

Leon Golub

RONALD FELDMAN

Skulls and snarling dogs are the protagonists of Leon Golub's bleak, energetic new paintings. Charging through black ambiguous spaces, the dogs bite, bark, and glare in all directions. One dog stares at a toppled skull with the eagerness of a Doberman contemplating a downed postman. Another gnaws a cranium as if it were a football.

Where are we? In some kind of Hell, evidently, where man's best friend has become a deranged pursuer. And in case the grim mood is not sufficiently clear, Golub has added ominous words, such as "Despoiled" and "Transmission Garbled." There are also literary quotations neatly printed in open spaces between the rampaging canines, reminding us that the "bad dog" theme has a distinguished pedigree. From Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "I have given a name to my pain and call it DOG." And from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "Cry Havoc!"—the opening words of Marc Antony's invitation to civil strife, which continues, "And let slip the Dogs of War."

Golub wants to conjure up a nightmare image of the "brutality" that threatens us—not only of our own natures but also of an unsympathetic cosmos. These paintings are, in a sense, a more urgent version of traditional *memento mori*. It's not just that we will die, Golub seems to be saying, but that death and adversity and chaos are after us—they are hungry

This is an admirably serious message. But the paintings themselves are stiff, and seem to derive from a collection of disparate photographic sources. The longer one looks, the more these elements begin to disassemble. Subtract the skulls, for example, and Golub's dogs look generic, even friendly. As a result, the paintings' visionary pretensions fall flat. Golub's earlier paintings of mercenaries and death squads combined earnestness with a chilling banality. Here, Golub's earnestness becomes simply didactic.

ALEXI WORTH



Leon Golub, *Snake Eyes II*, 1995
acrylic on linen, 92" x 124½"
Ronald Feldman