

Leon Golub: Bite Your Tongue. Serpentine gallery London, 4th march to 17th May 2015

Severed hands..... I recall a talk given by Leon Golub in the mid 1980's where he and Nancy Spero sat with the audience afterwards answering questions. An image of a victim whose hands had been cut off during the Vietnam War suddenly slipped into the conversation. The normally lucid Golub glazed over and became incoherent and appeared mesmerised. Spero 'snapped him out of it', by talking through and remembering where they first encountered the image and resolved their apprehension of this cruel or symbolically evil act of dismemberment.

The title of this retrospective show, 'Bite your Tongue', refers to the blocking of speaking and implies several levels of meaning in the exhibition: The audience may have bitten its' collective tongue, astounded by the aestheticized malevolence of *Mercenaries 1V*, 1980. The author and by extension the audience may in a Freudian sense have experienced loss of speech as a result of sympathetic psychic trauma induced by *Interrogation 111*, 1981; or the subject in this painting of torture by CIA trained Contra agents and mercenaries engaged in covert political activity in Central America, has bitten her tongue and is silent. Likewise some of those who might defend her human rights have been silenced.

Semantic meaning in Art is conveyed through facial expression, figural gesture, titles, statements, discussion and criticism. The depiction of hands gesturing, taunting, pointing guns, tucked in Jeans, holding a cigarette or tethered is overt in most of Golub's works. His response to the severed hands I mentioned is understandable in light of Gerald Marzorati's account of how a person under torture will follow the torturer's conversation and gestures looking for signs of humanness and for hope. Though it is difficult to glean any signs from the brutes portrayed- they are what we have to work with.

These 1980's Interrogation series are installed in the central domed gallery at the Serpentine, a former tea pavilion in the centre of Hyde Park. They depict interrogators at work or at down time: figural compositions across flat or generic backgrounds: it is ironic that these grand history paintings in the line of Jaques-Louis David, should hold pride of place in the art world yet they 'loudly' display a non-place: a torture chamber.

The show is introduced by the Monster school paintings of the 1950's flanked on one side by Golub's late works or Dog paintings and on the other by the Vietnam paintings. *Vietnam 1* 1972, is positioned nearby *Gigantomachy 11* 1966 and the retrospective turns on this juxtaposition. The transition from universal human suffering mirrored from the battles of the gods of the Pergamon alter, visually akin to a naked game of rugby with a raw painterly surface, to the specific consciousness of history painting of the Vietnam war is the politicised focus of Golub's life's work.

A massive misshapen canvas *Vietnam 1* 1972 inverts the implication of a return to the old orders of figurative painting by cutting and erasing areas of the canvas. The homogeneity of painting is refused and the audience becomes aware of the unusual production of the work. We are left wondering what element of violence Golub would choose to remove. The overall composition of the work reminds me of Degas', *The Young Spartans* with its' two groups confronting one another, though for Golub youthful energy is transposed onto the violent political stage as one of the young soldiers

turns to look at the viewer as participant rather than voyeur. The influence of photography is felt in this posed gaze. Golub collected numerous images from the media as reference material. Both Leon and Nancy Spero were political activists: he joined the artist and writers anti-war group in 1964 and Nancy was part of the Women's Ad HOC committee. The discourse that accompanied these activities informs the politicised transition into the Vietnam series and is inseparable from the idea of artwork where the author is producer.

Proletarians are nevertheless invariably displayed as brutalised and brutalising in this show, there's little reprieve or salvation on offer. There is no sense that a revolutionary proletariat could politically emerge from these depictions. There is a strong and vivid sense of protest that is coupled with impotence. Goya who is clearly an influence through his Disasters of War series, for example the etching *Why? 1810* directly shows a soldier being strangled. His Cappricho series however visually satirically connects the class structure of society with the clergy and aristocrats horsing around on the backs of blind peasants. By extension Terry Atkinson makes connection with the structure of the means of production with his titles in his WW1 paintings.

Elsewhere, not included in this show, Golub has produced portraits of corporate and military power selecting patriarchal figures such as Franco and Rockefeller. These effigies of power structure are not critically applied to the class structure of the Interrogation, Mercenaries or Vietnam series. Is the aim to reveal a deep fascination with power or to resist this? The Sphinx as self-portrait is a recurring theme. It's possible to imagine Golub as Oedipus asking the sphinx 'what is the riddle of the politicisation of aesthetics?' In the process of destroying the riddle of power he and the viewer alike are implicated through fascination with its' spectacle.