

LEON GOLUB  
H. C. WESTERMANN  
FAMOUS ARTISTS FROM CHICAGO. 1965-1975

From 20 October 2017 to 15 January 2018, Fondazione Prada will present at its Milan venue a research and information program on the Chicago art scene developed in the aftermath of World War II, through three exhibitions, curated by Germano Celant as a whole: "Leon Golub", "H. C. Westermann" and "Famous Artists from Chicago. 1965-1975".

Fondazione Prada thus further expands its strategy of reinterpretation of those moments in contemporary art history that, although not entirely acknowledged by critics, have nonetheless influenced new generations of artists, from graffiti to neo-digital artists. The project is focused on the employment of a painting style characterized by political commitment, figurative narratives and radical graphics, and therefore rejected by mainstream New York culture – which was more interested in the abstract and impersonal dimensions of art. The exhibition is structured around three thematic sections, all devoted to two generations of artists formed in Chicago between the 50's and the 60's. This project further investigates the artistic production of those two decades in a location far from the main artistic centers, from Paris to New York, and explores the development of alternative scenes generated in art schools and academies, namely the School of Art Institute of Chicago, which critically competed or opposed Minimal Art's industrial and essential approach.

"Leon Golub", the first part of the project, is hosted in the Fondazione's Nord and Sud galleries, and explores two complementary aspects of the artist's production, displaying 22 acrylic paintings on canvas of spectacular dimensions, realized between the late 70's and the early 80's, and more than 58 photographs printed on transparent paper in the 90's. Golub (Chicago, 1922 - New York, 2004), since his formative years in Chicago, developed a personal approach to figurative painting, detaching himself from the dominant styles of New York School's Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism. The exhibition focuses on the political aspects of his work, which openly denounces the brutality of war, racism, torture and violence. Throughout his life, his subjects became more extreme, for instance in the *Mercenaries* series, large canvases on which he depicted direct references to the Vietnam war, which became symbols of the paramilitary conditions of contemporary life. The rough realism of the existence is transferred onto photographic transparencies, in which Golub manipulated and altered existing images of the same dramatic and tragic subjects.

The exhibition section devoted to H. C. Westermann (Los Angeles, 1922 – Danbury, 1981) reunites on the first floor of the Podium 53 sculptures of different dimensions, realized between the 50's and the 90's, along with a selection of 20 works on paper. Westermann began his career in Chicago where, after serving in the army as a Marine in the South Pacific and in Korea, studied Applied Arts at the School of the Art Institute. The exhibition explores his peculiar, intense approach to wood carving which he derived from traditional carpentry. The refusal of formalism and his predilection for found materials, along with his nostalgic

take on old America and a critical gaze on the brutality of present times, have become key inspiration elements for the next generations of artists, active in Chicago or elsewhere. Born the same year as Leon Golub, Westermann took up art later, and can ideally be considered a bridge between two generations of artists who studied at the School of the Art Institute, for whom he was a sort of spiritual father, imparting them such elements as vernacular sources, sense of humor, wordplay, sexual references and a proliferation of details combined with a surrealist's taste for enigma and manipulation. With regard to the contemporary art scene, his work can be considered as a source of inspiration for the current visual languages, from Jeff Koons to KAWS (Brian Donnelly).

The last section of the project, "Famous Artists from Chicago. 1965-1975", hosted on the ground floor of the Podium, has been conceived as an in-depth analysis of the artists active throughout the 60's and 70's, who were featured in shows that questioned traditional exhibition set-up and presentation conventions, such as "Hairy Who" (1966-'67), "False Image" (1968-'69), "Nonplussed Some" (1968-'69), organized at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, and itinerant exhibition "Made in Chicago", first presented at the São Paulo Biennial in 1973. The title of the show highlights the necessity, expressed by curator and teacher Don Baum, to launch Chicago artists into the national and international scene. "Famous Artists from Chicago. 1965-1975" depicts the energy of the cultural environment of this American city as a center for figurative production, as well as the heterogeneity of the contributions of some artists known as Chicago Imagists (Roger Brown, Ed Flood, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Suellen Rocca and Karl Wirsum), who had identified the roots of their personal research in Surrealism and Art Brut, in a way that anticipated the new tendencies of the 80's and 90's, from Graffiti to Street Art, from wild cartoons to urban murals. Starting from this collective dimension, the exhibition path develops starting from a central room hosting paintings and sculptural objects by all nine artists on display in the show. The central group space leads to nine individual rooms in which the language of each artist is investigated, underlining the dialectic between the collectiveness of groups and solitary artistic research. While there exist evident differences in style and technique among the artists, a bent for figuration, irony, a sense of humor and a distancing from academic traditions remain elements of a shared sensibility.

As stated by Germano Celant: "While Monster Roster group - whose members were Leon Golub and H. C. Westermann, among others - still aimed to provide an exhaustive, caustic response to political and ideological falsifications connected with American, male, imperialist powers that originated wars and disasters, the Imagists were more cynical and disenchanting. Recognition of vast urban and national tragedies drove them to respond with 'deformations' and grotesque representations of mankind. Instead of denouncing, they created a visual subversion that contemplates destruction of the body, now fragmented and broken apart: a representation of life in its squandering of sexual and carnal energies, where blood flows and the ambiguity of existence leads to inhuman transformations. They don't

focus solely on a moral argument, but attempt to push forward, awake and aware, adopting an ironic, overturned point of view.

The project is accompanied by three publications in the Fondazione's Quaderni series, which analyze the themes of the shows through essays by Germano Celant and Jon Bird, interviews with Don Baum and H. C. Westermann and other unpublished materials.

**Press Contacts**

Fondazione Prada

T +39 02 56 66 26 34

[press@fondazioneprada.org](mailto:press@fondazioneprada.org)

[fondazioneprada.org](http://fondazioneprada.org)