

LEON GOLUB *Danse Macabre*

March 14 – May 3, 2014

Leon Golub (1922–2004) was one of America's great political painters. Keenly observant, he registered the upheavals and dislocations of an openly or latently aggressive society: racism, urban crime, the abyss of war, physical and psychic infirmities, and bottled-up, repressed rage. Golub became famous for his monumental, nearly cinematographic cycles of paintings of warfare in *Vietnam*, *Mercenaries*, and *Interrogations*. They are historical paintings without heroes, in which the focus is on the human body as the actual site of violence. With the events of September 11, 2001 and the United States' "war on terror," these works took on a new currency, to which Golub reacted with a final group of large format tableaux, seen at the Documenta 11 in 2002. The exhibition at Barbara Gross Galerie spans the arc from these to the more intimate, but no less volatile works on paper Golub produced in his final years of creativity.

In *Two Heads II* (1989), the earliest of the works shown here, the rough surface of the painting represents the style typical of Golub's works from the 1980s. After being applied, the paint was dissolved with alcohol and partially scraped off again with a sharp blade. The furrowed, lacerated texture of the painting corresponds to the exhausted, haggard expression in the faces of the two men. The underlying threat merely alluded to in this work breaks out explicitly in the large Documenta work, *Disappear You* (2001), or the oil pen drawings *Hung* and *From Out of Hell* (2000): dogs with bared teeth, maltreated bodies, the out-of-control conditions in the prison camp and the prison, the permanent state of emergency.

As he aged, Golub increasingly turned to smaller formats. His drawings are fleeting, impatient; the stroke is put rapidly to paper, shapes disintegrating. Mythological motifs recall Golub's early enthusiasm for antiquity, while his integration of slogan-like text fragments adds sometimes biting humorous commentaries to the visual statements. The theme of collective political violence recedes into the background—not because he is finished with it, but because Golub is approaching it from a different, private side.

This personal perspective lends the works on paper something conciliatory, despite all of their harshness. Here, Golub steers the gaze away from the excesses of senseless aggression to small gestures of resistance and the challenging showdown. Masculine encroachment (seen in the posers in *Not Bad Huh?*, 2003) is answered with a loaded gun or contentious sexuality (*You're Going to do What?*, 2003, and *Golden Girl 2*, 2003). The exuberant dance of the goat-footed female faun with the skull ridicules death (*Danse Macabre*, 2004). Recurring stray dogs are not just apocalyptic heralds that will inhabit the world after the human order breaks down and decay spreads, but also symbols of freedom and the wild.

Leon Golub, born in 1922 in Chicago, died in 2004 in New York, where he had lived and worked—after a five-year sojourn in Paris—since 1964. In 1996 he and his wife, the artist Nancy Spero, received the Hiroshima Art Prize. His work was seen at the Documentas in 1964, 1987, and 2002, as well as the 2001 and 2003 Venice Biennials. Solo shows at the Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid 2011; The Drawing Center, New York, 2010; the Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, 2003; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 2001; the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, 2000; the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2000, and others.