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{ LEON GOLUB }

LIVE & DIE LIKE A LION

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Story Steve Lopes

Leon Golub (1922-2004) is regarded as one of North America's most influential figurative artists—a unique and sharp-witted visual provocateur of the second half of last century and into the new millennium.

Known for his mural-size paintings on unstretched canvas, Golub dealt with brutal forces of the modern world—issues of political corruption, race, violence, war and the cruel dark seediness of everyday life—with base urges always set at the forefront of his imagery. Golub described his work as a "definition of how power is demonstrated through the body and in human actions". Never an art world darling during his life, he was however highly respected by a dedicated following of fellow artists. In 2004, aged 82, the Chicago-born Golub died in his adopted city of New York, where he had resided from the late 1960s, married to artist and feminist political activist Nancy Spero.

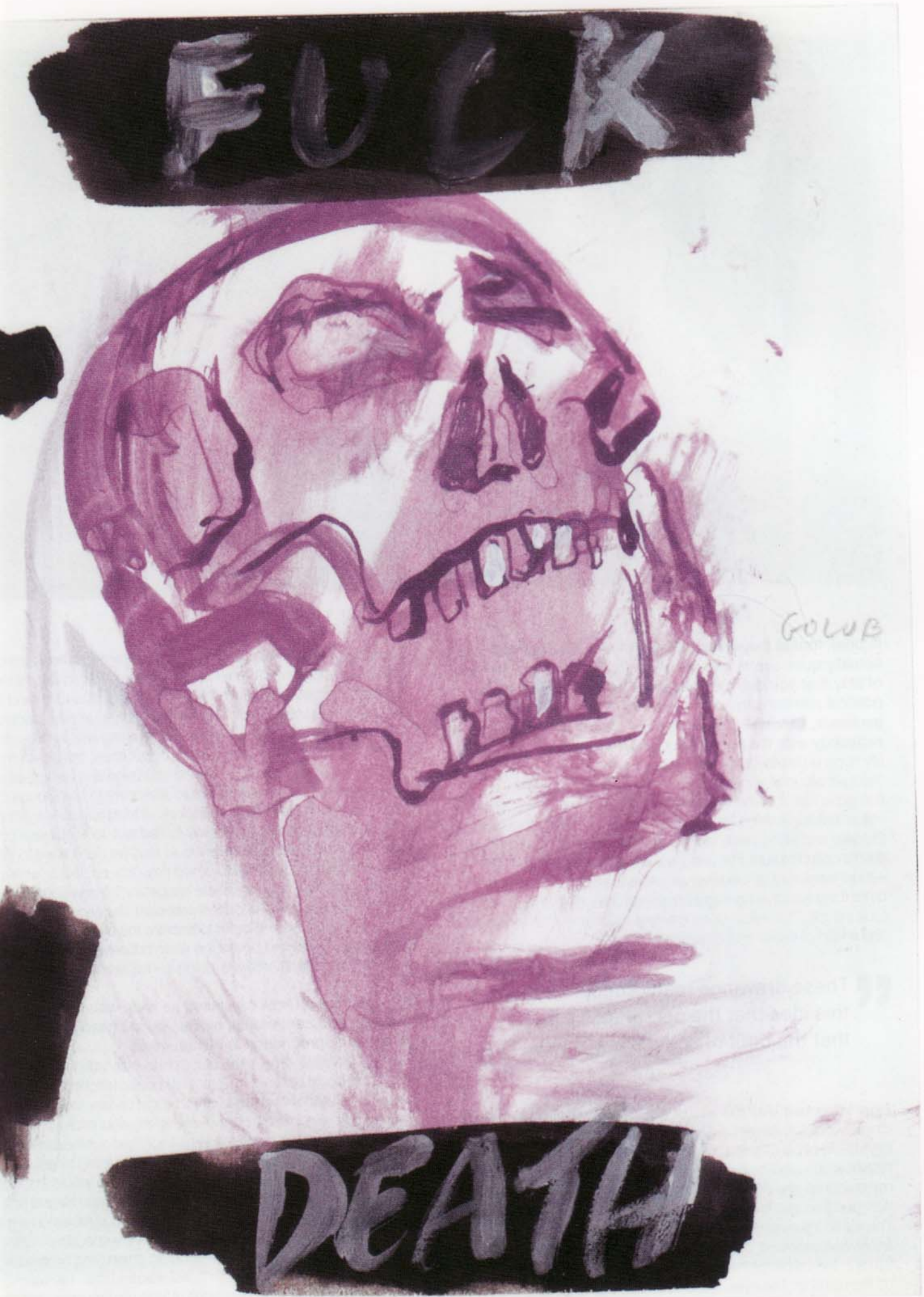
The Drawing Center, New York, is currently hosting a touring exhibition of compelling and hitherto little-known drawings from the final years of Golub's life. Dealing with themes of separation, loss and death, they highlight this important artist's last creative output as he faced his own mortality. ARTIST PROFILE met with Brett Littman, exhibition curator and The Drawing Center's executive director, in New York.

You have said that these series of drawings weren't viewed as important at the time Golub made them, or that they were underrated.

Leon started to make the drawings in 1997, and the story that Nancy Spero told me was that Leon's health was beginning to fail, he was slowing down in his painting practice. He bought a sketchbook to the Museum of Modern Art where Nancy was having a show and when she started installing he started to draw. Now, he was always drawing on paintings and canvas, but he hadn't taken a sketchbook out in many, many, years. I think that probably from then until about 2004 when he was making the drawings there were about three or four exhibitions. The work did not sell well. I think at that point people really wanted a big Leon Golub painting and that is what he had staked his whole career on. I mean, it was a little like Matisse's late work, which wasn't really critically accepted. It was like the ramblings or the musings of someone who's kind of lost their ability to do what they're known for. That's probably why I feel they've been a little under-recognised and definitely undervalued—an area that has not been explored up to this point.

Why did you choose to do the show, how did it come about?

From my position as director of The Drawing Center, I'm always interested in the relationship that artists have with this activity that we call drawing. With Leon, because it was so front and centre in terms of his practice of painting, in the sense that the understructure of the painting was hand-drawn from source material. Golub, is an artist who I really respect—and I wouldn't say that just because of his political beliefs—but he's someone that I always thought had a lot of integrity. The genesis of the show is to both explore the relationship of painting and drawing in Leon's practice and to also look at these late drawings as reflective or problematising the read of Leon's oeuvre. The more I got into this and did more research, the more I felt these things really change the way we look at him as an artist.





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In book format the works look so in-your-face but they are actually quite subtle and draw you in. There's a real sense of play that you don't really get if you see him as this big political painter with huge scale works. These are really generous, beautiful little works that show another side of him especially with the soft quality of vellum.

My hope is that this exhibition opens up areas of art historical dialogue around Leon but I actually hope that the experience someone has is a kind of looking-inward experience. He liked the vellum because of the light. He realised that if he was painting in this way and using these fast brushstrokes that they would have a luminosity. I'm sure that Leon looked at illuminated manuscripts – there were a lot of medieval art references in his archives. The other thing was that he might have liked the way that the vellum took the ink. The vellum does create a much more flowing surface and a kind of easier less resistance.

“ These drawings really condense down this idea that the personal is political, that the limit of politics is our skin. ”

How important was the use of source material to his work?

I think absolutely essential. Golub's a painter who was of his time regardless of his classical inflections and his understanding of historical art—and he had a great understanding of it, maybe more so than any other American painter that I can think of. He was using source material as the little engines for the paintings. There's an interesting relationship in the way that Golub's bodies are always awkward, the way that he would sometimes start the figure in the corner of the painting and the arm would be coming off the painting. The eyes, in particular in *The Mercenaries* or *White*

Squads, I mean, it was all about these interactions. And also power structures—it's almost like a horizon line of power. In Golub's work, the idea of a social matrix and how to use that to understand the dominant power structures comes from looking at newspapers and magazines and pornography and anything else in his sight. He looked at a lot of sports imagery. Barbara Gross, the dealer from Munich, said that when she went to visit Leon and Nancy, often times after having dinner they would walk over to MacDougal Street to the newsstand and they would look at Motorcross Magazine, Hustler, Playboy. Golub would say to Barbara, look at these books, these magazines. And Barbara would say, "we don't want to look at the pornography". And Golub would say, "no, no, this is where we see the body, this is where it's all happening". In the source material for this show we found a lot of skateboard stuff, soccer players, because I think Leon, in order to capture the body in motion and particularly in awkward poses, he wasn't drawing from life and he wasn't going to have a model doing it—he needed to see it.

You can see just how organised he was, with files of images, clippings and centrefolds, he was quite ahead of his time in an age of appropriation in the art world.

Very much ahead of his time. Bacon also was working in a similar way. Leon could have easily kept millions of sketchbooks and he could have been sketching all the time but he wanted to use the material that was informing his own thinking and influencing his consciousness—the mass media. If Leon had survived and was still alive now ... I mean the internet, he was starting to get involved and loved it, he could just pull images all day. He would just type in "man with arm behind back" and get fifty images. He would just print them out, have someone Xerox them and put them in a folder. So, in terms of his lexicon, the folders are very specific. It might say "man with right arm behind his back", "man lying on ground", "torture victims", "lions running", "lions standing still". He was building an encyclopedia of images, it was very much a database.



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Are you hoping through this show of late drawings and its focus on process that people will view his work differently?

If you know Leon's paintings this exhibition allows you to have a very personal and more intimate experience with Leon's art making. What I want people to take away from this is that the work is celebratory, there's nothing maudlin about it. This is a guy who knows his time is limited but his response is to hold up a middle finger and go, 'fuck that!' That's great, and that's the kind of energy that was Leon Golub. Hopefully people will walk out taking that bristling kinetic energy that is in these drawings and really apply it to their own lives.

On a political level, on a personal level, on an art historical level I hope that people will look at these, be surprised by the subject matter, by the scale, by the painterly qualities of them, and then to really try to link these back up because there is a huge network of interrelationships between even his earliest drawings from the late 1940s.

You talk about how political he was but the works are also very human. I wanted to talk about the humour that comes across. Did that come with facing his own mortality?

Leon talked a lot about the idea of throwing a monkey wrench into the work. He talked a lot about the idea of humour and why humour is important, and why with his work there was a certain perceived heaviness. But even in the heavy works, and even in the 'Mercenary' works, there's a guy grabbing his crotch, another guy grabbing his crotch and they're ridiculous. Even if they're scary they're silly, and in a way so self-deprecating that they cancel each other out. There's one where there's a prostitute and a mercenary and you can't really tell if the prostitute is a man or a woman and maybe there's going to be a surprise. I think that Leon was always interested in the idea of levity—laughter as an exhale.

One of the things that's really important also is that 95 percent of them: one figure, one image. Golub very rarely ever did that in the paintings. Usually it was either multiple bodies or a lion and a person and a dog. These really condense down this idea that the personal is political and that the limit of politics is our skin. In a way what we're left with is individual, that's where everything happens. These drawings are pretty bereft in that people aren't looking at each other, they're not interacting, except for the really erotic ones where there are couples, this is an individualistic world. And that's something that with these drawings it's very important to make the distinction—the social matrix totally disappears.

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He had an intelligent use of text and language in his imagery. Has that contributed to the continued currency of his art?

In the 90s the graffiti and the kind of fragmentation of the text really starts to play a much more important role. In the late drawings, they have handwritten titles. He was living in downtown New York, looking at street art obviously, he saw the graffiti, he saw the use of propaganda—he probably thought about that. Leon is actually a very textual artist. He's a great reader and he's interested in so many different things that even though his world was a visual world, I think he was deeply influenced by literature. In the studio there were bookcases, and he and Nancy were major readers.

How is his legacy regarded in the US? For an international audience who may not be as familiar with him, how is he regarded here in New York?



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There are three levels: in New York he's a hero, in Chicago he's a hero but more within a kind of outsider world. Leon and Nancy left Chicago to go to Europe and during the kind of heady days of Abstract Expressionism and the real New York scene, they weren't present. They came back in the 60s and they were making figurative work and political work at a time when it wasn't in style. From the artist community he's a real artist's artist, as we say. Still there's a sense of him as being an aggressive male dealing with the tough stuff—that there's no light side or no feminine side to him. I would make the argument that by just being married to Nancy Spero, Leon was probably a great feminist. He was a feminist, no question, and was someone who was very concerned with the rights and the position of women. Surely there were women who were being beaten or tortured, as there were men—I think he was showing the world as it stands. Outside of New York and Chicago, Leon's reputation is not as solid. I actually believe that there's a lot more to investigate in his work since his death. In Europe and the Netherlands where the show is going to go, *this will be pretty eye-opening.*

How important was scale? There is a marked difference between these small works and those from earlier periods in his painting career.

Scale is definitely an issue related to his health and related to his ability to make the large paintings, which he was no longer able to do. He felt that it was a limitation that he had never really worked with. I think he was very challenged. It really focused him in. You asked about chance in his art and I was thinking a lot about that. Leon would truly invite mistakes and disaster and problems but in these drawings it's a very controlled environment. He was very concerned about the resolution, the foreground, the background, how far did he need to go when he was finished. But you know if he didn't like it he'd throw it away, he didn't care, it wasn't a canvas, he could just move on to the next drawing. ■

EXHIBITION

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

23 April - 23 July 2010
The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, New York, NY
www.drawingcenter.org

21 Sept - 12 Dec 2010
The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, Ill.
www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu

22 Jan - 24 Apr 2011
Museum Het Domein, Kapittelstraat 6, Sittard, The Netherlands
www.hetdomein.nl

- 01 **Fuck Death**, 1999, ink and acrylic on paper, 20.3 x 15.2cm
Collection of Ulrich and Harriet Meyer
- 02 **Bunnie & Quyyde**, 2003, ink on vellum, 25.4 x 20.3cm
Collection of Ulrich and Harriet Meyer
- 03 **Hell's Fires Await You**, 2003, oil stick, acrylic and ink on Bristol, 25.4 x 20.3cm
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York
- 04 **Satyr Love II**, 2004, oil stick and ink on vellum, 25.4 x 20.3cm
Courtesy Estate of Leon Golub and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York
- 05 **Post Modernist Bimbo**, 2002, oil stick and ink on vellum, 25.4 x 20.3cm
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York
- 05 **Leon Golub**, photo: Andre Morain
Courtesy The Drawing Center, New York.