

Lines, Gaps, Shapes, Strokes

Jokes, Colors, Holes . . .

by Lynne Tillman

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Philip Guston: From Garbage Cans to God

I arrived in New York in 1975, when, to paraphrase the Sara Lee Pound Cake ad, nobody didn't like Philip Guston.¹ (I did meet a contrarian painter once who wasn't all in, but she was just grumpy because she said he was so easy to love.) I went to all his shows at McKee Gallery and I fell in sync immediately,² first as a Chicagoan, i.e., someone on the lookout for humor, and then as someone who never quite grasped the critique of subjectivity. For Guston, the subject position is a default starting point, and he occupies that position straightforwardly. I mean, what else is life made of? You plod to work, eat a sandwich, think about death, call a friend, feel dread, walk the dog, notice some stuff, get an idea, take out the trash, then go back to the painting wall. (And that's if you're *lucky*.) From garbage cans to god, pastrami to Klansmen: Guston brings the news and even

1. In 1968, advertising agency Doyle Dane Bernbach provided the Sara Lee frozen pound cakes with the long-running slogan, "Everybody doesn't like something, but nobody doesn't like Sara Lee." It was written by Mitch Leigh, who later composed the musical *Man of La Mancha*—"The Impossible Dream" . . . [Editors' note]

2. David McKee and Renee Conforte McKee opened their gallery in New York in 1974 with an exhibition of figurative paintings by Philip Guston; the gallery was then located in a former beauty salon at the Barbizon Hotel for Women, on Lexington Avenue and 63rd Street. Guston had five more solo shows at the gallery before he passed away in 1980. Until its closing in Fall 2015 the McKee Gallery represented the estate of Philip Guston. [Editors' note]

manages to include the funnies. I saw how dumb things (like flotsam, like buoys) began to appear out of the shimmering atmospheres of his earlier abstract paintings, and I loved the tragicomic appearance of these boots, books, elbows, clocks, all tangled up in the painting's very construction. Guston's crude thatch, his thicket of heavy air, was weighted by strokes of crimson, clumps of gray, patches of orange, and glowering pinks. (In Guston's work, pink often seems to indicate something menacing.)

By the way, when I say painting I really mean drawing, lines unfurling from the end of a pencil like a spider web, a stream-of-consciousness process that an artist can watch as any other spectator would. That's the magic aspect of drawing: when you're really rolling, the marks feel like they're coming equally from within and without, from some source both internal and alien. Guston's self-reflexive image of the painter painting underlines this split in consciousness, as well as the greater treachery of time itself. Time, that patient substance that the work is unraveled in, is also slowly devouring us even as our pictures unspool. The worried guy in Guston's pictures, smoking, eating, and watching, is a guy who both reveals and repudiates time; doubt regenerates him.

I can't feel this much existentialism in other painters, and not many other painters wager such ridiculousness. Guston's is the kind of unexalted comedy that museums and art history generally want to suppress. In places of high art you're supposed to see the majesty of time's arrow as it arcs across time, not the way the failed arrows fall out of the quiver between wonder and stupidity. But that's how life actually feels. So yeah, who wouldn't love Philip Guston? ♦

This essay was originally published in the monograph Philip Guston Now, ed. Harry Cooper, Mark Godfrey, Alison de Lima Greene, and Kate Nesin, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2020).