University of Tennessee, Knoxville
TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

Senior Thesis Projects, 2003-2006 College Scholars

2005

The Presentation of Philip Guston: A Social Realist

Melissa Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp3

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Melissa, "The Presentation of Philip Guston: A Social Realist" (2005). *Senior Thesis Projects, 2003-2006.*
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp3/30

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College Scholars at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Thesis Projects, 2003-2006 by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

FORM C
COLLEGE SCHOLARS PROJECT APPROVAL

Melissa Hoesman Johnson — Scholar

DOROTHY M. HABEL — Mentor

Philip Converse, A Social Realist — Project Title

COMMITTEE MEMBERS
(Minimum 3 Required)

Name	Signature
DOROTHY HABEL	Dorothy Habel.
BALDWIN LEE	[illegible]
Tim Hiles	[illegible]

PLEASE ATTACH A COPY OF THE SENIOR PROJECT TO THIS SHEET AND RETURN BOTH TO THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR. THIS PAGE SHOULD BE DATED AND COMPLETED ON THE DATE THAT YOUR DEFENSE IS HELD.

DATE COMPLETED 8 August 2005.

Melissa Hoesman Johnson
Artist Statement
June 16, 2005

During my last semester in the painting program at the University of Tennessee in the Fall of 2004, I shifted the focus of my work from figurative paintings and portraits of myself to images of food. Painting and drawing my likeness had become sentimental and confining, resulting in my physical disappearance. I sought to become indifferent and more open minded to self-portraiture, which released the process of painting into a freedom that was a less invasive on my part and allowed the medium of paint to have a life of its own. Due to my love of cooking and collecting of cookbooks from the 1940's, 50's and 60's, I began sketching old images of food from photographs in the cookbooks, emphasizing the food's structural plastic qualities. Painted portraits of myself emerged through the new images of food which, contained visual information about my life and myself that surprised me. A regeneration of my likeness occurred through an exchange with edible objects. By the action of my disappearance I found a possibility for representation beyond disappearances, a physical likeness beyond the physicality of myself, and ultimately a new liberated process of painting. The human quality that surfaced was not "other worldly," but "other personal," which only through my absence had become manifested.

In addition, through the re-creation of forgotten images and recipes from a Post-World War II sensibility I am discovering through my paintings a balance between simulation and the realization of my natural self. The painting of a forty-three-year-old Jello recipe pretends to be more than sentimental as she becomes retroactive through paint. I've found that food images support a personal dialogue that encourages me to structure an authoritative voice. Sometimes my paintings feel familiar and yet detached at the same time, like a Doppelganger. As an artist I want to reveal myself within my work and initiate discourses, yet the food images sometimes seem to take on a life of their own as separate entities with separate voices. I watch as some of my food paintings have the uncanny ability to lure viewers into an illusion of seduction or uneasiness. The titles themselves seem animated when they make figurative references describing how the "delightful flavors mingle together, while the chilled fruits lie leisurely in a whipped cream dressing. " I am enjoying this series of work and plan to continue.

My College Scholars senior thesis, involving a research paper on the artist Philip Guston, has strongly influenced the way I think about art and the art world. His revolutionary spirit supported by a Romantic Utopianism and Social Realist consciousness has inspired the vision I have for my own future work. I am impressed with his persistence and determination to pursue an individual aesthetic outside of the pressures to conform to Formalist theories in the 1960's and 1970's. His writings described the fears that he faced throughout his artistic career, while trying to establish a personal position in the art world and yet at the same time resisting complete assimilation and loosing his true sense of self. I feel that I have gained from this project a personal strength to confront the pressures that lie ahead of my artistic career that will also try to convince me subordinate my personal vision for that of the collective and the universal.

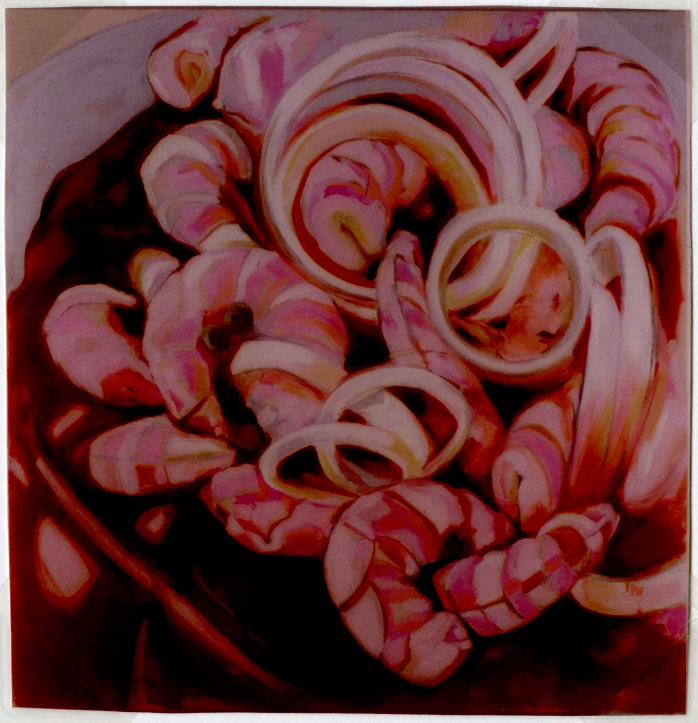
Self Portraite 2004

Self Portrait 2002

Self Portrait 2003

Deviled Eggs 2004

Shrimp and Onions 2004



Brussel Sprouts
2004

Philip Guston

A Social Realist

"A Fighter Against His Time"

Melissa Hoesman Johnson

College Scholars Senior Thesis

The University of Tennessee

July 27, 2005

Dr. Dorothy Habel, Dr. Tim Hiles, and Prof. Baldwin Lee

presiding committee

Philip Guston (1913-1980) began his artistic career in 1930 as a Social Realist in Los Angeles, California. In a world full of fantasy, scandal, and propaganda, he pursued the Romantic Utopian ideal, to defend lower class struggles from a pro-communist perspective and to expose social discrimination against those who lacked privilege and opportunity. Along with other revolutionary artists, he felt a social responsibility to create images that actively responded to current cultural situations. After dropping out of high school, he pursued becoming a self-taught artist (Feld 20) and relied on proletarian organizations like the John Reed Club and the Mexican Mural Painters for support and direction. (Ashton, Philip 26) Newspapers and journals were the informative media sources that helped shape and sustain his social and political beliefs. Photographs, illustrations, and comics were essential images seen within culture that inspired him. Influential were the political and satirical drawings of George Grosz (1893-1959), seen in the Los Angeles publication *Americana* from 1932-33, which at the time printed some of the harshest examples of criticism involving the art form of comic caricatures. (Ashton, Philip 30)

Throughout his painting career Guston continued to read numerous publications, which he relied on as tools to help maintain his awareness of the art world and politics. As American art transformed over the next three decades so would the media, which consisted of radio broadcasts, newspapers, and photography. Throughout the Depression Guston's enthusiasm and loyalty to social causes created powerful images, seen in the form of paintings and murals, which like the media, also commanded the viewer's attention. As the 1940's approached and World War II began, the American media did not favor the avant-garde or its political messages due to the fears of communism and

Bolshevism, which persuaded many artists to neutralize collectively into abstraction. (Guilbaut 11) With the rise of Abstract Expressionism in 1947-48 came the development of American art criticism, which Guston believed was a negative driving force that gathered momentum during the 1950's and 1960's and corrupted the art world.

The Abstract Expressionist era of the 1950's reflected an apolitical state of "social amnesia" and by 1960 American art criticism favored a nihilistic form of social abandonment with the emergence of Pop art and New Abstraction. These two decades contrasted with Guston's early career pursuit of defending his individuality through the Romantic notion of taking actions grounded in Social Realism and left-wing, revolutionary sensibilities. (O'Doherty 15) Beginning in 1968 and continuing through his late-transitional work until his death in 1980, Guston aggressively confronted this trend with an individual aesthetic and defiant subject matter that directly implicated the overt influence of the Formalist art critics Hilton Kramer and Clement Greenberg, both of whom were unable to critique or categorize Guston's work, which resisted their contemporary evaluations.

In 1930 the John Reed Club asked Guston to create a drawing for an art exhibition publicizing the upcoming Congressional Hearings concerning the NAACP's campaign on anti-lynching. (Haskell 280) The drawing *Conspirators* (New York, Whitney Museum of Art; 1930) (Fig. 1) is a graphic black and white image depicting hooded figures committing acts of racial violence. A large hooded figure stands in the foreground holding a heavy gauge rope, as several hooded figures gather together on the upper right. In the background a black figure hangs lynched from a tree, while a light skinned, faceless figure appears crucified to the left and nailed on a cross. A large brick wall with

classical brick posts topped with spheres separates the hooded figures from their executed victims. Guston has embodied the white hoods with fabric falling in a classical drape. The uniformity of the brick wall alludes to the Klan's rigid belief system, which is hard to dismantle and structurally inhumane. The crossing lines on the ground resemble longitudes and latitudes, which hint at the location of a specific place. It appears to me that the geometric blocks characterize the simplified forms of the states of Alabama and Mississippi, the locations of many lynchings. These violent crimes were published nationwide and circulated among the organizations that Guston was involved.

The imagery in *Conspirators* prefigures the stylized figuration and symbolism seen in Guston's later murals and easel paintings. Art historical references are seen in the sparse Surrealist spaces and horizontal cloud formations found in Giorgio de Chirico's work. References to the works of Piero della Francesca are seen in the balanced classical compositions and ordered spaces. Guston, like de Chirico and Piero, constructed walls within his compositions to divide dramatic situations and enclose his subjects in definitive, concrete spaces.

Conspirators was a commissioned piece, but reflecting Guston's adolescent experiences watching Klansmen commit terrible acts. He struggled to survive in the volatile Los Angeles environment, where the Ku Klux Klan maintained one of the country's largest followings. (Auping 17) The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Guston was raised feeling segregated from the masses. Because of this condition, he maintained a marginal position within society, identifying with neither the city's glamorous high society or with any of the numerous mystical religions, but instead with the sympathizers of left-wing politics and various artistic groups. (Ashton, Philip 12)

Guston's interests in social issues began as a child reading comic books and creating the content for his own comic strips. His favorite was George Herriman's sadistic comic strip "Krazy Kat" (Published in Krazy Kat; September 10, 1922)(Fig. 2), depicting a defensive mouse throwing bricks at an obsessive cat. (Ashton, Philip 13) He acquired a precocious understanding and sensitivity towards the human condition in his adolescence by the unfortunate events of his father's suicide and his older brother's accidental death. (Weber 46) At the age of twelve he remembered escaping to his closet to draw under the light from a single hanging bulb. His father's suicide by hanging may have been symbolically depicted in the image of a single hanging light bulb that appears in his late-transitional work. Throughout his teens and into his twenties, Guston's political interests developed along side his artistic abilities, producing a strong collaboration between his political and aesthetic beliefs. Throughout these years from 1926 and 1940 he developed the symbolic imagery that reappeared much later in his late transitional paintings beginning in 1968.

Guston arrived in New York City late in 1935 and immediately applied for work painting murals for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) through the Federal Arts Projects. (Feld 22) He lived with his high school friend Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), with whom he learned to paint murals in the early 1930's. They first observed and then worked for the famous Mexican muralists, David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) and Jose Clememte Orozco (1883-1949), in Mexico and California. (Auping 16) The passionate Mexican muralists influenced Guston's ability to paint reality with sincere personal expression. (Ashton, The New York School 38)

Guston found political and artistic solidarity among artists at the Art Student's League and the Artists' Union, which generously supported one another throughout the Depression. Between 1936-37 the WPA funded a Federal Theatre experiment that the artists titled, *The Living Newspaper*. (Ashton, Philip 36) Guston helped produce plays inspired by the current events printed in the New York Times and other various newspapers. The scripts for these plays were written to include actual quotations from the headlines and articles. Like his murals, many of the plays were placed under scrutiny for their left-wing political nature. Congress was investigating artists within all of the Federal projects to detect a "communist menace." (Ashton, Philip 38) The Dies Committee was looking for communist sympathizers involved in un-American activities and placed these artists and individuals on black lists. New Deal officials were not able to sustain the funding for the Federal Arts Projects due to the nation-wide fear of communism and fascism.

In Los Angeles and New York City Guston experienced conflicts with the Red Squads, which consisted of armed men believed to be Klansmen posing as police officers. (Ashton, Philip 27) In the late 1920's the Red Squad cut and shredded several of Guston's first small Ku Klux Klan paintings displayed in the window of a Los Angeles mercantile store. In 1930 the Los Angeles Red Squad destroyed his *Fresco Panel* (Destroyed; 1930) (Fig. 3), showing a black man tied to a pole as a Klansmen whipped him, while it was being stored in a meeting room for the John Reed Club. Guston's panel reflected the theme of "The American Negro" seen in the murals painted by members of the John Reed Club. (Auping 17) Later, in New York City during the mid to late 1930's,

Guston witnessed the Red Squads violently breaking up demonstrations of Union workers who were protesting unfair wages and violations of their civil rights. (Balken 94)

By 1940 the world had changed dramatically. Artists became black listed by government agencies, if they were "sympathizers," if they belonged to or associated with organizations or subject matter that favored left-wing politics. (Morgan 199) The emergence of World War II brought a fear of communism and Stalinism, which labeled individuals as Trotskyites or Stalinists. *The New York Times* reported in an article "Excerpts From Reports of the Dies Committee to Congress" (January 4, 1940), that the Dies Committee had found a "Red Tinge" of un-American activities within many unions and civil rights organizations, which were attempting to deceive the "great mass of earnest and devoted American citizens." Funds were made available for further investigations, despite the Committee's abusive methods. (Excerpts From Reports 15)

After Leon Trotsky's assassination in 1940, *Art Digest* reported in an article "Guston Goes To Iowa" (September 1, 1940), that Guston had accepted a teaching position at the University of Iowa along side the famous Regionalist painter Grant Wood. In addition, this article claimed he was born to American parents, implying that his name change in 1937 before marrying Musa McKim was not public information. A career move and identity alteration such as this may have been necessary after funds ran out for artists in the Federal projects in order to find employment and avoid government investigation. In fact, in the 1940's it was difficult for immigrating professional German and Russian Jews to acquire positions at major northeastern or mid-western universities as many were scrutinized as communist sympathizers, which caused many to seek employment instead at southern African-American institutions. In any event, perhaps this was an attempt to

assimilate into society and hide, due to a fear of the Red Squads and congressional watchdogs. In turn, what aesthetic changes would also have taken place in his future work?

Guston arrived with his wife Musa at the State University of Iowa in 1941. His intension was to make easel paintings and abandon his past mural work, which became an art form directly tied to communism. His colleague, Grant Wood was described in *Time* magazine (1934) as the "greatest teacher of representational art in the United States," who thereby promoted the advancement of U.S. cultural nationalism. (Haskell 224) As a Regionalist, Wood believed a work of art must make contact and enlighten its public or it becomes lost. This sounds similar to the emphasis that the Mexican Muralists placed on their works, describing the mural's expressive social content as the highest possible achievement in art. (Ashton, The New York School, 38)

Guston painted *Martial Memory* (The Saint Louis Museum of Art: 1941) (Fig. 4) after first settling in Iowa City. The imagery is similar to that of his previous mural *The Gladiators* (Edward R. Broida Collection; 1938) (Fig. 5), which depicts a rough urban brawl. Fighting themes occupied Guston's work during the 1940's (Auping 23), but the presentation in the later painting has been diluted; the children depict a nostalgic image during the war years by pretending to be gladiators as they play in the streets with found weapons and shields. The figures in *Martial Memory* create a strong triangular composition and the attention to details reflects the sensitivity that Guston admired, which was found in Italian Quattrocento painting. (Ashton, Philip 7) The dark murky skies and vacant façade windows reflect the enigmatic environments of de Chirico. There is a cross lying in the foreground and two boys, resembling Klansmen, wear either

a folded newspaper or paper bag hood reminiscent of images seen in *Conspirators*. Faced with the fear of scrutiny, Guston finds solace in subtle symbols from his Social Realist past.

Guston described the complicated layering of forms seen in *Martial Memory* as assembling into inventive shapes that became active upon the painting's surface. The idea of images layering and piling up into mounds was a metaphor that came from his memories of his father's career as a junk collector. The decision to focus on the inner structures of forms and things allowed him to reduce the meaning of his paintings to their simplest common denominator, which was a strategic move to cope with his past and present. Further, this illustrates his growing acceptance of abstraction as a mode of expression. (Ashton, Philip 17)

The end of World War II unveiled the horrors and crimes committed on the Jewish people. As Guston grieved over the news and photographs while still living in the mid-west, he questioned his ability to cope with his new symbolism, which caused him to work even more subjectively through abstract means. (Balken 94) He wanted to separate his hand from mental distractions, so he practiced drawing through automatic writing. The truth of the war was paralyzing and this made it difficult for him to react objectively.

Guston's interests in symbolism prompted him to read Erwin Panofsky's *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1955) explaining Renaissance iconography and its themes. (Feld 14) Framed on the wall in Guston's house since the early forties hung a copy of Dürer's engraving entitled *Melancholia I* (The Philadelphia Museum of Art; 1514) (Fig. 6), which represented an allegorical image relevant to Guston's personal experiences and beliefs. Panofsky describes the figure of Dürer's Melancholia as in a

state of "gloomy inaction." (Ashton, Philip 55) She is extremely unhappy as the symbols all around her describe her condition. Scales, an hourglass, a magic square, a bell, and a variety of tools are on the walls and floors to help her measure time and space. Panofsky calls the print the Artist's Melancholy, which implied, "The mature and learned Melancholia typifies theoretical insight which [can] think but cannot act." (Saltzman 79) Melancholia's condition of desiring to act and subsequent failure to do so resemble Guston's frustrations with the possible and impossible act of painting where he struggled with the opposing rational and irrational forces in his life. Unfortunately, at this time his period of inactivity and isolation caused him to long for something that was difficult for him to reach.

Dore Ashton, who interviewed Guston on numerous occasions, wrote that he repeatedly experienced mental "roadblocks" in his career where his "theoretical insight" was hampered by inactive periods. (Ashton, Philip 56) Throughout his life it seems evident that exterior and interior pressures, social and personal, created these roadblocks that may have lowered his confidence of knowing impulsively how and when to act. Guston confessed to Ashton, "The Dürer [print] has always quieted me, all the world's essential forms pause for a moment." The isolation and calm created from Dürer's *Melancholia I* may have reminded him of his childhood memories of hiding within his favorite closet to escape from the pressures of the outside world, in addition to his later periods of inactivity while in the mid-west, when he longed to return to the freedom of expressing his revolutionary impulses.

Guston's career began in 1930 surrounded by Utopian ideals, with the Romantics and the Social Realists both insisting that a life full of uncertainties and contradictions

stimulated the opportunities for individual choices and creativity. Social Realism was layered with elements of 18th and 19th century Romanticism and like the Romantics the Social Realists questioned the Enlightenment's approach to a rational and systematic way of explaining and governing human existence. In addition, they believed that human progress could be attained by expanding an individual's "pursuit of knowledge," by including and trusting one's passions and senses, as well as intellect. (Oliver 116-17) Durer's *Melancholia I* encompassed many of these truths and symbolized, for him that his own progress existed within his individual freedom.

Guston returned to New York City in 1949 with his wife and daughter, and experienced a different art world. He soon befriended the New York School composers Morton Feldman and John Cage. (Ashton, The New York School 92) He had met Cage the previous year in Rome. Initially, Guston was not trusted among the abstract expressionist painters, as he carried himself as a "prize-winner" and a "skillful semi-academic style browser" seeking self-recognition in the highly competitive art world. (Feld 67) While teaching at various mid-western universities, he had experimented with abstract and metaphorical images, but he had not completely surrendered himself to abstraction before relocating to New York City. His relationships with the composers, who were not left-wing, but apolitical, were influential in persuading him to totally abandon his figurative work and pursue new directions in both his art and politics.

In the late 1940's Guston found camaraderie within the newly developing clubs and organizations affiliated with the New York School. (Johnson 3) Artists and musicians became exceedingly loyal to the ideology that unified America's first internationally recognized art movement. Guston was drawn to the closeness that reminded him of his

associations in the John Reed Club and with the Mexican muralists. Collectively, these artists looked inward for inspiration instead of being distracted by the traditions and events of the objectified world. It is within the *Club,* the most prominent Abstract Expressionist organization in New York City, comprised of mostly New York School painters, sculptors and musicians, that Guston became educated about the new theories and critical essays circulating within the art world. (Johnson 7) With an existentialist approach, artists practiced abstraction by reducing their personal experiences and interpretation of the world into abbreviated actions of expressive marks or gestures. (Ferguson 21) In the beginning the abstract expressionists confessed they were more satisfied with creating works for each other and furthering the success of the movement rather than receiving recognition from bourgeois collectors. (Ashton, The New York School, 3)

In 1947-48 the New York avant-garde was still predominantly composed of left-wing, social realists. (Belgrad 17) The avant-garde, comprised mostly of anti-Stalinists, continued its pledge for the proletariat even after World War II ended. But by 1950 the New York art world was collectively taking an apolitical direction, which reflected a more socially accepted political attitude. Included in this trend were the social realist's of whom had abandoned their hopes of helping society during the Depression and World War II. As a result many artists were encouraged to collectively begin practicing abstraction to free themselves from the social messages connected with communism and Marxism that had consumed them for the past decade. Beginning in the mid 1930's many highly influential art historians and critics wrote about the current need for a freedom of expression in the arts and supported a new emerging American avant-garde.

Along with many other New York artists, Guston read these writings as both liberating and inspiring.

Meyer Shapiro, a friend of Guston's since 1949 when they met at the artist's Club in New York City, was an art historian who promoted left-wing social causes and was respected within anti-Stalinist circles. (Gilbaut 25) In the mid-thirties Shapiro was involved in the Popular Front, an organization made up of diverse artists from literature, music, and painting, who, despite their differences, united their energies to fight the spread of fascism. (Belgrad 17) In 1936 Shapiro wrote "The Social Bases Of Art," which encouraged social realists to begin practicing abstraction, because "the artist was cut off from all revolutionary hope." (Shapiro and Shapiro 24) Shapiro claimed that, "All art, even most abstract art, is rooted in the condition under which it is produced." The abstract artist, he said, " works under the illusion of freedom and does not understand the intricacies of his situation or the tenuousness of his position in the art world." Shapiro believed the abstract artist could produce work more effectively by recognizing that his or her work directly represented the "social fabric" from the period which, it was produced, revealing both "social conflicts and contradictions" signifying to the artist the full impact of his work. (Gilbaut 24)

Shapiro was responding to earlier commentaries from the 1920's and 30's from Alfred H. Barr that claimed how abstract artists were isolated from reality, operating within their own separate disciplinary laws. (Ashton, The New York School 56-60) Shapiro's argument attempted to connect abstract art with society and dispel any beliefs that abstraction was not relevant to culture. In Shapiro's next essay "The Nature of Abstract Art" (1937) he described the emerging movement towards abstraction as a personalized

"form of labor" that was diametrically "opposed to the characteristics of Industrial production" and as a new visual language was also "opposed to communication as it [was] now understood." (Gibson 307) Shapiro interpreted an artist's labor and visual language as a manifestation of self-realization, which satisfied the Romantic notion of self-discovery among social realists. Shapiro's ideas reached these left-wing artists who still sympathized with proletariat interests and Marxist philosophy.

Shapiro also predicted in "The Abstract Nature of Art" (1937) that a new development in abstraction would succeed the most prominent movements in America during the first half of the twentieth century, including regionalism and realism, and French cubism. (Gibson 307) A decade later, the rise of Abstract Expressionism must have appealed to Guston who would have trusted Shapiro's promotion of individual expression and revolutionary innovation through abstraction. The idea of camaraderie and support among artists for a unified purpose was something that attracted Guston, which satisfied his need for group dependence evident through most of his career. The ability to combine and compromise one's individual ideas for the common good was repeated later in the philosophy that unified artists in the Abstract Expressionist movement.

In the 1930's social realists saw American abstraction as isolated from society, as if existing within an ivory tower, which Soren Kierkegaard described as inhabiting those who judge society from an "intellectual point of view," those who are "detached from society" and "think systematically." (Blackham 10) But Shapiro's message refuted those ideas, encouraging artists to begin seeing abstraction as a "language to express social consciousness" and an opportunity to relieve themselves of their lost causes. (Gilbaut 25)

A year later after Shapiro's essay, Leon Trotsky and André Breton's "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" (1938) was published in *Partisan Review.* (Breton and Trotsky 483-86) After Shapiro blurred the line between Formalism and Social Realism, the "Manifesto" reinforced the idea of pursuing freedom and individuality. The "Manifesto" spoke of a true art, originating from the "anarchist individual," that enriches culture and is concerned with the condition of humanity. "True art" can only be revolutionary and should not be connected to the bourgeois, either financially or aesthetically. An artist should "assimilate [art's] social content" and feel its meaning "in his nerves" as he "freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art." In their essay, Trotsky and Breton state,

> In the realm of artistic creation, the imagination must escape from all constraint and must, under no pretext, allow itself to be placed under bonds. To those who would urge us, whether for today or tomorrow, to consent that art should submit to a discipline which we hold to be radically incompatible with its nature, we give a flat refusal, and we repeat our deliberate intention of standing by the formula: A complete freedom for art.

In the following year Clement Greenberg wrote "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), which was influenced by the earlier "Manifesto." (Greenberg 48-59) Greenberg advised the avant-garde to develop a new American art that would be "valid on its own terms," by "dissolving content into form." (Greenberg 50) Greenberg suggested that the American avant-garde detach from society and strive for an independence separated from the European influences seen in revolutionary politics and bourgeois culture. These changes would allow the avant-garde to unify as an art movement and "find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving [forward] in the midst of ideological confusion and violence." (Greenberg 49) These words gave the social realist a new purpose, which

benefited the country at large as the art world began to focus on America's first national art movement and cause the next center of the art world to transfer from a war ravaged Paris to an energized New York City.

Greenberg's essay was extremely influential in the art world and he later became the "feared guru" of Abstract Expressionism over the next decade. He became the critic who could "make as well as break reputations by means of public comments or private introductions." (Shapiro and Shapiro, 18-19) Greenberg never published criticism of Guston's work. (Balken 92) Greenberg knew Guston's abstract and late-transitional paintings, but generally wrote only about those artists who reflected his formal thinking.

Philip Guston eventually became one of the more prominent figures in the Abstract Expressionist movement during the 1950's. With his revolutionary ideas visually neutralized throughout the 1950's, his abstractions would begin to slowly portray elements of realism towards the end of the decade. His "impressionistic" brushstrokes seen in *Zone* (Edward R. Broida Collection; 1953-54) (Fig. 7) began to group into separate blocks of color, as seen in *The Mirror* (Edward R. Broida Collection; 1957) (Fig. 8). These forms allude to the structure of 'things' as opposed to an atmosphere of light and space seen in *Zone*, found in his earlier abstractions between 1949-1955. As his work began to display evidence of a reunion with representation, seen in the painting *Mirror To S.K.* (Private Collection; 1960) (Fig. 9), dedicated to Soren Kierkegaard, which shows a deviation from abstraction as forms begin to surface in spite of his expressionistic application of paint. The shapes of heads, the profiles of faces and eyes, and the triangular outlines suggesting clan hoods are symbolic images from his past that he had not painted since the early 1940's. Guston continued to develop these symbolic

images, which he repetitively used in his late transitional work beginning in 1968. His friend Ross Feld wrote in 2003 that if Guston had not practiced the evasive acts of masking himself and his revolutionary messages from the 1940's through 1966, he might never have painted the "powerful and self-revealing" work produced in his late-transitional period. (Feld 93)

In 1959 Guston's paintings received two reviews by John Canaday, of which included *Zone*, *The Mirror*, and *Mirror To S.K.*. (Canaday, Art 44) In the show "Two Painters" twenty-nine of Guston's abstract paintings were exhibited at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York City, along side art by Jack Levine. In Canaday's first article, "Art: Stylistic Poles Apart," (December 30, 1959, *The New York Times*) Guston was described as exhausting a style that has "become his private vocabulary." In contrast Canaday wrote that Levine "[told] us exactly what he thinks about things, yet he guards his public opinion to such subjects as politics and the social scene." He continued to describe how Levine's work "comments on the vulgarity of our age" in the painting *1932* (1959) he depicted the Nazi villains, Hitler and Goebbels handing a letter to the German statesman von Hindenburg. Levine dedicated this painting to George Grosz and his politically inspired caricatures exposing social corruption. (Canaday, Art 44)

In Canaday's second critique of the same show titled, "Two Painters," (January 3, 1960,*The New York Times*), he compliments Guston's abstract efforts, but claims that the paintings in the show from 1958-59 "represent no startling departures from what we already know." (Canaday, Two 18) He reminds the reader of Guston's earlier paintings from the 1930's, which contained images of social consciousness and anti-fascism. Canaday described dramatic changes in his work, which occurred in the

mid thirties when he created murals for the Works Progress Administration. He closes his review stating, "Mr. Guston and Mr. Levine can abide by one another's work, [...] if thought that on occasion they might draw a little sustenance on one another --- Mr. Guston some of Levine's respect for the visible world [...] and Mr. Levine, some of Mr. Guston's feeling for the mystery that lies beneath what we see." (Canaday, Two 18)

It is unclear what Guston thought about such reviews as he rarely commented on his work's published criticism. Guston wanted us to believe that he was not persuaded by these published criticisms and that they had no influence on the direction of his work. In the film, *Guston A Life Lived* (1980) (Blackwood), which was made just before his death, he was asked how he felt about critics who had attempted to define the changes between his abstract work of the 1950's and the crude painterly style seen in his later work between 1968 and 1980. He responded abruptly and said that the criticism had nothing to do with him, that what they said did not matter, because he was functioning in the same creative state the whole time.

Guston was not alone in his return towards realism. Members of the New York School marked the exhibition of Willem de Kooning's *Woman* series at the Sidney Janis Gallery in March 1953, as a terrible loss to the "purity of abstract painting." (Ferguson 33) In fact, while de Kooning presented the figure and collaged mouth from a cigarette advertisement as a viable subject to combine with the ideology of abstract painting, he unknowingly inspired many second-generation abstract expressionists from the late 1950's and through the 1960's to also look towards popular culture and figuration for inspiration. A surge of comic strip inspired figuration developed in this era.

On September 11, 1960 a caption in the *New York Times* read, "Twilight Seems To Be Settling Rapidly For Abstract Expressionism." (Canaday, Twilight 21) Author and critic Canaday reported the movement's increasing demise and failing popularity after experiencing over a decade of international success and soaring profits. In his article Canaday quoted Alfred H. Barr Jr., director of collections at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, as saying, "The vigor and quality of [Abstract Expressionism] is bound to generate a reaction, but where we are going to go to I'm not willing to prophecy. What I see is a new concern for [the] figure and a movement towards a new severe style." (Canaday 21)

Since 1955, American art had become in transition, moving away from the "expressionist technique" and emerging in a variety of ideologies and "schools" that challenged the legacy of the New York School. Painting was evolving from what was believed to be an existentialist act to a more intentional and intellectual practice. By 1960 the New York School's camaraderie was gone, save the remnant of a passing legend. (Ashton, The New York School 229) The popularity of the gestural mark had faded, because it had become a generic style that was easily duplicated. Barr statement implied that American art was in a state of transition and the new stylistic changes could develop away from the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism. Barr's statement was in response to pressures for regeneration due to mounting criticism from many American museums, galleries, artists, and a maturing audience who were growing tired of sympathizing with the abstract expressionist's gesture. It would be interesting to investigate to what capacity these pressures encouraged the nihilistic works of the 1960's. Guston listened to the medias prophetic cues and prepared himself for a transition as

well, still relying on collective guidance, but preparing himself for a future, independent artistic direction.

As the next American art movement known as Pop art, or Neo-Dada and New Realism, began to surface, the art world promoted criticism in the media and it was not unusual for artists to be guided by the articles, which helped them to contemplate new directions for their work. Because an artist was judged in comparison to other artists working in the same vein, political manipulation by critics in the form of demagoguery was common. Hilton Kramer described in his article, "Critics of American Painting" in the October 1959 issue of *Arts,* that the critics in the "school of poetic criticism" enjoyed the spotlight as much as the artists and used those opportunities to elevate their own "poetic" jargon and interpretive "meanings." (Kramer, Critics 26-31) Further Kramer stated that it is a sociological fact that the rise in American art's popularity in the late fifties coincided with the widespread publication of art criticism. (Kramer, Critics 26)

As American artists shifted their attention towards new movements, they were forced to make changes in business and personal relationships founded during the previous decades. Due to its rise in popularity, collecting contemporary American art became an obsession. The art world anxiously listened to authoritative opinions that could help sustain the work of existing artists or point to those capable of creating the next innovative avant-garde styles. The action of a powerful collector or critic could place an artist's work securely within art's history or devastate his or her career indefinitely. This type of political patronage in the art world was common, and Guston personally struggled with both the criticism of Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer. (Balken 92-93)

In November 1962 Guston left the Sidney Janis Gallery in protest after Mr. Janis replaced his Abstract Expressionist exhibition for a show of Pop art. (Kramer, New Realists 298) Critics regularly promoted the new Pop art movement, while questioning the endurance of Abstract Expressionism. Guston received some negative reviews for his shows, and this occurrence also helps explain Mr. Janis' decision to cancel. Even though efforts from supportive critics like Dore Ashton, Thomas Hess, and Harold Rosenberg highlighted the positive results from Guston's shows, the negative reviews, from Hilton Kramer, caused devastating and humiliating results. These resulted in Guston's choice to leave the Janis Gallery.

In 1962 the Guggenheim Museum hosted Guston's first retrospective exhibition, which was reviewed by the art critic Max Kozloff. (Kozloff 292-96) Kozloff described his work as "lacking self confidence and containing self-imposed restrictions." He stated that Guston's painting had conservative appearances comprised of "rhapsodical interpretations," which were not reaching for extremes. (Kozloff 292) Guston was clearly struggling in those years to find direction in his work, and like the allegorical figure of Melancholia, he was not sure when or how to act on his impulses. He realized at this time that Abstract Expressionism had "degenerated" into a form of genre painting, but he continued his loyalty to the movement and its members until 1966.

After 1960 a new nihilistic attitude in the art world challenged abstract expressionism with an "anti-romantic and anti-emotional" condition seen in the emerging Pop art and hard-lined abstractions. Students in their twenties graduating from college art departments could not relate to the previous generation's experiences of domesticated violence and the horrors of World War II. In February 1964, Brian O'Doherty wrote

"The New Nihilism: Art Versus Feeling," in *The New York Times*, explaining that the young artists of today simply have nothing to feel, because their emotions have been abandoned as a method of coping with the problems that have "kept most of us in a state of acute formless anxiety (due to the influence of McCarthyism) for years." (O'Doherty 15)

In reality the country was becoming more violent, with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, several civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King Jr., and the escalating Vietnam War. Guston was frustrated in the mid sixties and expressed that he was "feeling very schizophrenic. The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I sitting at home reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything --- and then going to my studio to adjust a red to a blue." (Balken 93) He wrote, "Art is not needed," describing his work "unromantically" to Ross Feld. "For, the living out of our lives--- it is putting in some time and activity. It is nerve wracking--- the need to fix an image forever- like a pyramid in the desert. It does not move--- I am tired of moving--- and where is there to move?" (Feld 14)

In 1962 the critic, Hilton Kramer, published the "The New Realists," which was published in conjunction with a Pop art show seen at the Sydney Janis Gallery. (Kramer 297-98) Kramer reviewed the same show that Guston had protested earlier for causing his show's cancellation at the Sidney Janis Gallery. In his article Kramer described the various paintings, found objects, comics, the refrigerator and lawn mower sculptures inspired by the newest American Pop artists Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, and Roy Lichtenstein. (Kramer, New Realists 297) He claimed that they were the rightful successors to Abstract Expressionism and became the "radical innovators and heirs to

tradition." (Kramer, New Realists 298) These comments described the personal goals that Guston had aspired to during Abstract Expressionism. In fact, the goals were initiated through Meyer Shapiro's predictions, first seen in his essay, "The Abstract Nature Of Art" (1937) and later through his lectures at the Club in the 1950's, which claimed a new development in American abstraction would surpass earlier art movements. In addition, Kramer quoted Sydney Janis as saying, "By the new realist's eschewing pessimism, [they] made something important out of their delight in the objects of modern life." (Kramer, New Realists 298) This comment directly repudiates the nature of Social Realism, which as a form of social criticism embraces all contingencies and in turn uses those experiences to propel its desire for change through revolutionary messages. Kramer's comments justified the motivation for sixties "neutral" art, and he and Janis both encouraged an "abandonment of one's emotions" and departure from the negative issues in the world. (O'Doherty 15) Kramer's comments also reflected his support of Greenberg's Formalist perspective.

Interesting are Kramer's notion that the New Realist's work was only a comment on art and not a "serious criticism on contemporary life." (Kramer, New Realists 298) He explained that artists desired to depict the vulgarity of "public culture," but were unable to because they "remained hostage" to Formalism and "highbrow aesthetics," which are separated from mass culture. He continued by saying their use of "irony" is "puny and slack" and their attempts to, "make a raid on the world," projected an inability to deal with worldly experience.

> "Their vision is too tame and accommodating, their concept of art too diffident and insecure, even to conceive of triumphing over the experience they are ineluctably drawn to, and their art thus becomes the victim and satellite of the very energies they yearn to harness and effect. The visual

> dynamics of mass culture are simply too robust, too ubiquitous and resourceful to submit to so feeble a challenge."

Kramer's comments were arrogant and manipulative. They instigated a rise to action, a revolt, and not from a politically neutral artist, but from an avant-garde artist, someone who recognized the bonds and constraints that were placed upon the imagination of those producing artistic creation. (Breton and Trotsky 485) The avant-garde artist embodies the symbolic figure found in Dürer's *Melancholia I*, as representing both "scholastic activity" and "melancholic inactivity" fused together, "the merging of two different worlds of thought and feeling," soul and mind. (Saltzman 79-80) A revolutionary act is in itself timeless, and the content of revolutionary art can describe both the striving for, and failures of, human existence. It is in this state of mind, seen in the Durer print, that Guston reacted to Kramer's words, which represented those "opposing forces of irrationality" that tried to dismantle and hold hostage the "knowledge and method" of his artistic genius.

I believe Kramer's words prompted Guston to begin looking at his contemporary life with the eyes of someone who had lived through the vulgarity and crudeness of worldly experience. Someone who was not afraid of risking his career by attacking the irrational elements that violated contemporary art and artists, those negative elements he identified specifically as art criticism. It was not until 1968 that Guston broke free from the visual orthodoxies of Formalist criticism and identified within his work the formula of "endless repetition of known inventions." (Balken 92) Guston responded to the invasive nature of Greenberg and Kramer's criticism in the early 1960's stating to Dore Ashton in an interview, "I am in 1950 again except that it is worse, because of the extreme codefication of beliefs and the institutionalization of everything!" (Balken 93)

In 1966 Hilton Kramer's article "Art: Abstractions of Guston Still Further Refined," (January 15, 1966, *The New York Times*) reviewed the show of Guston's 81 painting and drawings at the Jewish Museum. Kramer described the work as " tenuous" and even identified an "ideological hanky-panky accompanying the work." Kramer convicted Guston of having a "narrow range of feeling." (Kramer, Art 22) Guston's painting *The Light* (Collection of the Museum of Art at Fort Worth; 1964) (Fig.10), shown at the Jewish Museum, reflects Kramer's concerns. Even though the reduction of color and form to a sparse combination of black and gray blocks may have been influenced by the presence of minimalist works during the sixties, but Kramer does not buy it and convicts Guston of placing severe restrictions on himself. His work is "a style now in decline" and his loyalty to the movement, as well as those that "support this champions older art," especially the New York School mentor Harold Rosenberg, is "rather touching."

This review exemplifies the persistent blows that Guston's work suffered from the late fifties though the mid sixties. Because of his distaste for Kramer's criticism, Guston began painting from his house in Woodstock, New York, as if ordered to assist in a proletariat class struggle. His reason for a revolt was not collective, but a Romantic defence of his own individuality caused by the oppressive social vacuum that existed within the art world.

In contrast, Dore Ashton also wrote a review of his work shown at the Jewish Museum in the spring of 1966. Her article, "An Evolution Illuminated," published in *Art International* (March 1966), acknowledged the controversy surrounding the "grudgingly admired" artist. She first compared his "mature manner" to that of Rembrandt's and praised his paintings surface of "rusty shapes, like phantom cupolas, [that] live tenuously

in a turbid atmosphere. They are formed in a coalescence of long strokes that can be read abstractly or as concrete space-displacing objects." Later she described his "excellent drawings ... as spare as certain oriental still-lifes, relying totally on the tense whiteness of paper in contrast with the memory of volume each line provokes." (Ashton, An Evolution 113) In spite of Ashton's good intensions, this criticism still sounds promotional and detached from a man whose art was driven by a political purpose. Proving how loyal Guston's supporters were, even after abandoning abstraction, those renowned critics, including Ashton and Rosenberg, continued to praise him when his late-transitional work was overwhelmingly criticized.

Guston exhibited all of his thirty-three new paintings from 1968 to 1970 at the Marlborough Gallery during October of 1970. This marked the beginning of his late-transitional period (1968 – 80). Kramer once again reviewed Guston's show harshly in his article " A Mandarin Pretended To Be A Stumblebum" (October 25, 1970, *The New York Times*). Kramer wrote that Guston had always been a "colonizer" rather than a "pioneer" within the New York School and had "occupied a special religious place," second only to Willem de Kooning, among collectors and critics that supported the movement. "He is one of those painters fated to serve a taste instead of creating one," and his "new style of cartoon anecdotage" is "clumsy and demotic." (Kramer, Mandarin 27) Kramer's perspective on Guston's work reflects his own political leanings that would not allow him to see within the work any social significance. Guston's new work blatantly exposed this invasive nature of art criticism in the late sixties, but in order for his work to effectively revitalize and create an awareness of art's true condition he knew his actions had to be "critical." (Balken 93)

Guston's paintings were a revolutionary reaction to society. He resurrected his ability to observe society by creating a visual alphabet that depicted his opinions on social and political matters. He reclaimed the hooded figures seen in his earlier work and presented them in a crude, unrefined, painterly expression that could not be easily placed within a movement or style. Throughout his career he had used the media as a tool, but with his late work he attempted to trump the media. This innovative artist's individual aesthetic baffled and shocked the critics and viewers. His response was ingenious, using the canvas as a mirror to reflect the art world's invasive and critical nature back at itself. Essentially, in Guston's mind, the art world had become excessively dominant with its criticism, causing him to react and rise up and reclaim his work's intentions.

Guston's late work reflected his early influence of comic strips. He applied symbols from his past to stand in as metynonyms, which were essentially metaphors that continuously transform and evolve into new meanings. While the hooded figures initially stood for Klansmen and police officers posing as Klansmen in the1930's, in his late work they became the art critics that he so passionately despised. The hooded figures soon began to interact with the other emerging objects on the canvas causing meanings to evolve and resist fixation.

Guston's painting, *Flatlands* (Byron R. Meyer Collection; 1970) (Fig. 11) portrays a strange landscape of reality. The painting measures 70 x 114 1/2 5 inches and has a variegated white and pink brushed background. There are thirty-eight scattered forms and objects including two hooded characters that face each other in the center of the canvas. The scattered images are painted in his favorite palette of cadmium red, a range of fleshy pinks and grays, orange, golden ochre, black, and touches of blue and green.

Guston called the hoods "little bastards," which intentionally included himself, a religious slang term for Jewish boys. (Weber 19) He insisted that the paintings evolved into self-portraits. In fact, 'bastard' was a term commonly used by artists in the Abstract Expressionist movement to describe the individuals, like Guston, who remained loyal even after its decline. Those frustrated members claimed that, "Expressionism was a bastard word, a bastard idea, and [it produced] a bastard artist." (Canaday, Twilight, 21)

Guston's paintings of hoods, made between 1968-70, show them freely conducting daily business by driving cars, painting, pointing, and observing abstract works of art. He saw them as criminals within society and killers who roamed free. *Flatlands* was painted at the end of this series of hooded figure paintings with the hooded figures disappearing in 1973. Guston depicted these characters with a matter-of-factness that defined what was considered to be a socially unacceptable subject matter, which exposed himself and his work to public ridicule. (Kunstmuseum 56) The hoods were the most blatant form of ironic symbolism that he portrayed. In 1970 viewers believed he was mocking the Klan, but that realization shifted as the hoods puzzling behaviors began to mock the viewer.

The landscape is expansive and consuming, even apocalyptic, as it stretches beyond the horizon. (Auping 23) Social criticism is found within the landscape. The red pointing glove could represent the menacing red squads searching for un-American activities or revolutionaries or possibly Stalin himself who on his deathbed pointed as if cursing his bedside attendants. The boots represented the uniforms worn by authority figures and soldiers ordered to report to war. (Balken 95) Two clocks and a sun, whether rising or setting, refer to the cyclical function and pressure of time itself, and the action of cycling directly relates to a revolutionary operation. "There are twenty minutes in the

evolution of each of my paintings," Guston stated. "The closer I get to that time --- those twenty minutes --- the more intensely subjective I become --- but the more objective too. Your eyes get sharper; you become continuously more and more critical." (Storr 107)

In 1970 Guston confessed, "American art is a lie, a sham, a cover-up for a poverty of spirit. A mask to mask the fear of revealing oneself." (Mayer 170) Guston learned over his lifetime how to recognize the source of his personal fears. I found in my research evidence describing the fears that were prolific in the art world throughout Guston's career from 1930-1980. Inhibitions and anxiety existed within the Romantic artist, the proletariat, the avant-garde, and the abstractionist, but nothing suggested the possibility of fears among the bourgeois or the art critics, the elitists and the Kramers. Both sides of the opposing forces have the same vulnerabilities and opportunity to revolt, but the one who becomes guarded and callous, who thinks systematically "does not live anymore," and "does not act or believe." (Blackham 10)

In 1978 Guston wrote to his friend Ross Feld and described his studio as a battlefield. "The bomb has exploded!" he wrote, as dozens of paintings and drawings were strewn around. (Feld 80) "Literally, now I am showing myself to myself, making [as] concrete as I can, visible as I can." He continues to describe painting as an "impossible-possible" act, without "moments of innocence." He says he is, "fighting the abstract part of art," because it is the "not visible." He sees art as a conflict, with brushes as weapons and garbage can lids as shields. He says, "The conflict [is] between the real against the unreal." "No one knows it, but right here, in the woods, I feel like Lenin or Trotsky, in Zurich, plotting the revolution!"

Bibliography

Ashton, Dore. *Philip Guston: A Critical Study.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., 1976.

Ashton, Dore. *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., 1972.

Ashton, Dore. "An Evolution Illuminated." Art International. March 1966: 112-13

Auping, Michael. *Philip Guston: Retrospective.* London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 2003

Balken, Debra Bricker. *Philip Guston's Poor Richard.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Belgrad, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Blackham, H.J. *Six Existentialist Thinkers.* New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1959.

Blackwood, Michael. *Philip Guston: A Life Lived.* New York: Blackwood Productions, C.1981

Breton, Andre, and Leon Trotsky. "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art." *Theories of Modern Art.* Herschel B. Chipp, ed. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968. 483-86

Canaday, John. "Art: Stylistic Poles" The New York Times 30 Dec. 1959. final ed., 44

Canaday, John. "Twilight Seems To Be Settling Rapidly For Abstract Expressionism" The New York Times 11 Sep. 1960. final ed., X21

Canaday, John. "Two American Painters" The New York Times 3 Jan. 1960. final ed., X18

Dabrowski, Magdelena. *The Drawings of Philip Guston.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988.

"Excerpts From Reports of the Dies Committee to Congress." The New York Times 4 Jan. 1940, final ed., 14.

Feld, Ross. *Guston In Time: Remembering Philip Guston.* New York: Counterpoint Publishers, 2003

Ferguson, Russel. ed. *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-1962*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993.

Gibson, Ann Eden. "Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics." *Pollock And After: The Critical Debate, 2nd Edition*. Frascina Francis, ed. New York: Harper and Row Ltd., 2000. 307-328

Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde And Kitsch." Pollock And After: The Critical Debate, 2nd Edition. Frascina Francis, ed. New York: Harper And Row Ltd., 2000. 48-59

Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

"Guston Goes To Iowa." The Art Digest 1 Sep. 1941: 29

Haskell, Barbara. *The American Century, Art and Culture 1900-1950*. New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1999.

Johnson, Steven, ed. *The New York School of Music and Visual Arts*. New York: Routledge Press, 2002.

Kozloff, Max. "Guston" *Brushes With History: Writing On Art From the Nation. 1865-2001*. Peter G. Meyer. ed. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001. 292-296

Kramer, Hilton. "A Mandarin Pretending To Be A Stumblebum." The New York Times 25 Oct. 1970. final ed., sec. D: 27

Kramer, Hilton. "Art: Abstractions of Guston Still Further Refined." The New York Times 15 Jan. 1966. final ed., 22.

Kramer, Hilton. "Critics of American Painting." Arts Oct. 1959: 26-31

Kramer, Hilton. "The New Realists" *Brushes With History: Writing On Art From The Nation. 1865-2001*. Peter G. Meyer. ed. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001. 297-299

Kunstmuseum Bonn. *Philip Guston: Tableaux / Paintings 1947-1979*. Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000.

Mayer, Musa. *Night Studio, A Memoir of Philip Guston*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 1988

Morgan, Ted. *Reds: McCarthyism It Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Random House Books, 2003.

O'Doherty, Brian. "The New Nihilism: Art Vesus Feeling." The New York Times 16 Feb. 1964. final ed., X15.

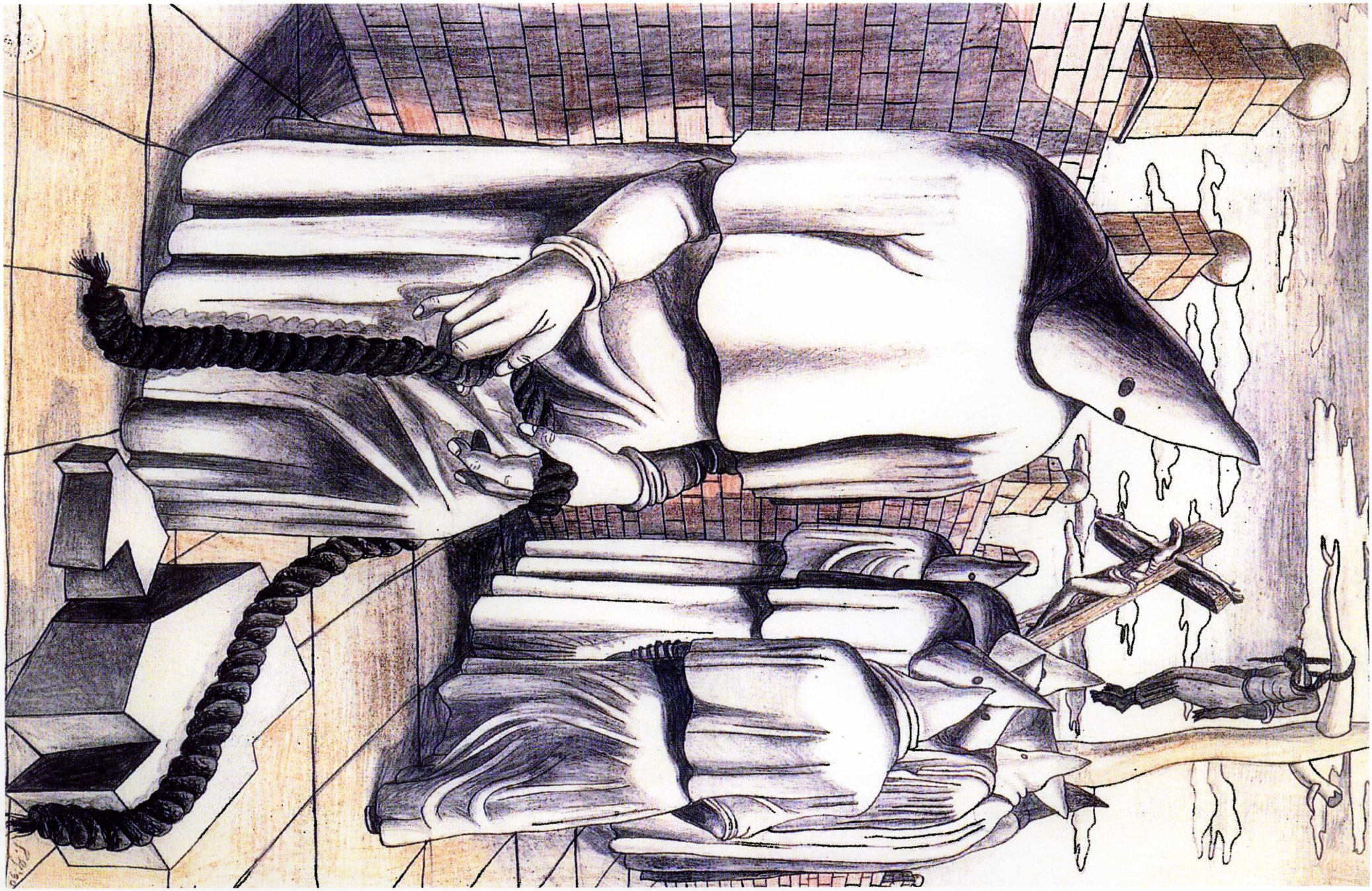
Oliver, Martyn. *History of Philosophy*. New York: Friedman/ Fairfax Publishers, 1997.

Saltzman, Lisa. *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999.

Shapiro, David and Cecile Shapiro. *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Ambridge University Press, 1990.

Storr, Robert, *Philip Guston, Modern Master Series*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986

Weber, Joanna. *Philip Guston, A New Alphabet, The Late Transition*. New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000.



Drawing For Conspirators 1930
Graphite, ink, colored pencil, crayon, on paper

Figure 1

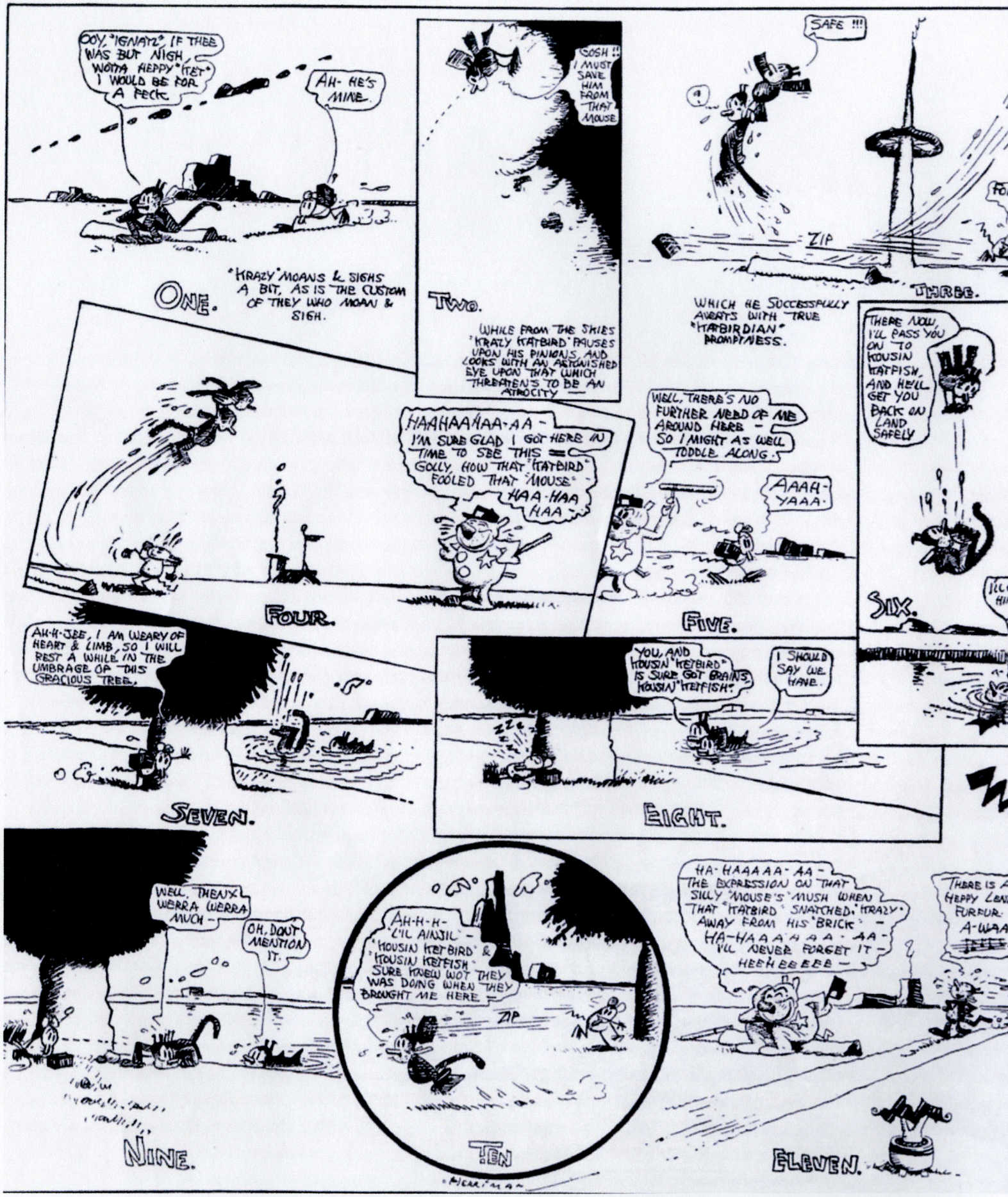
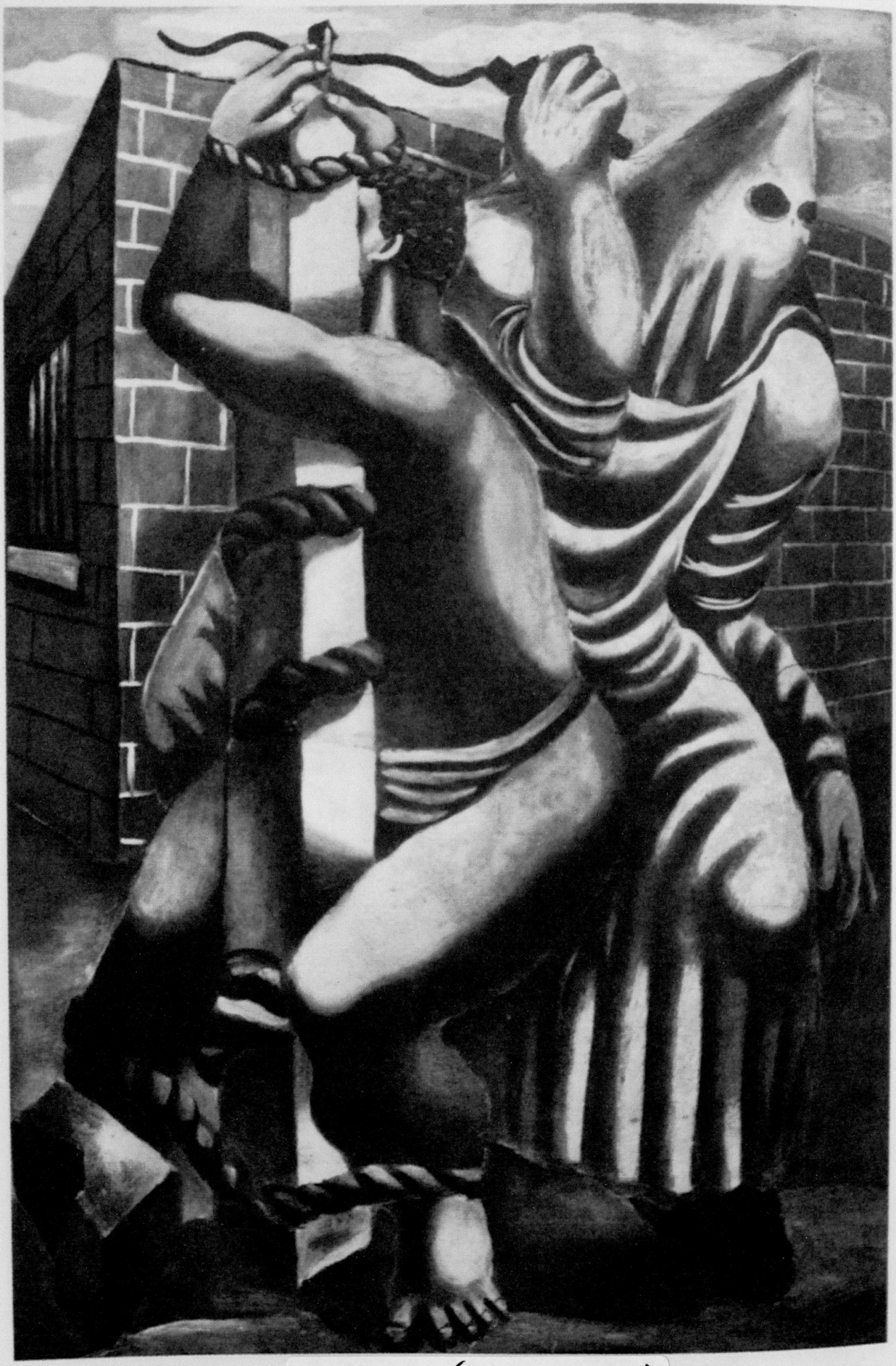


Figure 2

George Herriman's Krazy Kat, Sept. 10, 1922



Fresco panel, 1930 or 1931. Fig. 3. (Destroyed; 1930)

Martial Memory 1941
Oil on Canvas 40"8 x 32"4"

The Saint Louis Museum of Art Figure 4

The Gladiators 1938
Oil on Canvas
24 1/2 x 28 inches

Figure 5
The Edward R. Broida Collection

Figure 6

Albrecht Dürer
Melencolia I, 1514

Engraving 9 1/2 x 7 5/16 inches
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Figure 7.

Zone 1953-54
Oil on Canvas
46 x 48 inches
The Edward R. Broida Collection

Figure 8

The Mirror 1957
Oil on Canvas
68 7/8 x 61 inches
The Edward R Broida Collection

Mirror to S.K
Oil on Canvas
63 1/2 x 75 inches Private Collection

Figure 9

Figure 10

The Light 1964
Oil on Canvas 69x78 inches
Museum of Art at Fort Worth

Figure 11

Flatlands 1970
Oil on Canvas 70 x 114½ inches

The Presentation of

Philip Guston

A Social Realist

"A Fighter Against His Time"

Melissa Hoesman Johnson

College Scholars Senior Thesis

The University of Tennessee

August 8, 2005

Dr. Dorothy Habel, Dr. Tim Hiles, and Prof. Baldwin Lee

Presiding committee

In 1967 Philip Guston's pursuit for artistic freedom was motivated by his desire to return to the Romantic Utopianism he experienced much earlier in his artistic career. He was searching for, "an emancipation from man, so his individual spirit could follow its natural course." (Trotsky and Breton, 485) His pursuit led him to a permanent separation from the art world moving with his wife and daughter to Woodstock, New York, which displaced him several hours from Manhattan. He relinquished his obligations to Abstract Expressionism, one of the most deeply Protestant art movements in history, and his remaining relationships, which divorced him from any existing milieu that may have tied him to the movement. He sought refuge from the oppressive, formalist beliefs and systematic, nihilistic evaluations within contemporary art criticism. His freedom consisted of finding within himself a new place of origin, a place where he could begin again and control his own work, and become, if possible, "the first painter in history." (Ashton, Philip 55)

In Woodstock Guston formed new aesthetic guidelines that he called the "generous laws in art" (Feld 51), incorporating into his work the privilege to adopt risk, to violate conventional standards without restraint, and the ability to recognize failure and success on his own terms. (Corbett 44) He created a list for himself, "Do not make laws, Do not form habits, Do not possess a way, Do not possess a style. You have nothing finally, but some 'mysterious' urge- to use the stuff- the matter." (Feld 52)

Isolated in Woodstock, far away from his reputation, Guston's new paintings beginning in 1968 began to portray a crude form of self-expression with images that had broken free from common "visual orthodoxies." (Feld 85) He confessed to the art historian Dore Ashton in an interview, "I am in 1950 again, except that it is worse,

because of the extreme codefication of beliefs and the institutionalization of everything." (Balken 92) He was referring to the overt Formalist art criticism by the critics Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer whose oppressive evaluations, Guston felt, corrupted the art world.

Isolated in Woodstock, New York, away from the pressures in Manhattan, Guston developed a visual alphabet called *The Small Panels* (Woodstock, Estate of Philip Guston; 1968-70) (Fig.1) consisting of 27 individual paintings, which initially expressed his opinions of social and political matters and the view of the world around him. These paintings became the vocabulary for his new symbolic language within his late-transitional work.

In the preliminary drawings for *The Small Panels* Guston redeemed the hooded figures seen from his earliest Social Realist work of 1930 and his figurative abstraction from 1947. His *Fresco Panel* (Destroyed; 1930) (Fig. 2) from 1930 was destroyed by the Los Angeles 'Red Squad,' because it depicted horrific crimes committed to African-Americans, and Guston's painting *The Tormentors* (San Francisco Museum of Art; 1947) (Fig.3), reflected the same symbolic imagery that he favored, while he grieved the tragic events of World War II. Both paintings exemplify two examples of how the images of Klansmen objectified his consciousness. *The Tormentors* contains the similar irregular line seen in his late-transitional work. As politically explicit subject matter became strongly discouraged after World War II, Guston's images of Klansmen dissolved into abstraction. When Abstract Expressionism was in declined Guston's work began to slowly merge again with realism. His new vocabulary of symbolic forms began to interact in drawings and small paintings beginning in 1966, which he assembled into

larger paintings by 1968-70. As these new paintings began to freely emanate from him, his "histrionic impulses" quickly developed forming allegories bathed in melancholy and irony.

Guston rarely spoke of being influenced by the artist Marcel Duchamp, yet in revolutionary actions and in writing the two avant-garde artists had many similarities. Both artists shared a distant camaraderie for the theatrical and brutal effects that shocked their viewers. At the time of Duchamp's death in 1967 his final work proved to be his most enigmatic and revolutionary, and like Guston, his isolation from the art world would nurture his creativity, ridding him of any existing milieu and making it difficult for critics to place his work within an existing movement or style. Both artists abandoned conventional art forms and developed their own personal system of representation. For Guston the subversion of 'taste' evolved into 'bad' painting, while Duchamp relied on the 'boring' and anti-retinal elements to criticize traditional standards. Duchamp, like Guston, was amused by the multiple function of symbolism, which accommodated the invention of new meanings and the presence of irony. Duchamp confessed in 1966 that existentialist art no longer existed, but Guston's late work had reached a level of self-fulfillment through existential means. (Cabanne, Pierre 1967)

In the 1970's Guston identified the development of his new late-transitional work as having a combination of three different modes involving the theatrical, asymmetrically plural, and the philosophical. (Feld 34) Between 1968-70 his paintings would evolve from the symmetrical, objectified images seen in *The Small Panels*, to expansive landscapes of forms and asymmetrical pile-ups. While his paintings related to his favorite literary and philosophical writers, such as Isaac Babel, Franz Kafka and Soren

Kierkegaard, his asymmetrical and expressive compositions satisfied his desire for theatrical Baroque Dramas.

In the 19th and 20th centuries allegory was considered to be an inefficient art form not lending itself to academic possibilities. Political struggles during the modern era of the 1920's and 30's increased the popularity of allegorical images seen through comic and satirical artwork. Guston's late work reflected his exposure to these allegorical art forms. In contrast, Guston's daughter, Musa Mayer, insisted his paintings did not resemble cartoons nor did she think his expressive style was crude, but instead painterly and artful. She believed the new changes in her fathers work became a problem with critics because of the independent nature of his position, which exemplified his work's individual aesthetic that denied and challenged the collective and communal art world. (Mayer 153)

Guston wanted his new work to openly confront the issues concerning the revitalization and renewal of American art in the late sixties, but in order for that to occur he knew his actions had to be "critical." (Balken 93) His new larger paintings depicted the vulgarity of mass culture as he attempted to make a raid on the world with serious criticism of contemporary art and life. But Guston's political and social turmoil had always been intertwined with his personal life. Along with this new freedom to criticize society came his ability scrutinize him self. It became evident to him, even while he was painting, that meaning and perspective were constantly shifting. It was unclear at times if he was criticizing the relationship between himself and the art world or himself and his art. (Weber 58)

Influenced by Walter Benjamin's The Origin of German Tragic Drama (1928) Guston was intrigued by the idea of art as ruin. (Feld 11) He agreed with Benjamin believing

that art's role within society had become corrupt and decayed. Unsettling was the hierarchal position criticism had acquired over a work of art, guiding or eliminating altogether the initial relationship between art and audience. In addition, the violence within the Civil Rights Movement and the protests against the Vietnam War, were predominately absent from the contemporary art world. In 1970 Guston confessed, "American art is a lie, a sham, a cover-up for a poverty of spirit. A mask to mask the fear of revealing oneself."
(Mayer 170) These socially negligent practices angered Guston and became the primary concerns for his late work, motivating him to create allegorical paintings that responded to his moralistic persuasions.

Guston's late-transitional paintings displaying his new, unrefined figurative style were not well received at the Marlborough Gallery in October of 1970. A break from abstraction was clearly evident as painters and critics alike were startled and confused by his new images. His friends Morton Feldman and John Cage convicted him of "abandoning abstraction for the Pop art thing," (Auping 18) while Willem de Kooning approved, telling Guston, "It's all about freedom!" (Blackwood) Guston was never interested in Pop art, only influenced by other artists within the movement who borrowed images and symbols from culture, which inspired him to claim his own symbolic subject matter for his new allegorical paintings.

Exhibited at the Marlborough Gallery, *The Studio* (Private Collection; 1969) (Fig.4), measuring 48x42 inches, displayed Guston's reduced palette commonly seen after 1968, which contained variations of white, black, red and pink, and the occasional touches of orange and green. Oversized and larger than life, like most of his work displayed in the

show, *The Studio* was constructed like *The Small Panels* with solid forms of color. The brushstrokes were expressive and the line irregular, similar to the gestural marks of his earlier abstractions, but with a more subversive quality, which contrasted greatly from the hard lined aesthetics popular in the 1960's.

A red drape at the top of the painting is drawn open to expose Guston's allegorical interpretation of the human condition, unveiling the truths concerning humanities falsity, duplicity, and concealment. The cartoon-like, hooded figure smokes and paints simultaneously in a pink room illuminated by a single hanging light bulb. The hood performs the mundane task of painting his self-portrait. The painting becomes a self-portrait-within-a-self-portrait, virtually a *doppelganger* creating his *doppel.* Theatricality and irony are evident in Guston's matter-of-fact portrayal of masking to mask, which shows how artists have become numb and critics do not concern themselves with public scrutiny. Guston painted the awkward scene leading the viewer from comic amusement to puzzlement and shock. The moment is suspended in time and the scene offers no easy solution or understanding, just a "stunned reality" within a "a temporary stasis." (Feld 14)

In 1970 Guston described the hooded characters and he said, "They are self-portraits. I perceive myself as being behind a hood. In the new series of 'hoods' my attempt was really not to illustrate, to do pictures of the KKK, as I had done earlier. The idea of evil fascinated me, and rather like Isaac Babel who had joined the Cossacks [and] lived with them, I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. Then I started conceiving an imaginary city being taken over by the Klan. [...] What would they paint? Would

they paint each other, or paint self-portraits. I did a whole series in which I did a spoof of the art world." (Balken 94)

Guston's self scrutiny brought him to the realization that he had compromised his beliefs for many years and during that time associated and agreed with the corrupt manner within the art world.

The Studio displays the artist's indispensable tools like Durer's engraving of *Melancholia I* (The Philadelphia Museum of Art; 1514) (Fig. 5), which are objectified around him as an easel, a palette, paints, a can of brushes, a clock, and a green pull shade for privacy. (Ashton, Philip 54-56) White is used selectively representing the clock, light bulb, canvas, hood, cigarette, and left handed glove. Guston may have used white to symbolize a need for purification or an origin for revolutionary change. Symbolized are the necessary purification of time, a burdensome childhood, the condition of art, and bad habits.

As the red glove symbolized the Russian revolution and left-wing politics in the 1930's, the white, left handed glove in the painting *The Studio* may have represented for Guston the formation of a New reformed Left movement that emerged on college campuses in 1968. Teaching from 1968-73 at Skidmore College in New York and Columbia University in New York City, Guston would have been aware of this nation-wide development. Characterized by a diverse array of politically conscious individuals and empowered college students for a reformed Democratic society, the New Left coincidentally adopted allegorical means for their platform to project their comical and cynical messages. (Morgan 583) Bob Dylan, the famous musician and a resident of

Woodstock, New York, was recognized by the New Left for his song, "*The Times, They Are A-Changin'*."

Martin Heidegger wrote that allegorical symbols are the strongest part of a work of art, which can be used to help assist in the meaning of the whole. Owens, Craig 315-28) An allegorist can claim images and symbols commonly seen in culture and assemble them into layers of meaning. The allegorist becomes the interpreter of his symbolism by creating innovative situations or junxtapositions. In an allegorical work of art the meaning is found under the surface and within the layers of the image. The viewer must discern the hierarchy between the lower appearance of the image and the higher level of meaning. While some viewers become hostile to a work of art after not being able to understand its meaning, some also become puzzled by their own inabilities and remain challenged by the works mysterious symbolism and irony. (Summers, David 132-34)

In addition, Walter Benjamin's allegorical theory described how an object's meaning could shift and take on added meanings. Guston practiced these theories in his late work, claiming symbolic images from his past and allowing them to function as metynonyms, which were essentially metaphors that continuously transformed and evolved. For instance, while the light bulb initially representing a chilhood memory for Guston of drawing alone in his closet on the floor under the light from a single hanging bulb, it became transformed, due to the changing relationship on the canvas with the other objects around it, becoming a symbol, which represented his father's suicide. Later the bulb would evolve again in another composition and become a lynched figure.

It is possible Guston may have borrowed Jasper Johns' Pop art images of Light Bulb (1958) and Painted Bronze (1960), also a light bulb, for *The Studio*. Guston was acquainted with Johns and sold him a drawing before moving to Woodstock. (Corbett 17)

In Morton Feldman's essay, The Anxiety of Art (1965) he wrote, "There is no such thing as a moral, or an honest, or a true position in art," because, "for art to succeed, its creator must fail." (Feldman 27) What art needs, Feldman believed, was a creator who desired not to be in control of his medium. Guston realized his own invasive presence altered his art, so he relinquished his active vices and allowed his images to begin experiencing freedom through 'the generous laws in art.' (Feld 37)

In his frustration he doubted his effort and became baffled by his works perverse appearance confessing that he needed to "trust this new perversity." (Balken 92) His brushstrokes became progressively more expressive and loose, while his process of adding and reducing, painting in and scraping out, began to revolutionize his matter-of-fact crudeness into an uncanny quality that exposed his paintings to even more ridicule.

Doubt became essential to Guston's creative process because he believed it led him to the truth, which was found through much resistance. He constantly questioned his methods and how strange and indifferent his paintings felt to him. He believed his images had their own lives to lead and within their 'threatening carnival' of thugs in hoods, smoking cigars while driving around the city streets in cars, they also turned and mocking him with their absurd behavior. (Feld 41)

"It's a bitter comedy the mind makes, a fantasy the mind plays out," explained Guston. (Feld 49) "An attempt to control or fix the image [would be] like accepting a

dogma [or] some kind of belief." A belief he said was a form of purity, a limitation that resulted in a work of art accomplishing nothing.

The painting *Bad Habits* (Collection National Gallery of Australia; 1970) (Fig.6) measuring 73x78 inches, was also exhibited at the Marlborough Gallery. The painting contains a large bottle in the foreground flanked by two large cropped hooded figures that face each other. The figure on the right with a raised arm grasps a whip to strike the left figure. In front of them are tabletops with an additional bottle, a burning cigarette, and scattered used cigarettes. The hooded figures stand in what is perceived as a room, due to the placing of outlined forms, which suggests a window and a curtain pulled closed for privacy, a clock, several small hung frames, and a single ascending bare light bulb.

The hooded figures and whip were first seen in his earliest work *Fresco panel* (Destroyed; 1930) He initially borrowed the whip from Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* (1455), which was painted to illustrate how Christ's sufferings could purge us from evil. Seen again later, Guston reused the image not only to speak of his new social concerns within a racially volatile world, but to represent symbolically the anxiety and responsibility he felt to art itself, his desire and belief that art should have a life of its own and become purified from the invasive elements in the art world.

These violent hoods were his most blatant form of ironic symbolism that Guston portrayed between 1968-70. He called the hoods "little bastards," which intentionally included him self, as it was a religious slang term for Jewish boys. (Weber 19) Guston insisted his paintings had evolved into self-portraits. In addition, Clement Greenberg commented in the fifties that Guston and de Kooning were both 'homeless artists,' which

led Guston to believe that he directly labeled him as a bastard, due to his heritage as an immigrated Russian Jew.

Guston's painting, *Flatlands* (Byron r. Meyer Collection; 1970) (Fig. 7) portrays an enigmatic landscape of the artist's reality. The painting measures 70 x 114 inches and has a variegated white and pink background. There are thirty-eight scattered forms all associated with his symbolic vocabulary and painted with his late palette, including the two hooded characters that face each other in the center of the canvas. Bricks, boots, clocks, a sun, a ball, and a red left and right-handed glove are all represented from Guston's earliest allegorical work.

Flatlands was painted towards the end of 1970, before the hoods eventually disappeared again in 1973. It is within these expansive and consuming landscapes we begin to see Guston's most liberal expression of artistic freedom. It may be that his work's allegorical meaning now lies in the handling and positioning of the objects in space. The forms are spread out like a tableau, a world of fragmentation with no apparent possibility of restoration or wholeness. Presented is a ruinous environment of forms thrown around where ever they might land. He depicted his world symbolically the way he experienced it at that time, which is how we must interpret the painting. No true order or gravitational plane, no fixation of thought or feeling as the painting has the presence of moving forward towards the future and so does his work with a continuous series of landscapes.

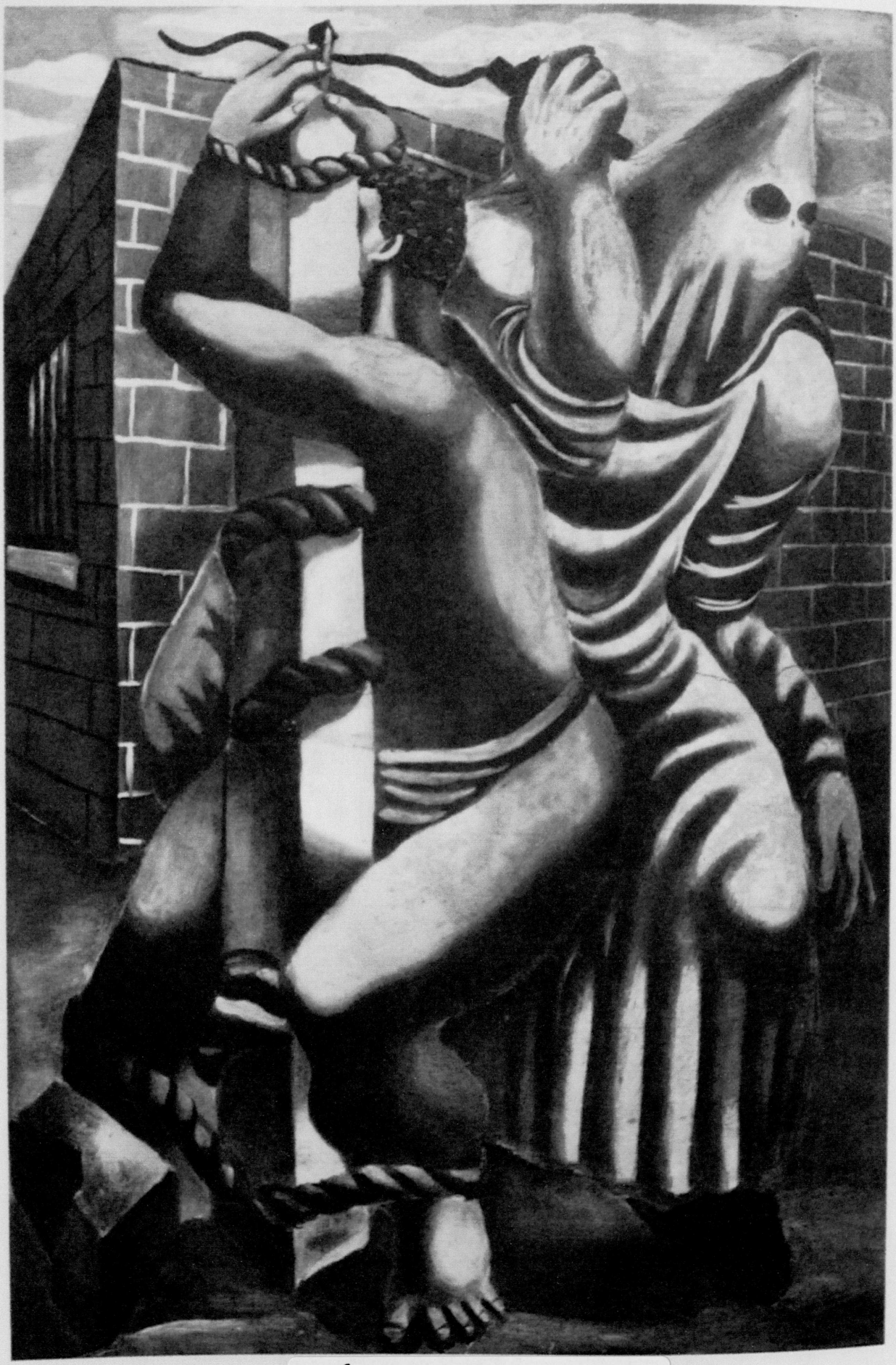
In an interview with Harold Rosenberg in 1966, Guston expressed his desire to discover new territories, and in those expansive spaces experience a continual recognition of the old and the new. He explained, "I would like to think a picture is finished when it

feels not new, but old." (Kunstmuseum 56) He wanted to paint and scrape out and repaint images that had been in him for a long time, but wanted to experience them again in a new way, as if having a double experience again with the same image.

Compared to Guston's later self-portraits of hoodless, one-eyed, grotesque heads, *Flatlands* still carefully illustrate the language of things seen in *The Small Panels*. *Flatlands* is a comprehensive painting involving the recognition of solid forms in an imagined space. He addresses everything at one time, the ethical and religious problems, the problems with perception and recognition. He initiated this process in his painting *Mirror To S.K.* (Private Collection; 1960) (Fig. 8) dedicated to Soren Kierkegaard. The images of heads, the profiles of faces and eyes, and the triangular outlines suggesting clan hoods were symbolic forms from his past that he recollected again a decade later. His need for remembering the past as well as activating the physical and psychological processes involving the location and placement of things was always present in Guston's work. He confessed, "It is the unsettling of the image that I want...It must be an image which ...has not made up its mind where it wants to be, but must feel as if it has been in many places all over the canvas, and indeed there is no place for it to settle- except momentarily. [And also the image] must have its past. It must feel it has lived in me, in previous paintings, and now in a new and particular situation, ...you might say [the work] has won its freedom from inertia."

Frame 1

The Small Panels 1968-70



Fresco panel, 1930 or 1931. — Figure 2. (Destroyed; 1930) —

Figure 3.

The Tormentors 1947-48
Oil on Canvas 40 7/8 x 60 1/2"
Estate of Philip Guston

Figure 4

The Studio 1969
Oil on Canvas 48 x 42 inches
Private Collection

Figure 5

Albrecht Dürer
Melencolia I, 1514

Engraving 9 1/2 x 7 5/16 inches
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Figure 6

Bad Habits 1970
Oil on Canvas 73 x 78 inches
Collection National Gallery of Australia

Figure 7

Flatlands 1970
Oil on Canvas 70 x 114½ inches

Fig. 8

Mirror to S.K. 1960
— Oil on Canvas 63½ x 75 inches —
Private Collection