

Obituary in the *Brooklyn Rail*, September 2004.

Remembering Golub

by David Levi Strauss
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Leon and I were set to record another of our conversations for publication on June 24th at his studio. The night before, he called to say that he was very sorry, but he didn't think he was going to be able to make it to the recording session, because he was on his way into the emergency room at NYU Hospital. "Leon, what's wrong?" I asked.

"Everything," he said. "Is there anything I can do for you?" "Yeah," he said, "you can go find me another body."



Photograph of Leon Golub, taken in 1989. Photo by David Reynolds.

It is a measure of my confidence in his strength of will that I thought then I would see him again, that he would rise and come back to work, and we'd continue our conversation. I thought this right up until August 8th, when Leon's son Stephen called to tell me his father had died in the night.

I only got to know Leon late in his life, but when we were together, I often forgot that he was old, and in the best times, I think he forgot, too. He certainly wasn't old in outlook. He was as curious as a kid, and had one of the most agile and inquisitive minds I've ever run across. He was well read, and was a great appreciator of writing. He knew what writing takes, having written well himself.

Leon was one of the most intelligent artists I've known, and he knew that painting is primarily physical; that it comes from and speaks to the body, first. Sitting among his colossal heads from 1959-64 at his last show at Ron Feldman's in May, Golub said he could barely glimpse, then, the man who had the strength to paint those heads. I should have known then that he was dying.

But it was hard to tell, because he was so damned cheerful. For a social pessimist who dealt head-on with what was wrong with the world, Leon was awfully optimistic. He appreciated the benefits of liberal democracy more than anyone I've ever known. He'd say, "You know, in many countries in the world today, you and I would have been thrown in prison or shot a long time ago. But here, we're more or less left alone to keep working, even celebrated once in a while." And though he was certainly not always pleased with the way his work was treated, he well recognized and reveled in the privilege to make it. "It's something else, isn't it?" he'd say. "We're able to make art and write, and get by doing it—even more than get by, sometimes. What could be better than that?"

By the time I got to know him personally, Golub had gained perspective on the vagaries of the art

world, and he gave me wise counsel many times. When our bid for a joint exhibition of the works of Leon and Nancy [Spero] for the U.S. Pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale was summarily rejected, I was crushed, but Leon was philosophical about it. "You win some, and you lose some," he said. "It was still worth a shot."

I don't think Leon was afraid of dying, and he was too pragmatic to speculate too much on what happens after death ("looks to me like that's the end, personally, you know? Kaput!"), but it definitely bothered him to think that he wouldn't be around to see what was going to happen. He once told me he'd gladly sell his soul for the privilege of coming back every year or two to look in on the world—even the world that is envisioned in his late paintings.

The late work is fragmentary, explosive, and catastrophic. When I first saw the later paintings on the walls of his studio, I thought they looked like works made by a young artist, a man in his twenties. They're smart-ass paintings, raw and free. I called them "distract expressionism," because they came out of and are responding to distraction culture. They "jitter" (one of Leon's favorite words) across the landscape, picking up bits and pieces, flotsam and jetsam, as they go. "One has to keep moving," Leon said in an interview I did with him in 2001. "Now I've shifted. I'm more sardonic and trying to slip around more. I'm trying! You know?"

Golub turned physical awkwardness into a kind of grace. He was determined to make a connection, to be of his time, and to do that he had to reach back into the origins of painting, to the first marks and dabs and inscriptions, and forward to a world of cyborgs and roaming packs of dogs.

Golub disdained mere facility. He continually put himself in the position, in painting, of not knowing. There is courage in that, but also a kind of faith in faithlessness. Donald Kuspit was right to call Golub an existential/activist painter. Golub's work enacts a real challenge to painting itself. He threw down the gauntlet right at the beginning, and waged a furious, muscular struggle with it the rest of his life. His art is agnostic and agonistic. It exists in the heat of battle, where everything is at risk. This lead, paradoxically, to constant renewal, so that Golub's work was never done. And this is why, though he lived a long and productive life, to all of us who knew him, he died, Goddamnit, too soon.

When Giacometti died, John Berger wrote about how Giacometti's work was utterly changed by his death. "The reason Giacometti's death seems to have changed his work so radically is that his work had so much to do with an awareness of death. It is as though his death confirms his work: as though one could now arrange his works in a line leading to his death, which would constitute far more than the interruption or termination of that line—which would, on the contrary, constitute the starting point for reading back along that line, for appreciating his life's work." May it be so with Golub.

—August 20, 2004