

## "Leon Golub: Live & Die Like a Lion?"

★★★★★

**The Drawing Center**, through July 23  
(see Soho)

Leon Golub (1922–2004) was an artist-activist for whom art could never be separated from social meaning, ensuring him long periods of neglect from the art world. As early as the 1940s, in Holocaust-themed works, Golub focused particular attention on violence as an expression of power, especially the kind of expedient violence—technologized and bureaucratized—that serves state or corporate interests. His paintings from the '60s on, including the "Vietnam," "Mercenaries" and "Interrogation" series, bore witness to and decried the wars, inequities and oppressions of our time.

In the 1990s, Golub began to make more enigmatic paintings, often with apocalyptic themes, that incorporated text and a new cast of characters—skeletons, dogs, lions, satyrs and strippers. The 50 or so small-scale drawings here, which Golub made between 1999 and his death, reprise their concerns. Chief among these is the artist's own mortality, as in the drawing of a skull trenchantly captioned **FUCK DEATH**. A preoccupation with war persists, but the focus is now on its aftermath: A dog approaches a skeleton curled up in the earth; a body is exhumed from an unmarked grave. More sardonic works, such as one marked **POST**

**MODERNIST BIMBO**, refer to art, settling a few personal scores. Women, largely absent from Golub's work for the better part of 50 years, suddenly appear, strutting, yawning, leering and—perhaps fed up at last—shooting.

Golub's skill as a painter is much in evidence in the backgrounds' throwaway Abstract Expressionism (a style he criticized for its lack of engagement with the real world). Often, the chance interaction of figure and ground is breathtaking, as in *2 + 1* (2003), depicting a threesome having sex against a backdrop of blue, yellow and red bands. Salty, sly and full of internal memos, the drawings as a whole reveal an artist who, in the end, was as alive to the absurdity of the world as to its pain.—*Anne Doran*



Art