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PERSPECTIVES ON POWER :

THE WORK OF LEON GOLUB

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## INTRODUCTION

"Specialization, cultural discontinuity, and competing ideologies are context and fabric of our heritage. Art no longer speaks a common language. Content was formerly rooted in integrated meanings which were easily inheritable. Today the artist needs to seek for what he is to say and to whom." (1)

Leon Golub

Leon Golub began painting at a time when conflict in the "real world" had just experienced its height of technological destruction - the Second World War, the Jewish holocaust, and the threat made real, of nuclear doom - and when the 'mainstream' art world, following the collapse of Abstract Expressionism, was 'gorging' itself on formalism and 'aesthetic novelties'. This was a lesson which Golub understood and against which he never ceased in his attempt to counteract.

Golub's basic theme has remained constant throughout his life. That is, dealing with oppressors and oppressed, the abuse of power and vulnerability. His current formal device of basing large canvases on composites of photographs of violence dates back to 1946 when he made paintings from newspaper photographs of holocaust victims

"Thus Golub begins with modern historical realism at its most horrific" (2)

But he had not as yet developed the technical and ideological means whereby he could represent the effects and construction of power in society

"almost immediately his work becomes subjective as if registering the impact of that real history" (3)

In this thesis I will attempt to trace the path of development which Golub takes in his 'mission' to place 'real world' conflict back in the art world on a critical level.

This development in Golub's work is slow (it took almost 30 years apprenticeship in fact) but, it is peculiarly unbroken. From a subjective analysis of the artists power in our society (by way of the ideas and images in Primitive Art) he moves to the influence of Roman Art, where he discovers a means of integrating the self with the social, and ultimately leading to what he now terms a 'relative objectivity', which he discovers in the iconographic complexities of the photographic reproduction.

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Leon Golub, Golub, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984, Ned Rifkin and Lynn Gumpert, p. 69
- 2 Donald Kuspit, The Existential/Activist Painter : The Example of Leon Golub, p. 49
- 3 Ibid, p. 49.

## CHAPTER I

### Against the 'kenosis' in post-war American Art - A determination to witness -

"From its beginning in the 19th century modernism was based on the perception of a severe disjunction between human nature and the political and economic systems of the industrial age" (1)

In modernism the Abstract Expressionists such as Pollock, Rothko etc. discovered an art that possessed a capacity to change the consciousness of its audience and to undermine the established order, through joining the political dimension in aesthetics and radical political ideas. Political aspects of art seemed to be central to the era. But once attached to the Communist Party modernists found themselves the subject of Party Control. By the 1940's art had a history of exploitation and misuse by politics, so these artists wanted to avoid simplistic explanations for their art.

As an art created during the war years, the '30's and '40's, Abstract Expressionism took much of its expressive resonance from Depressive Radicalism and European Surrealism. However they pursued meaning for their paintings without sacrificing them to any one interpretation (imposed by surrealists and leftists). Although they disclaimed the conventional political realism that the left preferred, that of the '30's popular front. They still defined themselves and their art as hostile to the predominant political and economic system. Underneath the 'political dimension' of their aesthetics there was also a statement of the severe inability of the artist to cope with the contradictory stereotypes of a media based society. But the political neutrality claimed by some Abstract Impressionists, made them vulnerable to penetration by prevailing

ideological trends. Because of this and on the basis of the formal aspects of their work Abstract Expressionism was used as a weapon in the 'Cold War', as a form of cultural imperialism as government officials were eager to illustrate the 'vitality' of American culture against that of Russia.

"Eva Cocknoft complained that during the 1950's MOMA in co-operation with the State Department had used a show of Abstract Expressionist painting (The New American Painting) to demonstrate to European intellectuals that American culture was superior to that of the Soviet Union." (2)

By the mid '50's Abstract Expressionism was selling pretty well and by 1961

"the works were so valuable that the editors of the 'New York Times' chose the headline "The Jackson Pollock Market Soars" for an article on his work. In 1958 Pollock sold for \$30,000 and it went up from there." (3)

To the next generation of artists and to the public this art was no longer radical, it was an Official American Art and a 'triumphant cultural achievement'.

'Mainstream' American art for about the next ten years 'developed' from here. It was 'static' and reactionary in that it was art as an end in itself. It had no purpose for or reference to the outside world other than as a commodity. this mainstream became a form of 'aesthetic narcissism' involving the endless stripping of its own conventions. It went from 'Post Painterly Abstraction' of Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella etc. to the 3-dimensional minimalism of Donald Judd in the '60's.

Young artists in Chicago at this time opposed and tried to find a way through the influence of the 'New York Mainstream' where Abstract



Expressionism was already decaying in to a Nationalist Emblem. In order to find an alternative voice, with which they could relate to lived experience, they worked vehemently against that growing 'kenosis'. Leon Golub was among these. In 1946 he joined "The Art Institute of Chicago" and among other ex-veteran students he was instrumental in organising 'Exhibition Momentum' - alternative exhibitions for students who were excluded from the annual juried Chicago and vicinity exhibitions. He was also involved in setting up Contemporary Art Workshops, an alternative art school.

'German Expressionist' revivals after the war were not unusual but like the "Cobra" group in Belgium and Denmark many were short lived. While in college Golub underwent psychoanalysis and amongst others worked from primitive art in the "Field Museum of Natural History". This group, because of the 'tormented' nature of their work were termed 'Monster Roster'.

The wholly subjective level of working that Golub investigates in these early years are, as I have mentioned, a development on a basic theme, that of power, the persistence of which he described as "a really deep imprint on my unconscious" (4). So it is not surprising that Golub investigates this theme, at its root, which is for him the subconscious.

Like the early Abstract Expressionists and especially Pollock, Golub borrows from Surrealism ideas which give his theme 'visionary and apocalyptic' implications. Pollock engaging in 'automatic painting' with his 'drip canvases' was in fact stating the 'pathos' of the artists will to power. This knowledge, as Golub proves, is a means to an end which leads out of the 'totally subjective' statement and into what is at best, a

'relatively objective' investigation into its social implications.

At first Golub's works are also internal and subjective, with utopian aspirations for arts intervention in society. These are based on the "Dervish Principle - that the prime elemental resources within the psyche have intense pictorial equivalents" (5). In primitive art he found stylized and abbreviated forms of the kind which he believed related to this idea. In works entitled Priests (plate 1) and Shaman (plate 2) Golub attempts to 'possess' through representing repositories of power in past societies, what he then termed "vehicles for adaptivity in highly personal idioms" (6). But with the primitive and the psychological alone, there can be no escape from the point of origin of 'the self' and in our society knowledge of the self is based on complex historical and ideological formations. But Golub doesn't use stylistic forces in a formal way, as aesthetic ends in themselves. Throughout his work he investigates the expressive qualities of paint, through material and technique to create, what he had called, a "rude, raw visual shock" (7) in order to counteract the clean, smooth gloss of the media, the mega-visual tradition of Hollywood, and the formalist mainstream that was developing in New York at this time. He is trying to find forms through which he can bear witness to lived experience.

Until the mid '50's he had dealt with the 'internal object' but he differed from 'classical surrealism' in his realisation of the inadequacy of a perspective based picture space and from the Abstract Expressionists in his attempt to make the images retrieved from the unconscious act as historical metaphors.

In 1956 Golub went to work in Italy for a year. Here he used sources

which are among the most mutilated and fragmented of classical sculptures, those from the Alter of Zeus of Pergamon and from an excavation site in Ancient Memphis (plate 5). These classical inspired works differ from the primitive ones in that they become more external and 'concrete'. As Golub says himself, the primitive and classical inspired pieces "works as metaphor and idea" (8) and on this level the Roman Classical is at the origins of our society, as opposed to the Primitive at the origin of our consciousness. So these works become more external. Golub exaggerates the way these sculptures look today - they are broken, disfigured and eaten away by time. when they were made however, they were physically idealized and beautified to represent the ideology of that society - a stoic, heroic idea of power, as strength in mind and body. In the decay of these once idealized figures Golub finds a metaphor for our loss of innocence, if only in our 'determination to witness'. We no longer 'see' power in our society, we only see the effects of its abuse in technologically and systematically advanced killing, to the point of impending total annihilation -

"Modern man's awareness of the infinite forces on him a sense of insufficiency that opens his consciousness. While this sense of insufficiency is a source of existential anguish, it is also the catalyst of ambition, of a limitless relentless faustian will to power. Classical man has strength not power - natural strength, supernaturally justified, rather than authoritarian power existentially apologetic" (9)

The allegorical content of Roman friezes where mythical stories of Gods fighting giants (Gigantomachy) were used to commemorate specific historical victories of the Roman armies over the 'barbaric peoples' inspired Golub to bring movement and more than one person into his paintings. In his Gigantomachy Series from 1965 which developed into the Mercenaries and Interrogations series he also develops their specific allegorical format.

Golub finds a similarity with our society today and that of late Imperialist Rome - the decadence as it developed in the circuses and 'deranged' emperors - as he says its 'the grossest, the most bombastic, the writing of 4th century Rome, in this urban civilization possibilities have closed down ... that was just the way the world looked in terms of western civilization today" (10). And again, in America's outlook on the use of power the idea is similar for both societies "You get in the way and we'll knock you down (11).

In 1962 works such as Burnt Man (plate 4) and Combat 1 (plate 5) are prophetic of Napalmed men and women which were to become 'the numbing iconography of the American intervention in Vietnam later in the decade. Golub echoed the art of one Imperialist moment in order to paint accurately within another" (12).

1962 was the year in which the American Military Council was first established in Vietnam and 1975 saw the final American withdrawal and the fall of South Vietnam to the communists. Also, the Watergate scandal and the economic recession contributed to the decline of America's confidence in its world imperial role.

Disillusionment and criticality became apparent through the growing involvement with the issue of colonialism and with those of facial and sexual equality.

The 'kenosis' in Mainstream art had reached its peak in the late '60's with pop art and Conceptualism and from the tradition which they had created, they simply had no means left with which they could refer to life as they experienced it.

"Despite its massively endowed institutional presence and operational capacity, the practical disciplines of the American Fine Art tradition proved effectively as feeble as those of its poorer weaker European counterparts ... Far from thriving under monopoly capitalism ... the Fine Art tradition had not prospered at all" (13)

Having remained 'on the periphery' as regards the 'New York Mainstream' Golub by this time had developed the means whereby it was possible for him to represent the experience of American life as he felt it. Golub went to New York in 1964 at the age of 43 years. On the television and in the papers there was coverage of the Vietnam War - killing and fighting, civilians often killed or brutally mistreated and evacuated from their homes and villages - this was all mixed with soft porn and commodity promotion in the form of silent power - 'soap operas' and adverts - Golub does not believe that this conjunction in any way belittled the horrified emotional response to what was happening in Vietnam, in fact he believes it made it all the more horrifying. This is a very 'concrete' approach which I have noticed is consistent in his attitudes to and explanations of his later work.

It is at this time that Golub begins his Gigantomachy Series (plate 6). These are paintings done on large unstretched canvas. The figures are approximately twice life size, a scale which Golub has developed to the present day. These paintings can be looked at from the perspective of what was to come, in that their intentions only realised in the later works of a public art for the 'front page' are apparent in the size and subject matter. But at this stage, these intentions, are caught in procedures and attitudes which Golub himself says "are partly semi-conscious and partly conventionalised" (14).

The scale relates to that of the tradition of history painting, developed in pre-20th century western art to commemorate major events of the time, or as art developed into a more autonomous activity, to report on them. This is what Golub intended to do. Also, through the subject matter - male, physical violence, public violence, war - he is attempting to become more objective, to move outwards from the self and to relate to modern history - the Vietnam War. but in these works Golub is still working within the expressionist ideal of a wholly emotional/humanistic - man's inhumanity to man - level of communications.

It is not surprising that many modern artists have gone to primitive art for their ideas and subject matter. Donald Kuspit has referred to primitive ideology as "malienably regressive and frustrated" (15) and in many ways the fine artist of the 20th century has found himself in a similar position. The primitive people saw their own power only as something attributable to a higher, supernatural power

"With the broken promises of monopoly capitalism and the appearance of the mega-visual tradition in this century, the fine artist has found himself deprived of representational conventions valid for even a single class view" (16)

and in finding this total autonomy thrust upon him, has also been unable to transcend his own subjectivity. Golub says:

"In situations of totalised possibility, the artist may be reluctant to plug in to massive data outputs of the big society. Reduction and minimalisation are, in effect, both the result of the technology of information and simultaneously, symptomatic of the artist's backing off from overloads." (17)

Following through the primitive to the classical, however, Golub found a means of integration of the self and the social. The Romans had a positive view of power physical and mental power which began and ended in the self. Elevations of the mind in the supernatural sense are no longer applicable here, the mind is a force heightened in order to articulate physical power and strength through enduring physical pain. And this was the structure of their society and the conditions of its downfall

"The pioneer work of advancing against constantly opposing physical forces cannot in the nature of things go on forever. That task in Rome had now been completed ... a mightier task by far remained to keep pace intellectually and spiritually with the enormous material advance ... the final reason for Rome's defeat was the failure of mind and spirit to rise to a new and great opportunity." (18)

Edith Hamilton  
'The Roman Way'

So too we find these factual, specific notions in their architecture and art. I have already mentioned the Roman friezes and how they were made to commemorate Roman victories, through the myth of the war between the Gods and the giants. But they are commemorations, they are issued by the State. They were distanced from the viewer, they are not critical, they are not 'reportage'. Golub borrows these figures, in order to give a physical gesture (if not a face) to the American notion of power, which he sees as being basically similar. He uses the aggressive, physical, bodily gesture they display (albeit the notions, as he finds more material in photographs of footballers). An in lieu of relating the abuse of power as we see it as opposed to the Romans, he "existentializes classicism" (19) he gives us no hope but is determined to witness - he is unspecific and therefore universal and he distances them from us making them into Giants or Monsters. but on the levels of their 'universality' and their Giant like appearance we cannot relate to them, and therefore they are not

critical.

At this stage, Golub realized that he had been "too generalized, too abstracted, despite my intentions ..." (20). A crucial painting at this stage called Napalm I refers to a chemical bomb used in Vietnam. This bomb burns through skin and bone on contact. And suddenly we see what the giant nudes in the Gigantomachy were running away from. Golub refers to this painting "an overt political effort" (21).

This was an attempt to break with the 'semi-conscious' conventions of universality and timelessness. But as he says "it changed the tempo, but it didn't change it enough" (22). In accepting the specificity of t.v. coverage and that of photo-journalism, as valid material for the fine artist, Golub begins collecting and using photographs of guns and soldiers, directly, in his Vietnam Series.

So, from the time when Golub had diverted from social comment, from 'Channel House' 1946 - referring to the Holocaust - to subjective analysis in Primitive art he had at last found the means, ideologically and practically - through the Roman view on power and technological specificity - whereby -

"Given the kind of art I had, my point of view, it was easy for me to see victims and aggressors." (23)

And he could place his individual interpretation of the world 'how he comes at it', within a network of theoretical discourse.

With the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and the war in Vietnam during the 1960's artists again abandoned neutrality on the question of art



and politics, and placed that issue at the centre of the art works -

"A wave of political activism rolled through the art world between 1968/72 ... it was short lived and incontestably pathetic, it nonetheless did produce or confirm among some artists a determination to find a function other than that of serving as adjuncts to the American flat." (24)

"That year (1972) saw Richard Nixon's landslide victory over the anti-war platforms of George McGovern, the Watergate break-in and Nixon's authorisation of the mining of Haiphong Harbour and the bombing of Cambodia." (25)

In New York, Golub became involved in Artists Action Groups against US involvement in Vietnam which consisted of radical attacks on MOMA and the Rockefellers', 'Angry Arts Week', Art Workers Coalition and others. For the Vietnam Series, as I have said, Golub took his imagery directly from photographs (plate 7). In these pieces he is trying to overcome the problem of distance between the viewer and the viewed. But even though he uses direct gestural confrontation - where victims and or aggressors direct their gaze out towards the viewer - it is still impossible for us to enter their space because their ground level is lower than ours, the boys shoulders in Vietnam II would be at our knee level if this was hanging in a gallery.

In these paintings Golub places emphasis on the questionable American policies of aggression - one one side of the canvas we see soldiers heavily armed, about to, or in the process of, attacking unarmed Vietnamese civilians. Golub has brought the agents of power into direct confrontation with their victims. However, war is official violence and official power and, although he presents it in a humanist way, since it is official it has been taken through all the 'right' channels. It is only when power has to be carried out quickly, when it does not go through these 'channels' that we can see its real structure.

FOOTNOTES  
CHAPTER I

- 1 Annette Cox, Art-as-Politics : the Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society, p. 32.
- 2 Ibid, p. 161
- 3 Ibid, p. 159
- 4 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 19895, The Imag(in)ing of Power, Interview with Jon Bird, p. 10.
- 5 Ned Rifkin and Lynn Gumpert, Golub, Ibid, p. 13
- 6 Ibid, p.13
- 7 Unpublished quote.
- 8 Donald Kuspit, The Existential/Activist Painter : The Example of Leon Golub, p. 30.
- 9 Ibid, p. 16
- 10 Ned Rifkin and Lynn Gumpert, Golub, Ibid, p. 23.
- 11 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, Ibid, p. 12
- 12 Peter Fuller, Beyond the Crisis in Art, 1982, p. 105
- 13 Ibid, p. 89
- 14 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, Ibid, p. 10.
- 15 Donald Kuspit, The Existential/Activist Painter : The Example of Leon Golub, p. 83.
- 16 John Roberts, "Leon Golub : Selected Paintings 1967 - 86", "Zones of Exclusion : Leon Golubs' Other America, Circa Publications 1987, p. 10.
- 17 Leon Golub, Golub, Ibid, p. 74.
- 18 Edith Hamilton, The Roman Way, p. 176/178
- 19 Donald Kuspit, The Existential/Activist Painter : The Example of Leon Golub, p. 30.
- 20 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, p. 10.
- 21 Ibid, p. 10.
- 22 Unpublished quote.
- 23 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, Ibid, p. 10.
- 24 Peter Fuller, Ibid, p. 96
- 25 Ned Rifkin and Lynn Gumpert, Golub, Ibid, p. 35

## CHAPTER II

### "The distribution of power in American Society" and "A Self Conscious Art Practice"

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In the Mercenaries and Interrogations series we see Golub's determination to confront the problem, that the real structures of power in our society, as opposed to that of the Romans, are hidden. Although they had the basic understanding of how it was to be used, in our society,

"power needs so many intermediaries - the press, the courts, the legislature etc. There are all these complex secondary effects, transmission belts, allegiances etc., that are going on all at the same time" (1).

In order to avoid these - to "get the job done quickly", covert operations take place. On a cognitive level of investigation therefore there, "is a sense of the infinite productivity of power, making it - impossible to follow the tributaries of power to a fixed source" (2) - Foucault.

Between the Vietnam Series and the Mercenaries and Interrogations series, from 1976-'79, Golub worked solely on a series of paintings of the 'faces of power'. These were portraits from, photographs of people like Francisco Franco, Ho Chi Minh and Nelson Rockefeller, among others. Before the "separation of art from the state; the democratic taking over of arts communicative function, by the capitalization of technology" (3), such portraits would have been commissioned by their subjects. In this sense they were the most specific form of a homogeneous art, reflecting state ideology. Right back to the Romans the 'power portrait' had strong public meaning as it involved gesture as a form of rhetoric of power, in that it

would 'declare to the public what they already must know' - the unquestionable power of their king or emperor, etc. But today rhetoric has diminished through such ideas as false consciousness -

"Today the gap in consciousness between who you are, what you're saying and what is actually going on seems larger" (4)

and through advanced technological methods of communication. therefore, and often under the guise of democracy, methods of promoting an ideology or imperialist extension have become indirect and extremely complex. Those in power today have become a cover of opposing ideologies, and through the media a cult of personality property, organisation and lies. so at the summit of the 'visible' power structure we do not find an all-knowing, all-seeing, albeit corrupt technological monster. but are faced by a perplexing maze of tributaries of power impossible to follow to a fixed source. For example, the Watergate break in affair with its hose of secondary characters, Presidential lies, etc., and more recently the ongoing Irangate Scandal. So these portraits convey meaning extensively from within their historical tradition, and as it is "informed by and a product of the massive historical reality of the mass media" (5). In the Franco Series Golub paints five portraits of Franco - as a young man, at the time when he was gaining power, as he physically degenerates and finally as he is laid out in his coffin. Although sensitively painted, these portraits are outwardly crude, at once hinting at his own personal attitude towards the subjects and reinvesting them with the uncanny flitting surface quality of modern history in the method of its making - the photographic reproduction.

These portraits stand in relation to our 'understanding' of the power structures at work in our society in a way that at once gives immediate

recognition but like in binocular vision they stand at the point where perspectives change and effect a 'blind spot'.

Golub says:

"I can no longer believe that I can represent the central figures. I can't show the President or the Prime Minister, and show how they affect policy because its too indirect: they sit around the conference table and make policies. If I make a painting of that its not going to mean anything much. A shaman waving his arms and making the spirits obey is a gesture we can comprehend in a visual sense." (6)

In them Golub deals with the specific problem of the static image in a mega visual society. The point of recognition from which he can take either of two options - the cognitive, which would necessitate a puritanical use of images, at best, or a 'modern' philosophical approach to "start with it and in it" (7). To work within the real life configuration of our own psychological and ideological contractions.

On the basis of the latter Golub moves from the 'official subject' in the Vietnam Series and, the 'invisibility' of the 'portraits of power', to the perispheres in Mercenaries and Interrogations. At the periphery, on the levels of idea and potential experience he produces knowledge about the world which is of an existential kind in that it acts from within a determination to witness:

"This is not make believe, this is not fantasy, this is not symbolism. It is, but it isn't. These situations which call these forces into existence, actually exist ... my job is to be this machine that turns out these monsters at this particular point and make them tangible as possible." (8).

So there is no attempt to reach conclusions from these situation, to infer

a pyramidal structure of power or to find an ultimate meaning. But instead to make us actively involved in recognition, to make use of our society's approach to economic and psychological factors i.e. Marx and Freud - as we understand them to create us as beings of circumstance. the effect is to make them (the economic and psychological factors) 'visible' at the margin where things change - at the Periphery.

#### On the Periphery

"The invisible operations of the law re the production of regimented and docile bodies providing an example of the way in which the public face of power conceals the nature of its real operations and relations" (9)

"If you want to comprehend a phenomenon you have to go to the edges or perimeters where it slips into something else, or where its contradictions or isolations become evident" (10)

Golub's practice of going to the peripheries for his subject matter of undercover military operations in the Interrogations Series and the unofficial or irregular use of power in the Mercenaries Series works on the double level of idea and experience the locates his figures where the laws of society no longer apply. Where the intermediaries such as "the press, the courts, the legislature" (11) are by-passed so that the 'job' can be done quickly, information extracted, people silenced.

The principles of organisation of the regular military establishment are regimentation, repetition and a hierarchical structure of authority. these principles function very strongly as a form of conditioning from within and create confidence outside of the military establishment, thus allowing for the "implied constant use of the most terrible violence out of

a considered view of the causes and nature of that violence." (12)

At the intersection of these discourses of power and restraint, however, and in order to avoid the constraints of conditioning implicit in the regular military establishment we are faced with another establishment - covert, world embracing and without restraint in the pursuit of its aims - the Central Intelligence Agency or C.I.A.

By its very nature the exact structure and operations of this agency of power are all but impossible to delineate. However "we get enough from the media to know the C.I.A. is instructing countries in how to handle political opposition" (13). This it achieves through its myriad of political and military agents in these countries and through the traditional reserve army of reaction - the lumpen proletariat.

Golub refers to the lumpen nature of the mercenaries and interrogators that he depicts. Ernst Henry has described the lumpen proletariat as:

"the man at the bottom, standing on the lowest step of the social ladder, and who through his own fault is met with distrust and even contempt. He belongs to no class, recognises no morality, does not participate in any productive work and violates the law whenever he can. He is against one and all and stands for himself alone ... hating the bourgeoisie he hankers after the property of the individual bourgeois. He prefers leading a parasitic existence to doing any useful work". (14).

Lenin particularly noted the nature of the lumpen proletariat: "The rich and rogues are two sides of the same coin, they are two principle categories of parasites which capitalism has fostered." (15).

As regards the actual operations of the C.I.A., Golub says:

"They didn't actually go out with the squads, just as they stepped out of the room when the actual torture was going on. But on the days when their proteges weren't killing, they would train them in how to do it better. So that's an American product. And as an American artist I'm recording it as an American product." (16)

The sadomasochistic person is always characterised by his attitude towards authority, his longing for submissions and lust for power. The individual factors which give rise to this constitutionally given dispositions, idiosyncrasies of family life, exceptional events in a persons life - are played down in 'normal society'. However in its massive interventions in the affairs of Latin American countries, like El Salvador and in its activities in "instructing countries how to handle political opposition" (17), "the U.S. has brought about an almost complete militarisation of civilian life and the unleashing of residual fascist groups" (18) in these countries.

This "State Terrorism" exemplified in the regime of General Pinochet in Chile creates a psychic atmosphere conducive to wholesale sadism, attracting as functionaries mercenary sadists from all over the world. In such situations the sado masochistic character becomes a normal, natural manifestation of the approved behaviour. As well as affording the sadomasochistic personality, scope to exercise his tendencies, such a regime offers - in poor rural societies, where military service is a major upward step - the possibility of economic well being



"The US Government in all its claims about terrorism and its victory over the hijackers - that's fine and good at one level, but it's nothing compared to the terrorism that this government has sponsored in Latin America. There's 40/60,000 individuals that have been slaughtered over the last four years in El Salvador ... so terrorism on one level, sadism on another depending on how you view it." (19)

An important function of art in past societies, for example Syria, Ancient Greece and Rome, was to report (or maybe commemorate is a more apt definition) major historical events of the time. These would have been made in order to celebrate a victory in war, and therefore would have been quite ruthless in describing the event. Golub wants his work to have this function of reporting also, although obviously he is not celebrating the covert operations of the CIA or 'State terrorism'. He describes the nature of their content, (of the art of these past societies and his own) which he feels is lacking in 20th century art as "a realistic understanding of what the nature of life can be". (20)

In the catalogue text for the recent show of Leon Golub's work (in the Orchard Gallery, Derry and the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin) the art critic John Roberts points out that

"In effect by dramatizing the actions of these individuals and groups he clearly makes visible capitalism as a contradictory formation, a formation determined by fundamental asymmetries and exclusions in power and resources." (21)

He goes on to reference the cognitive and aesthetic elements in Golub's work as they go to make up a politicized art practice, which does not just protest the pathologies of modernity, but also offers itself as an historical learning device. To this end John Roberts established Golub's re-working of a "decayed and Social Realism and a decayed modernism" (22).

Golub's link with the Social Realism is on the level of his subject matter - the underdog of society and those who do the dirty work of capital. Social Realism was a pre-modernist form of painting based on narrative and descriptive Realism. In the '30's Popular Front, with the lesson of Courbet of the 1850's, it was revived as a 'political art' presenting an ideology opposed to that of the dominant classes. Courbet did this by presenting as important events, worthy of commemoration, the everyday lives of the working class peasantry. History painting as a result of this was disclosed as a 'problem' as a space of conflicting class interests and not, as a sealed dioramas of "Great Events" (23). However with the importance that the painters of the '30's Popular Front continued to place on a high degree of verisimilitude of figures, action, place and time, and the ensuing manipulation of types to secure the right epistemology they denied the basic modernist assentation of the fictiveness of representation - whereby aesthetics became a significant learning device. "In effect they valorized the abstractions of commitment before learning in the face of the real" (24). This resulted in the aesthetic and cognitive 'closures' of propaganda or sentimentalization. They presented a single ideology, which had its effect in attempting to 'white-wash' over the necessary contradictions of the modern world.

As a revolt against this what the Abstract Expressionists proved was that there was no necessary link between critical content, aesthetic value and the world of appearances. However their very denial of reference meant that they could not offer anything more than a protest and even this, as has been shown, opened their work up for gross manipulation.

One of the results of "arts separation from the State and the taking over

of its communicative function by technology" (24) is that artists have tended to see themselves as disjuncted from the big traditions of the past, where a stable constituency was present. This disjunction is of course unavoidable on one level, because what this autonomy gave to the artist with one hand - the possibility of addressing the crisis of the moment on their own terms - is taken away on the other by the endless consuming ability of the commodity market and hence the dominant ideology

"In a society like our own where power is based on economic position and more specifically on relationship to means of production (although in a complex and mediated way) the ideas which tend to dominate are those of the ruling class." (25)

Therefore even the artist who turns down the 'rewards' of presenting a positive view of life and the system, and who attempts to make a critical statement has found his work neutralized by the gallery system. This has resulted in these artists working in what has been termed 'alternate space' for example abstraction, novelty space, etc. where there is often an absolute dependence on theory, resulting in the production of a wholly elitist form of knowledge. Golub revolts against this and attempts to maximize public accessibility albeit on varying levels of 'critical' understanding. As he says

"The challenge then becomes to operate as far as possible on your own terms within a particular society. This is perhaps the real subversive role of art: using the system to change the system." (26)

In order to do this Golub presents a going on within the "deep resources of the old traditions" - to present us with our own self conscious image of ourselves (through the media) and to make domination explicit (albeit due to his autonomy this is of a critical kind).

All art is both informed by and a product of the society in which is produced. And some art can only be understood years after it was made, when it can be said that was how people saw themselves in the 19th century that was how they viewed possibility. At the time 'Courbets Peasants' denied his view of what was possible but by placing that art in history we accept and understand it. This is not to over simplify the possible function of art in society, but to understand that just as we are informed by and a product of the society in which we live then history of 50 or 400 years ago is re-cast in informs us as we see it -through history delegated to the present. This is especially visible in cultural practices, as in them the 'specific' relationship between the spectator/reader etc. and the subject of criticism continually re-casts historical and cultural material. Re-emphasising this John Roberts points to paintings "primary if occluded status as a productivity i.e. an activity that is simultaneously a process of appropriation - from shared cultural knowledge and an individual act of supercession" (27) So if the 19th century history painters securing the view of conflicting class interests at the basis of theirs and our critical understanding of ourselves, have a claim to producing a subversive art, this is but on obstruse instance within a continuum of more submerged ones (that is in relation to our present requirements our view of possibility). For in this continuum there have been countless artists for whom art - even when linked to the State, aristocracy or church or royalty - has been a means of challenging experience who, even though their intentions were not always subversive, they were in accordance with a changing consciousness within that society.

"What is it you see out there? Is your head clear? Are you seeing it correctly? If society can say your not ... they said that either because the artist really is insane or because the artist is seeing an aspect of reality which isn't being brought to attention sufficiently up to this moment in this particular way" (27)

Due to the 'information explosion' and the mega-visual tradition the nature of definition in our society has changed. We are no longer linked on a level of experience to the information we received through the media. so how we view possibility is different to how people would have viewed possibility 100 or even 50 years ago. Through investigating the ways reality is directly perceived or mediated by photomechanical reproduction Golub presents us with our own self-conscious image of ourselves.

In these paintings we see men and women specifically of the '80's, their clothes, their haircuts, their cigarettes. The often gross look of self love in the way they make eye contact and gesture out to us and among themselves. Some of the figures turn to us as if to acknowledge our presence, maybe for photograph? Their familiarity seems to imply our acceptance or disregard of what is happening or is it that they know we will soon go about our business regardless. The 'naive' relentless description which characterizes each face - the importance of painting every tooth, lips etc - and at the same time stereotyping them. The very opaque transparent quality of the scraped and dissolved paint surface corresponding with the transient flickering images produced by a faulty t.v. tube, or the buzzing static energy of a poor quality satellite transmission. It is the world of the media image - news, fiction, violence and titilation, bombard and effect our everyday lives, with images and words that become the way we experience the world.

So how we experience each other today is different to how people of the Renaissance would have experienced each other, because we have a different mode of consciousness. In comparing a Titian portrait to that of a medieval icon Golub says

"... So that the very look on their faces tells us something about the way they absorbed information. They look different from modern man ... because their awareness of possibility and their sense of confidence was considerably different from ours." (28)

These are the things which show up for us as opposed to the Greeks who saw heroes or the Christians who saw saints and scholars. Since the 20th century our view of the world has been that of the anti-hero. This is shown on a popular level in the genre of t.v. programmes exemplified by 'Dallas' and 'Dynasty' which are now among the highest rated in viewer polls:

"These soap operas focusing on the individuals lust for power and the dirty tricks used in order to attain it, manifest a national fascination with the mechanisms of power and vulnerability." (29)

But this expose, this perceptual process of recognition is not a claim to intervention.

It is necessary not only to see Golub's work as a product of, but also a response to our highly spectacularised political culture. As he says

" ... these kinds of figures reflect American power and confidence. This is an American presence, the projection of a very powerful society which intends to stay number one. the implications of confidence and the life of force is implicated by these figures." (30)

The scale of Golub's canvases immediately relate to us on the level of power relations, of domination and confidence as we stand in front of them. they are a development from the 'giganticism' of his early 'Roman pieces' where power was explicit and an attempt to make what goes on 'undercover' today just as unavoidable. The evidence of the material construction of

these paintings - a brutal and reductionist approach, whereby the canvas is used raw and unstretched and all excess paint is dissolved and then scraped off with a meat cleaver - also reinforces the brutal immediacy of the still image and insists on an objective intention to make power explicit.

Therefore the failings of these paintings, as the anti-painting arguments might suggest, is not secured by the "constant (market) repetition of its structural (modernist) myth: self expressions" (31) as Golub's main conviction is a vivid theoretical rejection of this. He doesn't wallow in the sensuality of expressionism or present it as the "signifier par excellence of the artists authenticity" (32) but uses it in order to transmit meaning to "thing signification" (33) across the set of social and class relations he presents. In this way he places a 'use value' on the means of representation or structural limits particular to our cultural formation.

So Golub does not fall into the aesthetic and cognitive closures of academic descriptive realism.

Golub uses the specificity of the media image which provides him with the necessary detail whereby he can anchor references. Such as the way a photograph catches people unaware or frozen in action. Details as varied as the way an arm moves in a snap shot gesture, to the varied connotations of a gun, or the accessories of a military jacket. They by securing a range of "aesthetic effects adequate to our distorted and distorting culture" (34) Golub re-emphasises the crudity of action of these groups and the psychological maladjustment endemic to their class position and on their sadistic personality. This tense awkward treatment of gesture is objectified, or 'held in check' by its being specifically located within

the outline of the figures and ideologically in the method of construction where slide images are projected onto the canvas and are blocked out in black and white and then colour until the image is valid - so even at the level of construction the production of these images is organised and controlled.

What is essential to our view of possibility in the technological age is our separation from the knowledge we receive through the media and the attendant voyeurism that must result from this. This is also important in Golub's work. He sets the essential fictiveness of his images through such ideas as 'instant history' and potential incidents and in the means employed "(the vividness of those tropes, displacements that secure the fictiveness of painting)" (35). They by way of contradiction, he attempts to make us physically and psychologically involved in these acts of torture and manipulation. The figures are twice life size, Golub says "they're actually twice life size by psychologically they're in the space with us" (36). So we are allowed no escape - they are inserted in to our space and us into theirs. Through gesture and eye contact (plate 8) they then implicate us into their world of oppression, sadism and subordination to the ruling class. They implicate us not only of living in an economic system buttressed by the US but also as individuals with the potential to perpetuate violence and oppression, albeit on a less horrific level, in the relations that constitute our everyday lives. So the moral condemnation that might result from the subjective/voyeuristic distancing of the two-dimensional image, on the contemplation of the art object (with its attendant manifestations as a luxury commodity or a form of self conscious intellectual enjoyment for middle class and upper class life) is broken down. The viewer instead becomes involved in a "troubled inconsistent response to that which invites the pleasure of consumption" (37). So what



beings in enthrallment (voyeurism) results in alienation (knowledge) :- the fact that the pleasures we are implicated in here are oppressive ones" (38). So these paintings are not solely a report on the hidden realities of "Reagans America" but through this collision of subjective (voyeurism) and objective (condemnation) they attempt to present us with our own ideological contradictions. For example in the Interrogations Series (plate 9) where we see the covert operations of the military, Golub explains the social relations he attempts to make visible, in this otherwise totally brutal scene of torture:

"I try to characterize gestures or appearances which would make them more 'civil' brutal as they are, because this guy has to report to someone else and has to know the forms of social discourse when he talks to his captain because he's only a sergeant." (39)

And again in the Mercenaries Series (plate 10) Golub presents us with ideological contradictions at work in our society as regards class position and race by including blacks in what is otherwise conceived of as "a wholly white lumpen proletariat/petty bourgeois" manifestation. As John Roberts points out:

"Doubly subjugated as blacks and working class their position (as agents of state oppression) is massively one of bad faith. the recent recruitment of immiserated black youth from the townships into the security forces is a comparable example." (40)

So it is essential to the critical nature of Golub's work that references are not totally determined - the locations of the covert operations of the CIA are implied (the de-industrialised north of America and Latin America) therefore we can contextualize them. But it is just as important that the connotations of suppression and domination (and the ideological and

psychological contradictions that determine their continuation) are re-contextualized - so that they relate to our every day lives. However, this is not to say that the functionaries of "State Terrorism" become totally universalized, but that they address male and female, black and white, upper class and working class, each on their own terms, and as both oppressed and oppressors in our Capitalist/Imperialist, white-male power dominated society:

"Thus if these paintings problematize male power by excluding the female viewer (in order to privilege her position as political critic of such acts) Golub also problematizes the easy assumptions about the world of mercenaries being wholly white lumpen proletariat petty bourgeois one." (41)

So Golub attempts to take the 'information explosion' on its 'own terms'. That is the ability to absorb new information and contradictions, as he also does the aggressive will or autonomous power ascribed to western individualism (of which choice is a fundamental element). Therefore if we feel pleasure in viewing these kinds of images, this is something that Golub has no control over, but it is a necessary contradiction. As he points out "one of the sources I use are sadomasochistic publications ... the observer must decide, must figure out whether it matters where these images come from" (42).

In order to compound this 'contradiction' Golub says, in relation to the ambivalent nature of the construction of these images "I play out these roles in various ambiguous ways, I think I can identify equally with the victim and the victimizer." (43)

As a result of this Golub presents an inherently critical knowledge, even self critical. We don't simply read the signifiers and signified in

Golub's paintings. We arrive at the socio-political content - the inherent decadence of American Imperialism and the contradictory nature of racial, sexual and class conflicts - by way of being confronted with our own ideological and psychological contradictions.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER II

- 1 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, Ibid, p. 12
- 2 Jon Bird, Ibid, p. 12
- 3 John Roberts "Leon Golub : Selected Paintings, 1967/86", Ibid, p. 10.
- 4 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, Ibid, p. 10
- 5 John Roberts, "Leon Golub : Selected Paintings, 1967/86", Ibid, p. 10.
- 6 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, p. 10.
- 7 Professor J P Stern and Professor German, University of London, Tape.
- 8 Leon Golub, Golub, Ibid, p. 73.
- 9 Jon Bird, 'Leon Golub : Mercenaries and Interrogations" K A Exhibition Catalogue, 1982, p. 13
- 10 Leon Golub, "Leon Golub : Mercenaries and Interrogations" Ibid, p. 11
- 11 Leon Golub, 'Art Monthly', February 1985, Ibid, p. 12.
- 12 Terry Atkinson, Postscript Interview with John Roberts, Unpublished.
- 13 Leon Golub, Sunday Tribune, 13 March 1988, Interview by Ciaran Carty, p. 19.
- 14 Paddy Gillan, Workers Life, March 1986 p. 11 - taken from - Ernst Henry, Stop Terrorism°, Moscow 1982,
- 15 Paddy Gillan, Workers Life, March 1986 p. 11 - taken from - V I Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 26,
- 16 Leon Golub, Sunday Tribune, 13 March 1988, p. 19.
- 17 Ibid, p. 19.
- 18 John Roberts, "Leon Golub : Selected Paintings, 1967/86", Ibid, p. 11.
- 19 Leon Golub, 'State of the Art', 1987, p. 170

## CONCLUSION

The nature of our society, with its "atomizations, structural deformations and distortions" straightforward, one-to-one interpretations of reality are impossible.

In response to this 'critical' art has tended to become 'universal' or totally subjective (which are two sides of the same coin). For example, the Abstract Expressionists in their assertion of the critical value of aesthetics (its political dimension) moved away from any outside references. In effect therefore their work could absorb absolutely anything and produce any knowledge which the 'world' wishes it to. In contrast to this the artists of the '30's Popular Front ignored the critical value of aesthetics altogether. As a result their work was unable to absorb any fluctuations or contradictions, aesthetic or cognitive. "In effect they conventionalized their own critique of ideology" (1).

Golub seems however to find a balance between these two extremes. As through his technique of intertextual re-working of media images he anchors references while still leaving room for 'modernist knowledge' - contradictions produced in the face of the real: the political dimension of aesthetics.

With the strength of direct intention evident in this work that is to report on the covert operations of the CIA and State terrorism, and the attempt to work, objectively, within the real life configurations of his own (and our) contradictions Golub establishes the complicity of ignorance. So by depicting that which is unseen and rarely read about in the newspapers and magnifying it as if to shame, Golub's work becomes an art

for the front page rather than an art for the arts page. So on this level, these paintings are for the intellectual and the layman alike. They are for anyone who can read a newspaper and see whats between the lines. As Golub puts it:

"I finally came to the justification that on one level, I am simply a reporter. I report on these monsters, cause these monsters actually exist ... I don't think any art can effect political change (although he can serve in the ranks). However, I think artists are immering in their reflections of what is happening, what is possible." (2)

The irony of the commodity market (and art is a commodity) is, of course, that if this work is selling then it is the art we are prepared to see "the artist has become safe" (3).

But with the strength of ~~direct intention~~ and ~~disregard of absolute values~~, explicit in these paintings and their discriminative value of historical transmission, Golub is confident that their controversial content cannot be overlooked - to an extent, at least they will infiltrate the buyers space on their own terms. Nor can they be subsumed by an ideology which would delegate to them to an uncritical apolitical stance or "a life enhancing art". Golub doesn't however see this achievement on a simplistic level, the artist doesn't "win the whole battle" - art is a commodity and the only way for the artist to surface is through the established structure of the art gallery. He explains:

"I'm not attacking the commodification of art, because thats the kind of world we live in, in the 20th century and maybe the 19th century ... It's very easy for me to say no to the CIA art buyers but there are all sorts of other in-betweens, the grey areas of the art market. We're dealing with that kind of world." (4)

FOOTNOTES

CONCLUSION

- 1 John Roberts, "Leon Golub : Selected Paintings, 1967/86", Ibid, p. 8.
- 2 Leon Golub, Golub, Ibid, p. 73
- 3 Leon Golub, Sunday Tribune, 13 March 1988, p. 19.
- 4 Ibid, p. 19.

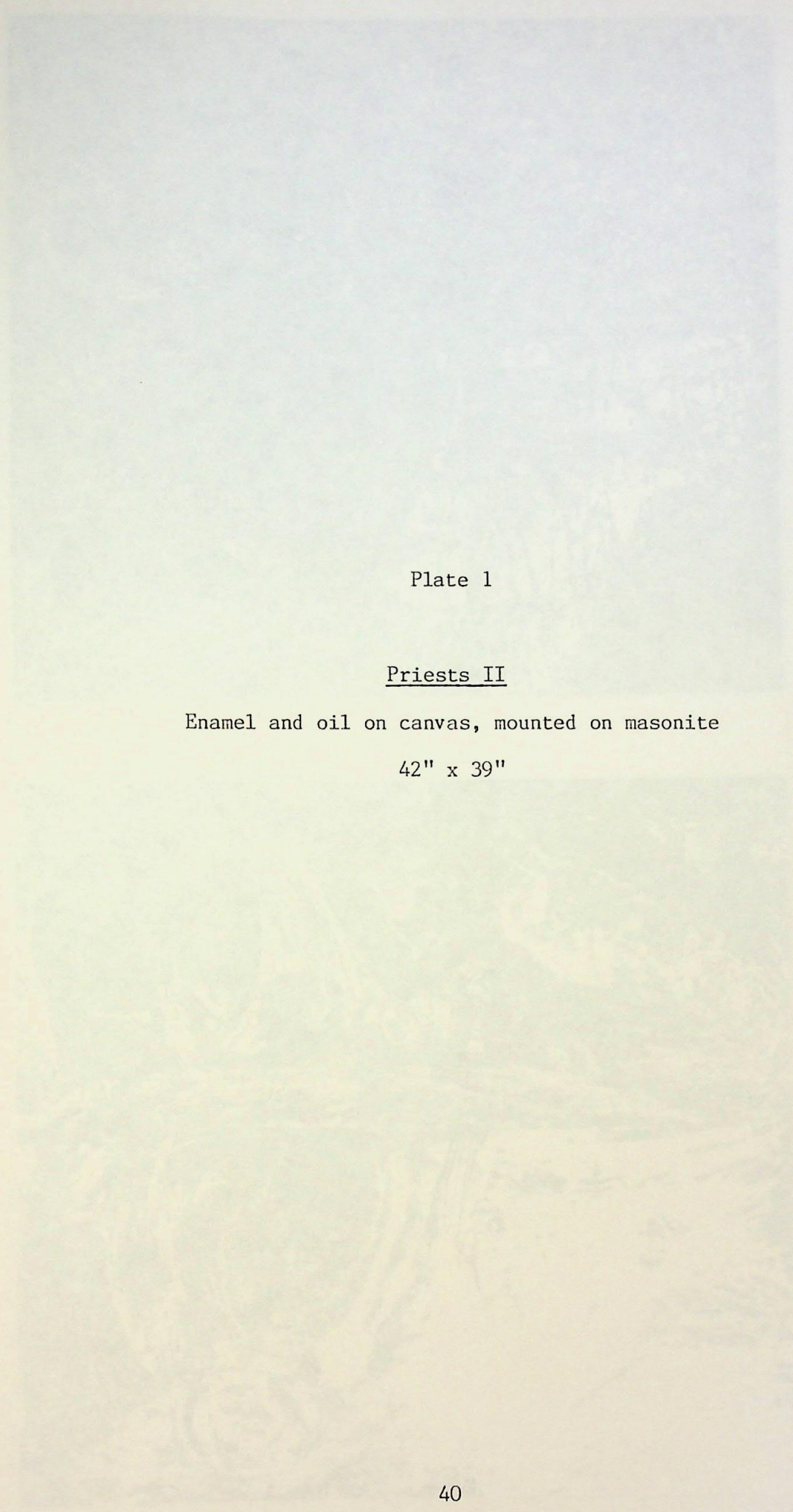


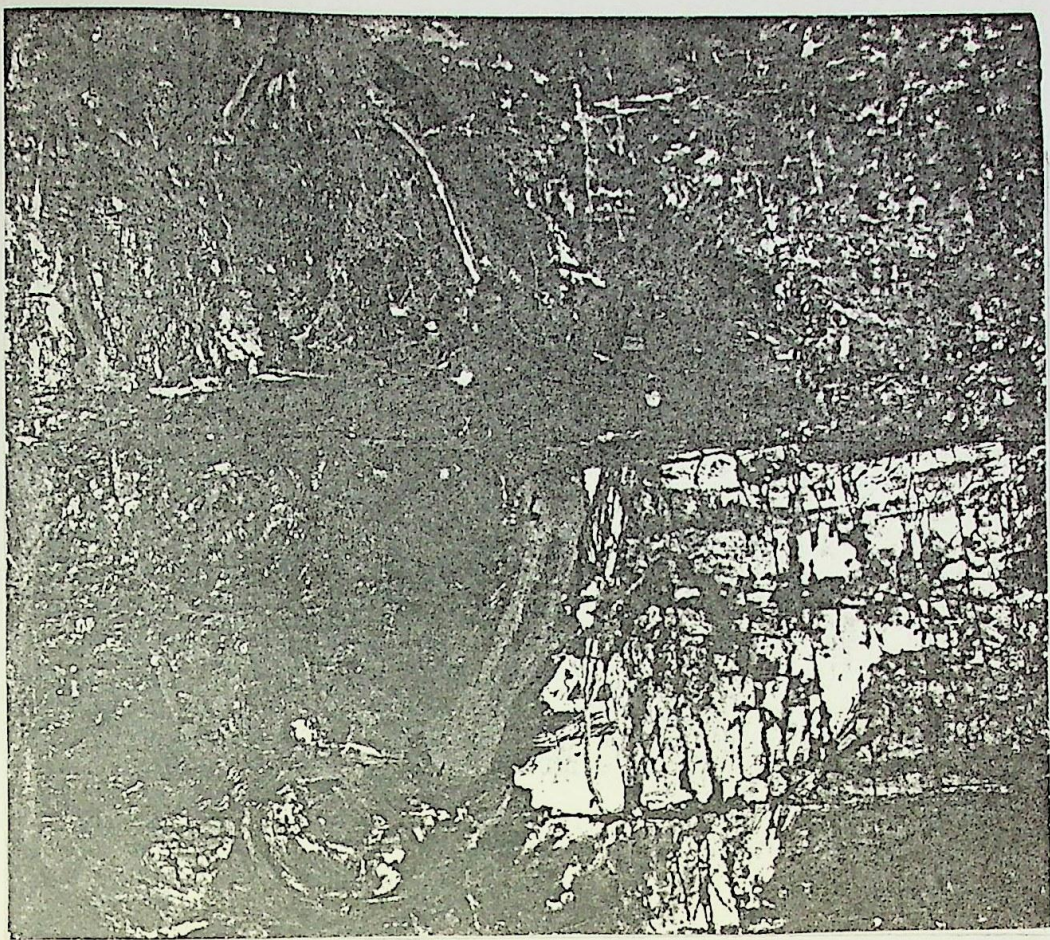
Plate 1

Priests II

Enamel and oil on canvas, mounted on masonite

42" x 39"





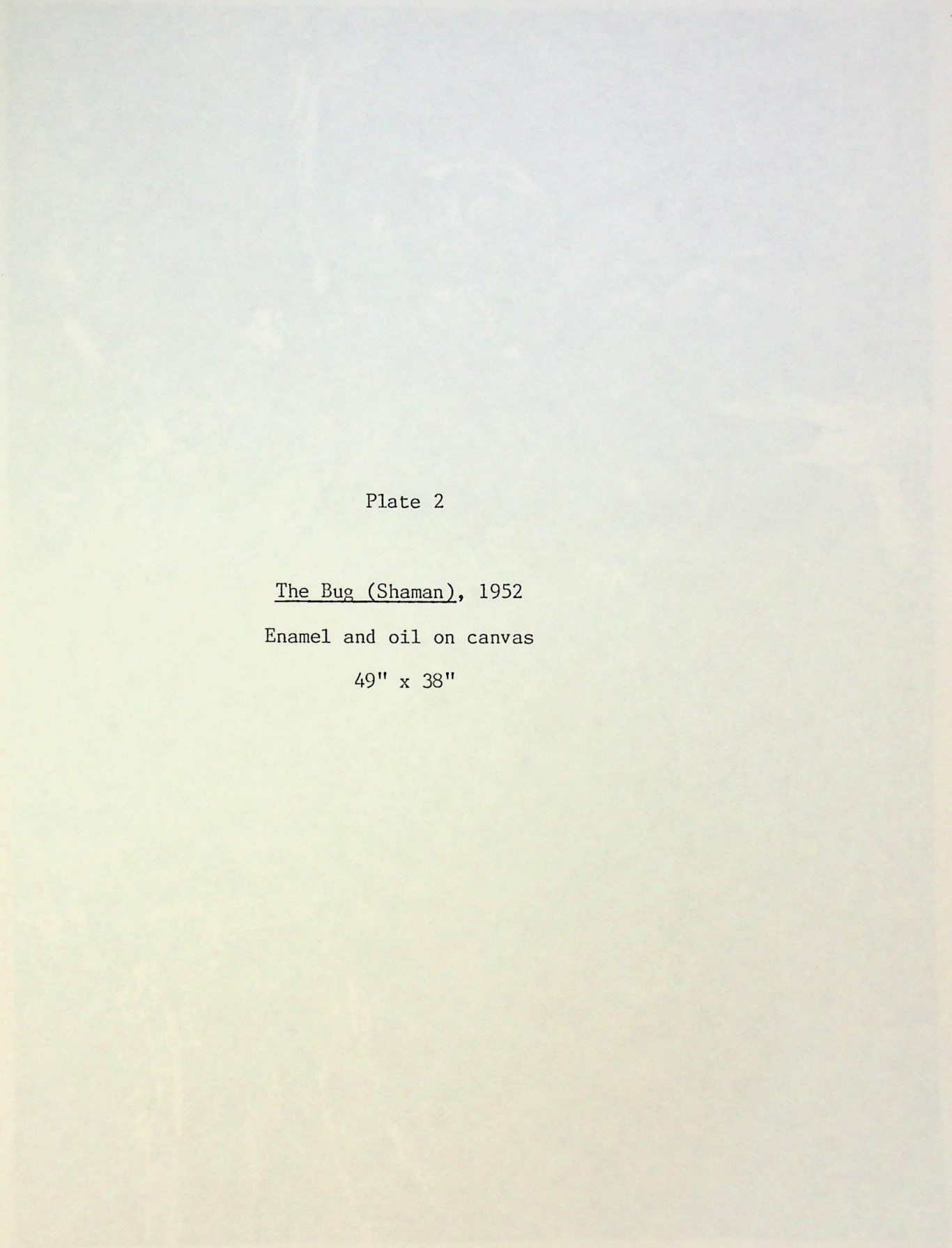


Plate 2

The Bug (Shaman), 1952

Enamel and oil on canvas

49" x 38"

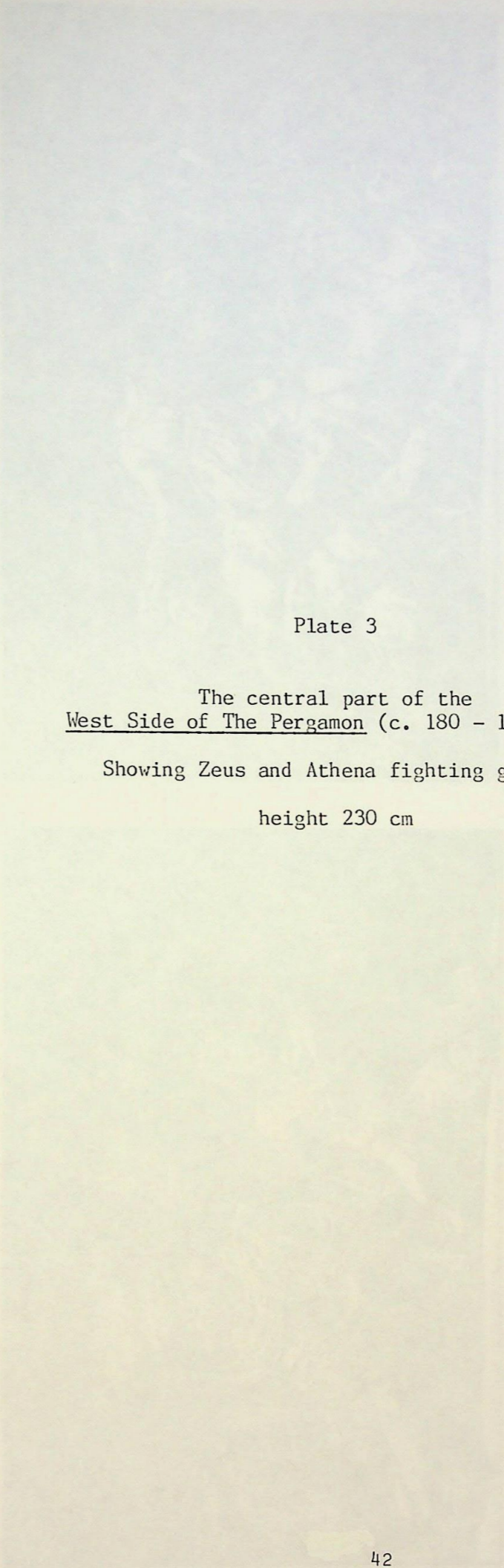


Plate 3

The central part of the  
West Side of The Pergamon (c. 180 - 160 B.C.)

Showing Zeus and Athena fighting giants

height 230 cm



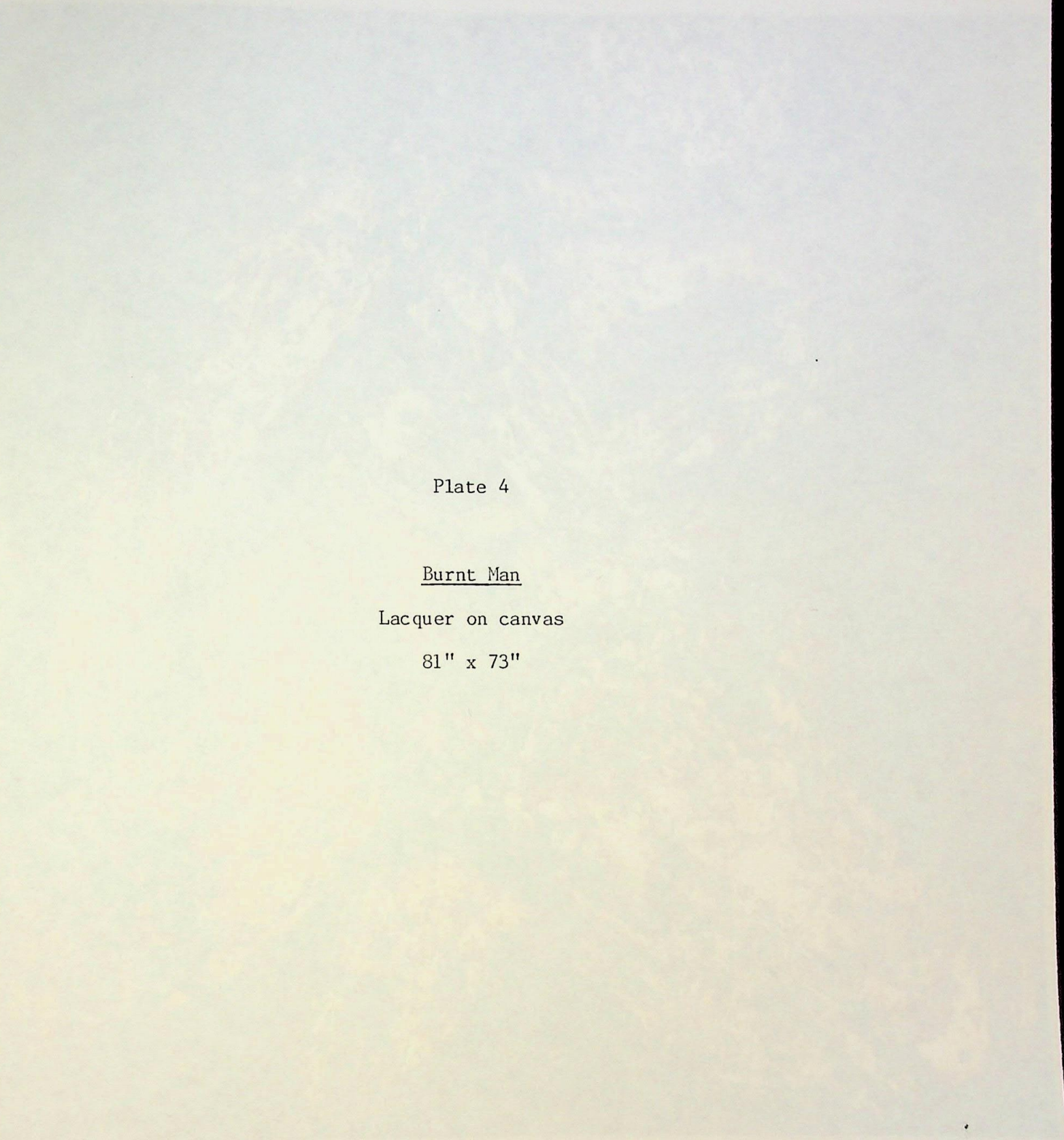


Plate 4

Burnt Man

Lacquer on canvas

81" x 73"



Plate 5

Combat I, 1962

Acrylic on canvas

91" x 81"





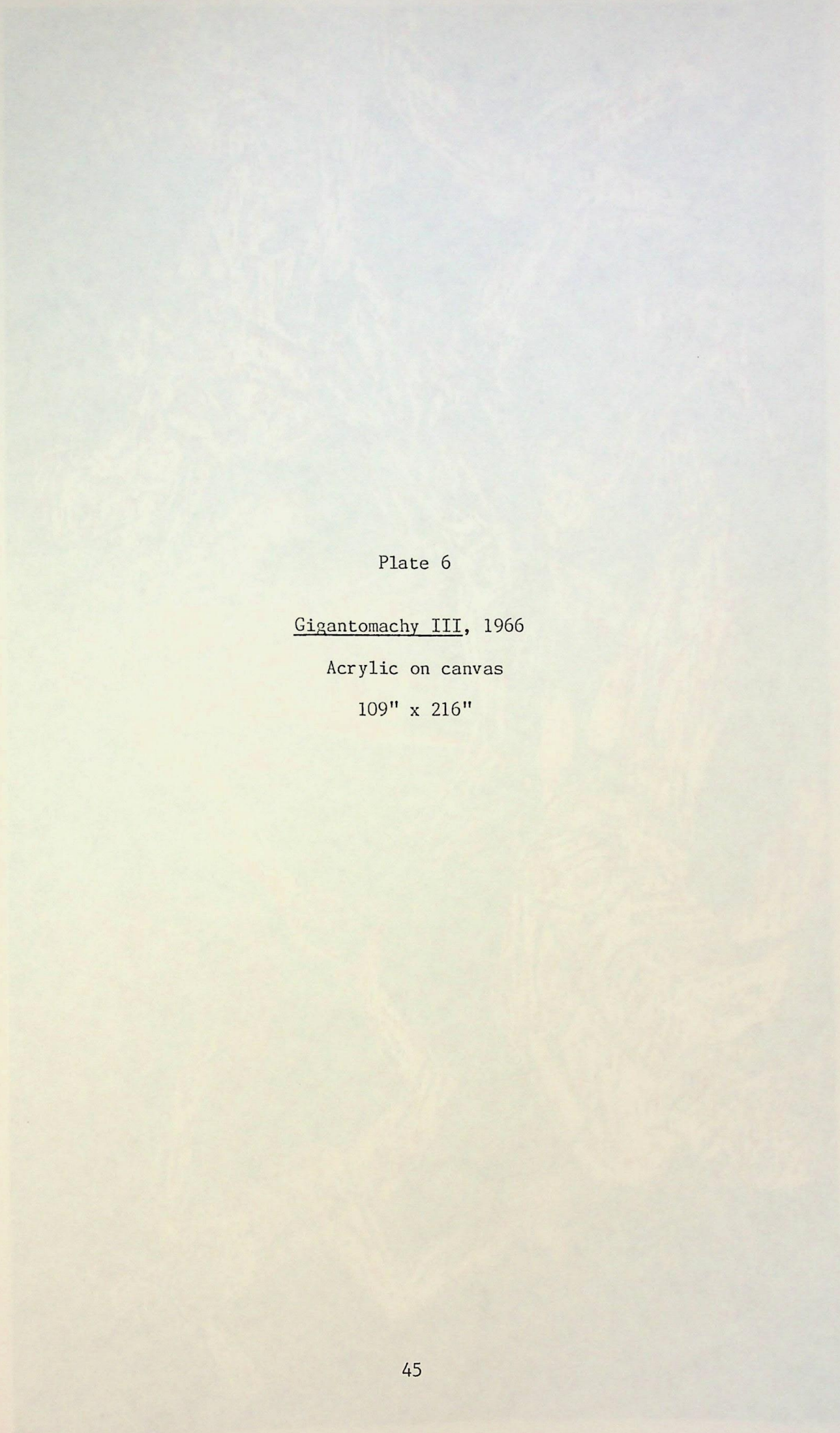
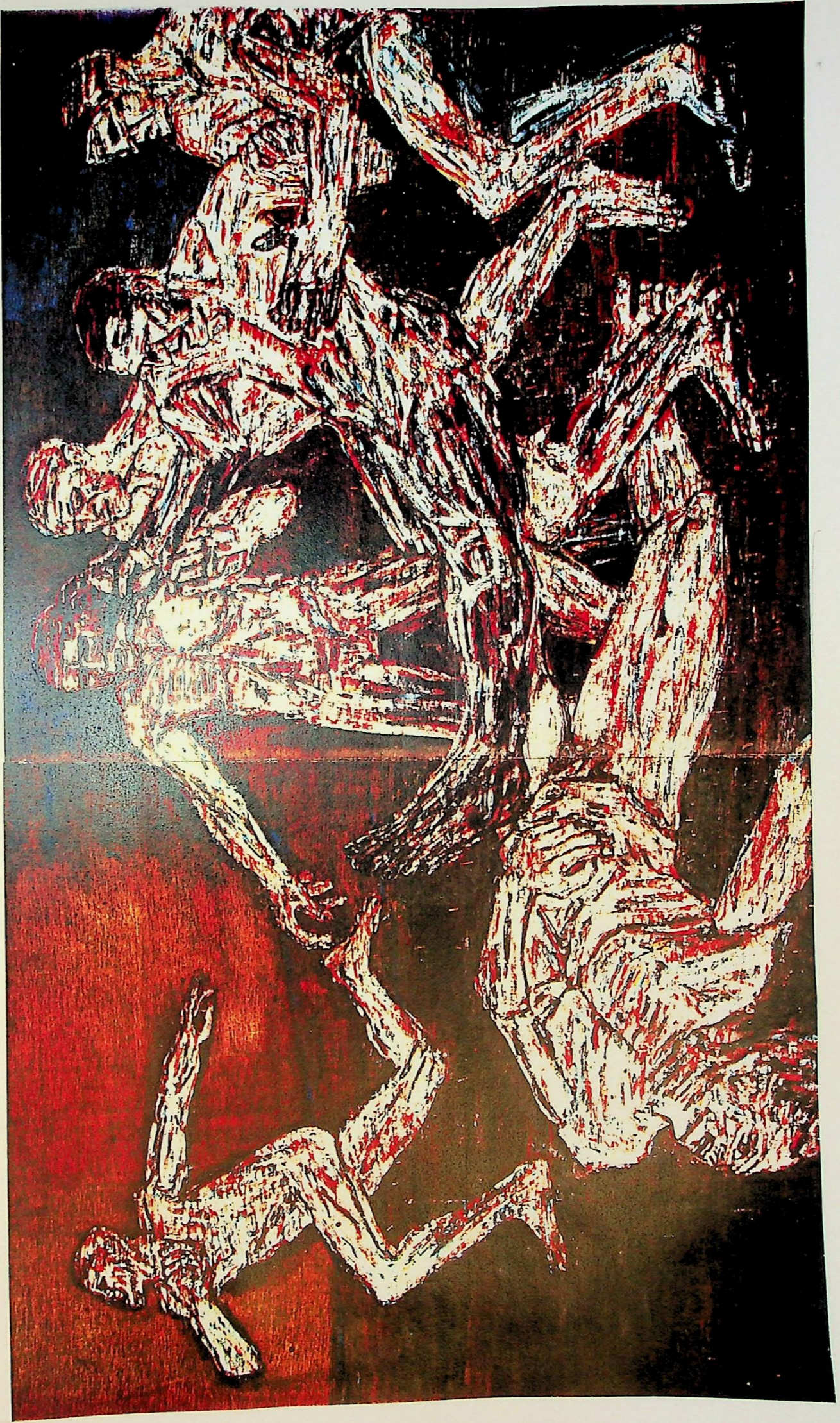


Plate 6

Gigantomachy III, 1966

Acrylic on canvas

109" x 216"



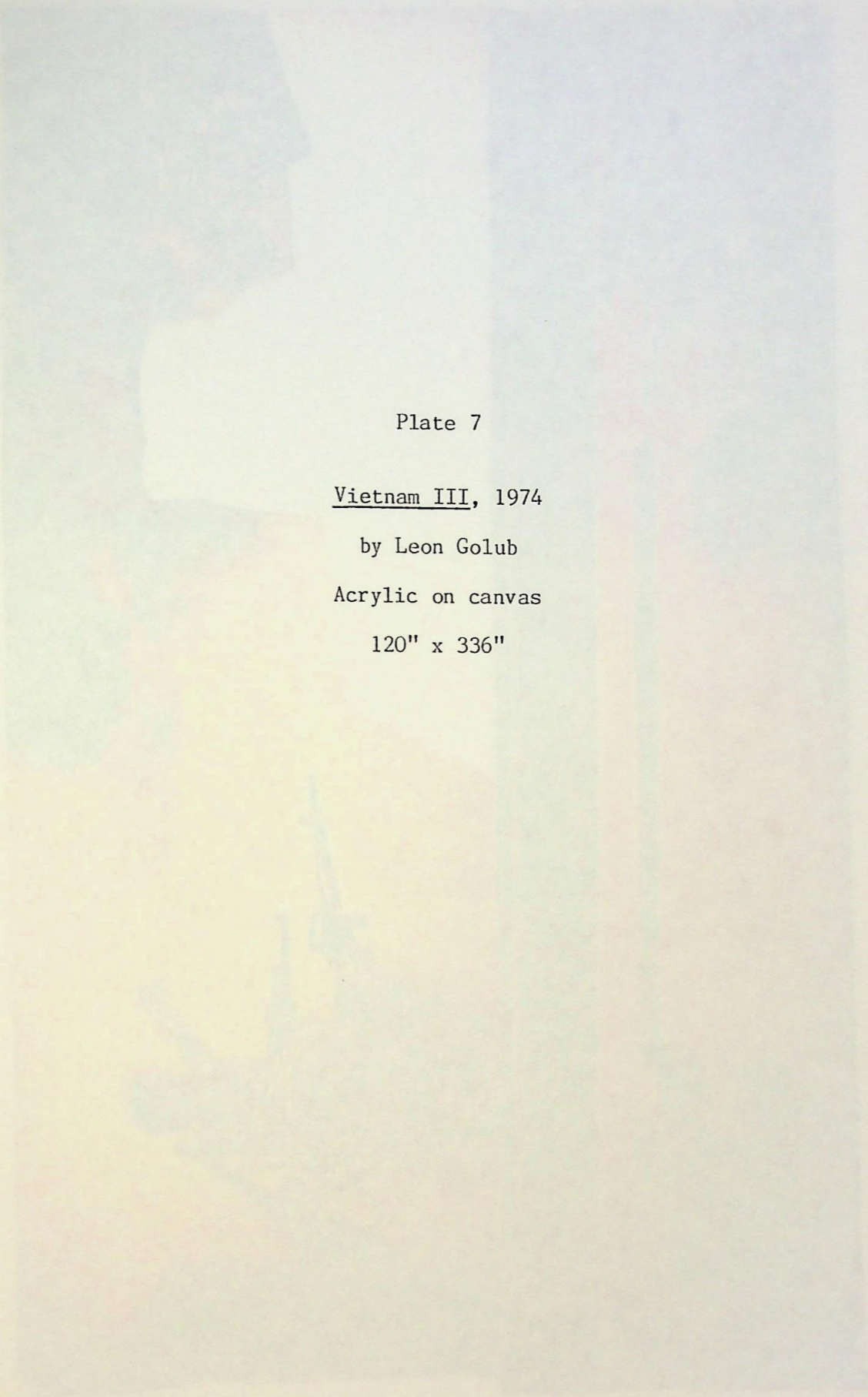


Plate 7

Vietnam III, 1974

by Leon Golub

Acrylic on canvas

120" x 336"



Plate 8

Horsing Around III, 1983

Acrylic on canvas

88" x 90"



Plate 9

Interrogation II, 1981

by Leon Golub

Acrylic on canvas

120" x 168"





Plate 10

Mercenaries I, 1979

by Leon Golub

Acrylic on canvas

120" x 166"



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