

Leon Golub  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 59

University Art Museum  
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1983

White Squad II, 1982



Was a revival of figurative expressionism necessary for Leon Golub to be suddenly recognized as a painter of importance? Is the vision of art critics that severely limited to the restraints of fashion and styles of the moment? Was Jasper Johns on the mark with his sculptmetal piece of 1961 showing mouthing lips behind the critic's glasses? Did we need all the media hype to make a "hero" out of an artist who for years has pursued and matured his personal vision about art and the world? It is with apparent surprise that Peter Schjeldahl writes that Golub, "a fringe figure for most of his long career . . . has suddenly become a major artist."(1) Yet Golub's purpose in art was formulated more than twenty years ago: "What's it all about? In my case, a brutalized humanism--brutalized because this is the end process. You need a public art to deal with power and corruption, to deal with the implacable and to deal with survival."(2)

But his work in the early 'sixties when this was written, his gigantic fragmented figures, inspired by late Roman and Hellenistic art, figures of heroic stance and relentless austerity, did not fit into an art scene of Pop and "Post-painterly Abstraction" where cool blandness rather than expressive metaphor were the order of the day. Golub's "Gigantomachies" were followed by political paintings--the "Napalm" and "Vietnam" series--which were overt accusations against American aggression when politics was not supposed to be mixed with art. In the mid-seventies he turned to painting a series of small

portraits, depicting contemporary men of power-- Nelson Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger, Chou En-Lai, Brezhnev, Franco--which loomed like small icons of evil of our time--all the more menacing for their semi-photographic realism. Power and the threat of violence is expressed most forcefully in the "Mercenaries," "Interrogations, and "White Squads" which deal with coercion, torture, domination and aggression.

Sustaining his occupation with art as a moral act, Leon Golub has over the years moved from internalized images of primitive mystery to picturing palpable reality, increasingly objectifying his work. Where he previously commented on universal experience, placing his ritualized figures into time less space, his new work is factual, blunt and political. Although the locales of the "Mercenaries" are not stated, he records their action as witness. They are certainly the work of an American painter. "This is an American presence," he writes, "the projection of a very powerful society which intends to stay Number One. . . . I don't think that figure of this kind--inflecting this kind of power--could come out of any society that's not a dominant one."(3)

When these paintings were shown at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in the summer of 1982, the critic of the Manchester Guardian, referring to all the paintings of American might which we have been sending to Europe--pictures of Stars and Stripes, displays of the surfeit of consumer goods, vast

protractors of high tech--commented that "This is an extraordinary show. Golub is the first American artist we have seen for some time who comes here not to praise the Great American dream, but to accuse it of corruption, to weep for it. . . ."(4)

The images are often taken from sado-masochist publications or magazines like Soldier of Fortune with advertisements for armed mercenaries who "will do anything." These men are hired guns, torturers, killers. They do their dirty tasks casually, as part of the day's work. The victim of White Squad II with his eye bulging in fear and his neck muscles strained to the utmost, is enduring the ultimate fear of death, while the "merc" may just be playing with his huge pistol. These men carry out their acts of oppression in far away places, perhaps in El Salvador and Chile, in Africa, or in the Gulag, where governments are reluctant to use the central or public organs of control. The ugly men, waiting around in Mercenaries II are like the agents in Kafka's novels: they follow orders which derive from some distant, not identifiable bureaucracy.

The paintings are large canvases, painted in red. Have Barnett Newman's magisterial enveloping spaces suddenly been populated by figures of punishment? But Golub was probably looking at the red oxide color of Pompeian walls. The red background serves to push the figures right up to the front. These men, enormous in scale, whose feet are not visible, impinge and intervene on our own space. The acrylic surfaces of these

unstretched canvases have been scraped and scrubbed to a dryness which is a metaphor for the agony of the victims and the red background suddenly takes on the color of drying blood. It also creates vast spaces as between the black and white soldiers making eye contact across the great expanse in Mercenaries III. The red lamps overhead recall the shower heads in the pictures of concentration camps. The thin paint skin itself is eroded, creating the raw, porous surface which is an essential aspect of the painting.

The "Mercenaries," "Interrogations," and "White Squads" are public paintings of political acts, inflicting horrors without end. They are pictures in the narrative tradition in the broadest sense. Like his predecessors, Goya, Picasso, Orozco, and Beckmann, Golub does not glorify, beautify or obscure pain, but alludes to reality to reveal truth. Making use of the formal possibilities of his time, he confronts the often hidden aspects of violence for us to experience, perhaps to respond.

Peter Selz

#### Notes

1. See bibliography, Schjeldahl, p. 96.
2. Leon Golub, Letter to the author, Paris, April 8, 1961.
3. See bibliography, Baigell, p. 168.
4. Waldemar Janoszczak, "Prisoners of a tortured conscience," Manchester Guardian (G.B.), July 28, 1982.

Works in MATRIX:

Mercenaries (II), 1979,  
acrylic on canvas, 120" x  
172". Lent by Susan  
Caldwell, Inc., NY and Musée  
de Beaux Arts de Montreal,  
Canada.

Mercenaries (III), 1980,  
acrylic on canvas, 120" x  
198". Lent by Susan  
Caldwell, Inc., NY.

White Squad (II), 1982,  
acrylic on canvas, 120" x  
187". Lent by Susan Caldwell,  
Inc., NY.

Selected one-person  
exhibitions:

Pasadena Museum of Art, CA,  
'56; Institute of  
Contemporary Arts, London,  
'57, '82 (cat. pub., essay by  
Jon Bird; interview by  
Michael Newman); Centre  
Culturel Americain, Paris,  
'60 (cat. pub.); Tyler School  
of Art, Phila., PA, '64 (cat.  
pub., essay by A. James  
Speyer); Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Chicago,  
'74 (cat. pub., essay by  
Lawrence Alloway; traveled to  
New York Cultural Center);  
New Jersey State Museum,  
Trenton, '75 (cat. pub.,  
essay by Dennis Adrian); San  
Francisco Art Institute, '76;  
Colgate University, Hamilton,  
NY, '78 (cat. pub., essay by  
Edward Bryant); Susan  
Caldwell, Inc., NY, '82 (2  
exhibitions).

Selected bibliography by the  
artist:

"Utopia/Anti-Utopia,"

Artforum, May '72.

"What Works?" Art  
Criticism (NY), vol. 1, no.  
2, Fall '79.

Selected bibliography about  
the artist (see also  
catalogues under  
exhibitions):

Selz, Peter. "A New  
Imagery in American  
Painting." College Art  
Journal, Summer '56.

Schulze, Franz.  
Fantastic Images: Chicago  
Art Since 1945 (Chicago:  
Follett, '72).

Sandler, Irving.  
"Interview: Leon Golub Talks  
with Irving Sandler,"  
Journal, Archives of American  
Art, vol. 18, no. 1, '78.

Baigell, Matthew, "'The  
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with Leon Golub," Arts  
Magazine, May '81.

Dreiss, Joseph. "Leon  
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Pergamon Revisited," Arts  
Magazine, May '81.

Horsfield, Kate.  
"Profile: Leon Golub,"  
Interview, Video Date Bank,  
School/Art Institute of  
Chicago, March '82.

Kuspit, Donald B. "Leon  
Golub's Murals of Merce-  
naries," Artforum, May '81.

Robins, Corinne. "Leon  
Golub: In the Realm of Pow-  
er," Arts Magazine, May '81.

Lippard, Lucy. "Making  
Manifest," Village Voice,  
Jan. 27-Feb. 2, '82.

Perreault, John.  
"Realpolitik," Soho News,  
Jan. 10-16, '82.

Roberts, John. "Leon  
Golub's Mercenaries and  
Interrogations," Art Monthly  
(London), Sept. '82.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Red  
Planet," Village Voice, Oct.  
26, '82.

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