

Block Exhibit Honors Master of Ferocious Spirit

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By SARA BURROWS, Contributor

The lion's eyes are intense, watchful, and there's undeniable power, maybe even menace, in the huge paw that thrusts forward. A little long in the tooth, lying in a wash of bright blue, the animal seems to be roused, roaring the words on its poster: "Getting Old Sucks."



Leon Golub's "Live and Die Like a Lion?"
Photograph by Cathy Carver



Leon Golub's "Alarmed Dog Encountering Pink!"
Photograph by Cathy Carver

Going gentle was never an option for Leon Golub. This drawing, one of 440 he did from 1999 until his death in 2004, reflects the same ferocious spirit that created the oversize paintings of his prime -- searing, disturbing, protests against man's inhumanity to man. "Leon Golub: Live & Die like a Lion?" brings 42 of those drawings to the Block Gallery and Museum at Northwestern University in Evanston through Dec. 12.

"He was vigorous, very vigorous," said Debora Wood, the Block's senior curator. Golub painted big and bold, explained Brett Littman, curator of the show and executive director of the Drawing Center in New York. His paintings were bleak, unsparing commentaries on the many atrocities humans visit upon each other.

Every painting began with a drawing straight onto the canvas. To paint, Golub often worked standing on a ladder, or maybe the floor, applying colors thickly to his huge canvas, scraping it off, laying on more, to create a textured, layered, three-dimensional surface.

When his health began to fail, Golub turned to drawing. But these drawings have a new quality. "He's in a more self-reflective mood," said Littman. "I think he was very conscious that he was making work for his 'late period.'" Lions figure strongly in these sketches, as do snarling dogs -- "His dogs are never friendly," notes Littman. Sex, death and power are not unusual themes for artists contemplating their mortality. For Golub, these themes were far more introspective and personal than anything he'd done before. "I think that in the end his subject was Leon Golub," said Littman.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is a huge, Golub-sized canvas, with a sketch of three powerful lions, done apparently about 2001, that hung unfinished in his studio until he died. He probably hoped to get back to it, said Wood. "I think that's why it stayed up." Though Golub lived in Europe and spent most of his artistic life in New York, the Chicago-born and trained artist "never quite quiet left the culture of Chicago, and the culture of Chicago never let go of him," Wood said.

It's an important show to bring here, she added, because his collectors and very close friends are still here. During his early years as an artist, Golub even taught classes in Northwestern's continuing education program. During the 1950s, Golub was one of a loose-knit group of artists that included H.C. Westermann, Karl Wirsum and Nancy Spero, (who Golub married), and others, dubbed "the monster roster" for their dark, mysterious, reality-based work. Violent and graphic though they often were, many of them, Littman said, "are suffused with a dark humor that was always part of his work." In these late drawings, often done in cheery popsicle colors, loosely drawn and with an improvisational feel, said Littman, that sardonic glee "really came to the surface." Thus "Alarmed Dog Encountering Pink!" is exactly that -- a snarling canine facing down a rosy splotch of paint.

'Leon Golub: Live & Die like a Lion?' - through Dec. 12 at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston. 10 a.m.- 5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday and Tuesday; 10 a.m.- 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday. Free. For related programs, call (847) 491-4000 or visit www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu