

The Private Eye of Phillip Guston*

Phillip Guston's recent paintings, drawings, and these new prints ruminate on life itself. They must be counted among the most important accomplishments of American art in the past decade for the way in which they open alternative pathways of expression.

The mood of Guston's new work is one of pervasive silence. His imagery is languid and sleep-charged, private, personal, and arcane. The time frame is non-linear, mixed, zig-zagging elusively between the present and the past. Nor are we certain at any given moment as to whether Guston is awake or asleep or, implausibly, both. His imagery is at once zany and sinister, part dream-world, part real. Guston's art is autobiographical, distilled from his ruminations. The brushwork and drawing imparts a feeling of his persona. It is as if Guston has abstracted aspects of his own craggy features and his slow-moving, bulky figure, transforming them into elements of line and shape. He parodies himself and his subject matter, menacingly plays the clown at the same time that he ironically solicits our sense of pity.

Central to Guston's hallucinations and muddled dreams is the contest between structure and subject, between his slurps of paint and the ridiculous objects depicted. The outcome is always suspenseful: we never know for sure what's winning that continuous contest. If a drawing goes sour, Guston can discard it, take another piece of paper, and start again. Easy. The paintings, on the other hand, are never abandoned. They are battlefields between a mutinous ego and id refusing to conform to their roles, with Guston standing to one side and egging them on. Guston thus becomes his own best enemy. Guston's sense of structure, his will to order his canvas surface, is that of his abstract paintings and it regularly threatens to submerge his gritty imagery, only to be rescued at the last moment by the energy of the brushed line which darts and slithers, piling and jamming tragicomic inventions that pun on memory and language. A heavily stitched football, for example, opens its despairing eye only to transpose itself into the eye of a potato.

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In another example, the primordial Jungian sea momentarily disgorges to reveal mindless flotsam and jetsam – an empty man’s jacket, rotund from human usage, held up on either side by booted fingers attached to stockinged legs adrown in helpless existence.

Guston loves paintings of battles, especially those of the great painters of the Renaissance. In fact, he recently said that the whole trouble with abstract art, its restrictiveness, is that it denies painters the right to paint what they want. “It’s as if Moses came down from the Mount and commanded Thou Shalt Not Paint Battles.” So Guston does just that, and we see his American battlescapes of humanoid garbage lids held up by hairy, bent, pistonlike arms battering at each other like a squadron of goons run amok. Or, a dark storm rages over a desolate battlefield and pours bullets of rain on the drenched and sorry corpses of Guston’s expired brushes and boots.

At times Guston’s imagery moves from the private to the public domain by mocking self-denunciation, derision thereby becoming the father of invention. For example, Guston is a heavy smoker of the strongest non-filter cigarettes, and utterly imprisoned by this habit wherein guilt constantly succumbs to the pressure of inhalation. This pleasurable ambivalence begets two unattached fingers, holding a smoldering cigarette in a cluster of wide-eyed, half-drowning heads drifting aimlessly within sight of land and salvation. Or, again, in an image that spoofs de Chirico’s style, an artist’s mouth is sealed by layers of tape yet smoke issues forth from his drawing hand, thereby establishing once and for all the axiom: there is no creativity without smoke.

Guston’s most nightmarish memoryscapes are those without vegetation: treeless urban deserts littered with intestinal inventions that propagate and feed upon themselves, or with similarly sinister agglutinations of monstrous science fiction things that rear up from the deep. At other times, Guston cocks a drowsy eye, only to find that his hanging clothes have a life of their own and threaten him from afar. There’s no peace, no getting away from his own mad imagination. Guston persistently and unwittingly haunts himself and us by turning harmless

household appurtenances – doorknobs, hatracks, chairs – into ominous portents. Only occasionally is Guston able to outwit himself. Pulling a concealed trap in the floor, he gleefully tumbles a jumbled pile of excrescences back into the void.

With his humorous and droll invention, Guston maintains a precarious balance between contradictions. This balance is the stuff of fairy tales, both grotesque and charmed. Guston is a modern-day Rip van Winkle who, having awakened, keeps pinching himself to see if he is alive, to see if what is real is true and if what is true is real. And, if the world that Guston depicts is topsy-turvy, then the viewer is free to tug at one of the fancy velvet bell pulls – Guston provides an adequate supply in convenient locations – to summon psychiatric help. The question is for whom?