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An Artist Who Painted Indignation **Amei Wallach**

Leon Golub's grinning assassins and truth-squad goons embodied his rage against savagery and injustice

Leon Golub died on August 8 at the age of 82 from complications following surgery. In art and life he raged against savagery, abuses of power, and everyone's culpability – including his own – in "war, violence and atrocities," as he once wrote. Nearly as prolific a writer as he was a painter, Golub wrote in the Australian journal *Pataphysics* in 1989, "I try to comment on the ferocity of events." And he painted his fury in the tradition of Goya, Orozco, Otto Dix, and the Picasso of *Guernica*. But his grinning assassins and truth-squad goons of the Vietnam era had most in common with Guston's KKK thugs.

Golub had more than 70 museum exhibitions, including a retrospective at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and then the Brooklyn Museum in 2000. But, except for a time in the 1980s, when his work intersected with the Zeitgeist of big, expressionist painting, he was always at odds with the prevailing esthetic.

In Chicago, where Golub was born in 1922, figure painting was the means through which artists were expected to articulate heritage and identity. He studied art history at the University of Chicago before being sent to make maps with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during World War II. In 1947, while at the Art Institute of Chicago on the GI Bill, he met artist Nancy Spero, whom he married in 1951 and who survives him, together with their three sons, Their art is in many ways antithetical – his a larger-than-life diatribe against masculinity run amuck; hers an intimate investigation of the anguish and valor of women. But they shared a social indignation that expressed itself through activism as well as art.

His "Burnt Men" series of 1960-61 conflated the heroic ideal of Greek sculpture with the barbarity of Art Brut to make paintings of blood-encrusted humanity, marked by Hiroshima and the Holocaust, with skin as seared and abraded as the canvas that he scraped with a meat cleaver. His "Gigantomachy" series of the mid-1960s tore off the smooth skin of the heroic gods and men battling on the Altar of Pergamon to expose what Golub called "documentary descriptions of reality, hysterically exact." At that point, Golub wanted to detach the violence he depicted "from specific circumstances or history." But watching the Vietnam War on television changed all that.

In his "Napalm" series, from the late 1960s, faces began to appear on his flayed figures, and he attacked, cut, and tore whole sections from the canvas, which he saw as a metaphor for their bodies as well as the "skin of the world." In the early 1970s, with the "Vietnam" series, the figures wear uniforms and carry machine guns. The torn canvas rends groups of Vietnamese civilians at whom the uniformed figures point their guns. The viewer is put in the position of figuring out who is "us" and who "them."

But it is with the cinematic scale of "Mercenaries," "Interrogations," and "White Squads" series, which Golub painted throughout the 1980s, that he seemed to place the viewer squarely in the picture as voyeur, accomplice, and judge. His hoodlums, gesturing against a blood red ground, were cut off midcalf so that they loom above yet occupy the same ground as anyone standing in front of them as they tear off a woman's nails or urinate on a fallen man.

By the 1990s Golub was scattering political, mythological, animal, news, and cartoon images, along with slogans and gags, across his canvases, with boisterous pugnacity.

In his last years he made more than 300 drawings of snarling dogs, libidinous satyrs, and zany erotica. The day he entered the hospital he completed his recently published book, Dog, which includes texts and drawings and a quote from Diderot: “What is a monster: a being whose duration is incompatible with the present order of things.” Golub was a righteous monster who reconciled painting with the unpalatable realities of his time.