

2 contrasting figurative exhibitions

By Lori Waxman

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Iranian video artist Shirin Neshat produces haunting, metaphorical films that meditate elusively on gender in Islamic culture. The late American painter Leon Golub scratched out some of the rawest, angriest and most monumental condemnations of war in powerful illustrations from the 1950s until his death in 2004.

These two artists couldn't be further apart in terms of lifespan, cultural background, career trajectory or medium, but concurrent solo exhibitions at the Block Museum in Evanston offer a potent opportunity to compare their respective manipulations of the human form — and to understand why Neshat and Golub are two of the most celebrated figurative artists of recent times.

Neshat, who was born in Iran in 1957 and came to the U.S. as a teenager to attend college, presents "Rapture," the masterful video installation that helped her win the Venice Biennale 10 years ago.

Across the Block's main gallery, two large screens face one another. One features a world of men dressed in white shirts and black pants, striding through an old stone city full of cannons and ramparts. The men skirmish, move with staccato clatter, wash themselves with ritual gestures and stand silently, waiting and watching. What they look at is the other screen, where a world of women unfolds, veiled in black from head to toe, swarming across a rough, rocky landscape. The women make their way down to the seashore, echoed by inky birds, whirled with the wind, gathering together and drifting apart, a formidable force that ululates en masse and moves to the sound of a swirling, lyrical treble. They carry a wooden boat to the water and some of them board, drifting off while the men, from their screen across the gallery, gaze and wave.

The oppositions that Neshat's two channels set up can seem too pat, too simplistic, at least in description. Male equals rising civilization, intellectual response, ritual interaction, war. Female equals spreading earth, emotional being, animalistic behavior, peace. Add to this a clearly Islamic dress and location — "Rapture" was shot in the Moroccan seaside town of Essaouira with a few hundred locals — and the equation threatens to amount to something offensively stereotypical.

Description, however, reveals none of the lyrical majesty and unexpected reversals of the work. "Rapture" is rivetingly melodramatic, stunningly shot and, for all its bold dualism, surprisingly ambiguous. Though the men wear the pants and occupy the city, they also appear stuck there, unable to breach its high walls. The women, by contrast, move freely outside the fortification, stop the men with their high-pitched cries and finally set sail to some great unknown.

In place of easy answers, or any answers at all, Neshat offers a visual poem. The picture may seem black and white at first — the tidy division of male and female — but between those limits exists an entire spectrum of possibilities.

Upstairs at the Block, where Golub's "Live + Die Like a Lion?" hangs on the walls, viewers might expect to find some firmer answers. Born in Chicago in 1922, Golub went to war and then went to art school, and his creative productions ceaselessly took a fierce stand against the cruelties of recent history, from the concentration camps of World War II to the American atrocities in Vietnam to the torture campaigns of mercenaries in Latin America.

A selection of prints from the Block Museum's collection offers a mini-retrospective of Golub's crusades and the crude, scratchy techniques he used so adeptly to depict brutal acts and their actors. It's a style that's always felt appropriate to his subject matter. Why paint pretty pictures of hell and its soldiers?

The centerpiece of the exhibition, however, is a startlingly personal series of small oil stick and ink drawings with none of these polemical world politics. The question mark of the exhibition title is just the beginning. Mortality — finally the artist's own — is the end. Wry satyrs, lion surrogates, post-apocalyptic dogs, helpless tortured men and people engaged in violent, apathetic sex fill out the middle.

Selected from the more than 440 sketches that Golub produced between 1999 and 2004, these pictures are erotic, fractured and free. An aggressive, messy looseness seems unskilled but in fact took a lifetime of practice to render. Handwritten titles skew everything mordantly. Bright, garish colors unsettle.

"In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes," Golub once said, and the central catastrophe here is life. Life in general, as witnessed over 80 or so years. Life as Leon Golub, as lived over those same years and approaching its end, betrayed by a once strong body but not yet by its mind. A mind fierce enough to insist on giving death the finger, one last time.