Cultural Daily

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# Remembering Leon Golub

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, March 7th, 2018

As a consequence of the current (thru May 27) exhibition,"Leon Golub Raw Nerve," at The Met Breuer, I began to reconstruct my relationship with this prodigious artist who, in addition to creating art of monumental significance (his paintings were often 10 x 24 feet), demonstrated unequivocal social consciousness.

We first met in New York around 1967. He and his wife Nancy Spero, one of the originating feminist artists, had recently relocated from Paris. Our connection was through our kids who attended the Lycée Française. Leon and Nancy shared mine and my wife Mary's social and political concerns of the day — most prominently civil rights and the war in Vietnam. The New York art world was exploding with incredible origination and energy manifested in the seminal work of Andy Warhol, Merce Cunningham and John Cage, among others. However, there was also a respected place for socially conscious endeavors.

Leon Golub always held a distinguished place in that less stylish art world environment. He taught at Rutgers and exhibited mostly in his studio. He was involved with artist groups protesting the war in Vietnam and those endorsing civil rights, feminism, gay rights and artists' rights. His involvement with politics and social issues was visceral.

In September 1972, we met by chance on an Amtrak train to Washington. I had just been hired by the Smithsonian to develop National Bicentennial programs and was, the following day, reporting for my first day at work. Leon and a small group of peace activists, including Candice Bergen, planned to demonstrate their opposition to the war in Vietnam. They were going to chain themselves to the Senate doors blocking access. Leon invited me to join them. I hesitated. My wife and I had participated in many anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and marches. I admired Leon's group's plan of action, but knew that if I used being in jail as an excuse for not showing up for work, I would lose my contract. with the Smithsonian. Incidentally, the group was arrested by the Capital Police. I believe that they spent the night in jail.

America's VietNam misadventure finally ended. Civil Rights legislation was passed by Congress. Periodically, I would bump into Leon and Nancy at New York art events. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan initiated a proxy war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government. Opposition became a cause célebre among liberals. Here again, our paths crossed. While attending an anti-Contra pro-Nicaraguan Sandinista political support meeting, a friend told me that Leon Golub had just donated $60,000, the proceeds from the recent sale of a painting, to the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture. What a magnanimous gesture! I don't recalll having heard of many other artists doing

anything similar.

While digesting this news, I asked myself if I could have done the same thing. I had a dozen valid reasons why I could not do it. Consequently, my admiration for Leon as an activist/artist was considerably enhanced. I applaud The Met for presenting an exhibition of this artist who never deviated from his mission of exposing the evils of society in his work while, on a personal level, supporting those causes which he considered to be just.

**Image above:** *Gigantomachy II* (1966) Leon Golub (American, 1922–2004). Acrylic on linen, 9 ft. 11 1/2 in. x 24 ft. 10 1/2 in. (303.5 x 758.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts and Stephen, Philip, and Paul Golub, 2016 (2016.696). © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

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