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The Last Roar of Leon Golub

by Stephen Maine



Leon Golub, *Aging Golden Sphinx*, 2002. Oil stick and ink on vellum. 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York © Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by Cathy Carver

A piquant pleasure of gallery-going is an encounter with unfamiliar and challenging work by an artist whom you thought you "knew:" had dealt with, figured out, mentally filed away. "Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?" on view at The Drawing Center through July 23, provides exactly that order of pleasure. The exhibition includes fifty drawings, primarily in ink and oil stick on 8 by 10 inch sheets of bristol or vellum, from the artist's last six years. It is an object lesson in late, great stylistic surprises.

At the height of his visibility, Golub (1922-2004) painted on a grand and public scale in global if didactic terms. Among art-world observers in the 1980's, Golub

might have been known as "the *Interrogations* guy" for his depictions of brutal, blasé torturers and their hooded and helpless victims. The work touched a nerve at the time of the Iran-Contra affair and the American public's mushrooming awareness of our country's "dirty little wars." Closely related canvases featured similarly monstrous groups of leering mercenaries and screeching white trash. Golub's politics of human rights is unassailable but, unlike the more open-ended of that decade's Neo-Expressionism (e.g., Francesco Clemente's kitchen-sink, fetishistic symbolism) his polemics stipulate a narrow path of approach. He illustrated sources of outrage without illuminating their psychic blood and guts.

Later, Golub's profile waned. His work was increasingly weird and elliptical. In the measured words of Thomas McEvelley's April 2002 *Art in America* feature, the canvases of the 1990's "consistently show less resistance to the sensual aspects of the painterly tradition." Oh, and he started drawing like a sonovabitch.

No Escape Now (2002) reprises the theme of the torture victim, here tethered to a post and slumped forward, unconscious or left for dead. Scratchy ink and oil stick suggest stressed, exhausted musculature. In *Blue Movie* and *Blue Movie II* (both 2004), passionless couples strenuously copulate. Sex is more fun in *Satyr Love II* (2004), in which a male of that species lifts his hirsute partner's shapely hoof and guides himself into her. Satyrs abound in Golub's late oeuvre, as do licentious women, guys with oxymoronic tattoos ("think HATE"), hyperventilating lions, and inscrutably gesticulating skeletons. Often, image vies with lettering for primacy; "FUCK DEATH," screams a skull in *FUCK DEATH* (1999).

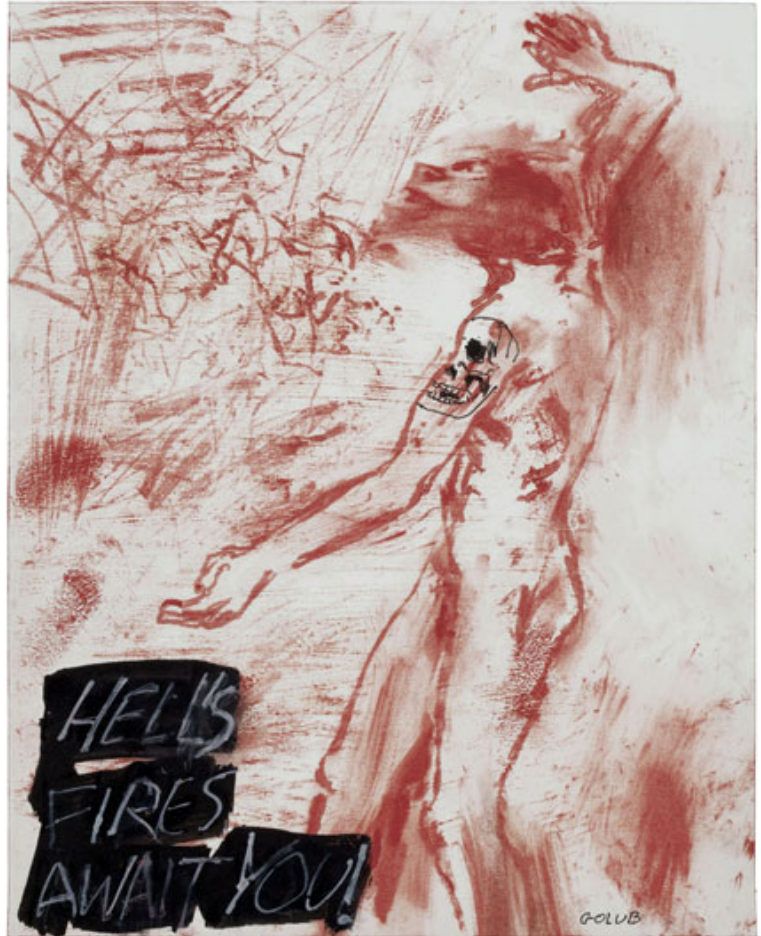
Taunting the viewer, the skeezy couple in *Bunnie & Quayde* (2003) pull at their underwear and fondle a gun. The work is based on a newspaper photograph on display in a vitrine among other source material culled from fashion magazines, straight porn, and the sports pages. Drawing as ever from his pool of print-media images, Golub loosened his grip on message, on meaning, and allowed it to become diffuse. In the catalogue accompanying this exhibition, Curator Brett

Littman quotes the artist: "I want to throw drawings in all directions. That's my ultimate intent: to have them be political, to have them be erotic, to have them be neurotic, to have them be just rotten."

That rottenness is everywhere, and economically expressed. Each drawing is two or three colors, rarely more, and looks like it took maybe ten minutes to do. Sure, into his eighth decade Golub was getting tired. But what the aging artist might have lacked in physical stamina he made up for in pictorial smarts. The diminutive scale and material modesty of these droll, sour little icons of discontent contribute mightily to their punch. Funny and morbid, they track the efforts of an old man, a lion of our tribe, to deal with his own extinction. Dreamlike and inward-looking, they might be confessional in tone if they were not so ferocious.

A second vitrine houses a number of "unfinished drawings," inchoate smears or stains of color that divulge the works' procedural origins in abstraction. Golub valued image above form, having denounced Abstract Expressionism in its heyday, so it is amusing to think of him relishing the triumph of his iconography quite literally "over" the abstract. In fact, the distinction between figure and ground, ever clear in his epic canvases, is artfully scrambled in most of these late works. When it is not, the artist's title sounds the alarm, as in a 2002 work depicting a steely-eyed, grinning contractor kicking back among blood-colored, Hans Hofmannesque rectangles, titled GUNMAN CAUGHT IN RED ABSTRACTION! SITUATION COULD BE SERIOUS!

The most haunting of these images are not the heartless couples, the skulls or lions, not even the abandoned corpses, but Golub's dogs. They roam this exhibition, pacing its perimeter, snarling at the sky, dumbly staring down the viewer. *Bones* (2002) is the best of these wickedly strange postcards from the edge. A skulking mutt approaches a crumpled human skeleton, sniffing for meat. The joke's on him: nothing doing! It's a desiccated archeological dig, no juicy corpse. After decades confronting the void of the empty canvas, Golub enlists man's best friend to help him confront the void of his own bodily demise. The possibly feral dog that lopes across *A Sentimental Story* (2003) looks a bit beaten down. He shoots the viewer a baleful glance, and you just know that this lunatic hound will soon find something to howl about.



Leon Golub, *Hell's Fires Await You!*, 2003. Oil stick, acrylic and ink on Bristol, 10 x 8 inches. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York © Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by Cathy Carver

Leon Golub: *Live and Die Like a Lion*, at the Drawing Center

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35 Wooster Street, between Grand and Broome
New York City, 212-219-2166

Cover Image: Leon Golub, *Live & Die Like a Lion?*, 2002. Oil stick on Bristol, 8 x 10 inches. Collection of Anthony and Judith Seraphin, Seraphin Gallery Philadelphia © Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by Cathy Carver