

Political art—art that directly addresses issues of war, racism, sexism, and nuclear power—has suddenly become a hot ticket on today's market-driven, supposedly apolitical art scene. Signs of a rejuvenated political consciousness abound: Artists are making art with strong, pointed statements; major galleries and collectors are showing and buying it; and institutional bastions of official culture like the Museum of Modern Art are sponsoring shows of an uncompromising nature such as last year's "Committed to Print," a survey of political graphics from 1960 to 1980.

There have always been artists pushing a political agenda from the margins of the modern-art world. The question is, why are today's political artists suddenly being admitted into the limelight? Is the newfound popularity of political art just another calculated move, the channeling of genuine passion into mere commodity, or does it say something significant about new currents of cultural thought?

One clue lies in the formal sophistication of today's political art. While many artists are working with similar themes, they rarely work with the clichés of classic political art (posters, slogans, banners, murals). Like all art of depth and complexity, the best of it resists easy definition. Although often related to a specific topical event, political art in the Eighties is art first and foremost rather than propaganda.

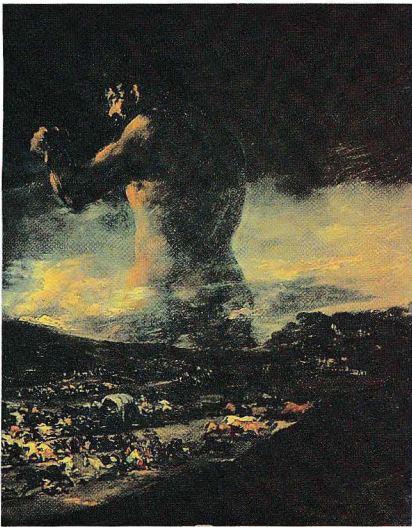
Some of the best political artists even try to escape that classification. Richard Flood, director of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, which represents several major political artists, among them the pio-

neering Leon Golub and the younger Mike Glier, says, "In Golub's case, I prefer the term 'historical.' His work goes beyond politics and enters the realm of history—and history is always a fiction." After Golub worked in obscurity during the Fifties, his recent paintings depicting state-sanctioned torture have been widely praised by an art world that had dismissed his earlier, similarly unequivocal work as crude or reactionary. Inspired by actual events in Central America and South Africa, Golub painted an ongoing series of "White Squads," "Mercenaries," and "Interrogations," which portray larger-than-lifesize satiric thugs who grin and wink as they abuse their victims. Intensely disturbing, this body of work has evoked an enthusiastic response from critics, curators, and collectors; last summer, collector Charles Saatchi displayed his considerable Golub collection at the Saatchi Museum in London. From his position as a tenacious outsider, Golub, at 67, has become one of the most admired painters of the decade.

Why now, and not in the politicized Sixties and Seventies? Gallery director Flood speculates that Golub's paintings of that era, which addressed the Vietnam War, were "too close to the American reality of the time." Golub's ascendance also coincided with a critical shift in the art world, when Minimalism was giving way to the figurative imagery of Neo-Expressionism. "The zeitgeist of the early Eighties allowed subject matter to reemerge," explains Flood.

Nancy Spero, who is married to Golub, has also followed the arduous path from the fringes to the center of art action while making politically tough-minded art. Inspired by the feminist revolution of the Seventies, Spero, 63, makes works that analyze the persecution of women throughout the ages. She remembers the years of isolation as "very hard," and describes her partnership with her husband as "an ongoing dialogue that was very encouraging in the face of adversity." (Spero's retrospective opens at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York later this spring.)

Such a major change in art-world opinion directs new attention to precedents. This season offers the first retrospective in 50 years of the art of Francisco Goya. (Originating at the Prado Museum in Spain, "Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment" is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and then travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.) Goya's satirical etching portfolio "Los Caprichos" and the brutal "Disasters of War," his rendition of the Spanish war of independence



Top: *The Colossus*, Goya. Below: *Hera IV*, Diptych, Nancy Spero.

THE MEDIUM HAS A MESSAGE



WHY ARE POLITICAL ARTISTS SUDDENLY IN TODAY'S LIMELIGHT?

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against Napoleon in 1808 to 1814, stand as definitive expressions of the human capacity for cruelty, destruction, and folly. "Disasters" remained hidden from public view throughout the artist's lifetime. Not until 35 years after his death, in 1863, was the collection at last published by the Spanish Royal Academy. Today, after a flood of gruesome images from Vietnam, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and other combat zones, Goya's brand of almost hallucinatory barbarism looks prophetically modern.

Is political art easier to take in the Eighties? The art of the socially tumultuous Sixties (at

NANCY STAPEN

least the art considered important by the critics, curators, and other art-world powers that be) rarely reflected the era's political upheavals directly. The detached symbolism of Pop appropriated the language of mass media; imitating advertising, it seemed to give equal weight to Jackie Kennedy's traumatized, postassassination face as to a can of Campbell's soup, and packaged each for consumption. Color-field painting upheld the high modernist maxim: Art was to be pure, and devoid of worldly reference—a tradition also asserted by the reductive geometry of Minimalism. The most political Sixties movement, Conceptual art, challenged the art-as-commodity syndrome, wrenching itself out of the galleries via art that existed in the head and not on the wall, and with forms that were difficult, if not impossible, to sell. But the photographic documentation of those ideas inevitably ended up for sale in the galleries and the political message was eventually lost on most viewers.

Golub theorizes that contemporary society has the means to co-opt any subversive imagery: "There's nobody I could possibly threaten with my work. Our culture knows how to ignore

oversized figures of torturers and their victims are thrust to the front of the picture plane and float without the anchor of a horizon line. The abstract surface surrounding the figures has been abraded (Golub actually uses a meat cleaver to obtain this effect). Spero's long horizontal scrolls, which sometimes wrap around the four walls of a gallery, evoke the unbroken flow of history. Spero alternates painted and printed figurative imagery with text (culled from such diverse sources as *The New York Times* and a *Cosmopolitan* ad) to convey the changing status of women. Variations of scale cause the viewer to reposition him- or herself constantly, an act that parallels the varying positions women have historically occupied, from prehistoric goddess to subjugated object. Spero's use of repetition suggests that this process is infinitely unfolding.

Spero and Golub have recently enlarged their respective vocabularies. Spero has added a celebratory female figure; for the artist this form acts as "a kind of magiclike cave painting. It counters all the wading in the muck—the paranoia." Golub's recent work is also a departure: His half-man, half-beast "Sphinx" paintings represent an uneasy synthesis of irreconcilable forces—progress and regression, rationality and irrationality.

In such works "political" art veers from the role of reportage to the internal world of dream and hallucination, a path that holds particular appeal for younger artists like Mike Glier, 35. Although Glier's early work directly derived from media images (including a moving series based on the multiple murders of black children in Atlanta in the early Eighties), he is now seeking less didactic interpretations of contemporary events. He has tackled such issues as the homeless, AIDS, and nuclear disaster—his large trompe l'oeil wall drawing inspired by the Chernobyl nuclear accident, executed in 1987 at the Museum of Modern Art as part of its "Projects" series, was a surreal combination of an orderly architectural setting with a nuclear explosion, framed by exquisite blooming vines. Glier's tableaux are obliquely affirmative; even in the face of nuclear annihilation, he sustains the regenerative power of nature.

The support of work like Glier's suggests changes in the Museum of Modern Art's commitment to apolitical modernism. Linda Shearer, MOMA curator of the department of painting and sculpture, and director of the "Projects" series, attributes these new directions to "a generation of younger curators, who have a different kind of involvement with the community." As for the belated recognition of political artists like Golub and Spero, she believes that it is primarily due to the quality of their art: "They've come to the fore today because they're simply very good artists. As fast as one thinks the art world is today, it can also be

THE IDEA OF POLITICAL ART IS AN UNEASY PRESENCE IN THE DISCUSSION OF CONTEMPORARY ART



Today's art takes to the barricades. Clockwise from far left: *Head I* and *Mercenaries IV*, Leon Golub; *Barbara Calling III*, Mike Glier.

it by accepting it."

What, then, is the real effect of political art? Can it change a policy or save a life?

Golub states bluntly, "It can't do any of that." Spero worries about "preaching to the converted" in the limited domain of the gallery setting. But Golub points out, "At the very least, political art enters the discussion. It becomes an uneasy presence at the table of contemporary art. In our current information explosion, it becomes a voice that competes for the attention of the public."

In order to gain that attention Golub and Spero employ formal strategies that underscore their message. In Golub's early Eighties paintings, the cruelties of life in contemporary Central America and South Africa are played out in a spatially scrambled world. Golub's

pretty slow. The tough, hard-hitting content of their work made it difficult to see just how good it is as art."

For Shearer, however, political art is "most interesting to me when it's less overt. Ten years ago, I was in Brazil looking at new work for a show I was curating at that time. I was shown a drawing of folded paper whose creases formed the geometric contours of the drawing, with straight pins inserted at various points. It was a typical late-Seventies abstract work—except that it was made as a response to the artist's experience of imprisonment and torture. Learning that fact gave me goose bumps. And it made me realize we now have to look at the idea of political art in a whole new way.

"Today's younger artists have become involved—and it is a quite subversive involvement—with the larger issues of who is an artist," Shearer continues. "Tim Rollins + K.O.S. are the perfect example of how artists who are interested in making a statement have changed in the Eighties."

The 33-year-old Rollins, who was born in Maine, has spent the last seven years working with disadvantaged learning-disabled teenagers in the South Bronx: "Kids of Survival." Inspired by and literally painting on the pages of literary classics as well as newspapers, comics, and children's books, artist-schoolteacher Rollins and his "kids" have produced elegant, ambitious canvases that have captured the attention of the art world (seven works have even been acquired by the mercurial Saatchi) and the media; last year alone the group was featured on the *Today* show and ABC's *World News Tonight*, and it is currently the subject of a BBC documentary.

The political repercussions of Rollins + K.O.S. resonate on several levels. The very act of focusing the energy of a group of poor inner-city teens into creative work of the highest order challenges the stereotype of antisocial youth, as well as the cherished high-culture notion of the artist as isolated genius. Rollins notes, "If an artist-schoolteacher and 15 kids in one of the poorest districts of the South Bronx can make work of this caliber, it opens up a Pandora's box—it threatens the image of the artist alone making masterpieces in his studio."

Rollins speaks admiringly of Golub and Spero. "I'm highly influenced by them, as well as by the German Express-

sionists. But one problem I've always had with political art is that its representation of a tortured social situation usually pales in comparison to the situation itself, the same way a landscape painting rarely captures the beauty of a real landscape." Rollins also cites the late German artist Joseph Beuys as a formative influence, because he believed that "every person can be an artist. I started investigating ways to make art *with* the people instead of making art *for* the people. And not 'the people' as an abstraction but a small and definite community."

The most overtly political of the K.O.S. series, the Orwell-inspired "From the Animal Farm," describes a barnyard filled with political leaders—Margaret Thatcher as a long-necked goose, P.W. Botha as a vicious guard dog, Reagan as a teetering turtle (another piece portrays George Bush as a wily fox). The work derives from a political/aesthetic tradition of zoomorphic caricatures of figures of power; in fact, it refers to one of Goya's "*Los Caprichos*" prints (a copy of which hangs on the wall of K.O.S.'s Art and Knowledge workshop), a large donkey teaching a student donkey, captioned, "What If the Pupil Knows More?"

More often, the K.O.S. critique is muted in sophisticated metaphorical imagery that recalls aspects of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and Conceptualism. The pages of the novel chosen by the group, whether Kafka's *Amerika* or Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, are used as a background—which in turn becomes a graphic geometric pattern evoking the overall surfaces of Jackson Pollock or the austere grids of Agnes Martin. At the same time they remain words, suggesting that the act of reading is in itself transfiguring.

Political artists of the Eighties—Golub, Spero, Glier, Rollins + K.O.S., and others—give tangible form to events that might otherwise seem unbearable and incomprehensible. They also remind us that aspects of our experience remain enigmatic and beyond our grasp. Paradoxically, this acknowledgment of painful issues gives rise to optimism. In Rollins's inspirational words, "Our enterprise is founded on hope. We believe in hope as a material force in the world."

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