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 a mounting 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 product. You need a public art to deal with power and corruption, to deal with the implausible and to deal with survival."(2)

But his work in the early sixties when this was written, his gigantic Francisco Franco paintings, inspired by late Roman and Hellenistic art, figures of heroic stature 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 "Dagantomachie" was 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 looked 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 idealized 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. And perhaps, the locales of the "Mercenaries" are not stated, they record their action as witnessed. They are certainly the work of an American painter. "This is an American presence," he writes, "the projection of a very powerful society which wants to stay Number One... I don’t think that figure of this kind--reflecting 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 surplus 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 fromrado-macabre 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 "mero" 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 they 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 power? 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 scored 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.
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, '76 (cat. pub., essay by Edward Bryant); Susan Caldwell, Inc., NY, '82 (2 exhibitions).

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


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


Selected bibliography by the artist:

"Utopia/Anti-Utopia," Artforum, May '72.

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

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