

Nancy Spero and Leon Golub

By Susan Hagen

I visited Leon Golub and Nancy Spero in their shared studio space in Greenwich Village recently, and they told me about their work in the Print Center exhibition, their ongoing artistic concerns, and their unique relationship as artists. Both in their late 70s and married for 50 years, they have each produced some of the most powerful and politically engaged art of the past few decades. It was evening and we sat together at their kitchen table, adjacent to their studios, and talked.

City Paper: Tell me about your work at The Print Center.

Leon Golub: Basically, it's The Print Center, so they deal with prints, but we used an expanded, spread-out, even disassociated sense of the print medium. My part consists of various prints that I've made, silkscreen or lithograph, and they deal with the themes in my paintings — themes of power and vulnerability. For example, there's a print of a sphinx and there's a print of a figure *Men Are Not for Burning*, which was about the Vietnam War. I also have an installation of three images, which are large Duraclear images on transparent photo film. They hang, and if you walk near them often, they'll move a little bit. They're not framed, they're not enclosed or protected.

Nancy Spero: What's interesting is that they're not against the wall in the gallery, and when people walk behind them you can see through them. So it's very interesting watching the interaction... In the show I have a wall piece that's made of cotton duck that was glued to a wall, painted over, and then was taken off the wall. On it I printed the "Ballad of Marie Sanders," by Bertolt Brecht, about a woman who was victimized during World War II. I also have a banner that is celebratory and really heraldic — made originally for a baroque room in a museum in Salzburg, Austria. It's hand-printed on the silk and then hand-sewn. They go from victimization to the celebratory; they couldn't be more different. They're both hand-printed on fabric, though. And we also have a collaborative print.

CP: This is a very broad question, but can you each talk a little bit about what your intentions are as an artist, and how they have evolved over the years?

LG: I am a narrative artist and, in a sense, I'm kind of a history painter, and that is not the most common thing today. Art has followed the 20th-century trajectory of trying to expand how it functions in our civilization. It's related to abstract forces and technological forces — and simply personal self-acknowledgement of artists without necessarily confirming or denying anything outside of themselves. Artists take that in many different directions, of course. If you think of the Russian constructivists for

example, they had a social vision, but it was largely an abstract social vision.

NS: That's true.

LG: The futurists were a little more figurative, and the abstract expressionists... Not too much had anything do with realism as such — because realism, and figurative painting, was largely to tell things in an anecdotal sort of way, whereas the real forces of nature were given a more profound, abstracted and symbolic kind of expression. History painting as it existed until the late 19th century had become very sentimental and corny. So you get the impressionists and everyone else reacting against it, and modernism developed in that way. Many years later, I, and artists like me, [are] trying to engage the world on another level and are dealing with events that transpire in our society. So now I'm talking about historical circumstances and struggles and violence and American power and American dominance and what the hell is going on in terms of the way society organiz-

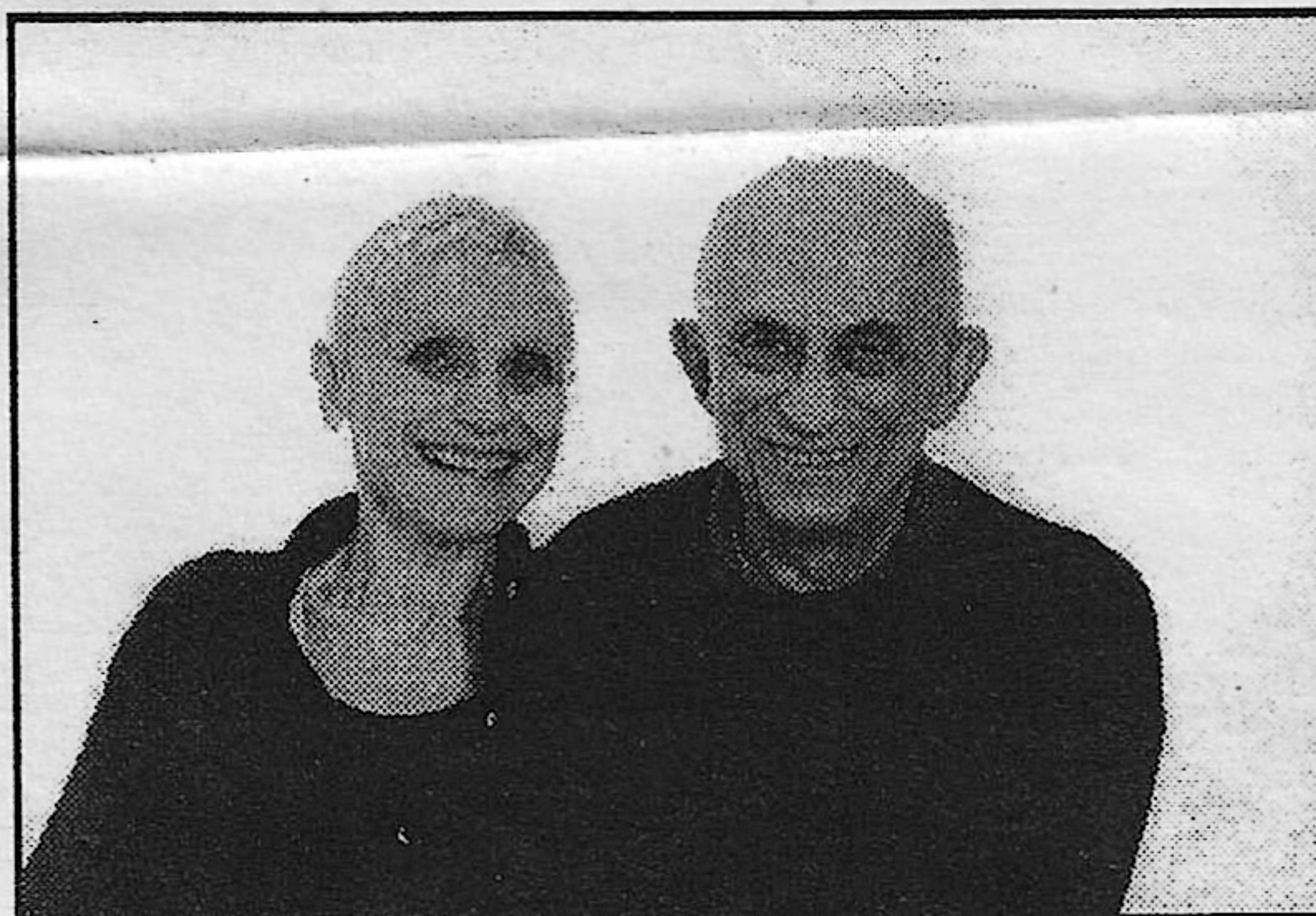
es itself, the way our power is extended into the world. But then people could say to me, "But yeah, that's what the photographs do."

NS: I think that Leon's work penetrates where the camera can't go.

CP: Yes, and that's his intention — to somehow expose something that's not being seen.

NS: Yeah, I really think so.

LG: So, I'm trying to give a picture of events and actions that determine the very nature of who we are as Americans today. Let's say we're dealing now with Afghanistan. OK, who and



what are the Americans at this particular time? I'm not dealing with Afghanistan directly, but I'm dealing with the abstract sense of American power, and crises that take place. I paint dogs running through paintings — for example, Chechnya with dogs roaming the ruined cityscapes — which become symbols of the devastation and the violence. And then I add a kind of paramilitary police-type because that's how violence is exacted on people. That's how they take someone and twist their arm, and worse. I'm trying to put these things together and say that this is part of our world. It's a kind of narrative that has some kind of historical resonance to it — it has to have a resonance that goes beyond the illustrative.

CP: Nancy, can I ask you to talk about your intentions as an artist?

NS: I consider my work open-ended. It's changed so much over the years and yet it all makes sense. My intentions really are to make a continuum and to... keep ambulatory.

LG: That's your physical intention!

NS: No, no, my work, too! It is my physical

thing, it is. But in a way it's for the art, too, to get out in the world and keep moving.

LG: That's a nice way to put it.

NS: Yeah, I don't want it to be static. And I don't want *me* to be static, which I could easily become.

LG: I think you need to say a little bit how you worked on Artaud and about Vietnam.

NS: OK, so I have gone from just painting on canvas to working with images of lovers and prostitutes, animals, children and stuff like that, too.

LG: She's going way back in time.

NS: Way back in time! I'm going back to the War Series. We had just come back to the United States — we had lived in France for five years.

I did this war series for five years addressing the Vietnam War. And war in general, too, the brutality and devastation of it. And then from there I went to the Artaud Series, using the language of Artaud, both the painting and the *Codex Artaud*. I used Artaud, the French writer, this sacred monster, in a way, of

French intellectuals. He wrote poetry and he put on plays and he was judged insane the last nine years but one of his life... I went from the war series to the angst of the artist in society.

LG: You're not saying this key thing you always talk about. Silencing.

NS: Oh, right. At that time, in 1972, I had joined various women's activist groups here in New York City, and was studying and learning about women artists' roles, and from that, making surmises about women in American society. I realized how, in the art world, women

had been excluded and silenced. The Artaud Series was about being silenced, because Artaud was screaming and yelling about being silenced. So I said, "God, that's just what I'm so upset about." There's nothing personal, nothing autobiographical in my work, but like any art, it comes from a very powerful personal impetus.

CP: How do you maintain the distance that you need to do your own work? And do you get ideas for your individual work from each other?

LG: To some extent we do pick up ideas from each other. ... It's a subtle thing, you know, we've picked up a lot from each other in various ways. We both got interested in Etruscan art at the same time.

NS: Well, we went to Italy.

LG: We both shifted to an interest in photographs. But who did it first? Nancy began to use strong color before I did. You can't help but pick some things up — it's a continual thing that's going on between us. At the same time, our work is very independent of each other's.

NS: Sure, sure, there are always influences and cross-influences. ... But it is difficult being so close — and for all these years too! — to maintain our autonomy from each other.

LG: We don't even know how it happened that we stuck together so long! [laughter]

CP: You must get along pretty well.

NS: We do, actually.

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Editor's note: More from this interview is available online.