstream approaches of the last half-century, he has produced raw, awkward figurative works whose blunt, brute shapes with eroded surfaces serve to further his basic theme, man's inhumanity to man.

Now 79, he is best known for paintings done in the 1970's and 80's: huge, engulfing canvases of Vietnam war scenes, riots, interrogations, death squads, racial face-offs and other grim tableaux in which power confronts the powerless. Men (they are mostly men; women play a minor role in Mr. Golub's art) shoot, club, beat, taunt, torture, kill, suffer and die in vivid accounts that make up in jarring action what they lack in painterly finesse.

Mr. Golub was once a limner of monumental but anonymous figures — solitary or engaged in existential struggles — which had a certain success. He turned to the specificity of the Vietnam War after a six-year

"Leon Golub: Paintings, 1950-2000" remains at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, (718) 638-5000, through Aug. 19.

stay in Paris, from 1959 to 1964. He had sought in Europe a more receptive climate for figurative painting than did the American art scene, which was at that time dominated by Abstract Expressionism and Pop.

An antiwar activist with his wife, the painter Nancy Spero, he realized that his work was too loftily detached from real events. And so he began to put his figures in uniform and identify the victims as Vietnamese. "I was attempting a kind of history painting," he has said, "and the paintings now seemed infinitely more relevant to war, aggression, violence, the clash of cultures."

These Vietnamese subjects and other works from the artist's more than 50-year career are on view in "Leon Golub: Paintings, 1950-2000," a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The show goes back to his early days in Chicago, where in 1950 — after Army service as a cartographer — he earned an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and first exhibited his work in a local gallery. Jon Bird, professor of art and critical theory at Middlesex University in England, organized this show for the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, where it opened last July.

The set piece is the enormous "Vietnam II" (1973). Mr. Golub's largest painting, whose cinematic-scale canvas, 40 feet wide, has pieces torn out of the bottom to enhance the heat-of-war effect. Two groups of fig-

ures are shown; a trio of armed soldiers, accompanied by a tank, point their guns across a wide expanse of raw space, toward a scraggly group of terrified Vietnamese, led by a young man screaming.

The painting, one of his more fluent, less static compositions, is the most effective of a trilogy of huge canvases devoted to the Vietnam War (and the only one shown here). As a graphic rendering of might asserting its rights over weakness, it delivers its message with impact.

Unlike some of Mr. Golub's other endeavors, "Vietnam II" has no historical or artistic source. (Goya, for instance, has sometimes served him as an inspiration.) The accurately detailed figures were composed from a vast library of body imagery he assembled, which ranges from ancient classical sculpture to old master paintings to clips from current newspapers and magazines.

More grisly is the artist's four-painting "Interrogation" series of the 1980's, presumably commenting on American military actions in Central America and representing a shift to more underground methods of combat.

With Titian's wrenching 16th-century painting "The Flying of Marsyas" as a partial inspiration, "Interrogation I" (1981) shows two uniformed men, in shiny brown boots, confronting a nude body suspended upside down like a side of meat. One man approaches the victim with a

stick; the other gestures complicity. But the two men seem static, arrested in motion, their facial expressions and body language un-Titianly rigid and cartoonish.

In "Interrogation III" (1980-81), the victim is a woman, mauled with seeming sexual intent by two clothed men, as she sits nude, handcuffed, legs wide open, on a mat. She is the only female victim depicted in the "Interrogation" cycle, and she inevitably comes off as a general symbol of male oppression as well as a specific object of terrorism in a particular situation.

Mr. Golub continues the theme of macho menacing in "Mercenaries," a series begun in 1979 that deals with the sinister subject of freelance soldiers and their have-gun-will-travel combat readiness. In "Mercenaries IV" (1980), a group of black and white soldiers stand around waiting for action. But there is an underlying menace in the taunting posture of a white soldier toward the blacks, which shows where the power lies.

Turning to a more domestic scene, Mr. Golub painted a "Riot" series in the mid-1980's, exemplified here by "Riot IV" (1985), in which two men drag a body by its feet through an abstractly rendered urban background. The body's anonymity heightens the brutality of the action, which the two men, an uneasy conspiracy of black and white, also compound by the grim wariness with which they go about their business.

The beginnings of his mature work can be discerned in Mr. Golub's early endeavors, heroic-size figures influenced by ancient art and classical sculpture as well as the "outsider" paintings of Jean Dubuffet and the tribal icons of precolonial cultures. "Fallen Warrior (Burnt Man)" (1960), a hulking, faceless seated nude derived from the Great Altar of Zeus in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, is one of a series of brutalized male figures he did at this time. It presumably refers to the Holocaust as well as to the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The series evolved to mural-size paintings of fighting male nudes, represented here by the huge canvas "Gigantomachy II" (1966). A view of history as a panorama of unending, unresolvable conflict, the murals led to "Napalm I" (1969), depicting a pair of flayed men, one gesturing in defiance, the other in agony.

This painful work marks the decisive shift in his art from generalized conflict to a specific event, the United States' use of incendiary bombs in Vietnam. The nightmare of its subject is intensified by the use of red oxide paint to denote the burning napalm; it is then scraped off the

canvas with a meat cleaver, a much-used Golub technique, to give the surface and the skin of the men a raw, abraded look.

By the early 1970's, Mr. Golub had resolved to take up the subject of Vietnam and other compelling events in the role of committed witness. And he was off and running. But for most of his career his work, with its emphasis on figuration and social-political concerns, was dismissed by followers of the major movements — Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual art. Only in the mid-1980's, when younger artists began to return to the figure and to an interest in political subject matter, did he again find recognition.

In recent years, as age encroaches, he has dwelt with wit more on philosophical themes, like mortality and man's fate. In paintings like "Mission Civilisatrice" (1996), in which a dog's head lies panting on a skull, he refers to the frailty of the individual and the inevitable end. However one may feel about the infelicities of Mr. Golub's style, he has steadfastly stuck to his role as witness to the evil workings of the world.