



Leon Golub: Paintings

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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New York figurative painter Leon Golub creates large, confrontational paintings that address issues of aesthetics, politics and the media. From mercenaries and death squad police to hapless victims of political violence, Golub's larger-than-life-size figures engage us in their world. Dating from 1976 to 1988, the paintings included in this exhibition deal with issues of power, violence and vulnerability.

Leon Golub was born in Chicago in 1922. Following classes at Wright Junior College, he received his bachelor's degree in art history from the University of Chicago in 1942 and a master's degree from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1950. He and his wife, artist Nancy Spero, lived in Rome and Paris before settling in New York in 1964. In his earlier work, Golub produced paintings of athletes, philosophers and colossal antique figures influenced by classical and Hellenistic Greek, Etruscan and Roman iconography. In his *Combat* and *Gigantomachy* series that followed, he explored the themes of human conflict with outside forces. Beginning in the 1970s, Golub's work acquired a specific, more objective stance, referring to contemporary political events.

"The actions that I paint are incipient: they could take place under almost any circumstances. Political violence and political interrogation can happen anywhere."¹

As a means of investigating the politics of power on an institutional level, Golub focuses upon the dynamics between individuals and reveals a world of irony and contradictions. An advocate for social change, Golub employs a variety of devices to make his paintings seem as convincing as possible. In this way, the viewer becomes a protagonist in the unfolding drama and more susceptible to questions raised in the paintings of power, violence and vulnerability.

To capture the proper gesture for his figures, Golub appropriates the photograph as a more immediate reference. The figures evolve as composites of newspaper, journal and magazine photographic images. The compositions resemble the journalist's snapshot which also makes the paintings seem more real. To the contemporary eye, the snapshot is as close to an

approximation of reality as possible. Golub depends upon the viewer's acceptance of the media photo as truth to transfer credibility to own his canvases, thus making his figures tangible.

"The freeze of the photographic gesture, the fix of an action, how an arm twists, how a smile gets momentarily stabilized, or exaggerated – to try to get some of this is important. . . . I attempt in these paintings to give some of the quality of media experience, a sense of tension and of abrupt immediacy."²

Just as Caravaggio populated his paintings of saints and disciples with common people from the streets of Rome, Golub plucks his mercenaries, villains and victims from the mass media. Based on ordinary people, his villains are as approachable as your next door neighbor. Golub comments:

"Each figure is a synthesis of different sources. . . . I want each figure to be both the reconstruction of a generic type and to possess an idiosyncratic singular existence."³

The unposed and often awkward gestures of the protagonists caught in a particularly revealing moment, the flattening out of the figures and the single point of view – characteristics associated with the photograph – are exploited by Golub to produce paintings of extraordinary presence and power.

Through his unorthodox painting method of building up layers of paint on unstretched canvas and dissolving them with solvents and scraping the surface with a meat cleaver, Golub develops an activated, aggressive surface in keeping with his disturbing subject matter. Golub describes his process:

"The paintings have a raw, porous appearance. . . . There is surprisingly little paint on the canvas. The forms and colors [are] smashed into the tooth of the canvas, but paradoxically aggressively active on the surface."⁴

Although flattened out, the huge figures are articulated to give the illusion of substance and weight. They inhabit a shallow space and are pushed forward to the front of the picture plane. The artist speaks of his intention of ***"trying to break down the barriers between depicted and actual space. To be inserted in the paintings means forcible contact."***⁵ The technique of

cutting the figure off at the foot or other parts of the body works to extend the arena beyond the canvas into actual or real space. This process, along with Golub's occasional practice of cutting into the canvas, connects the violation to the skin of the canvas with the social or physical violation to the victim's body. The aesthetics, the formal elements involved in creating a work of such physicality, combine masterfully with the artist's political point of view to produce paintings that have a lasting impact upon our consciousness. *White Squad V* (1984), measuring more than 13 feet wide, comments on acts of violence committed by police, such as the invisible death squads, in countries such as El Salvador and Argentina.

"One of the things at the basis of how I'm working is at some level the idea of the hero, antihero, the two sides, man and his shadow."⁶

Contradiction and irony weave into the narrative and formal elements of the painting. The Pompeiiian red background creates a shallow space that pushes the figures aggressively forward. In this way, Golub combines abstraction's sense of detachment with realism's sense of immediacy.

"One claims to support humanist values, liberal points of view, but maybe at some level you're identifying with those guys, deriving vicarious pleasure in viewing these kinds of macho figures."⁷

In *Four Blacks* (1985), Golub suggests the chasm that exists in American society today. The setting is an urban ghetto. The three men seated in front of a grubby wall watch the spectator – the intruder. Their enormous size and edgy wariness place the viewer, the outsider, in a position of uncomfortable vulnerability. Golub explains:

"I want to make these works as aggressive as I can. . . . They have a look of tension about them that says a lot about who they are, where they are coming from and what they want."⁸

The somber mood is enhanced by the cool, pale blue and green palette. The wall compresses the space, hemming in the figures as well as the viewer so that the drama is enacted upon a confining space that becomes emotionally charged. The woman's disheveled appearance suggests a loss of hope. The spectator is



Four Blacks, acrylic on canvas, 1985, 120" x 183", Collection of The Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.

the intruder here, and Golub raises the question as to who has greater power in society today.

In comparison to the pregnant stillness of *Four Blacks*, *Threnody* (1986) portrays both anguish and action. The painting (one of a series) alludes to political upheavals in Latin America or Africa. The title means "lamentation" and points to the suffering experienced by women due to the violence of war. The journalistic snapshot composition of the painting reinforces the authenticity of the event. The mysterious but clearly horrible action to which the women are reacting is not identified. The awkwardness of the women's positions exaggerates the intensity of their emotions. The syncopated color, patches of red, yellow and orange advancing amid the cool, sunless areas of blue and green, matches in its energy the wild gestures of the distraught figures absorbed in grief. The viewer witnesses the event but is powerless to act.

Although a fallen figure is partially visible in the corner of the painting, the real victims are the women. Grief reduces

war to its most elemental condition – the death of a husband, a son, or a friend. Futility and desperation permeate the drama.

The paintings in this exhibition combine dramatic elements to create an art dealing with social problems as enduring as Goya's *Disasters of War*. The work reveals Golub at his most provocative and compelling, probing issues of power, violence and vulnerability in contemporary society.

Michele Rowe-Shields
Museum Administrator/Curator of Exhibitions
Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum

1. Michael Newman, Interview with Leon Golub, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1982, pp. 6-7.
2. Matthew Baigell, The Mercenaries, An Interview with Leon Golub, Arts Magazine, May 1981, p. 68.
3. Newman, p. 5.
4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. Ibid., p. 4.
6. Lynn Gumpert and Ned Rifkin, *Golub*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, p. 64.
7. Newman, p. 7.
8. Kartemquin Educational Films, *Golub*, 1988.

Acknowledgments

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Bruce Hartman, Director
Gallery of Art

On the cover: *White Squad V*, acrylic on canvas, 1984, 120" x 161", Collection of The Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.



Threnody, acrylic on canvas, 1986, 120" x 167", Collection of The Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.

Checklist of the Exhibition

(all works courtesy of The Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.)

1) *Four Blacks*

acrylic on canvas, 1985
120" x 183"

2) *Mercenaries III*

acrylic on canvas, 1980
120" x 198"

3) *Threnody*

acrylic on canvas, 1984
120" x 167"

4) *White Squad V*

acrylic on canvas, 1984
120" x 161"

5) *Wounded Sphinx*

acrylic on canvas, 1988
120" x 154"

6) *Portrait of Nelson Rockefeller (1970)*

acrylic on canvas, 1976
22" x 18"

7) *Portrait of Nelson Rockefeller (1941)*

acrylic on canvas, 1976
23" x 18"

8) *Portrait of Nelson Rockefeller (1976)*

acrylic on canvas, 1976
22" x 19"

9) *Portrait of Nelson Rockefeller*

acrylic on canvas, 1976
18" x 17"

10) *Portrait of Nelson Rockefeller (1971)*

acrylic on canvas, 1976
17" x 17"