

Leon Golub show fetes a Chicago stalwart

Exhibit reveals ways local artist can still startle

By Alan G. Artner
Tribune art critic

The current celebration going on around town on behalf of Leon Golub is mostly retrospective in nature, honoring a long and powerful career of one of Chicago's best-loved native sons.

However, an exhibition of Golub's recent paintings at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery indicates the artist still is communicating his humanism in fresh ways that have a capacity to startle, which is saying a lot for a painter who's past 80.

The show includes two mural-size canvases that hang freely, like tapestries. This monumental, "public" form of utterance has served Golub well for decades, in terms of both the scale of his images and the tough, abraded way he has built them up.

Now they have fragments of text—one from the poetry of W.H. Auden—that give added sharpness to such images as dogs, a human skull, pierced heart and predatory eagle. The violent acts Golub depicts elsewhere in the exhibition are absent here, yet the juxtaposition of images and text cannot help but be taken as a laconic State of the Union address that proves deeply unsettling.

In much smaller oil stick-and-ink drawings and acrylic paintings Golub fleshes out, as it were, his vision of 21st Century society. These pictures have the immediacy of snapshots, and often are horrific in content, though the softness of Golub's painting also gives them seductiveness.

Here, rapidity of process combined with small size suggests



Leon Golub's "Time's Up" depicts a grim world that speaks to the political here and now.

the urgency of protest posters and broadsides. One can easily imagine them making an appeal in the street to passersby. This makes the small pieces vibrate with a strong feeling of the here and now, in a sense issuing a colloquial call to action instead of speaking in the symbolic poetry of the murals.

Golub's palette is, typically, somber throughout. The drawings are mostly in one color and black and white, thereby giving the suggestion of leaflets and pages ripped from a newspaper or weekly magazine photo essay.

For all the bleakness of their content, one seldom gets an impression of misanthropy. But I wonder how viewers coming to Golub for the first time will see his smaller pieces. It's nice to think that even those unfamiliar with his legacy will immediately feel the compassion he's been known for, realizing that we need it now more than ever.

At 118 N. Peoria St., through March 1. 312-455-1990.

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Artner, Alan G. "Leon Golub show fetes a Chicago stalwart." *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 2003.