

John Golding

Only Human

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THE MAYOR GALLERY

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Only Human

While making the works in this exhibition, Golding started teaching at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Balancing the studio with his teaching and research as an art historian proved surprisingly successful, though it was always his painting that mattered most. Nonetheless, he has been a hugely influential historian of twentieth century art, starting with his comprehensive *Cubism: A History and an Analysis* in 1959 and continuing to pioneer the serious study of modernism when (believe it or not) there was a serious dearth of literature to guide us in then virtually uncharted waters. In 2000 he published his Mellon Lectures, *Paths to the Absolute*; as he said in the Preface, at the time there was “no standard work on the origins, birth and dissemination of abstract art in the twentieth century, let alone a definitive study of the subject: its manifestations are too diverse, its ramifications too complex.” He chose to focus on seven artists – “the three greatest European pioneering abstract painters – Mondrian, Malevich and Kandinsky”, facing their American successors Pollock, Newman, Rothko and Still.



Untitled, c. 1960, monotype, 64.5 x 44.5 cm

My reasons for starting with this brief account of what Golding regarded as a secondary activity are twofold and somewhat paradoxical: firstly, his work of the late 50s and early 60s, that we see in this exhibition, comes as an utter shock in relation both to his later abstract paintings and to the fact that he had been totally immersed at the time in Cubism, in Picasso, Braque, Gris and Cézanne the progenitor, not a trace of which is visible. Secondly, in his discussion of those seven artists in *Paths to the Absolute* his aim, as Chris Green says, is to "insert himself empathetically into his artist-subjects", and what particularly grips him are the different

ways in which they respectively have moved into abstraction. Kandinsky, Golding explained in his wonderfully expansive interview with Richard Wollheim, discussed two ways: veiling, or stripping bare. But Golding proposes a third way into abstraction – "which is moving up into the image or images of an earlier mode." In his essay on Mondrian in *Paths to the Absolute* this idea is fleshed out. In Mondrian's Platonic "Triologue" "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality", the character Z, an "Abstract-Real Painter", remarks on the impossibility of using normal perspective to paint a close-up scene of a Mill. Golding elaborates: "Z is already suggesting to us that one of the many ways into abstraction can involve a move up into the very breast of perceived reality and into the heart of what an individual canvas or series of canvases may be depicting." This "move up into abstraction" for Golding was, as he put it, through the body rather than as in the case of Mondrian through landscape. And for him the body was not just the vehicle for this transition but remained the subject of his painting. "I recognize that the body is always there in my work, that it is what my paintings are about." The pictures become metaphors for the body, too.

What still hits one on seeing the paintings, drawings and etchings of the early 60s is their absolute absorbedness in the body as some kind of struggle, and not of a purely pictorial kind. They are dark, violent, secretive and very powerful. They do not seem, at least at first, to be engaged on the kind of move into abstraction Golding so eloquently analyses in *Paths to the Absolute*. Their remoteness from any kind of familiar figuration is partly due to the strong influence of the Mexican painter Jose Clemente Orozco, but their obsessions are quite particular, and almost all centred on the human body. The point is they need to be looked at, perhaps analysed, in their own right rather than as stages in a pictorial odyssey to abstraction, though at the same time they are the nuggets from which the later perceptions of painting through the body emerge. Between these images of the body and the first hard-edge abstractions followed by the joyous light-filled pastels and oils there was another period of experiment, with prints, collage and decalomania which ended in a zero-like break with the past.



Torso, c. 1963, oil on board, 146 x 98 cm

The works from the late 50s to the early 60s in this exhibition are absorbing and disquieting in their treatment of the human body. Some are frankly of the male body but others have female elements or are ambiguous. John was quite open about this: "The majority of my early single-figure pieces were male. Half the torso pieces of the 1960s were in fact female, although male and female were sometimes coupled. But there came a time when I was somewhat desperately trying to find a compromise between a male and female body. This is a perfectly valid subject for art and has been explored by many artists, writers in particular, but when I realised what I was doing, I turned my back on this because I am not interested in art as self-discovery or as therapy. Hence, probably, the move to a 'purer', hard-edged art..."¹

In one of the most powerful of the oil paintings, *Torso*, the body mass is centred in the canvas, encircled by a kind of shroud of grey brush marks overlaying a dark ground. Thick strokes of mostly white, grey and black paint, with occasional gleams of red, blue and gold emphatically construct the volume of a torso, which seems to be sitting or squatting - but the contours of a body, some slight indicators of female breasts, are swept into what seems to be the curve of a giant, hollow pot. Where the neck should be there is thick black paint that might signal emptiness, which extends into the hint of a handle. It is not so much a question of ambiguity, but of confronting the viewer with conflicting physical evidence, a torso unnervingly becoming impossibly hollow. Freud's ideas about sexual symbols - containers, for example, standing for women, arise, though not in a deliberate, wilful way. The energy and apparent spontaneity of the painting do suggest that somehow consciously or unconsciously Golding is facing something difficult, threatening. His friend Gunther Gerzso in Mexico wrote to him at about the time he was painting this picture: "try to be as black and violent as you can; by doing so you might discover things you've never thought of before."²



Le Transparent, 1960, oil and mixed media on board, 122.5 x 81.5 cm

An etching of 1963 is a less truncated version of a similar figure to *Torso*; it appears to be holding a staff or perhaps is divided down the middle. There is a similarly hollow neck, with a kind of Dutch collar. But more obvious here than in the painting are the skeletal lines of a ribcage, which recall Orozco. "Orozco was my greatest source of inspiration...One of the features of Orozco's art is the way in which his

figures all seem to be in some way flayed, they wear their skeletons on the outside, like armour, although it is an armour that is useless, and he mostly seems to see humanity as doomed."³ For Orozco the human figure is in an unending struggle against the gods. Prometheus is one of Orozco's greatest tragic figures, forever condemned for stealing fire from the gods for the good of mankind.

Obscurely related to the dark bodies are paintings that seem haunted by a deep Mexican or perhaps pre-Columbian past - presences like that in the extraordinary *Le Transparent*. While the *Torso* is headless, these recall a head, or a mask; in *Le Transparent* it is like a trophy, with Christ-like hair, luminous feathers, suspended on a plant-staff. Or could the shafts of vertical paint hint at limbs? Where does this come from? Although haunted it seems to have no obvious progenitors - perhaps a thing he had "never thought of before", as Gerzso said. In an untitled gouache, a helmeted head or body fragment challenges our sense of scale.

The male body, again a headless torso but in this case with no ambiguity about the gender, was the subject of a series of etchings in which the outlines of the body, which are in its first state very beautifully drawn, are progressively and progressively violently obliterated. The obliterating marks start as shadows, delineating and highlighting parts of the body, sometimes outlining an ideal musculature. Towards the end of the series violent whip-like lines encircle the torso; the strange thing about these marks is their regularity even as they slip almost imperceptibly from being as even as a rib-cage to mere scrawls.

The most direct study of a male body at this period - though we are for the most part lacking precise dates - is the oil and mixed media work *Desnudo gris*, Grey nude, a painting that used to hang above the bed in Golding's bedroom. Elsewhere I described this as a "tender" study of a nude, but it is better perhaps understood as a direct, unflinching account of a vulnerable body. Is it a self-portrait? It's offered quietly to the gaze, but is hardly narcissistic. A contrast with this muted nude are the paintings Golding made during or after a trip to Orvieto in 1959, which include studies of a male nude in flesh pink

in a watery setting. Enveloped in green water weed, arm raised to obscure the face which anyway is reduced to a black hole, the body has a quite grotesquely exaggerated, and in a sense formalised, rib cage, as though emaciated. This may be related to Signorelli's fresco *Resurrection of the Flesh* (c. 1499-1502) which he saw at Orvieto, in which skeletons advance towards heaven to receive their flesh again.

Golding was gay at a time when homosexuality was still illegal. It is difficult to understand that social and psychological situation today. Iris Murdoch in *The Bell*, which was published in 1958, gives an unflinching account of the anguish of one of the main characters, the leader of an idealistic lay community, struggling with his unacknowledgeable sexuality, and of the confusion of a young man encountering for the first time this "propensity" which he had regarded as "a strange sickness or perversion", though he realised that, unlike his father, "it was more proper to regard these people as subjects for the doctor than subjects for the police". However, unlike the countless victims of this social pressure who denied their sexuality Golding never did and lived with his lifelong partner the historian James Joll, whom he met in the late 50s. More than that it is impossible to know, except that in the letters to Gerzso and in his later interview with Wollheim he spoke of great difficulties, and of "desperately trying to find a compromise between a male and a female body." Gerzso responded "I know this painting business is rather awful, but I don't think it is worth getting physically ill about it. Maybe it is the content of your painting that depresses you so much not just painting. I don't know how you paint now - but your dark and tragic figures, surrounded by more blackness, are probably hard to face all of the time. It is like shouting the same despair over and over again..." Gerzso always stresses, though, that it is impossible to change direction and paint "calmer and more hopeful" pictures without going against oneself; what matters is the emotional truth: "through painting we are able to receive flashes of insight which enable us to recognise the true nature of our emotions." So, "be as black and violent as you can..."

Although Golding eventually turned away from procedures he came to regard as self-discovery or therapy, he always insisted, as we saw, that the body was in the painting. Looking again at the works in this exhibition, one of the strongest effects they have on the viewer is that the painting is happening as we look. It is physically and emotionally being made through an intense engagement of the body of the painter with the painting. It is also engaged with the world and the history of painting itself and with an individual's response to it. Here one might change tack and consider Golding's comment to Wollheim about trying to "find a compromise between a male and female body. This is a perfectly valid subject for art..." If we take this not as Golding's concern with seeing male or female bodies as such but as an issue deeply embedded in the history of painting - that is the dominance of the male gaze looking at the female ("scopophilia"). As the woman's body has been the subject so continuously in the history of art, a different kind of interrogation may have been in his mind. What if the male identifies with the woman as spectacle? And thus questions those visual traditions from a different standpoint? It is quite telling that the only work which had an actual model was the *Grey Nude*. The artist is here looking at himself looking, (though he eliminates the eyes). So the struggle, then, perhaps, was as much with painting itself and its histories as with the ostensible subject; the body creates a new psychic space for looking, seeing and acting: the painting.

Dawn Ades, October 2021

¹ "From Mexico to Venice, Postscript: Interview with Richard Wollheim", in John Golding *Visions of the Modern*, Thames & Hudson, 1994 p. 337. The interview was on the occasion of Golding's exhibition *Works from a Decade* at the Yale Center of British Art, New Haven, 1988.

² Gunther Gerzso letter to Golding July 10 1964

³ *Visions of the Modern*, Thames & Hudson, 1994 p. 338



Plates

Man Emerging from Pool
c. 1958
Oil on board
76 x 56 cm
30 x 22 inches



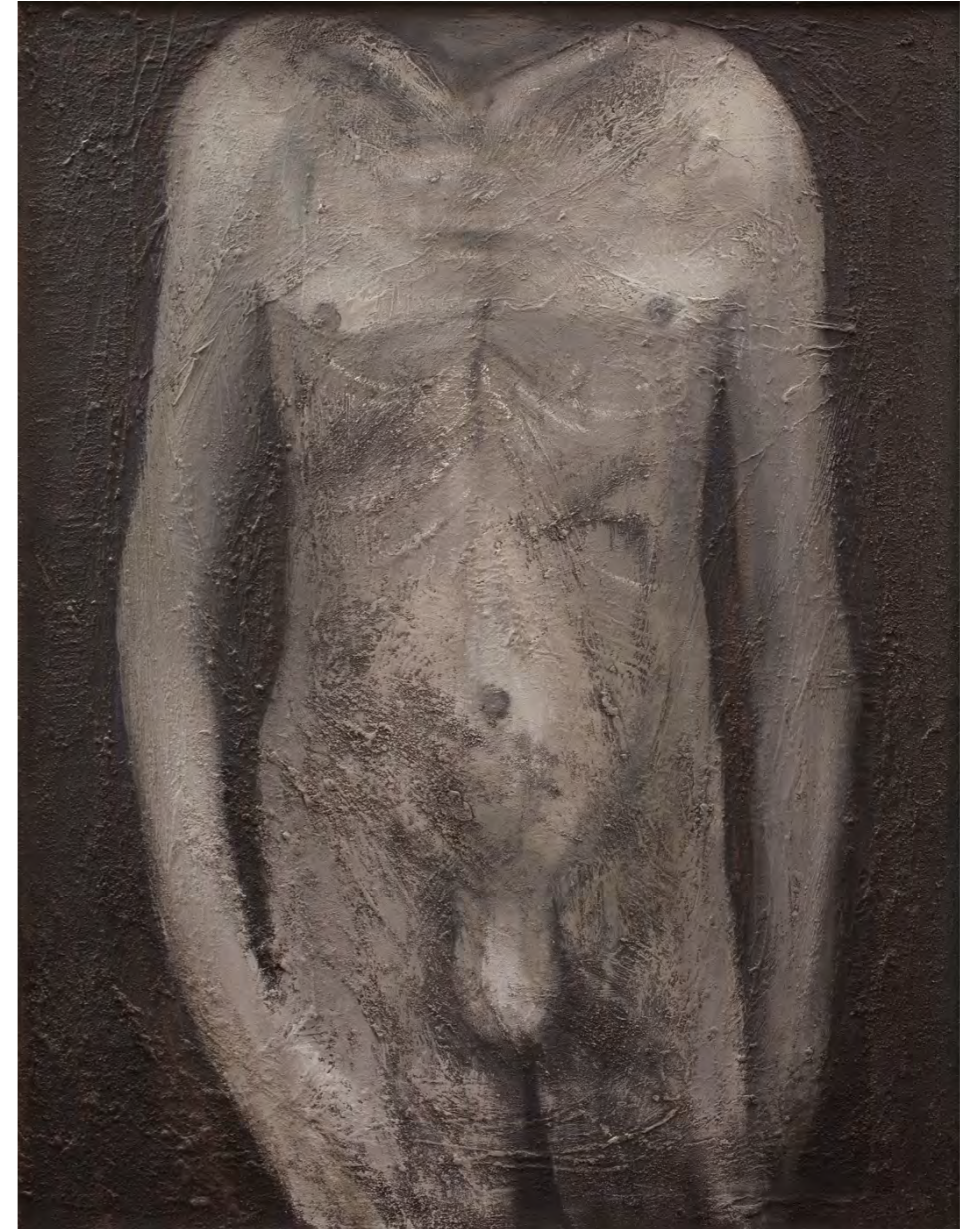
Desnudo Gris

1959

Oil and mixed media on canvas

92 x 72.5 cm

36 1/4 x 28 1/2 inches



Le Transparent

1960

Oil and mixed media on board

122.5 x 81.5 cm

48 1/4 x 32 inches



Small Totem Group
1962
Oil and mixed media on canvas
96.5 x 62.5 cm
38 x 24 1/2 inches



Torso
c. 1963
Oil on board
146 x 98 cm
57 1/2 x 38 1/2 inches





Untitled
c. 1960
Monotype
64.5 x 44.5 cm
25 3/8 x 17 1/2 inches



Untitled
c. 1960
Monotype
64.5 x 44.5 cm
25 3/8 x 17 1/2 inches



Untitled
c. 1960
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c. 1960
Monotype
64.5 x 44.5 cm
25 3/8 x 17 1/2 inches



Untitled
c. 1960
Monotype
64.5 x 44.5 cm
25 3/8 x 17 1/2 inches

Untitled
c. 1960
Charcoal on paper
64.5 x 44.5 cm
25 3/8 x 17 1/2 inches



Untitled

c. 1960

Monotype and charcoal on paper

52.5 x 41 cm

20 5/8 x 16 1/4 inches





Untitled
c. 1960
Charcoal on paper
50.5 x 35 cm
19 7/8 x 13 3/4 inches



Untitled
c. 1960
Charcoal on paper
42 x 30 cm
16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches

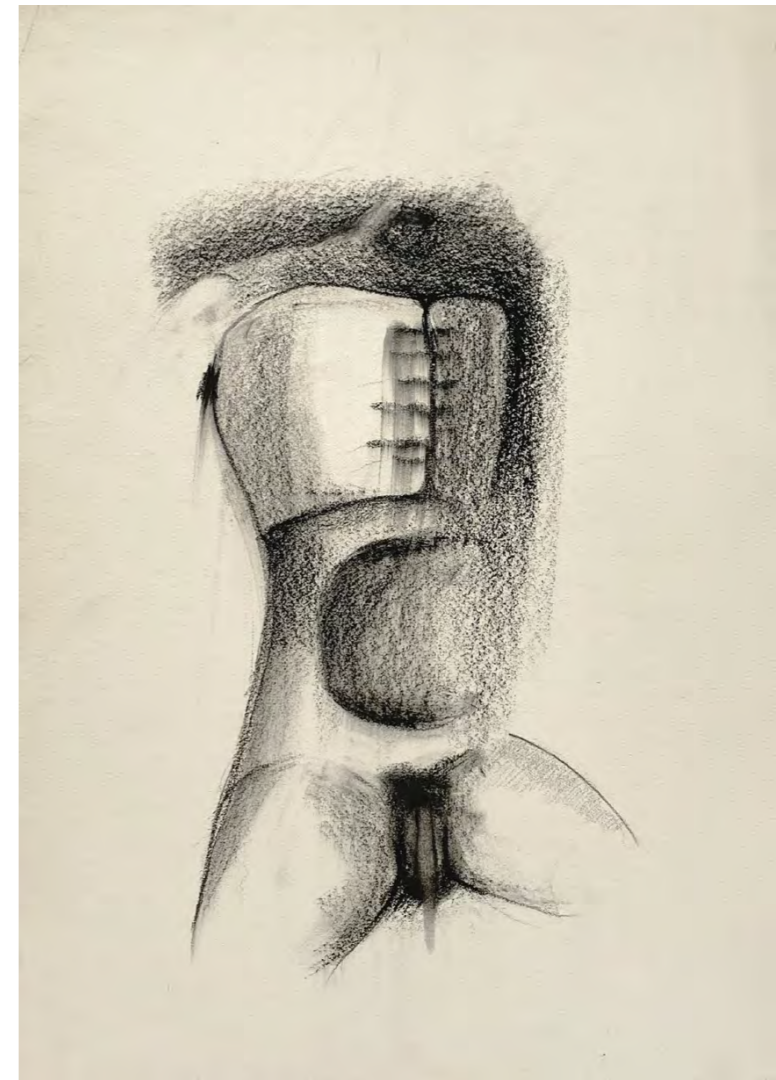


Untitled
c. 1960
Charcoal on paper
49 x 31 cm
19 3/8 x 12 1/4 inches



Untitled
c. 1960
Charcoal on paper
49 x 31 cm
19 3/8 x 12 1/4 inches

Untitled
c. 1960
Crayon on paper
35.5 x 25.5 cm
14 x 10 inches





Untitled
c. 1960
Crayon on paper
22 x 29 cm
8 5/8 x 11 3/8 inches



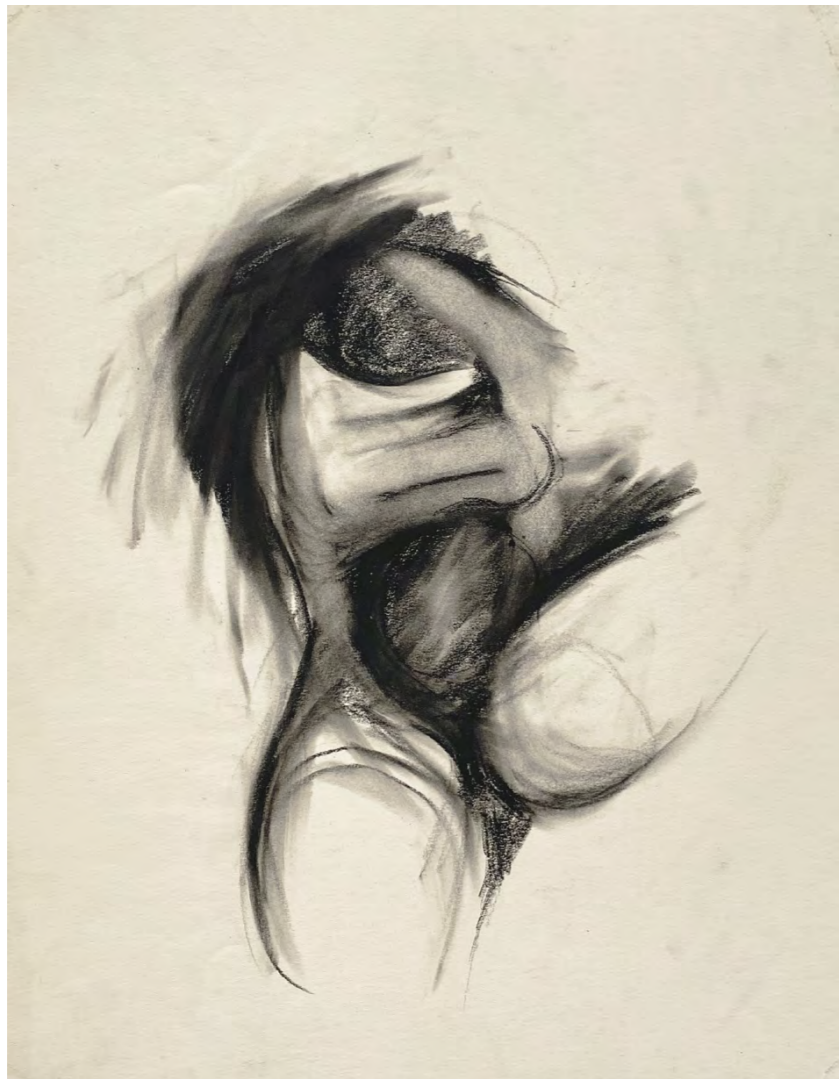
Untitled
c. 1960
Crayon on paper
25.5 x 35.5 cm
10 x 14 inches



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Crayon on paper
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11 3/8 x 8 1/4 inches



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Untitled
c. 1960
Crayon on paper
29.5 x 21 cm
11 3/8 x 8 1/4 inches

Untitled
c. 1963
Mixed media
29 x 21.5 cm
11 3/8 x 8 1/2 inches





Untitled
c. 1963
Mixed media
35 x 26 cm
13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches



Untitled
c. 1963
Mixed media
35 x 26 cm
13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches



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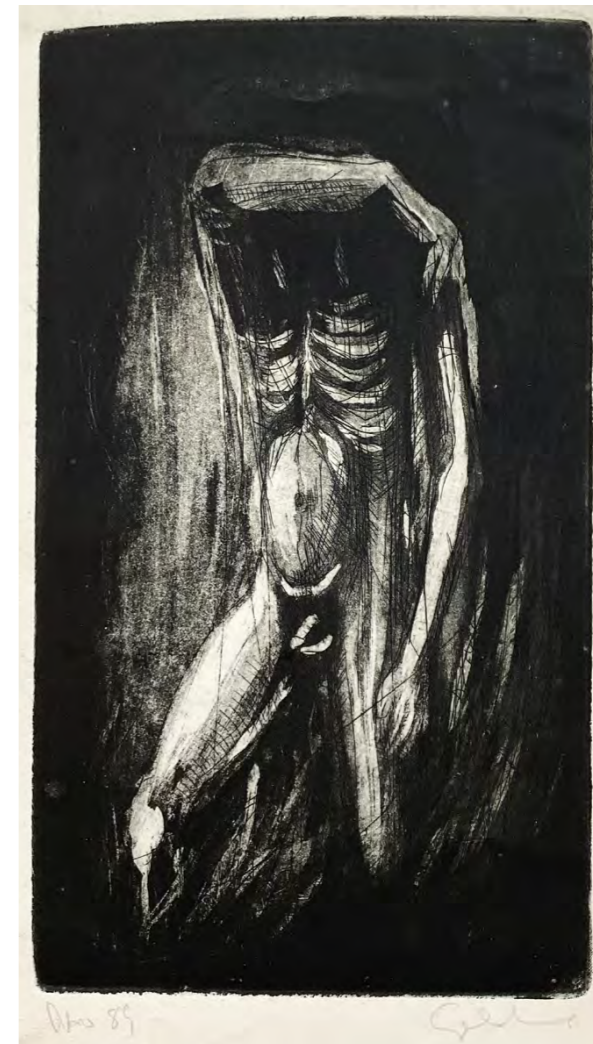
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c. 1963
Mixed media
35 x 26 cm
13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches



Untitled
c. 1963
Mixed media
35 x 26 cm
13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches



Untitled
1963
Etching
32.5 x 24 cm
12 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches



Untitled
1963
Etching
27 x 15.5 cm
10 5/8 x 6 1/8 inches



Untitled
1963
Etching
32.5 x 24 cm
12 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches



Untitled
1963
Etching
32.5 x 24 cm
12 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches



Untitled
1963
Etching
29.5 x 22 cm
11 5/8 x 8 5/8 inches



Untitled
1963
Etching
30 x 22.5 cm
11 3/4 x 8 7/8 inches

List of Works

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30 x 22 inches | p. 25 <i>Untitled</i>
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c. 1960
Charcoal on paper
42 x 30 cm
16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches | p. 44 <i>Untitled</i>
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c. 1963
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13 3/4 x 10 1/4 inches | p. 60 <i>Untitled</i>
1963
Etching
29.5 x 22 cm
11 5/8 x 8 5/8 inches | |

Biography

- 1929 Born in Hastings, East Sussex but brought up in Mexico from a very young age.
- 1951-57 Studied at the Courtauld Institute, London
- 1976 Appointed Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge
- 1981 Became senior tutor at the Royal College of Art
- 1992 Appointed CBE
- 1994 Elected a Fellow of the British Academy
- 2012 John Golding dies aged 82

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1958 *John Golding*, Galeria Diana, Mexico
- 1961 *Golding: Oleos*, Galeria de Antonio Souza, Mexico
- 1962 *John Golding: Paintings*, Gallery One, London
- 1970 *John Golding: Paintings and Papiers Collés*, Nigel Greenwood Gallery, London
- 1971 *John Golding - Museum of Modern Art*, Oxford
- 1974 *Rowan Gallery*, London
- 1974 *Holdsworth Gallery*, Sydney
- 1975 *John Golding: Paintings and Drawings*, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
- 1975 *John Golding: Recent Paintings*, Rowan Gallery, London
- 1977 *John Golding: Paintings*, Rowan Gallery, London
- 1977 National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh
- 1978 Ibis Gallery, Leamington Spa
- 1979 *John Golding: Paintings*, Rowan Gallery, London

- 1980 *Recent Drawings*, Riverside Studios, London
- 1981 *John Golding: Works on Paper*, Juda Rowan Gallery, London
- 1982 *John Golding: Works on Paper*, Nishimura Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- 1984 Coventry Gallery, Sydney, Australia
- 1984 *John Golding: Recent Paintings and Drawings*, Juda Rowan Gallery, London
- 1988 *John Golding*, Mayor Rowan Gallery, London
- 1989 *John Golding*, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven
- 1994 *John Golding: Recent Work*, The Mayor Gallery, London
- 2003 *John Golding at Roche Court*, New Art Centre, Salisbury
- 2010 *John Golding: Three Paintings*, Tate Britain, London
- 2012 *Working Space*, Annely Juda Fine Art, London
- 2015 *John Golding: A Path to the Absolute*, Piano Nobile, Kings Place
- 2015 *Abstraction and the Art of John Golding*, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art, Norwich
- 2015 *John Golding: Works on Paper*, Courtauld Gallery, London
- 2017 *John Golding: Pure Colour Sensation*, The Arts Club, Dover Street
- 2017 *John Golding: Pure Colour Sensation*, Piano Nobile, Holland Park

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1961 *Pintura Mexicana Contemporanea de la Galeria de Antonio Souza*, Instituto de Arte Contemporaneo, Lima, Peru
- 1962 *Three Aspects of Contemporary Art: Bell, Frink, and Golding*, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
- 1964 *Quentin Blake, Tony Stubbing, John Golding*, Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford

- 1965-66 *John Moores Liverpool Exhibition*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1966 *John Golding: Paintings, Charles Perry: Sculpture*, Axiom Gallery, London
- 1968 *Painting: 64-67*, Arts Council, London
- 1972 *Large Paintings: An Interval Exhibition*, Hayward Gallery, London
- 1974 *Critics Choice: selection by Marina Vaizey*, Arthur Tooth & Sons Ltd, London
- 1975 *Gallery Artists*, Rowan Gallery, London
- 1976 *John Moores Liverpool Exhibition 10*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1976 *7 Artists from the Rowan Gallery*, Sunderland Arts Centre
- 1977 *British Contemporary Art*, Kunsterhaus, Bregentz, Austria
- 1952-77 Royal Academy, London
- 1977 *Works on Paper*, the Contemporary Art Society's Gifts to Public Galleries
- 1977 *British Painting 1952-77*, Royal Academy, London
- 1977 *Gallery Artists*, Rowan Gallery, London
- 1978 *Gallery Artists*, Rowan Gallery, London
- 1978 *Small Works*, Newcastle Polytechnic Art Gallery
- 1978 *John Moores Liverpool Exhibition 11*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- 1978 *Cor na Pintura Britanica/Color en la Pintura Britanica*, Exhibition organised by the British Council for the São Paulo Biennial
- 1978 *Abstract Art: Selection by William Packer*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London
- 1978 *Small Works: Paintings, Graphics, Sculpture*, Axiom Gallery, London
- 1979 *Friends of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Silver Jubilee Exhibition*, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London
- 1980 *Growing Up with Art*, Leicestershire Collection, Whitechapel Gallery, London
- 1981 *Six Artists and the Whistler Appeal*, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow
- 1981 *Gallery Artists*, Rowan Gallery, London

- 1981 *Faculty Exhibition*, Royal College of Art, London
- 1984 *Contemporary Art Society Art Market*, 5 Dials Gallery, London
- 1984 *Summer 1985*, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 1984 *Small Works*, Juda Rowan Gallery, London
- 1985 *25 Years: Three Decades of Contemporary Art*, Juda Rowan Gallery, London
- 1986 *Hidden Landscape: Kenneth Draper, John Golding, John Hoyland, John Hubbard, Edwina Leapman, Norbert Rademacher, Bridget Riley*, Juda Rowan Gallery, London
- 1987 *Summer Exhibition*, Mayor Rowan Gallery, London
- 1988 *Exhibition Road*, 150 Anniversary Painting Exhibition, Royal College of Art, London
- 1988 *Works on Paper Selected by Marina Vaizey*, Oxford Gallery, London
- 1988 *Works on Paper*, Mayor Rowan Gallery, London
- 1989 *Colour and Light: Bridget Riley and John Golding*, Hongkong Land, Hong Kong
- 2014 *Abstract Drawing, curated by Richard Deacon*, Drawing Room, London
- 2015 *Stockwell Depot 1967-1979*, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, Greenwich
- 2015 *Simply Painting*, Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland
- 2016 *Simply Painting*, Peacock Visual Arts Centre, Aberdeen
- 2017 *A Decade of Gifts and Acquisitions*, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven
- 2018 *Caro/Golding: In Conversation*, Piano Nobile, British Art Fair, Saatchi Gallery, London

Collections

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Arts Council of Great Britain

British Academy

British Council

Borough of Camden Art Collection

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

The Hepworth, Wakefield

Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge

National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Southampton City Council

Tate

University of Hull Art Collection

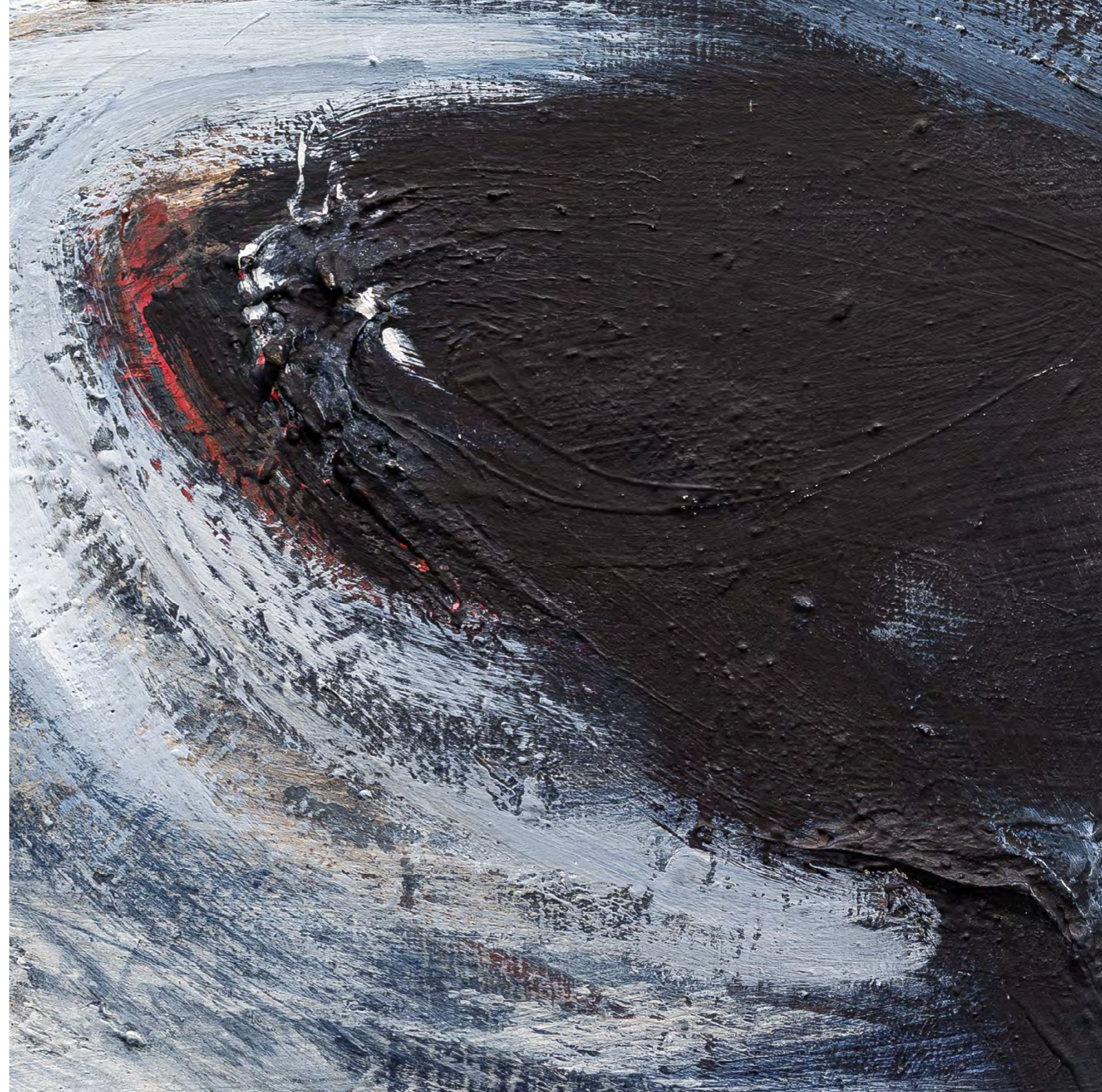
University of Oxford, St. Antony's College

Victoria and Albert Museum

Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

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