

Leon Golub

THE DRAWING CENTER

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An analyst and chronicler of violence, Leon Golub was a great shifter of the content of painting, which he wrenched into a career-long consideration of the ancient endurance of the aggressive impulse and of both the artist's and the ordinary citizen's moral responsibility in the face of it. To meet the brutality of his subject matter, his process was strenuous—he used to joke (or was he joking?) about attacking the canvas with an ax—and the surfaces of his works were scarred and flayed to prove it. In poor health during the last five years of his life (he died in 2004), Golub basically set this physically demanding practice aside to concentrate on drawing, making well over four hundred works, from which the selection here came. In some respects unlike anything I know from his earlier years, these drawings—of skulls and satyrs, victims and aggressors, dogs and lions, and, often, of sex—are also entirely in character, constituting an intimate, small-scale retrospective of his lifelong concerns.

At the same time principled and pragmatic—a rare combination—and both in spades, Golub was sly as a fox and had a wily, amused perspective in conversation, even when talking about his often horrific source material. His sense of humor persists in these late drawings, with their sloganlike inscriptions: *HERE'S TO YOU PAL!* calls a cheery skeleton, legs crossed comfortably, head turned toward and arm waving at the viewer. Other works are more somber, such as *Exhumed* and *Whereabouts Unknown*, both 2002, the former showing a body being pulled from the grave, the latter a bound and gagged figure probably headed for it. Both of these works index the political repressions and cruelties that so often gave Golub his subject matter. Similar drawings from the same year, such as *Impenitent!* and *I Do Not Bend Beneath the Yoke*, may make a more personal reference: It is hard to read their titles without thinking of Golub himself. The dogs and lions have the same effect. Principles of savage energy, they both frighten and endear, and one senses the artist's identification with them.

But then there's Golub's intelligence, and what I just called his slyness. Almost all of the drawings are eight by ten inches, whether horizontal or vertical. As the Princeton professor of literature Eduardo Cadava writes in the catalogue, this is a conventional format for old-fashioned photographs, gelatin silver prints—as if the size were a clue, a pointer, to the works' sources. Golub actually borrowed images throughout his career, looking both to classical art history and to the news media and keeping files of visual clippings to use or consult. The show's organizer, Brett Littman, (the Drawing Center's executive director), smartly included some of these clippings in a vitrine. Golub's language, too, the titles he inscribed in each drawing, while often salty and pungent, has the air of the found and familiar. The drawings, then, are the results of a magpie kind of process, and while the paintings often were as well, the grand scale of those works overpowered their known-ness, or rather kept it in check, set up a tension with it. The drawings, on the other hand—and this is particularly true of the erotic works, whose poses Golub derived from pornography—seem more like a sort of dictionary of gestures, a shuffling of the available cards.

This quality extends to many of the works' backgrounds, candy-colored expressionist sheets of pigment that Golub applied before drawing his figures over them. Recurring art jokes, too—*GUNMAN CAUGHT IN RED ABSTRACTION! SITUATION COULD BE SERIOUS!* reads one text, under a sinister-looking mercenary lounging alone in a Rothko-esque field—contribute to a feeling of claustrophobia. It is as if, late in Golub's life, artmaking for him came down to combining and recombining the units of a given vocabulary, whether that vocabulary was corporal—the range of possible poses the body can strike, in love or war—or aesthetic, the set of things an artist could do with oil or ink. Mordant and morbid, powerful as argument and troubling as message, these drawings strike a fractured, complicated mood.

Leon Golub, *Impenitent!*, 2002, oil stick on board, 10 x 8".



—David Frankel