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Leon Golub (1922-2004) Raphael Rubinstein

Leon Golub died August 8 in New York from complications following surgery. Earlier in the year, the 82-year old painter, who was best known for his epically scaled paintings depicting scenes of torture and political repression, exhibited a group of recent drawings on erotic themes at Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York. The show also included large-scale canvases of torsos and heads painted between 1959 and 1964 with a coruscated lacquer technique that gives the figures the look of ancient eroded monuments. It was works like the latter, which blend Classical motifs with the raw materiality of Dubuffet, that first brought Golub to prominence when five of his paintings were included in the exhibition "New Images of Man" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1959.

Born in Chicago in 1922, Golub studied art history at the University of Chicago before serving in the U.S. Army as a cartographer during the Second World War. When he returned to Chicago, he enrolled as a painting student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which he received an MFA in 1950. Along with a group of like-minded Chicago artists, including Cosmo Campoli, George Cohen and Nancy Spero, whom he married in 1951. Golub sought to develop a figurative approach that responded to the existential and political conditions of the postwar period, in particular to the revelations of the Holocaust, which inspired early works such as *Charnel House* (1946). In 1955, Golub articulated his dissatisfaction with art that, in his view, placed esthetics above ethics in a *College Art Journal* article titled "A Critique of Abstract Expressionism." Golub was also deeply influenced by archaic sculpture and ancient mythology, painting frontal images of priests, kings and mythic animals that show the influence of Hittite and pre-Columbian art.

Following a spell of teaching in the Midwest, Golub together with Spero, moved to Paris in 1959. As well as raising three sons, the couple developed a particularly close artistic dialogue, one that continued until Golub's death. Returning to the U.S. in 1964, the two artists moved to New York, where Golub who had switched from lacquer to acrylic paint, began the "Gigantomachies," large-scale paintings of battling figures based on Classical models. He also began to partially scrape away the images on his painted canvases, creating a dramatically abraded surface. About this time, he rejected the stretched canvas, outfitting his paintings with grommets that allowed them to be hung easily on the wall.

As the 1960s progressed, Golub's art began to respond more directly to current events, in particular the Vietnam War, which he staunchly opposed. In the "Napalm" series (1969), showing naked, flayed figures against raw linen grounds, and the "Vietnam" series (1972-74), scenes of U.S. soldiers attacking Vietnamese civilians, he began to cut away sections of the canvases, leaving gaping spaces that echoed the brutality and confusion of the painted images. He also increased the scale of his work: the largest of the Vietnam paintings measures some 10 by 30 feet.

For a period of two years, beginning in 1974, Golub went through an artistic crisis. He was without a gallery in New York, and his large Vietnam paintings had gone unsold; he survived thanks to teaching jobs. Golub felt ignored by an art world in which Minimal and Conceptual art were in fashion and painting seemed marginalized. After destroying some of his work and even contemplating giving up being an artist altogether, he turned to a smaller scale for a series of 100 portraits of political leaders and public figures (1976-79). Based on photographs, the approximately life-size heads were done in an intentionally bland, illustrational style and included Americans, such as Nelson Rockefeller and John Foster Dulles, as well as international leaders, such as Mao Tse-tung, Fidel Castro and Francisco Franco.

Having successfully weathered this difficult period, and having found a theme that inspired him (men and power), Golub returned to full-scale painting with renewed energy in a series of canvases portraying mercenary soldiers. In 1982, he had his first New York gallery show in 20 years, at Susan Caldwell. As a result of Neo-Expressionism and a reawakened interest in painting, the art world was much more open to his brand of figurative work. In the context of Ronald Reagan's controversial international policies, his political themes also found a more responsive audience. Drawing on images from a wide range of sources, from photojournalism to biker magazines, Golub created big, frequently horrific paintings that depicted the usually hidden world of soldiers of fortune and government torturers operating throughout the developing world. As he explained to *Art in America* in 1991, "I think of myself as a kind of reporter; I report on the nature of certain events. I think of art as a report on civilization at a certain time." Although their connection to contemporary events was an important part of their initial impact, Golub's depictions of torture and repression in Africa and Latin America are never simply pictorial reportage – his atmospheric, quasi-abstract grounds, distressed surfaces and deliberate echoes of Classical art give his paintings a visual richness that distinguishes them from much politically inspired art. At the same time, his pictures of government-sanctioned torture have continuing relevance, as many have remarked since the revelations of Abu Ghraib.

An accessible figure for younger artists and writers, Golub was an enthusiastic talker who enjoyed long, free-ranging discussions about art and politics. He was also seen by many as a model activist artist. During the massive Aug. 29 antiwar march in New York, one group of protesters carried a banner bearing one of his images. It's hard to imagine any other American painter receiving such a tribute.

Golub continued to evolve artistically. For several exhibitions in the 1990s, he experimented with printing his images on transparent vinyl and suspending them from the ceiling. In his paintings of the last 10 years, Golub mostly turned away from political subjects to allegorical depictions of anarchy and decay. Clearly influenced by Spero's work, he began to incorporate text into many of his paintings, often to make rueful comments on the travails of aging and the inevitability of death. He also began to introduce fragmented, discontinuous space into his compositions. As critic Thomas McEvilley observed, Golub in his later career "received elements back from

postmodernist painters who were once regarded as following his lead” (see *Art in America*, Apr. '02).

A 2000-01 retrospective of Golub's work was seen at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, and the Brooklyn Museum. Other surveys were mounted at the New Museum for Contemporary Art (1984) and the Malmo Konsthall (1993). In 1994-95, an exhibition titled “Leon Golub and Nancy Spero: War and Memory” appeared at the American Center in Paris and the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. Golub showed regularly in New York at Ronald Feldman and in Chicago at Rhona Hoffman. A volume of his writings, *Do Paintings Bite?: Selected Texts 1949-1996*, was published in 1997 by Hatje Cantz. In 2002, his work was included in Documenta XI in Kassel.