

A version of this review appeared in print on May 14, 2010, on page C25 of the New York edition.

Art in Review

Leon Golub: 'Live & Die Like a Lion?'

By KAREN ROSENBERG



Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York

An unfinished work, *Untitled*, 2001, from "Live & Die Like a Lion?," featuring Leon Golub's late drawings, through July 23.

At first glance Leon Golub's late drawings seem to reinforce the various clichés about art made close to life's end. Death and sex are the big themes here, writ small in 8-by-10-inch images of skeletons and pornographic nudes.

This impression is complicated, though, by the fact that Golub, who died in 2004, had a whole career's worth of raw and existential art. His abraded paintings on unstretched and unprimed linen showed the figure in physically and morally compromising situations. In this sense the 50-some works at the Drawing Center, made from 1999 to 2004 with oil stick, acrylic and ink on vellum, don't amount to a "late period."

Mr. Golub seems to be grappling with the whole idea of late art. The hand-lettered texts on his drawings deflect mortality, and maturity, with a blend of humor, defiance and absurdism.

In “Pseudo Blue Period,” a drawing of a splay-legged nude, Golub takes a shot at Picasso. And in “Gunman Caught in Red Abstraction! Situation Could Be Serious!,” Golub seems to turn a cynical eye on his own earlier work, particularly the large and overtly political Vietnam-era canvases.

His relationship to feminism was informed by the art of his wife, Nancy Spero, and is more complex than some of the more graphic nudes here would initially suggest. In a few works, including “Alarmed Dog Encountering Pink!” and “Post-Feminist Bimbo,” he reminds us that feminism can have a place in the work of male artists.

Setting a less strident tone are several sensitive renderings of animals — dogs and, especially, big cats. As is usual in Golub’s art, they come off looking more dignified than humans.

A glimpse of his source material — mostly clippings from sports, fashion and pornography magazines, scattered around a vitrine — isn’t particularly revealing. It’s more interesting to see a group of unfinished drawings, backgrounds awaiting figures, that show him experimenting with bright color and abstraction (both anathema to his earlier work). Golub will still be remembered for his paintings, but these snarling and self-deprecating drawings are both late and timely.

*The Drawing Center*

*35 Wooster Street, SoHo*

*Through July 23*