Detail of *Interrogation II* by Leon Golub Photo: Diana Church

By Hunter Drohojowska

A NUDE WOMAN'S WRISTS ARE bound, her eyes and mouth covered with tape. A man in paramilitary garb shoves her head forward while another tightens the rope around her wrists.

This is a painting by Leon Golub, in a retrospective exhibit organized by the New Museum in New York and now touring the country. The galleries are electric with the energy from enormous, unstretched canvases of mercenaries, interrogators and their victims. The backgrounds of the paintings are blood red. The figures are rendered in khaki or blue, roughly drawn, selected from newspaper and magazine photos. The paint is scraped down so that the figures appear raw and bruised.

With the rising interest in neo-expressionism has come increased attention to Golub's art. One of his paintings was on the cover of *Art in America* in January 1984. The artist, 63, feels vindicated by his new acclaim. Since the 1950s he has been painting figuratively, and therefore was an outsider to prevailing art world trends. Influenced by Jean Dubuffet and primitive art, his works had been internal and subjective until the Vietnam war galvanized his opinions.

Since then, his work has been overtly political, at first critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and now of U.S. financial support for mercenaries in Central America. He lives in New York with his wife Nancy Spero, an artist whose work is similarly motivated.

The bald dome of Golub's head tops a face of a million expressions. Brown eyes ceaselessly flicker, taking in his surroundings; his ears poke out, absorbing every word. He is an information addict and before the interview even begins he is chatting at high speed about human rights violations, metal detectors in airports, the art world and his own work.

This interview was conducted in La Jolla, Calif., where Golub's work is on exhibit at the La Jolla Museum of Contempory Art. It moves to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art February 8-April 7, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts April 18-June 2 and the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., July 6-September 8.

How did you force yourself into making these horrific paintings?

In a way I've always done it. My earlier paintings from the '50s—such as one called "Damaged Man": that's a flayed skin. There's your victim. The notions of people in power—authority figures—I had that in the paintings of shamans, priests and philosophers. What I've done is to enlarge and change their circumstances.

What I try to do now is get more objective. I wanted to represent people who look like you and I do, and how we respond to the kinds of pressures around us. On one level, my paintings are very unreal because they are so much larger and grosser than we are. The point is that their enlargement is the only way you can get to the enormity of what is actually occurring: tortures and killing. If I made it realistic in a more conventional way, it would not have that sense of being...(long pause)...omnipresent.

When you're in a gallery, you're enclosed by the paintings. You can almost suffocate in that kind of enclosure. There's no escape, no exit.

Up to the '60s, you were painting figures of authority, but they were about the inner state.

I wanted to get outside myself and look at the world, but there were two problems. First, you have to get outside your oversubjective self. Artists are very indulgent. There's an enormous narcissism in the making of art, and they are always watching themselves. In addition, you've got to escape the circumstances of the art world itself, which tends to self-enclose and be elitist. In the '60s and much of the '70s you rarely saw anything in art that had anything to do with any events whatsoever that were taking place. Even personal and psychological events were excluded, let alone external, historical events.

The problem becomes one of reinventing and reentering, of moving outside this window of the art world. The window was frosted, so you couldn't even look out.

How did this situation evolve?

Nineteenth-century history painting got off the track because it became sentimental and it glorified positions of power. It sentimentalized people like Napolean and told

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untrue stories of how they lived their lives and how power was used in those societies. They were romances, and cowboy stories.

The [kind of] obstractions that [supplanted] history painting ended up not reporting on anything at all. Now you have a kind of revolt by many younger artists who want a certain kind of tangibility, or a special sensuality which has to do with the textures of things—with effects, emotions, surfaces, ironies, images that are symbolic of the way we function on an everyday basis. Art is seen in a disjunctive way because we are in the process of destabilizing a lot of things.

Were the events of the '60s pivotal for you? Yes. I was doing paintings like *Gigantomachy*, those nude men. That is more violent than most, more of a street scene. But even in that one, the figures are in a location that is a universal kind of space. The figures are generalized, have to do with survival, the notion of men struggling with each other. An endless kind of struggle, like Sisyphus.

That is one way of looking at power, control and vulnerability—that life, on some level, finally ends up being at least irrational. But there was this Vietnam war going on every day. It was full of horrendous tales and photographs. I had claimed my work was public and political, yet it had nothing to do with these things.

But you can't go two directions at once. So I compromised. In the painting called *Napalm*, I kept the generality, the nudes like Greek sculpture, but I got specific with their wounds. Then I was compelled to go further, to put uniforms on them. I described this crisis with a joke—whether I wanted to spend the rest of my life painting wrinkles. I learned to love the wrinkles. And the most fascinating part of all, I began to give them looks.

What do you mean by "looks"? You're trying to get their naturalness, so that someone who's a mercenary or an interrogator is maybe your kid brother, or your father, the same father who brings you back a toy. That guy earlier in the day was doing something unspeakable.

Political art is often dismissed by critics. I think it's been exaggerated that art can't be political. That comes from the closures of the system—things that were permitted and not permitted.

Is political art telling us anything that we don't hear on the evening news already? That argument shouldn't be applied just to political art. What about an artist who paints still lifes? What's new about that? What about somebody who paints abstractions? There's an irritability about political art just as there used to be about figurative art in the '50s and '60s. "What could possibly be new about figurative art? It's dead." Well, it turns out that some of the people who claimed that are *deader*.

Your painting could be accused of sensationalism. I think sensationalism is part of the world. Smashing people around is sensational. Exaggeration and vulgarity are part of the world. I wouldn't want to be in the position of painting people in nice houses, showing them at their entertainments. I think that's just a cover-up.

Society permits you to have civilized veneers. Most Americans are not mercenaries. They go to their jobs, dress in clean clothes, pick up the children from school. They're well-meaning. But at some level, it's not real at all. Because we're living in a world where we control some 60 to 70 percent of the world's resources.

Americans have it good. We intend to stay number one. You know what the election was about? That Americans intend to stay number one. Even when Americans don't have much, they know they have more than most people in the world and they want a foreign policy that will keep it that way. "Do whatever it takes, but don't tell me about it," is the attitude. ■

Hunter Drohojowska is art editor of the L.A. Weekly.

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NEW YORK, NY

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