

The Tonic of Activist Art in a Passivist Time

BLOWTORCH REALISM

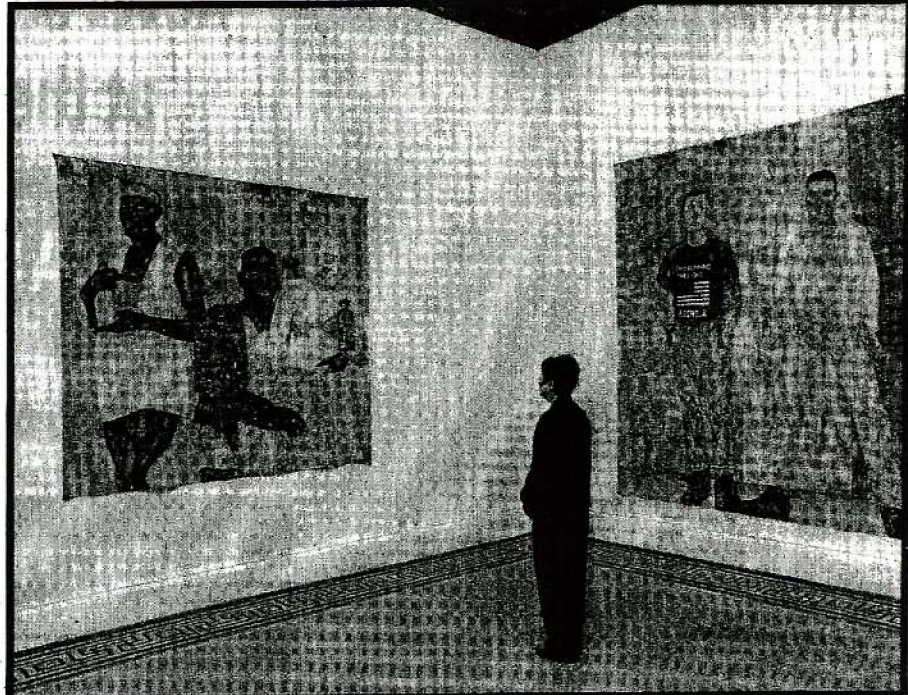
BY JERRY SALTZ

LEON GOLUB: PAINTINGS 1950-2000
Brooklyn Museum of Art
200 Eastern Parkway
Through August 19

It would be hard to think of an artist more out of sync with the current political or artistic moment than Leon Golub, this country's preeminent painter of torturers, mercenaries, goons, and death squads at work. His paintings are big, blunt, raw, fragmentary, and, in his own words, "in your face, up yours." More interested in history and politics than in anything especially formal, Golub, 79, is a passionate activist in a time that is far from impassioned about politics. In or out of fashion—and he has been both several times—Golub has been painting our predilection for destruction and folly for more than 50 years.

Although I've never been a devotee of Golub's blowtorch realism, I have been shaken by his menacing figures—thugs who send chills down your spine by doing little more than hanging out or giving you a shady glance. Golub excels at portraying what he calls "ferocious, indirect power." In *Horsing Around III* (1983), a powerful black man sporting a pistol and an army jacket sits on a crate. Next to him, a standing black woman in a bandanna smokes, while a dazed-looking white woman wearing jeans and a tawny bra sits on his knee. He puts one hand on her thigh and the other down the front of her pants. The colors are sickly De Kooning-esque turquoise and yellow, the surface abraded. But what makes this painting so disturbing—and the thing Golub does better than any painter I can think of—is the way it strips away your invisibility. The figures pause for a tense, pivotal moment; they know you're here, and give you a look that produces a shiver of fear, trapping you in your otherness, like you've stumbled onto something more than you can handle. Regardless of your origins or politics, Golub's work gives you a queasy sense of just how sheltered and vulnerable you really are.

This painting, and most of his other works from the 1980s (especially the "Mercenaries," "Riot," "White Squad," and "Interrogation" series), confirm that Golub is a polemicist, and a good one. From 1973, when he executed *Vietnam II*—the 40-foot-long breakthrough that saw him move from mythic figures to all-too-real ones—to 1991, with the startling *Try Burning This One* . . . an image of two guys daring you to mess with them and their flag, Golub was almost never off-message. What's more, this message comes through forcefully, without sentimentality or the device of language. The fact that he rarely stretched these canvases may have contributed to Golub's somewhat marginalized status, kept him from being compared to other painters. Instead, Golub presents you with these great, slack, rough-edged things—blood relatives to theatrical backdrops, banners, and ancient tapestries. Each flaunts its flatness and its physicality. Thus, the ragged, almost primitive look of these paintings—the stains, scrapes, wrinkles, and gouges—comes off that much more



"FEROCIOUS, INDIRECT POWER": *HORSING AROUND III* (1983). AT LEFT, *TRY BURNING THIS ONE* . . . (1991) AT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART

intentional and that much less arty.

However they come off, it's great to see these paintings installed so generously in such a weird political climate. Taking up little more than four contiguous galleries, this retrospective of 27 medium-to-huge works and a cluster of small portraits (of politicians like Richard Nixon, Francisco Franco, and

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Fidel Castro) feels truncated. When I got to the last room I had to ask if the show continued elsewhere. Nevertheless, Golub's development is tracked from a painter of muddy golems to his angular figures of the 1960s, to the eye-for-an-eye paintings of the '80s, to his occasionally poignant recent in-

vestigations into aging. Golub's chief influences seem to have been expressionism; Dubuffet; primitive, outsider, and classical art; and abstract expressionism's (especially Pollock's) scale and tactility. But his main touchstones were apparently José Orozco's images of social chaos and atrocity and Picasso's *Guernica*, which Golub saw in Chicago when he was 15, and later described as "a superphotograph, tremendous, stridently eloquent." As for his peers, Golub's pared-down political realism acts as the third leg of an intriguing, against-the-grain, generational tripod formed by Alex Katz's reductive, apolitical, representational paintings and Peter Saul's twisted political figuration. Along with his wife, the painter Nancy Spero—who also exhibits a fiercely independent, up-yours streak—Golub may also have paved the way for theatrical history painters like Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorf, and, more recently, William Kentridge.

The catalog capably records Golub's early failures and successes in Chicago; the drubbing he took in the press for his contribution to MOMA's 1959 "New Images of Man" show (his art was lambasted as "inflated, archaizing, phony expressive, and badly painted" by future MOMA curator William Rubin, to whom Golub wrote a note beginning, "Honey, I want you to know what

a big slob you are," and accompanied by a little drawing of a man pissing on himself); a five-year relocation in Paris; a 19-year dry spell, beginning in 1963, during which he went without an exhibition in a New York commercial gallery; his destruction of nearly all his work from the mid '70s; and his rediscovery in the early '80s by a generation who admired his figuration and politics.

Sadly, this exhibition can't show one especially salient side of Golub: his writings, which vary from scintillating to scathing. For a taste of his contentiousness and willingness to hold unpopular positions, check out this scorcher of a letter, published in the November 1968 *Artforum* in response to an article written by Robert Smithson: "Mangy doll! Give up your brushes and fissure your mind! Scum, throw away your *technology* and *rust* your bones! Sadist! Release nature and the *vile* laws of culture! Shrink your mental mud, man! . . . Die dog! We don't want your lousy bones giving *anthropomorphic* overtones to our graves! *Entropic Demiurge!* Build an earth *mound!* Piss on it!" Clearly, Golub never suffered anything lightly. Sometimes he pounced on a subject; other times he crept up on it. If in his current work he can do for aging what he did to mayhem and institutional power, Golub will have raised the bar of political realism to the truly personal. □ . . .