The Posthumous Travail of Philip Guston

Philip Guston, one of the great American painters of the last century, is back in the news, but not for any reason that he would have liked. Four of the most prestigious museums in the Western world have postponed an exhibition of his work for fear of offending the public, pushing the exhibit schedule back by four years.

Before going into the details, a bit of an introduction. His parents were Ukranian Jews who emigrated to North America around the turn of the last century, landing in Canada. Shortly after he was was born in Montreal in 1913, the family moved to Los Angeles, where he developed an interest in the fine arts and began drawing. He was actually a classmate of Jackson Pollock's at a Los Angeles high school and took a correspondence course from the Cleveland School of Cartooning, training that would come into play later in his career. Originally Philip Goldstein, he changed his name to Guston, which seemed more emphatic and arresting than the conventionally Jewish name he was born with.

He traveled through California and Mexico in the 1930s. He painted murals and met Fried Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Moving to New York in 1936, he found work with the Works Progress Administration and refined his talents as a muralist, and became friends with Willem de Kooning. Four years later, he left for the

Midwest to take up teaching positions, first at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, and later, in 1945, at Washington University in St. Louis. There he stayed for two years, returning to New York in ‘47. And it was some time after his return to New York that Guston abandoned his murals and became identified with the New York School and Abstract Expressionism, the movement that vaulted New York ahead of Paris as the center of the international art world. The French could still claim Picasso and Giacometti, but New York had the great private galleries and figures like de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Franz Kline—and Guston. The great champions of their work, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, built reputations that extended everywhere in the world that people followed trends in modern art.

But Guston left New York in 1967, permanently, and moved to Woodstock. He was, in the words of Philip Roth, “sick of life in the New York art world.” The two became friends when Roth himself fled the city and moved to Woodstock in 1969 after the overwhelming success of *Portnoy’s Complaint.* “He felt,” Roth wrote, that “he’d exhausted the means that had unlocked him as an abstract painter, and he was bored and disgusted by the skills that had gained him renown. He didn’t want to paint like that ever again. . . .”

Guston turned away from abstraction. His began painting commonplace American objects instead—including items of junk, bottles, bricks, anonymous hands, and bric-a-brac, and also Klansmen. The colors employed for these

paintings were shades of pink and emphatic red. He specialized in what he called "crapola," or billboards, garages, diners, burger joints, and junk shops. Roth describes this "as the dread that emanates from the most commonplace appurtenances of utter stupidity":

> The unexalted vision of everyday things that newspaper cartoon strips had impressed upon him when he was growing up in an immigrant Jewish family in California, the American crumminess for which, even in the heyday of his thoughtful lyricism, he always had an intellectual's soft spot, he came to contemplate. . . as though his life, both as an artist and a man, depended on it"

Roth goes on to describe these paintings as "popular imagery of a shallow reality" that Guston shaped into "a new American landscape of terror."

Guston's paintings of the late 1960s and early seventies are now established works of art, commanding the attention of collectors, dealers, and museum curators. But it took time for the wheel of opinion to turn in the painter's direction. When his new productions were unveiled in a show at the Marlborough Gallery in October 1970, critics, dealers, and buyers were confused, surprised, and offended over the turn his work had taken. Ross Feld, a writer who befriended Guston in his later years, reports that "Storms raged around him instantly. Old downtown friends"—where many of the better-known abstractionists lived—"felt betrayed. Critics, when not outrightly mocking, were clueless." And, regrettably, "hardly anyone bought a post-1969 Guston." He left Marlborough and moved to David

McKee's gallery in a hotel at Lexington and Sixty-Second Street, an address that seemed remote from the main action on 57th Street.

In an essay published shortly after the exhibition, Harold Rosenberg sought to capture the transformation and offer support. For Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and Co., "the experience on the canvas is *the* experience. The work is not a means of communication, it is the event itself, a piece of history, a rival of social action."

Guston's new canvases were different. When he introduced the bric-a-brac of American life, along with his thugs and hooded Klansman with their cigars and cigarettes, "crudely" held in oversized grasping hands, he introduced a political subject that was, in Rosenberg's words, "`out there' in society, and the painting is a second occurrence, which corresponds in the artist's mind which has already taken place in the world." Color and form are handled very loosely, even casually, in these paintings, which is why they have been associated a bit with Pop, comic books, and *l'art brut*. "Crudeness" is another word that the critics bandied about in describing the work, but not in any conventional sense. The description stems, rather, from the casual nature with which images are sketched and painted in and the artist's decision to leave large, empty spaces on the canvas. At a Q and A session before an audience at Boston University in 1974, Rosenberg was pressed to explain his use of the word "crude" to describe Guston's newer productions. Emphasizing the casualness of the lines and contours of the work, he suggested

that Guston showed "no great interest in a finished or elegant canvas." And he cited Baudelaire's distinction between a painting that is complete and one that is finished. "A painting that's complete," he told the audience, "can have all kinds of empty spaces around it"—which was certainly true of Guston's work. "A painting that's been finished has been tickled to the point where it begins to look like it belongs in a museum. . . ."

Despite his enthusiasm for Ab Ex and his distaste for Pop, Rosenberg supported the switch. Minimalism and Pop and the "austere" vestiges of Ab Ex were threatening, he felt, to make the fine arts irrelevant. In his essay on Guston published after the 1970 show, Rosenberg called "for a new outlook on art—one that will end its isolation from the crises of our time." He did not imagine that paintings of Klansmen would be effective in any direct, political sense. Guston was not after all producing poster art for a large public that would stir up support for civil rights. Rather, Rosenberg hoped for an art that "will contribute to an imaginative grasp of the epoch." "The separation of art from social realities," he writes near the end of the piece, "threatens the survival of painting as a serious activity."

Guston continued to paint American "crapola," which is how he identified his chief subject matter in casual conversations with friends. He died of heart failure in 1980 at age 67, not unexpectedly, since he'd had a history of heart

trouble and relished the French fries and unhealthy foods that he loved to paint; he was also a drinker and heavy smoker. He came too early for the fitness generation. But in the decade that followed his death, critics, museums and buyers more readily accepted the work they had rejected in the seventies. In my own peregrinations through museums in Chicago and St. Louis, I recall seeing only a single Guston abstraction and plenty of Klan paintings and the "crappola." I enjoyed them all, and would have been a willing buyer had I had the funds to be a collector.

Guston's portraits of the Klan vary considerably in tone. Perhaps the best-known example is "The Studio" from 1969, which offers the viewer an ingenious joke: A hooded Klansman is sitting in front of a canvas and easel painting a self-portrait, and the image has all of the characteristic Guston touches: A hooded, cartoonish figure is holding a cigar in one hand and painting with the other; the right hand holding the brush is touched up in an emphatic red, grossly oversized, and not at all in proportion to the rest of the body. A cone of grey cigarette smoke placed behind the right hand emerges from nowhere, at a distance from the hand holding the cigarette. (And what painter has ever worked in front of a canvas while smoking? The touch adds to the joke, of course.) The hoods of all the Klan figures are never shaped to a human head; they are always conical, suggesting a bullet-headed figure, and the eye slits are always black vertical strokes, not holes. (There

is never an aperture for the mouth in these picture, another distorting touch for these cigar-bearing Klansman.) A clock in the background of "The Studio" has only one hand, and a window shade in the foreground is painted a garish green. The rendering of the hoods in nearly all of the paintings have peculiar dotted lines converging on the top of the crown of the hood suggesting a piece that has been assembled.

The joke, of course is that one ever imagines that a Klansman can actually paint, much less take the trouble to do a self-portrait. And the pinks and reds Guston employs in so many paintings always more than hint at satire.

Awareness of political correctness, above all in the field of race relations, has frightened the managers of the art world. When Guston introduced the Klan figures in 1970, I am not aware that anyone complained that he was in any way celebrating them. The controversy stirred by the paintings was over aesthetics, not politics, and the painter's decision to exchange one set of images for another. In fact, Harold Rosenberg did not even believe they contained anything more than a glancing reference to politics or violence. He claims in the essay I earlier cited that "The Klan is not a central issue in politics today, and Guston's reversion to it as the personification of violence and tyranny puts politics at a distance. This separation

makes the Klan more manageable as a symbol of terror than would such contemporary manifestations as Vietnam, the Black Panthers."

The evasions used by the museums to justify their decision are so feeble they hardly require rebutting. "We are postponing the exhibition until a time at which. . .the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston's work can be more clearly interpreted." If the "message" is "powerful," what more is required than viewing the paintings? What is the public going to learn or understand that it does not understand today? The press release, dated September 21, goes on to say that "the world we live in is different from the one in which we first began" to plan the exhibit. "We feel it is necessary to reframe our programming and. . .bring in additional perspectives and voices to shape how we present Guston's work to the public."

No more time is required to interpret Guston's Klan paintings from the late sixties and seventies. Most museum goers will respond with indifference, a few will love the work, and a noisy minority with an agenda to push will make a brief fuss. And that will be that. The paintings don't need to be "reframed," and one can only shudder at the "additional perspectives" the museums might be thinking about.

But in the age of Black Lives Matters the timorous managers of the larger art museums in the West feel threatened by the prospect of exhibiting this work. A

large collection of Guston's paintings and drawings had been scheduled to open in June at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and later travel to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and the Tate Modern in London. Initially postponing the opening because of the pandemic, the museums in September chose to delay the exhibition until 2024. The museums are hoping, I am sure, that the civil unrest of the summer will somehow "blow over," perhaps even be forgotten, to be replaced by a fresh set of newspaper headlines. The paintings will seem as uncontroversial four years from now as they were when the exhibition was planned five years ago. Public interest will be limited to the usual small numbers who attend museum exhibitions, and the danger of negative publicity will have passed.

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