

Press Release

Et In Arcadia Ego

Leon Golub with Philip Guston, David Hammons, Rashid Johnson, Wifredo Lam, Sharon Lockhart, Robert Longo, Teresa Margolles, Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Taryn Simon

Conceived by Rashid Johnson

5 September - 19 October 2024

Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street



‘To be an artist means to never avert one’s eyes’

Akira Kurosawa

New York... ‘Et In Arcadia Ego’ takes the work of late American master **Leon Golub** (1922-2004) as a starting point to consider artists’ approaches to issues of conflict and uncertainty. Conceived by **Rashid Johnson**, this exhibition consists of a solo presentation of Golub’s paintings from the early 1950s to the late 1990s on the fifth floor of the gallery’s 22nd Street building, and a complementary group presentation of works in different mediums by international artists, including both Golub and Johnson himself, that spans the post-war period to the present day on the gallery’s second floor.

Taken together, the works on the second floor invite expanded insights into the psychic and sociopolitical approaches Golub took in depicting uses and abuses of power. Among the artists Johnson chose for this presentation are **Philip Guston** (1913-1980), **David Hammons**, **Wifredo Lam** (1902-1982), **Sharon Lockhart**, **Robert Longo**, **Teresa Margolles**, **Tiona Nekkia McClodden** and **Taryn Simon**. The exhibition also includes text excerpts from such writers as **Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones** (1934-2014), and **Samuel Beckett** (1906-1989)—prose that provides another entry point to the complexities of human nature expressed throughout the show.



The title, 'Et In Arcadia Ego,' is taken from Golub's 1997 painting 'Time's Up,' in which the archaic Latin phrase is inscribed over an upturned skull. Referencing a classical masterwork by Italian Baroque artist Guercino (1591-1666), the words 'et in arcadia ego' are typically translated to mean 'I too am in Paradise,' with the 'I' referring to death. Golub, who first studied art history at the University of Chicago before serving as a cartographer of aerial reconnaissance maps in World War II, lived with his wife, artist Nancy Spero, in Italy from 1956-57. There they found lasting inspiration in Etruscan and Roman art, which Golub believed 'represented cosmopolitan urban culture under stress' in its focus on themes of authority and violence.

True to Golub's practice of collecting and archiving ephemera—slogans, graffiti, tattoos, news photographs and other publicly available imagery—from which to cull for his own compositions, the Latin phrase also suggests associations beyond classical sources. In a sketch he made of a hangman, Golub drafted the phrase 'A Judiciary Error'—a possible reference to the deviant warmongering Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's book 'Blood Meridian' (1985), a character who first appears in the novel sitting on a rock in the middle of the desert with 'Et in Arcadia Ego' inscribed on his gun.

Rashid Johnson describes such layered associations as the 'radical juxtapositions' and 'proxy positionings' that have long animated his interest in Golub's oeuvre. Johnson remembers first experiencing the intensely visceral impact of scale and materiality in Golub's work while exploring the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago as a student. (Johnson graduated with an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005 and Golub in 1950.) Since then, Johnson has come to believe that it is Golub's relentless approach to bearing witness—his activism—that exerts a consistent influence. His works make ever-present such successive internalized modern horrors as the Holocaust, the traumas of the atomic bomb, the highly mediated abuses of the Vietnam War and American interventions in South Africa and Central America in the 1980s. Johnson explains, 'In looking back at the psychological condition of post-war sensibility, I think, as a contemporary African American artist, there are critical and philosophical parallels. I'm interestingly positioned to talk about the potentially transgressive and polarizing dynamic of experiencing a sense of tragedy while figuring out how to illustrate and navigate it.'

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Reframing Golub through what he calls a ‘kaleidoscopic unpacking,’ Johnson has selected works for the exhibition that reach across the Golub’s career, exploring both his aesthetic and thematic approaches to the dynamics of power and vulnerability. These include Golub’s forceful depictions of people from different backgrounds and his covert uses of masking—including the face itself as a mask—and what Johnson sees as Golub’s desire to create and occupy transitional space. In the complementary group exhibition of works by artist predecessors and successors in time, Johnson opens a visual conversation that serves to broaden the viewer’s understanding of Golub’s prodigious artistic and philosophical project.

‘Et In Arcadia Ego’ was conceived by Rashid Johnson and developed in consultation with Hauser & Wirth Curatorial Senior Director Kate Fowle. The exhibition includes major works by Leon Golub on loan from The Broad and the Meyer Collections, as well as new works created for ‘Et In Arcadia Ego’ by Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Robert Longo.

Public Programming

From Tuesday 8 October to Thursday 10 October the gallery will screen a series of films selected by Johnson—including ‘Stray Dog’ (1949) by Akira Kurosawa—that amplify some of Golub’s historical contexts and sources of inspiration.

About Leon Golub

The complex dynamics of power, violence and politics pervade the breadth of Leon Golub’s paintings. Born in Chicago in 1922, Golub received his BA in art history from the University of Chicago in 1942. Golub subsequently attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he received his BFA and MFA in 1949 and 1950, respectively, after serving as an army cartographer in WWII.

In the late 1940s, Golub met the artist Nancy Spero (1926–2009) to whom he was married, and collaborated with variously, for nearly 50 years. During this time, Golub became involved with the Monster Roster Group: a post-war circle of artists based in Chicago and united by a shared fascination with surrealism, mythology and ancient art, systems of representation, and the politics of social critique. This early engagement, especially for its motion away from then dominant abstract modes of painting, informed the rest of Golub’s career.

In 1950, Golub co-founded the event ‘Exhibition Momentum,’ a confrontational response to the Art Institute of Chicago’s banning of undergraduate submissions to its annual ‘Artists of Chicago and Vicinity’ exhibition. This recalcitrant form of activism proved typical for Golub, remaining a constant facet of his artistic career and personal life. Indeed, Golub was often called upon to lend his voice to political causes and artistic debate.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the subject matter of Golub’s work pivots as his attention increasingly turned to diverse manifestations of terrorism: from the subversive operations of governments to urban street violence and corrupt dynamics of power. References to interrogations, war, torture and mortality repeatedly surface in these later works, as Golub tackles themes of violent aggression, racial inequality, gender ambiguity, marginalization, oppression and exclusion.

From the 1990s until his death, Golub experimented with a greater illusionism: often appropriating graphic styles from ancient carvings, medieval manuscripts and contemporary graffiti.

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Time's Up
1997
Acrylic on linen
236.5 x 433.7 x 0.3 cm / 93 1/8 x 170 3/4 x 1/8 in

Figure Gesturing
1982
Acrylic on linen
102.9 x 99.1 cm / 40 1/2 x 39 in
Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer

Philosopher IV
1958
Lacquer and oil on canvas
206.5 x 120.7 x 3.8 cm / 81 1/4 x 47 1/2 x 1 1/2 in
210.8 x 126.7 x 7.6 cm / 83 x 49 7/8 x 3 in (framed)
Photo: Alex Delfanne