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ART



“George Gittoes in Afghanistan,” 2011. Photographer unknown, Courtesy of George Gittoes. Color digital photograph. Dimensions variable.

In Conversation with George Gittoes

by Noah Dillon

In addition to his previous [conversation with *Rail* Consulting Editor David Levi Strauss in the July/August 2010 issue](#), George Gittoes was recently able to set aside some time for another extended conversation, this time with *Rail* publisher Phong Bui and his students (Suzanne Brancaccio, Sara Christoph, Noah Dillon, Caroline Dumalin, Margaret Graham, Marco Greco, Juliet Helmke, Ambereen Karamat, Nayun Lee, Aldrin Valdez, and Tom Winchester) in the MFA Art Criticism and Writing program at the School of Visual Arts, via Skype from Pakistan.

George Gittoes is an Australian documentarian and painter who has worked in warzones across the globe for more than 25 years. Over the past half-decade

Gittoes has produced more than a half-dozen feature films, including *Soundtrack to War* (2005), *Rampage* (2006), *The Miscreants of Taliwood* (2009), and the soon-to-be-released *Love City Trilogy*. These films show in unconventional ways the Afghan and Iraq wars' seldom-recognized effects on soldiers, artists, civilians, and those that they love. A major exhibition *Witness to War* (April 16 – September 18, 2011) is on view at Station Museum in Houston, Texas. For more details of his work visit www.gittoes.com.

Phong Bui: George, although people always say, “All roads lead to Rome,” I feel we have a greater affinity and kinship with our mutual friend, Leon Golub, therefore I can say, “All roads lead to Leon Golub.” If you don’t mind, we might dedicate this to Leon.

George Gittoes: I was thinking of Leon recently. I went to police headquarters in Kabul to get film permits, and there were these big, Blackwater-type guys leaning on their vehicles. They were huge and American and very sinister. There was no human compassion in their expressions. Outwardly, they had the look of killing machines. It was straight out of Golub.

Nayun Lee: We wanted to congratulate you for winning the Jury Prize at the 2010 Traverse City Film Festival.

Gittoes: Thank you!

Noah Dillon: You’ve recently had a large solo show at the Station Museum in Houston. The show is rich and full of a lot of history. Does putting all of that together make you more productive? Contemplative? What were your thoughts and aims in mounting this retrospective and why Texas?

Gittoes: The Station Museum is its director, Jim Harithas, a genius curator who’s internationally famous for showing politically controversial work in the United States (which is notoriously anti-“political art”). Jim has shown art by Iraqis, Palestinians and Black Panthers, so I felt in good company. I thought, “If I’m going

to bring the horror of war back to America, then George Bush's Houston is the perfect place.”

“Witness to War” brought together all the different mediums to speak in many voices with one voice. In my head, the films, paintings, drawings, diaries, novels, and installations are all interconnected. But this show was the first chance to let others experience this, which is a credit to Jim. Many people were moved to tears by the work and spent hours in there reading the texts, watching the films, and coming back to the paintings. It was encouraging to see that people will spend the time to absorb that content.

Like Leon Golub, I believe Americans should have to contemplate the impact of war on both their own soldiers and the “others.” Few museum directors in the United States agree and it is very rare to see Golub or me on show anywhere. Paintings like “American Soldier” (2002), “A Place in History (Iraq)” (2006), and “Bad Boys” (2004) are works that should be considered by American public collections. Frankly, the Station Museum was the first place in America to risk showing my work.

Marco Greco: What made you want to enter warzones and why do you continue to risk yourself, physically, and psychologically?

Gittoes: I think my mind’s been in a warzone ever since I was born. I grew up in a *very* tough neighborhood called Rockdale, and the lessons of the street have saved my life more than once. At the age of 12 I was beaten near to death. But I know how to take a beating. From my youth I knew how to draw and had an artist’s sensitivities, but the neighborhood also made me very tough. That’s how I’ve been able to go to the places that I film and paint.

Lee: In making *The Miscreants of Taliwood*, how did you risk yourself and still stay sane in day-to-day life?

Gittoes: Basically, I'm running the same kinds of risks as the people around me. It's an ongoing challenge as video stores and other places are being blown up. But what's inspiring is that there are a lot of young filmmakers making very exciting films. I'm trying to help them get the money to realize their dreams. It's kind of like art in that it's a bit destructive and very important. It's very much like Golub, who was trying to show the faces of the people who make war.

Dillon: With the flood, the Afghan war, and the regional political instability things seem to be becoming more dangerous in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Have you adapted to the conditions that are emerging right now?

Gittoes: Well, everything changes. I recently drove safely down to Jalalabad from Kabul knowing that people had been attacked and killed on that road just a week earlier. You can't estimate these things. But it's very important not to get frightened, but to continue working.

Greco: When do you think this project in Pakistan will be completed for you?

Gittoes: I estimate I'll be working in Afghanistan for at least another three years. I'm in it 'til the end. I was in Taliban Afghanistan before *and* after 9/11. No one can get access to the kind of people I can. I've noticed incredible changes. Like a week or so ago I was in Jalalabad and a bunch of Taliban had attacked a huge American base there, killed 30 NATO soldiers, and got away free. The American forces have these huge armored personnel carriers with wheels as big as tractors, cannons, periscopes. The soldiers are inside, aiming the guns from laptops. We were in this taxi and we pulled up near one of these gigantic vehicles. Everyone said, "George don't pick up your camera!" I went to pick it up and suddenly one of the bloody periscopes turned towards us. The cannon rotated around and Amir Shah's nails began to dig in to my flesh. We were afraid we'd all die, so I put a scarf over my camera until the periscope lost interest. Then I thought, "This is *War of the Worlds*." America is the outside world here, in Jalalabad, with unmanned drones flying over

rooftops, controlled by technicians in Nevada. So the next documentary will be called *War of the Worlds*. Either that or *Kingdom Come*.

Juliet Helmke: You've traveled to war zones on your own instead of being commissioned by the Australian government. Do you have to approach your work differently than 'embedded artists'?

Gittoes: A lot of journalists have been "official war artists" but I've never done that. I've accessed many armies. In Iraq, I just came up to U.S. soldiers and surprised them with my questions, gained their trust, and got access without ever being embedded. Tomorrow I could be out there with the Taliban. I never do a deal with anyone, and no one ever gets control over my footage. Embedded artists and journalists have their stuff vetted afterwards. I've had people come up to me with guns and say, "Give me your film!" and I'll say, "Shoot me first."

I can never get funding for my documentaries because you have to write a script equivalent to a feature-length film outlining everything that's going to happen: what the arc and the conclusion will be. I chip away at my subject, finding it slowly. I'm not clairvoyant so I can never tell what it's going to be, which is the "problem" being an artist making a documentary rather than a journalist. *[Laughs.]*

Ambereen Karamat: What I like most about *The Miscreants* is that you've shown to Westerners that not all Pakistanis are Taliban and they, too, want a normal life.

Gittoes: That's right.

Karamat: What do you want the Pakistanis to think by watching this movie?

Gittoes: I'm here on my own, surrounded by locals. And I've shown the film to everyone and they seem to understand it better than Western audiences. I haven't had a negative reaction from anybody. I'd even be happy to show it to pro-Taliban

Pakistan Senator Maulana Gul Naseeb Khan or Mawlawi Jalaluddin Haqqani. Obviously, if I felt nervous about their reactions to the film I wouldn't be here now.

Karamat: Yeah, I agree. I am also from Pakistan and I was in Lahore two months back but I had not heard of your movie. Did you try to screen it in some of the commercial theaters in the big cities like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad? If so, did you get any support from them?

Gittoes: No, I haven't had much support from anyone. Everyone, everywhere, says, "Why are you dealing with those seedy industry people?" They think of people like Asif Khan and the kind of 35mm films shot in Lahore. The Taliban want to close these movies down and the larger part of the population doesn't want to support them either. They feel that by supporting my movie they'd also be supporting the pop dramas. We've just written the scripts for three new films that we're making in Jalalabad. The head of Afghan Film said, "But why are you making Pashtun films with those people in Jalalabad? You should just put your money into *my* 35mm films." Or, "Why are you using these crappy little cameras? We've got dollies and cranes. We really know how to make films." There's snobbery toward this kind of filmmaking on all sides.

Tom Winchester: One of the female actresses in *Miscreants* participated in pornography. Does that compromise the film?

Gittoes: Not at all. It's important to show the industry's sleazy side. There was a time in America and Europe when actresses were considered prostitutes. Here, a lot of them *are* because they can make more money. These women come from a background of poverty unimaginable to people in developed countries. Recently, while on location, I saw men consistently visit the hotel room I had rented for one of our actresses. She made a lot more money out of that than by being in the film. But, I have a lot of respect for her and she's one of the bravest people I know.

Sara Christoph: In *The Miscreants of Taliwood*, right before a very gruesome Taliban propaganda clip, you say something like “There are some things I wish I hadn’t seen.” Were there times that you thought, “This is too much”?

Gittoes: When I was in Rwanda, I thought that I had to go document every person, every body, every injury, every dead child. I learned (probably too late) that when you focus down on death and destruction you damage yourself irreversibly. I’ve done too much damage. I am still acting as a witness, but I don’t focus down on it so much anymore and I try not to expose people to it. I reluctantly felt that we had to use the decapitation scene in *Miscreants* because you needed to see what the Taliban are distributing to replace legitimate film. Believe me, there are much worse Taliban films than that. Particularly films about what they do to women.

Suzanne Brancaccio: Your life situates you in these war-torn areas where you’re often put in some fairly compromising situations. Can you think of one place or situation that stands out as the most terrifying?

Gittoes: There are always terrifying things and you start to become immune to them. But the subtle threats are often worse than being in a position where you’re dodging bullets. A few days ago I received a phone call from someone who threatened to remove my face from my body unless I stop making these “disgusting films” and leave Pakistan. I’m ignoring it, but these anonymous threats eat into your spirit. No one wants to be perpetually looking over his shoulder.

Undoubtedly, the most difficult and damaging time for me was Rwanda when I was amongst a group of 250,000 internally displaced refugees (mainly women and children) who were being slaughtered with machetes over the course of four days. I don’t think that anyone can recover from that. The only way that I could mentally survive was by saving as many lives as I could. So, for example, I collected 150 orphaned babies and tried to get them out. Some women, seeing what I was doing, took the children into a shelter and nourished them. I persuaded a truck driver to take them and those women to a Mother Teresa Orphanage across the border. I’m

still getting letters from some of those kids and some of them are now going to school and university. I remember someone saying to me “George, this is Africa. Let them die.” That taught me to go on intuition. And thank God for Mother Teresa Orphanages.

Dillon: You’ve had a lot of extreme situations like that. And in your paintings and non-fiction you use the character of Corporal Night as a proxy for yourself, right? The inclusion of lived experience seems very important to your work. We see you in your films, but I wonder if you could talk about how you work with your paintings?

Gittoes: As you know, I live on the road without a fixed home, studio, or country. These days, my most consistent home is Jalalabad, Afghanistan. This means I don’t get to contemplate my own work, except in the moment. Working with Jim Harithas was similar to working with a tough film editor: the images were structured to take the audience into a moving, fluid experience. Personally, this was a bitter pill to swallow because it made me accept how consistently dark my life has been. I thought there must have been some Matisse or Monet moments, but this show made me doubt it.

I love painting and the feel of paint, but it’s my writing that keeps me sane—the paintings force me to re-live events as I go back into the experience to interpret it in paint. The diaries are like talking to a therapist after experiencing the worst circumstances imaginable. My only escape is into my big, unpublished *Night Vision* novels, a kind of semi-science fiction myth, which enable me to talk about the supernatural and hyper-real aspects of my real experience in war. The main character, Corporal Night, has fought his way through the wars that I have also survived. It works for me the way the Vivian Sisters must have worked for Henry Darger. Writing about an alternate “me” provides a freedom that is incredibly soothing. The images I’ve painted, drawn, and photographed are all, inevitably, illustrations to this vast graphic novel; “Witness to War” was like walking inside the pages of *Night Vision*.

Caroline Dumalin: I wondered what possibly went through your mind when you hugged Naseeb, after having interviewed him for *The Miscreants*.

Gittoes: When you're in a war zone you can't avoid unsavory people or experiences because you'll miss opportunities to access important things. However, with Naseeb, you see in the film he mentions that the interview is not good for him. I thought we would be lucky to get out of that place alive. I was happy to hug him instead of having my head cut off, which was a real possibility. But it's a strange world: after that tense, dangerous interview, Gul Naeeb said "George, someday I would love to come visit you in Australia and meet your family." I had to tell him "Oh, yes you'd be very welcome." That's just token and superficial politeness to a guest. You always have to wonder if this same person, once you walk out the door, has set an ambush for you.

Dumalin: Do you think about hiding your personal convictions?

Gittoes: To be honest I'm not judicious enough to hide my feelings that much. The questions I wanted to ask Naseeb were all very good questions to ask and they were questions that I wasn't sure I *could* ask. The interchanges between a killer and a potential victim are complicated and I've managed these complications many times. In Rwanda once, a Hutu militiaman said, "If you take any pictures I'll kill you." And I had taken several hundred photographs. He looked at me and said, "Have you taken any photographs?" I said, "No, I haven't taken a single photograph." He had seen me take the photos and this completely confused him. I noticed that he had a beautiful, hand-made jacket for holding all these bullets, guns, knives, and things. So I said, "That is such a beautiful jacket, I could really use one of those for my film and everything. Where did you get it?" He said, "Well, my mother-in-law made it for me back in Kigali." I said, "Oh, I'll have to get your mother-in-law's address." He gave it to me and I went from a potential victim to a potential customer for his mother-in-law. There are ways of getting out of these situations.

Dumalin: Well, that's some great bluffing or some great people skills you got there.

Margaret Graham: Could you talk a little bit more about the relationship between risk and art? Do you think that art has a responsibility to be politically or socially conscious? If so, should artists take risks in order to pursue that?

Gittoes: I think art does have that responsibility, but it's a very difficult and delicate thing. It still has to work as art. In *Miscreants* or *Rampage* or my paintings I still try to make them on the same principles as any kind of successful art. They need to be able to stand next to other art that may not have anything to do with politics and still work as art regardless of their content. It's got to work like Matisse or Picasso, who were mainly apolitical. Leon Golub, George Grosz, Otto Dix, and other great political artists understood this. It's an interesting kind of tightrope walk to try and achieve that.

At the moment I'm doing something beautiful: I found these guys working on wedding gowns. The Taliban hated dressmakers and people said when the Taliban were in power weddings were like funerals. They were forced to create in secret because they could be killed for it. Now they're doing it openly and I'm collaborating with them to create this huge piece for a wedding palace in Kabul. I'm calling it *The Secret Garden*, for their secret love of beauty. When it hangs it will be not only beautiful but also tremendously politically significant.

Picasso said, "I don't think. I find." That's what I do. I just come to places and I find collaborators to create amazing things. I'm really a collaborative artist in that I always work with a group. I've got no home or studio anywhere; I'm just a living, mobile studio artist. I always find people and a means to create wherever I am.

Brancaccio: With the Lovett family in *Rampage* or Javed Musazai in *Miscreants of Taliwood*, your documentary work becomes something of a detriment and also something of great change in the lives of your subjects. What, if any, ethical lines

have you drawn for yourself as you intervene in the lives of the people with whom you work?

Gittoes: People from America and Australia ask that question. But I think those kinds of ethical considerations are the luxuries of people in rich countries. I say to people, whether it's Javed or the Lovetts or whoever, that if they feel like they don't want to be in the film I'll stop and I'll let them withdraw. I think that the only *ethical* thing you can do is to constantly give people that option.

People in safe places have to understand that if people like me stop what they're doing it means the flow of independent information will also stop and it's a world where you've got to get that information. The gatherers can't be hesitant. You've got to be aware that if too many moral judgments are placed upon the people that have the courage to go tell those stories, we'll say, "What's the point? There's no money in it, we risk our lives, and when we come back to our own country they just criticize us for doing the work that we do." Those are huge disincentives, especially the negative harassment from the liberal humanities community.

Brancaccio: Are you still in contact with the Lovett family? I'm wondering if you could give us an update?

Gittoes: Yeah, absolutely. You know, some people said the film caused the death of Marcus. In reality he was out that night with a gun and he was involved in fighting with a drug gang. So I put that in the film. And I personally don't think that the film influenced the events. It could have, but I don't think it did.

We're very close to the Lovett family. We love the Lovetts. They came to Australia and a lot of people criticized that aspect, saying, "Why did you have the scene where you took the Lovetts to Australia?" But, that was important because Denzel and Marcus are really creative and if nothing else they learned a lot of professionalism from the different people they met in New York, L.A., London, and

Australia. They're not going to waste their lives because they've gotten to know it from both ends.

Dillon: There's a dangerous edge to your films—they seem to *create* circumstances for the camera. Could you talk a little bit about how you make your films and where you draw the line between documentation and creation?

Gittoes: Every film is different and all my art's always evolving. But you're probably worried that I'm involving people like Khuram, Ijaz, and all these other people in what I do. This is their world—their warzone—and they would be creating whether I was here or not. I'm probably more at risk than any of them because I'm a real target. In Jalalabad I was visibly foreign and it's not a foreigner-friendly place. Bin Laden planned 9/11 there and it's probably the most Taliban-sympathetic place in the world. I'm sharing the risk. I am alone and make a very small footprint. Because I wear the local clothes I'm kind of invisible. Everyone here feels like I'm part of their family and I've had more than 15 years of contact with these communities. And I can sit down with Senator Naseeb. He's pro-Taliban and in favor of using suicide bombs anywhere if they "serve a good purpose." I'm happy to show that I'm not frightened of him.

I think it's crucial that I'll produce a film like *Miscreants* and then come back here and spend six months in the community and show it to people. If I made a film that I couldn't do that with, then I think I'd be a pretty suspect filmmaker. It's got to work for that community just as well as for outsiders.

Dillon: It also occurs to me that your films are also dangerous in the way they're made by revealing the artifice of documentary filmmaking. At the end of *Soundtrack to War* you have a soldier repeat himself until you get the right take. Then you included all that footage that would have normally been cut.

Gittoes: I had the perfect take for that, but the point is that's boring. An artist like Clemente started doing paintings that people thought were bad art, now we think

all of Clemente's pictures look good. He was moving in an area of distaste that made people stop in surprise and look at them. I'm using this kind of shock tactic in my documentaries. Constant surprises that deviate from the norm keep audiences watching. Slick, highly technical documentary makers have all kinds of smooth production line standards; I break those standards and annoy the hell out of these formal types. I'm a documentary filmmaker with the sensibilities of an artist who wants to always mess with the medium, like Duchamp, Beuys, or Picasso.

The new doc that I'm shooting *really* achieves that. I've been interviewing people to get their stories, and then I'm turning their stories into drama. Virtually the day after the interview I'm introducing them to the actor who is going to play them. This blurring of the lines really messes with people's minds. Art is only interesting if you are pushing the boundaries and documentary is a fantastic medium. People say that everything's been done or everything has been tried. I think that there's still a long way to go. It's a medium that has been controlled by journalists constantly try to make it all about imparting information. But artists can have a great time with it! I get put through hell when I go to things like the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam because other people think I'm degrading or debasing the medium. I just think it's refreshing to work with style and to get it to work as film.

Lee: You mentioned that you are working on a "love story" project in Jalalabad. I am really interested in the Gittoes version of a romance film. Could you tell us a little bit more about it?

Gittoes: Well, in terms of love, I really love what John Lennon and Yoko Ono did with their poster of "Love Not War." It had an effect on our whole generation and can even take some credit for ending the Vietnam War. I've spent a few months making love stories. We shot them in Jalalabad, which was renamed "Love City."

This is an interesting culture where marriages are arranged. It's very dangerous to get married for love—the bride and groom can get killed as a result. And there are many very dangerous Romeo and Juliet-type love stories. But *Romeo and Juliet* is

a tragedy. We already had tragedy in the film we just finished, *Moonlight*, where the girl gets raped and dies in childbirth. I've sort of had enough of tragedy for time being. Now we're on to happy endings.

Dillon: In November you're scheduled to give a screening at the SVA Visual Arts Theatre as well as a series of shows at Anthology Film Archive, correct?

Gittoes: Yes. I've recently finished the *Love City* series: three two-hour dramas in Pashto, made with local Afghan filmmakers and actors. I had just finished two dramas in Peshawar and responded to a plea for help from the Jalalabad film community who have been threatened by Taliban attacks. These three dramas—*Love City*, *Talk Show*, and *The Tailor's Story*—will have their international premier in November at the Anthology Film Archive.

The three films in our *Love City* series are being distributed in Jalalabad and the feedback is so good that we are about to make three more. Previously, all local dramas have featured male-oriented action, broken up by six racy dance numbers. Only men are allowed to purchase videos, so the market has been oriented to their tastes. But it is the women who watch these movies on their home DVD players. In a society where women are rarely allowed outside, denied education, and are forced to cover themselves with burqas, movies are one of their only windows to the outside world. Our films feature strong women doing courageous things, demanding freedom. The trick to the popularity of these films is that everyone, including Afghan men, is a sucker for good love stories because they all have their own secret love story.

You can imagine how many stories and possibilities open up for a documentary when you work closely with 50 people at the frontline of a war. To make *Miscreants* I needed to make a couple of feature-length dramas. But we'll have made eight features by the time we're done with *Love City*.

I spent two months this summer in the relative safety of Norway editing the first cut of the new documentary and I am relieved to discover much of the footage is my kind of cinema gold. When I was making *Miscreants* I only had the Taliban trying to kill me. With *Love City*, the threat is on three fronts: from the American military, the Taliban, and the corrupt gangsters who hold much of the real power. Naturally, I feel scared for myself, knowing that within a few weeks I will be back in Jalalabad, experiencing the anniversary of 9/11 from the village where it all started.

Helmke: In an interview earlier this year you commented that there's a supernatural side to war that photographers can't capture, and I agree. There's honesty and urgency that can only be brought to art that is *made*. How do you capture this in your work? Do some of your works capture it more successfully than others?

Gittoes: The camera is a mechanical device and supernatural, mystical, or spiritual things happen that a camera is not really designed to capture, although you sometimes do. For example, the scene in *Miscreants* with the shoes in the bombed mosque: I saw this amazing phenomenon going on above the shoes of the dead. It was as if there were holographic, three-dimensional spirits hovering over the shoes, not smoke. If I were a journalist I'd have probably just filmed them from a distance and moved on, but as an artist I dropped down on my knees and I held the camera as steadily as I could. I really didn't know how to focus. But I got it. It was great to see it, then look down at the camera and know that it was really there and not a hallucination.

At the Red Mosque I saw some arrested guys: they were the blind leading the blind. Their heads were covered and they were being marched off to somewhere like Guantanamo knowing they'd be waterboarded or tortured. Even though they may have killed people, they were being treated inhumanly. It was impossible not to sympathize for them. I drew them immediately. I didn't refer to a photograph; I didn't draw from my film. Drawing from the impact of memory, I conveyed an emotional, mystical power that the camera didn't get. The thing that the artist-witness most wants to talk to the world about begins where the camera fails. The

artist can go where mechanical devices can't go: your emotions. And people need artists who use traditional methods that go directly from your spirit onto the page. I've got access to photography and cinematography, digital art, but some things I can only express through drawing. As an artist you *draw* emotions.

Dumalin: It's interesting that you talked about the blindfolded-leading-the-blindfolded. Photography, drawing, art history all come together in your artist's diaries. Do you turn to history to make sense of the present?

Gittoes: I sort of pillage all of art history, just as Picasso did with the artists he loved, like Velázquez. There's a language in the history of art, and my work uses that language rather than words. I take these disparate visual images from the history of the world and put them in my diary and make drawings from them. For visual artists the most important thing is to never stop drawing—to draw and draw and not think too much about it. One of the problems artists have these days is that they think too much before doing anything, worrying what others will say. You've got to see anyone who tries to damage your self-esteem as a mortal enemy because often, that's all that artists have, their self-esteem.

Christoph: Many people compare your work to artists such as George Grosz and Otto Dix. How do you feel about that comparison?

Gittoes: I recently spent some time in Germany and discovered that Germans really hate me and they hate Expressionism more than anything. They had that stuff shoved down their throats when they were in school and don't want to know about it anymore. But artists like Otto Dix and George Grosz are very important. George Grosz was the first media person to really identify the Nazis as the very dangerous threat that they were. Grosz was way ahead of the National press.

I also love Max Beckmann. When I was in Germany I was staying with Mayen Beckmann, Max's granddaughter. She wasn't shocked to discover how much Germans hated my work. [*Laughs.*] She knows the truth about the way they

treated the Expressionists and how they still shun them in subtle ways. She said “I always told you they would not like your work but you wouldn’t believe me. You should feel happy it makes them uncomfortable, *real* art always has.” Berlin has done a real hype job on itself, saying that it’s the world’s art capital when really it’s very superficial and more allergic to anything political or Expressionist than in any other time in its history.

Aldrin Valdez: You’ve mentioned Leon Golub a few times and I was looking at one of your drawings, “The Riddle 11” (2002). I notice that you depict his head on the body of a sphinx. How has your friendship with Leon Golub influenced your work as an artist?

Gittoes: Leon and I were really close. I was in Nicaragua covering the conflict during Leon’s best period, all the Latin American stuff. He would debrief me when I would return some warzone. He loved accessing my photographs and experiences and we had a wonderful exchange. He was the master and I learnt a lot of lessons from both his art and the tenacity of his convictions. The riddle about Leon always emerged when he gave a public talk. Someone in the audience would always want to point out that figurative elements depicting political torture had in reality been sourced from S-and-M magazines and porn. They were worried that he hadn’t actually seen the torture and people began asking him all sorts of difficult and very awkward questions about torture and pain and S-and-M magazines and so on. It seemed to me that this really hurt Leon and that he never had a good answer. Towards the end of Leon’s life I shot a couple of interviews with him and I asked him about all that. He said, “Look George, you don’t judge a person on their art. You judge them on how they treat the other people around them. You judge them on what they are as a human being.” I thought that was a very good answer. I knew Leon for what he was and his intentions were unquestionably pure—Leon was one of the good guys. What he used to develop his compositions does not seem important because the final statement is always clear and it is against political oppression through such means as terror and intimidation. Unfortunately his work seems more relevant in 2011 than when he was alive.

Bui: George, it's been terrific having you here and I wanted to share something that Leon loved: a passage from *Tao Te Ching*:

“Man, when he enters into life, is tender and weak
And when he dies,
then he is tough and strong.
That is why the tough and strong are
companions of death,
the tender and the weak,
companions of life.
For this reason:
If the weapons are strong, we will
not be victorious.”

Gittoes: That's a beautiful passage, isn't it?

Bui: Yes it is, and it's dedicated to you, too, now. Thank you.

George Gittoes will appear in the Art Criticism and Writing Lecture Series on November 3, 2011 at the SVA Theatre on 23rd Street in Chelsea, where George will show clips from his recent films and discuss them with David Levi Strauss. Additionally, *The Films of George Gittoes* will screen at Anthology Film Archives (32 Second Ave.) from November 4 – 6 with Gittoes present for selected screenings. Latest updates will be at: anthologyfilmarchives.org.

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