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Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC.

"Burnt Man IV," 1961, depicts flesh charred upon a grimy surface of thick, scabbed paint applied and appraised with visceral empathy by artist and viewer respectively.

Art In A Time Of War

Leon Golub's four decades of indignant humanism was evergreen

By ANDREW ROBINSON

A naked, bloody, and bound prisoner contorted on the floor; a dead woman who had been severely beaten and harassed by dogs; a man apparently sodomized by a group of soldiers; a hooded prisoner and a bloody cell. These are the images and ideas that inhabit the paintings of Leon Golub.

There is a long tradition of artists responding to man's inhumanity to man and Golub has made a substantial contribution to the lineage of artists who faced atrocity head on and made an unflinching response to it. Artists such as Goya, Picasso, Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Dix, Dinos and Jake Chapman, and more have offered up dissent in the face of the public's passive disregard.

Images of torture and oppression—while not pretty to look at—are all too prevalent in the public sphere. The recent revelation of new images and videos documenting American as well as British military abuse, torture, and killing of Iraqis is anathema to a horrified public, but to the gaze of Golub it is not surprising at all.

Golub's indignant humanism and dark imagery gained some notoriety with his political thug narratives made during the Vietnam War. Images of military men and mercenaries alike torturing their victims with guns, electrocution, and the dogs of war are common themes. Paintings from this period offer a range of dimension and imagination. "Burnt Man IV" and "Napalm I" depict flesh charred upon a grimy surface of thick, scabbed paint applied and appraised with visceral empathy by artist and viewer respectively.



Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC.

In the three years before his 2004 death, Golub created a series of paintings capturing the ecstatic U.S. march to war with phrases such as "We Love Our Leader" scrawled over the surface.