

Leon Golub, Brawler In a Cosmic Melee

By AMEI WALLACH

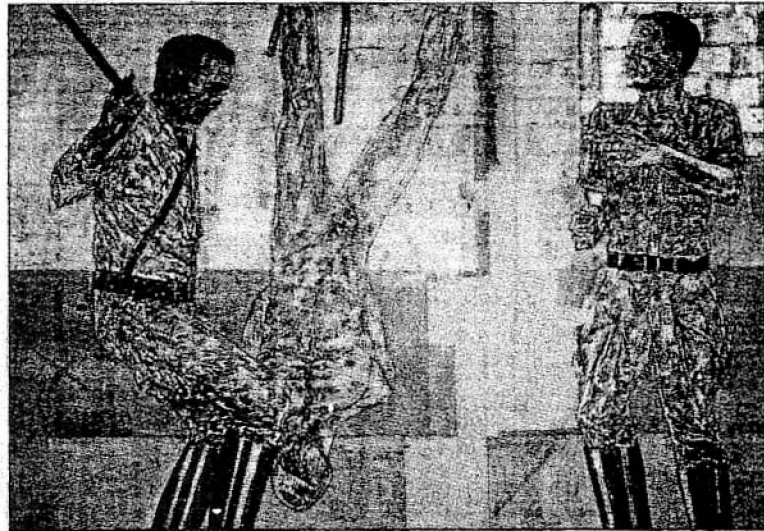
"I'M sort of political, sort of metaphysical, sort of wise-acre," Leon Golub is saying in his street-smart Chicago cadence. "When I paint a skull, I don't do it with eyebrows furrowed."

He has taken the more uncomfortable of the two chairs in his Greenwich Village studio, a battered metal affair, although his 79-year-old bones don't give him much relief. There's no more getting down on the floor to scrape a canvas, as in the old days in the 1980's, when he flayed the blood-red backgrounds behind his graphic, nearly 10-foot-high paintings of torturers, mercenaries and thugs with a meat cleaver.

Those paintings are the centerpiece of a retrospective, "Leon Golub: Paintings, 1950-2000," organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and on view at the Brooklyn Museum through Aug. 19. But as the exhibition makes explicit, they are only a way station in the artist's lifelong enterprise to make paintings that speak truth to power and record on an epic scale what he calls "this unending fatalistic aggression which is the nature of the world."

His cosmic ambition is to paint his dire, conflicted view of the condition of the world in which we live on the skin of the world, which is what he calls canvas.

Mostly it's a situation we'd just as soon not know about, like the guys in the truth squad horsing around while they torture a bound, hooded victim in the 1981 "Interrogation II." Two of the goons face us, grinning,



Brooklyn Museum of Art

Leon Golub's "Interrogation I," 1981, is at the Brooklyn Museum.

as if we share a dirty secret.

Mr. Golub's secret has been that he implicates us, and doesn't go that easy on himself either, in depicting official mayhem right out of the news. In the "Interrogation," "White Squad" and "Riot" paintings of the 1980's, the towering figures start at floor level and intrude on our space.

This was something new in painting, not the victor's propaganda of history painting from the Romans through Jacques-Louis David; not Francisco Goya's horror over the invader. This was painting that said, "We have met the enemy and it may be us."

"The only question that protest art asked was,

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"Which side are you on?" says Robert Storr, senior curator, department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. "But Leon makes big heroic paintings of anti-heroic subject matter, and you can't help but be swept up by the scope. You are put on the spot. You are on the side you don't want to be on, in a position where you are mesmerized by violence and at the same time horrified by it."

Mr. Golub has long been the art world's insider outsider, cherished for his activist efforts on issues from the Vietnam War to AIDS, but as often marginalized as celebrated for the pugnacious canvases that inevitably do battle with the aesthetic of the moment.

"See, I'm crazy because I think I am touching real things in real time," he says. "People are aware of these things in film, they're aware of it in novels. We're saturated in information. But this information is not accepted in the sacrosanct temples of art because those are the highest achievements of capitalism, and what they represent is the idea that the possibilities of the human spirit are open and vast and gracious."

As a painter he's a brawler. As a man he looks the part. There's something ominous and looming about him in a disarming, cartoony sort of way. He's got the head of one of his thugs — or of the late Picasso: a bald bullet skull, protruding ears, a libertine's fleshy lips. The eyes give another message; they're always checking for reactions, they're in constant tension between the need to be loved and the zest for a good intellectual fight.

In fact, Mr. Golub is an amiable man, married for a half century this December to the artist Nancy Spero, with whom he shares a remarkable artistic dialogue and divides their loft 50-50 into separate studios. Their life is their work; such domesticity as there is takes place at a table in the kitchen corner squeezed into the back of the loft and cluttered with the eclectic collection of publications to which they subscribe, from Time magazine to Women's International Network News, which itemizes human rights abuses around the world.

They met at the Art Institute of Chicago after World War II, in which Mr. Golub

served as a mapmaker for the Eighth Air Force in the wake of the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Mr. Golub was abrading, chipping and attacking his surfaces. It was as if they were the flesh of the crudely rendered allegorical figures he wanted to depict as at once universal, heroic and desperately defenseless. Late Hellenistic sculpture, pre-Columbian masks, shamanism and outsider art all went into the brew, notes Jon Bird, the curator of the retrospective, in the catalog.

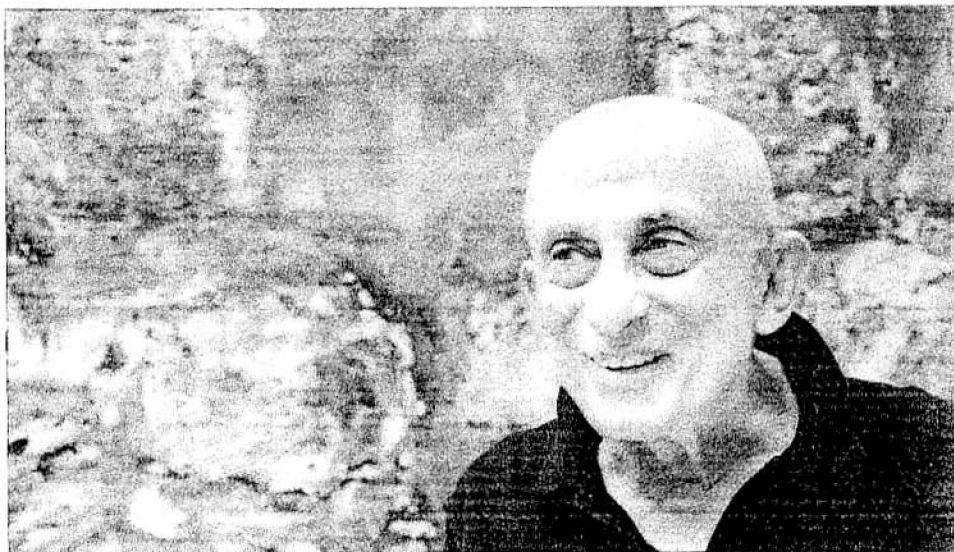
Very soon New York noticed. Peter Selz included Mr. Golub in his 1959 "New Images of Man" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, together with such figurative artists as Dubuffet and Giacometti. It was the wrong time and the wrong place, a moment of power struggle in the art world between a permissive profusion of styles and an uncompromising insistence on the inevitability of abstraction. William Rubin, who would soon become the reigning curator at the Modern, led the attack against figurative painting, savaging Mr. Golub.

And Mr. Golub rose to the bait. He sent Mr. Rubin a note calling him "a big slob," "a bully-boy" and "a sap," annotated with scatological drawings. He does that sometimes.

"Of course that letter killed any opportunity MOMA may have had to buy a painting," Mr. Golub says. He has had some 70 museum exhibitions, but it rankles that his paintings are sparsely represented in New York museum collections. Last year Ulrich and Harriet Meyer gave the Modern its first major Golub, his 10-foot-by-24-foot "Gigantomachy I" (1965). It is a painting with the ambition of a Roman frieze. It shows archetypal male figures endlessly entangled in ferocious battle.

"I describe the 'Gigantomachy' paintings as the most fatalistic and irredeemable of my work," Mr. Golub says. "There's no surcease to the aggression. There's no end point."

The Vietnam war was escalating when he was working on the "Gigantomachy" series. Their existential universality began to seem like a dead end, and Mr. Golub resolved the problem in the 1970's by putting uniforms on his aggressive warriors and faces on the populace. In the last half of the 1970's, he made multiple portraits of power: Nelson Rockefeller, Francisco Franco, John Foster Dulles, Mao Zedong, followed by his "Mer-



Leon Golub with "Torture on Canvas," in a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum: "Touching real things in real time."

Sometimes Golub makes his figures look jarringly disjointed, as physically incompetent as he says he feels in his own body.

cenaries" paintings.

He made his figures jarringly disjointed, as physically inept as he says he feels in his own body. He set them in front of his scrim of red oxide, as in a Pompeian mural. But they weren't murals, they were softer, more unstable linen, hung not stretched, patches sometimes chopped away, like limbs.

"His painting became most disturbing when he put his archetypes in modern dress, in a form that looks like us," says Mr. Storr. "Leon is one of those artists lots of people want to write off, but they are forced to respect him. They think about the pictures more than they want to, and that's his strength."

In the 1980's, a young generation was reviving figuration. Julian Schnabel learned

from Mr. Golub's technique, Eric Fischl from his subject matter. For the second time in his life, the artistic mainstream was in step with him, at least for the moment.

He has staged the spot where I sit in his studio: between two paintings he has just completed, "Bite Your Tongue I" and "Bite Your Tongue II." There's a skull in each of them — one dangles a cigarette from its teeth.

The new work has none of the coherent narrative of the theoretical paintings of the 1980's. Now he disperses over the canvas fragments of passion, politics, buffoonery and dread — slogans, graffiti, animals, unnerving cartoons — which pull apart as strenuously as they hang together.

The new paintings take their impulse from a 1937 essay by the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno on "Late Style in Beethoven." The essay ends with words that Mr. Golub has written prominently on "Bite Your Tongue II": "In the history of art late works are the catastrophes."

"You have nothing more to lose," Mr. Golub says. "The stakes are higher now. If you're ever going to do it, now's the time to do it. And these works are a catastrophe because they are going to pull out of you the

most extreme possibilities that you are capable of. So they are almost catastrophic in your attempt to get to them, and they're almost catastrophic in their effect on the world."

He turns and regards the painted dog that in one form or another runs through the new work, which is based on Marc Antony's grief-stricken lines after helping murder Julius Caesar: "Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war."

"Dogs move through our culture as a kind of unresolved issue," Mr. Golub says. "It mean we mistreat dogs, we pet dogs, when a city gets bombed out, what's left are dogs roaring through the city. The dog represents us at our most extreme letting go of love this notion. Endgame."

He sets his hands on black-clad knees. "I can try and slip in something unexpected, something that doesn't belong there even. And I make it belong, somehow, see? I put in a joker. It's thrilling to me, really thrilling!"

In 1950, the year he turned 28, he wrote: "In its most significant aspects, contemporary art is ugly... a threat to the ordering of society and man's concept of himself." For Leon Golub, nothing has changed, and everything has.