

Leon Golub at Ronald Feldman

Written words have lately invaded Leon Golub's paintings. A sprawling, aged lioness rears

her roaring head at the viewer, her front paws incongruously propping up a pink placard with red letters that reads, "getting old sucks!" Reacting to an attacking raptor, the anguished, contemporary Prometheus of another painting declares, "Fuck! I didn't expect this!" The inscription "INFVITABLE FATVM" (inescapable prophecy or fate) dominates the dourest picture of all, in which a hound, seen from behind, looks back at us, lifting its leg to piss on a human skull. The new Golubs, massive complaints about the inevitability of pain, aging, indignity and death, are not easy to swallow.

These fragmentary representations could be gradually coming into being or disappearing from view. The earlier technique of building up and scraping down the surface (seen at Feldman in two '60s paintings) gives way to lean and urgent gestures on raw linen. Verbally and visually Golub shuttles between a despoiled high rhetoric and an irritable, vernacular funk. A veteran painter who has paid his dues in art and in life and is beyond easy consolation, Golub evinces a tragic worldview and the moral imagination to visualize and render evil palpably. His earlier paintings of the '70s and '80s indicted our complicity with political and social horrors; those before and after often projected a sort of mythological disorder. The

new works may be seen as pained metaphysical ruminations. But then the key to Golub's vision is that the realms of history, myth and personal mortality have never been mutually exclusive.

You might wonder how it is that these *cris de coeur* do not for a minute seem overwhelmed by their insistent significations. These are no mere illustrations but complex paintings whose retinal impact, astute composition and subtly shifting descriptive language are crucial to their effect. Consider *Infuitabile Fatum*. Under "INFVITABLE" a man rendered in black on bare linen holds a rifle aloft in a heroic-revolutionary

gesture. The dog and skull on the right side, under "FATVM," were drawn with white lines on roughly scumbled blacks, then subjected to an intense, tattered layer of red that feels like the sharp flicker of irritating neon light and declares: blood! mayhem! Before we detect the particulars—man, dog, skull—we know this to be an image of some sort of hell. Even those distressed Roman letters with the V for U, count as much for their style as for their translated meaning; they are *late* Roman, the complete devolution of all classical order. The whites are not neutral here, given the linen ground's warm tan, but deadly cold.

The show's odd painting out is *Dionysiac*, whose rearrangement of the nude male figure's brittle, dismembered anatomy floats on gorgeous tones of thalo blue washed over the handsome linen. Perhaps this is a postlude after all hope has been abandoned, a dance of defiance, an ecstatic, if provisional, vision of triumph.

—Robert Berliand



Leon Golub: *Prometheus II*, 1998, acrylic on linen, 119 by 97 inches; at Ronald Feldman.