

From his figurative paintings to his abstractions **Philip Guston's** life was a continuous journey towards the most unflinching expression of the self.

# the first painter after the last

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**T**HERE WAS A GAME PHILIP GUSTON PLAYED WITH HIS FRIEND, the composer Morton Feldman. They pretended to be the last artists. 'Remember Alexander Pope's "Art after art goes out, and all is night"?' wrote Feldman in his 1966 essay, 'Philip Guston, The Last Painter'. Their final works, as they imagined them, consisted of almost nothing. Feldman played the same game with John Cage, though neither Cage nor Guston knew it. 'I think of myself as a double agent,' he wrote. But the game, or fantasy, wasn't much of a secret. It coincided with the postwar loss of faith in humanist ideals and supposedly universal systems of value that created the pathos that motivated modern painting and literature. In the realm of art it was as if an apocalypse had already taken place: not the destruction of the world, but of the possibility of describing that world as we experience it to each other. Like one of his favourite writers, Samuel Beckett, Guston was wracked by the seeming

**Philip Guston,**  
*Talking*, 1979, oil on  
canvas, 174 x 198.1  
cm. The Edward R  
Broida Collection





impossibility of making art in the wake of the breakdown of a common language.

But while Feldman and Cage seized on this collapse as a freedom and responded with an aesthetic of reduction, Guston moved in another direction. No sooner was he given nothing than he made of it something. Even at the height of his abstract period, his art remained bound to the ghost of recognisable forms, to the shreds of stories. By the late 1950s his paintings began to become more cantankerous, the strokes clotting into brightly coloured forms engaged in a tussle that pulled all the paint to the centre, leaving the edges of the

two cigarettes, one that appears to have burned to the filter, the other giving off an outpouring of red smoke. What looks like a beaded chain hangs down, presumably attached to the bulb casting light on the talking hand, and though the wrist-watch seems to read 3 o'clock, there is the feeling that the talking will go on indefinitely. Guston was a famous talker, and his daughter, Musa Mayer, describes how this painting captures for her what it was like to be with her father. But here, as in Guston's life, talking was painting, and painting was talking; on most nights at 3am Guston was at work in the studio, adding another stroke to a lifelong argument. 'You are

## 'AMERICAN ABSTRACT ART IS A LIE, A SHAM, A COVER-UP FOR A POVERTY OF SPIRIT.'

canvas bare. In paintings like *Fable I* and *To Fellini*, of 1957 and 1958, the brush strokes argue, at once defining and obscuring some pressing thing that wishes to take shape. Looking at *The Mirror* (1957), one sees a flesh-coloured form behind the scramble of red, green and black, like some emissary trying to claw its way out.

Unlike Cage, who is most famous for having subtracted everything, Guston worked by addition. He added paint on top of paint, building forms that seem almost to bulge forward

the best storyteller, and I am the best organ player,' Rothko once told Guston, and in saying so touched on the essence of Guston's art, even then, when his paintings were still entirely abstract.

One of the most critical paintings in Guston's evolution is a white field inscribed at the centre with a burst of squiggles in tan and grey, like the shorthand record of a monologue without words. Called *White Painting I*, it was made in an hour one day in 1951 and now hangs in the second room of the Guston retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is not, finally, one of his most exciting or moving paintings. But it marks a major shift early in his career, a change less violent but just as searching as the one at the end when he abandoned abstraction to open the flood gates for his grotesque, heart-wrenching parade of figures and objects.

Twenty years before *White Painting I*, Guston started his career as a social realist. He apprenticed with the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros in the early 1930s, and Guston's process included the laborious task of making preparatory cartoons. He moved to New York in 1935 to paint for Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, but by the early 1940s he'd begun to take teaching positions and move into smaller studio work. Each of these early paintings was a discovery, and in works like *Martial Memory*, painted in the fall of 1941 just before the US entered the Second World War, Guston was laying the foundation of his aesthetic, both in his selection of images (here, a group of kids outfitted in ragtag battle gear, holding 2 x 4s for swords and garbage lids for shields), and in his attraction to subjects that engaged with, and reflected, the world as he saw it.

And yet, something was missing. A small canvas may have been more intimate than a mural, but Guston's paintings of the mid-1940s were still too indirect for his changing taste; there was little that was personal at stake. The artists around him were already embracing their own forms of Abstract Expressionism, including his best friend from high school, Jackson Pollock, who'd discovered the drama of the gut-spilling splatter. In search of a new kind of painting that would allow for a more intense emotional resonance, Guston



Philip Guston and Morton Feldman in Guston's studio, 1965. Photo: Renate Ponsold

into the viewer's space. When he scraped paint away, it was only to add more. A history of gestures seems to buckle under the surface. His canvases are the inverse of Rothko's, whose draw in towards an ever-distant horizon. This extroverted quality is significant, is at the heart, really, of who Guston was as a painter. Above all, he wished to communicate. There is a wonderful painting he completed in 1979, the year before he died, called *Talking*. It's of a hand gesturing while holding

began to experiment with abstraction in 1947. The first of these works are incredible to look at. Seeing *The Tormentors* one has the sense of watching an interment, as Guston dismantles and buries figures and forms (Klansmen hoods, cobbled shoe soles) that won't surface for another two decades.

But Guston was still dissatisfied – as he would be again and again in his life, each time forcing him to change, and each change deepening the work. The reductions of abstraction weren't enough: something was still getting between him and the canvas. 'The desire for direct expression finally became so strong that even the interval necessary to reach back to the palette beside me became too long,' Guston explained. 'I forced myself to paint the entire work without stepping back to look at it.' The result was *White Painting I*, and it remains a record of both a liberation and a pledge – kept for the rest of Guston's life – to fuse thought and action, to make a record of his experience, and to follow his instinct, no matter how strange, stark or ugly its revelations. After that hour in 1951 Guston never again planned his painterly moves in advance. And in the last, great, decade of his life, he almost never turned away from a painting until it was finished, arguing with it through the night until a truce, or at least a compromise, had been reached.

Ugliness didn't come for a while. If anything, Guston's early abstractions, the ones that landed squarely in the American vanguard along with De Kooning, Rothko and Pollock, and made him a celebrated star of the New York School, seemed too pretty. In these moody, atmospheric fields of cross-hatched brushstrokes condensing just off-centre like a reflection in choppy water, people thought they saw landscapes, or even reminiscences of Monet's late waterlilies.

Some were surprised and annoyed by his shift to abstraction. Where could it lead? As early as 1913, Kandinsky, one of the pioneers of abstract art, had described its 'terrifying abyss', and posed the question: 'What is to replace the missing object?' But



Guston had three sets of heroes: the painters of the Italian Renaissance, Masaccio, Giotto and, above all, Piero della Francesca, the cartoonists of his childhood George Herriman, the creator of *Krazy Kat*, and Bud Fischer of *Mutt and Jeff*, who remained lodged in his mind's eye, and his pantheon of writers, Beckett, Kafka, Kierkegaard and Isaac Babel. Sometimes it seems that, aside from Piero della Francesca, it was the writers he loved most, and sometimes, too, one feels Guston himself was the closest possible approximation of a writer whose medium is paint. It seems significant that the painting the

**Philip Guston,**  
*Fable I*, 1956-57,  
oil on canvas,  
165.1 x 190.5 cm.  
Washington  
University Gallery  
of Art, St Louis.  
University Purchase,  
Bixby Fund, 1957

## GOT SICK AND TIRED OF ALL THAT PURITY! I WANTED TO TELL STORIES!

walking through a retrospective of Guston's brooding, relentlessly self-critical output, it becomes clear that rather than the problem being a deterrent for Guston, it seduced him. Where could abstraction lead? Did it necessarily have to be hermetic or solipsistic, a gesture in the dark for the sake of itself? Or was there a chance it could have, if not universal meaning, then at least an embattled meaning, open to be fought over and even shared?

curator, Nan Rosenthal, chose to hang alone in the entry room of the Met show is a bubble-gum pink painting of an easel, an illuminated light bulb and the names of five artists in type-writer-style print – 'Masaccio', 'Piero...', 'Giotto', 'Tiepolo', and, jauntily slanted upwards on the other side of the easel, 'de Chirico' – as if Guston were saying, 'Why not just spell it out?'

What happens when language ruptures, fragments, breaks



**Philip Guston,**  
*The Studio*, 1969,  
 oil on canvas, 121.9  
 x 106.7 cm. Private  
 collection

down into a meaningless stutter? Silence. And then, inevitably – because the desire to be understood is too powerful to resist – an attempt to find a way to begin again. In 1962 the Guggenheim mounted Guston's first retrospective to critical acclaim. At the same time, the work he was doing in the studio reflected an increasing agitation, his forms knotting into monochromatic blocks that drew the gaze in only to rebuff it. The reaction to these 'Dark Pictures', or 'erasures', shown at the Jewish Museum in 1966, was mixed. Guston retreated to his studio in Woodstock and, as he always did when feeling paralysed with doubt, he began to draw. In the beginning, all he could manage was a mark or two. There's an ink drawing of 1967 actually called *Mark* – a short, thick vertical stroke that begins at the top of the page and stops abruptly when it reaches the middle. By 1968 the marks began to cohere into the first objects – a head, a shoe, a light bulb, a hand holding

a pencil. It was as if a language was being invented from scratch. And not just any language, but one that came from the well of Guston's life: rope, like the one his father, a Jewish immigrant from Odessa, hanged himself with when Guston was ten, and of the kind he drew in *Drawing for the Conspirators* at the age of seventeen; a light bulb, like the one that lit the closet where he first began to draw a year after his father's death; Klansmen, from a mural he did about the Scottsboro trial in the early 1930s that was destroyed by vandals; cigarettes, bottles of alcohol, paintbrushes, easels.

What it all spelled, at least at first, was a harsh rejection of abstraction. 'American abstract art is a lie, a sham, a cover-up for a poverty of spirit,' Guston claimed. 'A mask to mask the fear of revealing oneself.' Later he said, 'I got sick and tired of all that purity! I wanted to tell stories!' When Guston showed his first figurative paintings in October 1970 at the Marlborough Gallery in New York people came away shocked and even disgusted. The paintings overflowed with buffoonish Klansmen smoking stogies, riding around in cars with 2 x 4s, painting under the light of naked bulbs, thinking. The paint was a sickly taffy of pinks and creams. Many of Guston's closest friends turned their backs on the work; in the case of Morton Feldman, it spelled the end of a friendship.

But ultimately the rejection of abstraction wasn't the main point. Towards the end of his life Guston would remark that people always asked 'why you work in this style or that style – as if you had a choice

in the matter. You're trying to stay alive! I don't feel any different now than I did in the fifties.' Guston made abstractions for sixteen years, or a third of his career, attempting to find a way of unmasking himself in that form. That he moved on seems less a case of manifesto than of realising that, given his particular storytelling gifts, he was limiting himself by avoiding the object. He was a very good abstract painter, but not, ultimately, a great one. It didn't quite suit him, even while it was a necessary step towards discovering an urgency of expression. What remained was to weld it to a comprehensible language. The first paintings that came once he let the image flood back in were an answer to the question he'd posed to himself in *White Painting I*. Not, 'What kind of artist am I?' but, 'Who am I?' 'I make some marks', he said, 'it speaks to me, I speak to it, we have terrible arguments, going on all night... Do I really believe that? I make a mark, a few

strokes. I argue with myself, not “Do I like it or not?” but “Is it true or not? Is that what I mean, is that what I want?”

Much has been made about Guston's various stylistic breaks, but it's impossible to look at a retrospective of his work and not be struck over the head with the unity of the whole thing. His was a continuous journey towards the most unflinching expression of the self. In 1945, a year and a half or so before he turned to abstraction, Guston painted a group of children in homemade costumes and masks. Its title was *If This Be Not I*, and it might as well be the title of his entire career. 'If this be not I', he seemed to be saying, 'then I'll change until I find what is.' The Klansmen in the paintings at the Marlborough Gallery were Guston. They were dark and tender, self-critical and thoughtful. And they were painters! In *The Studio* (1969), a 'hood', as Guston called them, sits in front of the easel, painting his own image with a 'real' looking, flesh-coloured hand, while puffing on a cigarette with a cartoon-like, white-gloved hand. In *Bad Habits* two hoods contemplate a large jug of alcohol, and one flagellates himself. The paintings are still filled with wonderful, abstract touches: blobs, lines and shapes that are critical to the unique alchemy of the composition. Guston's brushstroke, forced to evolve under the spotlight of abstraction, had gone from self-effacing to light and watery, to tense, bold and determined. When he used to make the objects that haunted him, the result felt like a bracing smack. Many of the images he was now fixated on were things he'd painted two decades before and scraped out or covered up. 'I wasn't ready to accept it,' he said. It wasn't

portrait of loving dependence, intimacy, tenderness, a beautifully ingrained life, the fear of an unfathomable loss. Looking at it, one feels like nothing anyone could paint could be more honest, or stark. It was Guston's gift to be emotionally gruelling and celebratory in the same stroke. To portray darkness in a way that was life-affirming.

Guston was an existentialist, but in his version life was not without purpose and meaning. To find it, and then express it, was the struggle – but also the work – of a lifetime. Though his final shift to figuration was a clear gesture towards the possibility of making something out of nothing, Guston never relaxed into certainty, or the happy finality of a solution. His late paintings portray epic battles in the spirit of Uccello, crowded with hands holding shields like the garbage can lids the children used in *Martial Memory*. They suggest the world as Guston saw it – anxiously. In *The Street* two small insects stand in wait below the struggle, prepared to take over should humanity self-destruct. But these late paintings also suggest the process



**Philip Guston,**  
*Couple in Bed*, 1977,  
oil on canvas, 206.2 x  
240.3 cm. The Art  
Institute of Chicago,  
through prior bequest  
of Frances W Pick and  
memorial gift from  
her daughter, Mary  
P Hines.

## GUSTON'S FINAL SHIFT TO FIGURATION WAS A CLEAR GESTURE TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF MAKING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING.

until the last decade of his life that Guston was prepared to see what his hand would make if he granted it freedom.

In a note dated 1972, Guston wrote: 'There's nothing now to do but paint my life.' In 1973 the hoods disappeared and in their place appeared a stubbly head with one large, unblinking eye. In *Painting, Smoking, and Eating*, it's seen doing the things that were Guston's life; painted shoe soles pile up on the canvas that the smoking, one-eyed head works on while lying prostrate in bed with a plate of food. From then on, until he died of a heart attack in 1980, the paintings became more bald and candid. Mountains of entangled legs futilely attempting to scale a wall, a crowd of one-eyed heads rolling in a deluge, himself asleep, the tremendous, witnessing eye momentarily closed awkwardly, perfectly, over a bright red blanket, a giant, sinewy hand descending from the heavens to draw a line, he and his wife, Musa McKim, alone in a dark sea. One of the most achingly beautiful of these is *Couple in Bed*, painted in 1977 after Musa suffered a stroke. Guston's and Musa's heads are joined together as they lie in bed in a black room, and Guston's scrawny, hairy legs still wearing shoes poke out from under a white blanket, as does his arm, wearing a watch with no hands, the fist gripping three mangled paintbrushes. It's a

that Guston loved, where the subject and the 'coloured dirt', as Guston called paint, were always engaged in a contest. Guston wasn't satisfied being satisfied: 'I scrape out all that does not belong to me', he once said, 'or that belongs to me too much.'

Guston painted as if it were the end of the world. But if anyone were keeping a secret in the game of the last artist it was he, for what really attracted him wasn't the fantasy of being the final painter, but the first. Or rather, the first after the last. Not one who painted 'as a cave man would, when nothing had existed before', he said in 1966, but rather 'like a man who has never seen a painting, but... lives in the world museum'. The effect of the last artist is finite: after him, everything is gone. But the first still holds the possibility of infinity in his hand. So the question is: what will be his first mark? The last painting in the show at the Met, and one of the last of Guston's life, is called *Wheel*, and that's what it is: an archetypal wheel rising out of the red earth, a sun or moon hovering low in the sky. But look closely and the wheel appears slightly squared. And why not? Guston, it turns out, wasn't afraid to take a gamble and try, or fail, to reinvent it. ■

**Philip Guston Retrospective** will be on display at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, 24 January - 12 April 2004.