

ART

Reviews

Action painting

Leon Golub's unflinching canvases show one artist's brush with politics

By Howard Halle

The work of Leon Golub is the sort you don't see much of anymore, which is to say that it is unabashedly heroic, both in scale and ambition. But then Golub, at age 80, is a bona fide member of the art world's equivalent to the Greatest Generation, a group for whom ideas mattered, as did taking a stand, no matter how deleterious to one's success. Indeed, Golub, whose paintings combine figurative expressionism with left-wing polemics, has spent a good portion of his professional life on the art world's fringes. Compare that to the instant success of boomer Julian Schnabel, for instance, whose postmodern thumb sucking owes a great deal to Golub's example, or better yet, to the career of Gen Xer Rob Pruitt, whose recent "comeback" was engineered with the help of a shrewd, if passive-aggressive, campaign of groveling.

As this compelling though abbreviated survey at the Brooklyn Museum of Art attests, there is nothing passive about Golub's work; as for aggressiveness, this artist comes loaded for bear. Golub has been known to take a meat cleaver to his canvases, scraping down surfaces until they are as faded as ancient tomb walls. This eroded grandeur only accentuates the casual cruelties—executions, tortures, etc.—perpetrated by the various grunts, Central American death-squad members and sub-Saharan mercenaries that populate his work. If this violent mix of imagery and technique suggests that Golub himself is somewhat fascinated by the darker behavior of his gender, well, he has never been shy about the tough-guy aspect of his work (notwithstanding a long and fruitful marriage to fellow artist and feminist icon Nancy Spero). He is simply describing what Timothy

McVeigh more or less said: that making a statement can cause collateral damage, and in Golub's mind, governments and their agents make the biggest statements of all.

Golub's subject is power—how it is abused, mostly, but also how it emanates from the objects he hangs on the wall. For these are no ordinary paintings: They are open wounds that refuse to heal, even



Leon Golub, *Riot IV*, 1985.

though their specific referents (Vietnam, El Salvador) have faded into history. Although it would be tempting to compare Golub's work to Goya's, that's not quite right. Goya engaged in a form of reportage, whereas Golub sees painting as a theater of engagement—an approach that isn't so different from Pollock's. Granted, Golub doesn't distill psychologized self-portraits the way Pollock did with action-painting, but his art is still about taking action. And in this sense, all action, like all politics, is local.

Golub was born in Chicago, a city with a great tradition of imagism, and one need only look at the work of Ivan Albright, with its mounds of putrefying flesh, to see just where his artistic roots

might lie. Like almost every American of his generation, Golub was swept up by Abstract Expressionism, but his propensity for figuration was perhaps too difficult to suppress. He visited Italy in 1956, where he saw the Etruscan murals and Roman reliefs that inspire his compositions to this day. In 1959, he and Spero left the Midwest for an extended sojourn in Paris, thinking it would be a more conducive place for their artmaking. Although the wall tags don't mention it, he must have encountered Dubuffet while over there; the French painter seems such an obvious influence, especially in the way that Golub imparts a flayed texture to pieces like *Colossal Heads I* (1959).

Golub and Spero returned to the United States in 1964, just as the country descended into the quagmire of Vietnam. Between 1972 and 1974, he produced three works, *Vietnam I*, *Vietnam II* and *Vietnam III*, that are certifiable masterpieces. In each, we see American

era, produced some pretty shallow art. Nonetheless, those years appeared to have galvanized Golub. The mayhem in the work exploded, and so did the color; the effect was as if Matisse had been invited to record the goings-on at Gestapo headquarters. In *Riot IV* (1985), for example, the evident glee of the street thugs dragging a body through the gutter is reflected by the bright teals and yellows of their shirts and pants. In *Mercenaries III* (1980), the sea of scarlet dividing two soldiers (one black, the other white) as they warily eye each other is worthy of the *Red Studio*. Although a marked strain of homoeroticism permeates Golub's oeuvre, it really becomes pronounced during this time. He seems to be suggesting that sadism and friendship go hand in hand, that all the world's miseries can be laid in part to the ups and downs of warrior-bond relationships—a geopolitical twist, in effect, on the old adage "love hurts."

With the end of the Cold War, Golub began making more personal, allegorical paintings, a move into classicism wholly consistent with the friezelike quality of his art. Unfortunately, these works, which express the artist's fears for his own mortality with his usual brutal candor, are not well represented here. More interesting are the portrait heads of world figures—Castro, Rockefeller, Mao, Franco—that Golub did during the transition between his Vietnam series and his work of the '80s. Although some are pictured alive and others lying in state, these men are all, essentially, dead meat. They reminded me, oddly, of Chardin's butchered hares—and of something Schjeldahl, again, wrote about them. If memory serves, he wondered whether Chardin's still lifes imply that annihilation figures somehow into the calculus of making art. In the Western tradition, I think it does, and Golub might agree. He has said that these subjects are "not...good guys, not...bad guys, but men [with] political power in their hands." Of course, by definition, a political leader is someone who has power in his hands and isn't afraid to use it, regardless of the collateral damage involved. And the same could be said of an artist.

"Leon Golub: Paintings 1950-2000" is on view at the Brooklyn Museum of Art through August 19 (see Museums).