

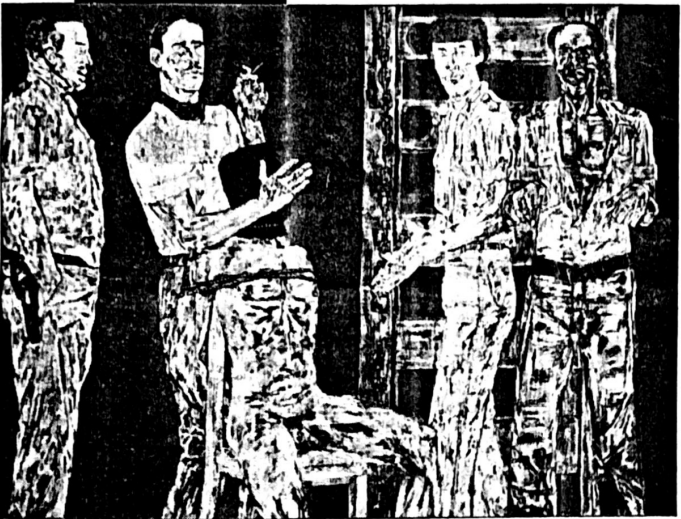
# Leon Golub Explains It All for You

by Hunter Drohojowska



Painter Leon Golub in front of his White Squad III (right) and White Squad IV.

Michael Arthur



Interrogation II.

Diana Church



Riot II.

D. James Dee

**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 frightening scene was painted by Leon Golub. Similarly violent images mar the serenity of the La Jolla Museum of Art through January 27. The galleries are electric with the energy from these enormous, unstretched canvases of mercenaries, interrogators, and their victims. In another one, a man cringes on the floor as a military officer aims a pistol at the back of his head. Adjacent to this, a high-booted mercenary stuffs a body into the trunk of a car. The backgrounds of these paintings are blood red. The figures are rendered in khaki or blue, roughly drawn, obviously 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 interest in Golub's art. One of his paintings was on the cover of *Art in America* last January. The retrospective at the La Jolla Museum was organized by the New Museum in New York. The artist, 63, feels vindicated by his new acclaim. Since the 1950s he has been painting figuratively, and therefore was an outsider to the prevailing trends in the art world. His influences were Jean Dubuffet and primitive art, and his art 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 this country's financial support of 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 about, taking in his surroundings; his ears poke out, absorbing every word. He's an information addict and, before the interview even begins, he is chatting at high speed about human-rights violations, metal detectors in airports, vacations in Puerto Rico, the art world in general and, specifically, his own work. At the Installation Gallery in San Diego, he has just completed a wall drawing of a "heretic's fork," a medieval torture device. His wincing victim has the fork, double-pronged on both ends, wedged under the chin and against the chest, so the head cannot move or talk. Golub calls it a "metaphor for the censorship of ideas and for intellectual conformity, which are more evident today than 15 years ago."

**Weekly:** How did you force yourself into making these horrific paintings? What was the process? When was the moment you knew you wanted to paint pictures of people as victimizers and victims?

**Golub:** In a way, I've always done it. My

earlier paintings from the 1950s, such as that 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 enlarge and change their circumstances. In a sense, instead of internalizing them, which is what I did in the early paintings, I became more objective. *Damaged Man* is rhetorical and generalized. It doesn't represent someone like you or me.

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 these kinds of pressures around us. How we are vulnerable in our own skins is unlike how we are vulnerable in a more generalized way. You put the actors on stage [in a painting] and you have them carrying out the actions which they perform in the real world — in the basements of police stations and in different countries. This is something I thought about when I came to the museum today. On one level, my paintings are very unreal because they are so much larger and grosser than we are. They're not realistic because they are so extreme in the way they are arrived at.

I'm overselling this thing in a certain sense. 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. We're surrounded by it. It's occurring simultaneously all over the world.

How do you get that kind of presentation? When you're in that gallery downstairs, you're enclosed by the paintings. You can almost suffocate in that kind of enclosure. There's no escape, no exit. You get that sense of being in a living tomb, that once you are caught by these people, your chances of escape are almost nil. How do you make it especially gross, to get that sense of claustrophobia, the actual condition of being without appeal? You have to project yourself into the situation.

**Weekly:** Up until the '60s, you were painting figures of authority, but they were about the inner state. What happened in your life that made you want to objectify them?

**Golub:** I looked at the work and decided I didn't want to keep churning around in the same way. I wanted to get outside myself and look at the world. There were two problems. First, you have to get outside your over-subjective self. Artists are very indulgent. There's an enormous narcissism in the making of art, and they are always watching themselves. They are reluctant to externalize their emotions. In a way, there is still a kind of intimate embrace that the artist gives her or his work.

In addition, you've got to escape the circumstances of the art world itself, which tend to self-enclose and be elitist, anyway. The main fact is that in the '60s and much of the '70s you rarely saw anything in art that had anything to do with

continued on next page

...y." 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. So I was constrained to find a way of handling this. Yet, I didn't want to give up my generalities.

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 — it was whether I wanted to spend the rest of my life painting wrinkles. If you want to characterize adequately, you have to do this sort of thing. So I learned to love the wrinkles. And the most fascinating part of all, I began to give them looks.

**Weekly:** *What do you mean by "looks"?*  
**Golub:** 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. They're not all sadists and masochists. Even if they were, you have a human element. They're vulnerable at the point of their greatest obsession. So you recognize that the gap between you and them is not as great as you might think.

**Weekly:** *Politics and art is a difficult marriage. Maybe Social Realism has given political art a bad name, but political art is often dismissed critically. What do you think the reasons might be, and are they justified?*

**Golub:** See, I don't think it's difficult. If you're a political animal, it's probably more natural to connect the two than not. 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.

**Weekly:** *Speaking as the devil's advocate, is political art telling us anything that we don't hear on the evening news already?*

**Golub:** Let me ask you something. What about an artist who paints still lifes, what's new about that? What about somebody who paints abstractions? Abstractions have been common to 20th-century art for 75 years. That argument shouldn't be applied just to political art. 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 dead.

**Weekly:** *Your painting could be accused of sensationalism . . .*

**Golub:** 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 the children up 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 or 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. People called Mondale a wimp because they were afraid that he'd give it away. So 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. ■



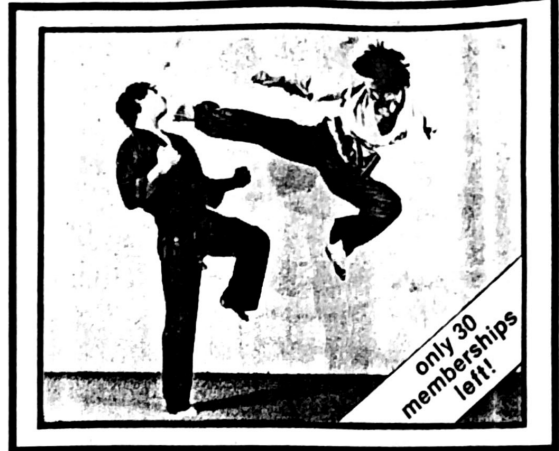
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