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Heart on Canvas: Three Manhattan Shows, Three Politically Edgy Painters

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If all art is political, directly or indirectly, then our time is uniquely filled with breezy stuff that effortlessly plumps for the status quo. Still, there are artists who buck the funfair trends. Among these is an intergenerational group of talented painters, the best of whom mine a rich history to buttress their contrarian efforts. Whenever I'm asked how I reconcile a preoccupation with politics with a love of painting, I'm quick to answer. It's a law of percentages that the world's oldest artistic medium should provide only a few original revelations along with convention centers full of trivial entertainments.

Three current Manhattan exhibitions — Leon Golub and Ida Applebroog at Hauser & Wirth's uptown and downtown galleries (respectively) and Jorge Tacla at Cristin Tierney in Chelsea — tack against the prevailing winds, offering viscerally topical shows that explore not vapid painting processes or digital ephemera but themes of trauma, suffering, and violence. Vivid examples of painting with a political edge, these exhibitions also push some of the medium's panic buttons. Rather than simply depict how the personal becomes political, each of these artists ransacks painting's history to make his or her individual political narrative compellingly personal.

Chief among modern history painters this century is the late Leon Golub. Though he has been gone eleven years, his influence casts an appropriately long shadow over several generations. "Leon Golub: Riot" presents a mini-survey of the artist's drawings and paintings that includes large-scale pieces from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s — the first such display in New York since a 2001 Brooklyn Museum retrospective. Raw, impolite, and unruly, Golub's eleven canvases and sixteen drawings enact a dirty street fight on the posh walls of Hauser & Wirth's refurbished East 69th Street townhouse.

A mix of modest works and monumental canvases, "Riot" channels the Chicago-born painter's profound engagement with the issues of his time: America's covert wars; political torture; and Western culture's infatuation with art for art's sake (think late abstract expressionism and pop art). After serving in Europe during World War II, Golub ruminated hard on its cruelties. He developed his own brand of expressive figuration, indebted in equal parts to Jean Dubuffet's art brut, Alberto Giacometti's thin men, and Francis

Bacon's screaming popes. The paintings at Hauser & Wirth combine untreated canvas, acrylic, and lacquer. After applying the last two, Golub routinely scraped away layers of buildup with a meat cleaver.

Rather than repeat protest art's simple bromide ("Which side are you on?"), Golub's best works confront the viewer with the weird enormity of regular foot soldiers, protesters, and Sisyphean men. The paintings Riot V and Napalm I, for example, present rough-hewn antiheroes struggling against unseen forces, their heads and hands lifted imploringly or protectively against anticipated blows. Another canvas, Colossal Torso III, effectively reduces the human body to a place of violation: The painting's surface is soaked in solvents, eviscerated, cut to shreds. Though Golub made it in 1960, it's hard not see in Colossal Torso III a premonition of today's beheading videos. Fastened to the wall with grommets, these and other large Golub pictures assume the status of endangered frescoes while also invoking world-heritage sites threatened by ISIS and Boko Haram.

A second exhibition to take on the polemics of power in human relations is Ida Applebroog's multipart painting installation. On view at her gallery's cavernous 18th Street space (it was once the fabled disco the Roxy), the show features a single video, 29 painted chairs, and 31 ink-on-Mylar figures that hang from the ceiling like stadium banners. The paintings include a ten-foot-tall image of a man blithely sporting an epic schlong, and a triptych that depicts three crouching, spread-legged women. Rendered in the artist's signature simplified figures — they look like supersize traffic-sign pedestrians, but angrier — Applebroog's stylized runway models provide acid commentary on gender politics, larger-than-life messaging, and sociosexual dysfunction.

Titled "The Ethics of Desire" after Plato's scholarly examination of human appetites, Applebroog's symposium of images unspools like a walk-through slideshow experienced like a bad dream: Some figures sport prosthetic limbs; all the nudes wear shoes. For Plato, analyzing our desires was a way of reflecting on human nature, and on the prospects for individuals to live worthwhile lives. For Applebroog, we are only as good as the resistance we put up to culture's blingiest temptations. Her giant figures don't merely mock big-dick clichés and strappy heels, they present truncated correctives to what the artist sees as society's overwhelmingly commercial and sexist brand of moral education.

Elsewhere in Chelsea, Jorge Tacla's grisaille paintings of things falling apart (to steal a line from Yeats) confirm the medium's possibilities as an excellent vehicle for humanity's most moving stories. An artist who, like thousands of others in the 1970s and '80s, suffered the topsy-turvy politics of his native Chile, Tacla moved on to a career of painting sublime views of the world's worst nightmares. Among past subjects are Middle East wars, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the 9-11 disaster (he's one of the few contemporary artists to have painted the aftermath of the attack on the twin towers). Tacla never focuses on the violence itself, just on the damage. As a result, his paintings of crumbled buildings juggle themes of destruction, aggression, and the light and shadow that shape fragmentary memory.

Tacla's most recent paintings find their sources in photographs and memories of photographs. Done in a palette of navy and charcoal, they mix oil and wax to achieve an underwater look. Titled "Hidden Identities," the current exhibition alludes to a little-known character in Latin American history: La Flaca Alejandra (real name Marcia Merino), who was tortured and spent decades giving up her former leftist comrades to Pinochet's secret police. A cruel casualty of Stockholm syndrome, this character is memorialized in several canvases: a blurry smiling portrait, a picture of an empty bed, and two more images of supine women. Are they victims or pinups? The paintings don't let on. But like Gerhard Richter's October 18, 1977 — a fifteen- painting suite about the Baader-Meinhof gang — Tacla's canvases drive home a seditious idea: History, too, is a traitor.

Several bigger paintings in Tacla's show reproduce scumbled views of bombed-out munitions factories in Republican Spain. It's possible to see in their mangled spires echoes of El Greco's rapturebound, corkscrewing bodies — the same ones that shocked Spain's King Philip II and his cronies. This artist's example — like Golub's and Applebroog's — indicates a contemporary road rarely taken. Painting from a contrary heritage, it constitutes a signal lesson in how to be currently political.