THROUGH THE LENS OF GUSTON: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS AND PHILIP GUSTON

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Why is it that one of the most influential artists of the last fifty years with young painters has consistently been Philip Guston?

Having been a teacher for over thirty years and a studio artists for forty, there are a handful of artists that seem to resonate over and over with both my students and with my painter friends—Philip Guston is one and, almost always, at the top of that list. Within this group, standouts are also Piero della Francesca, Giorgio Morandi, Balthus, Matisse, and Picasso and a number of the Sienese painters. What is interesting about this list, aside from the fact that they were all extraordinary painters with a wealth of art historical knowledge, they were almost all loved and borrowed by Guston. The artist Gregory Amenoff said,

More than any artist of our time, Philip Guston stands as a luminous reference point against which generations of younger artists measure themselves. His work and career demonstrate stunning levels of persistence, seriousness, courage, and a profound love of painting. However, there is a more elusive quality in Guston’s work, which strikes me more and more as the years pass. In his late masterpieces, Guston avoids the easy narrative structure of “them and us.” Guston himself, and in turn his audience, are implicated in his portrayals of hope, evil, and mortality. Yes, it took courage for him to so
radically alter his work in the 1960s, but that courage pales in the face of the courage it
took to so deeply imbed in the paint his own (and our) doubt and failure.¹

Timothy Taylor, whose London gallery mounted a 2015 Guston show of twenty-five
works created from 1959 to 1980, said, “I see him as a contemporary artist—particularly the body
of work throughout the ’70s, it doesn’t age. . . . The aspiration never lets you down. You never get
used to the paintings. I don’t really see him as a historic figure, and that’s what resonates with the
artists.”²

The Artsy article that previewed the Timothy Taylor show also reported:

Painter Ryan Mosley . . . was initially drawn to Guston after seeing a 2004 retrospective at
London’s Royal Academy. For him, part of his attraction was Guston’s different approach
to speed. “In a world that is so fast-paced and immediate, where everything is slick, the
world of consumerism and advertising, which has filtered into the art world, a painter like
Guston can be seen as the absolute antithesis—a slow burn,”³ Mosley says. It’s not just
Guston’s approach to painting itself that is reflected by younger artists. As multimedia
artist Athena Papadopoulos notes, “I am actually more interested in the philosophy
behind his work and stages of experience that he went through in his career. I identified
with the quote where he says, ’What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading
magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio
to adjust a red to a blue?’”
This isn’t the first or last time when Guston’s work has been reflected in the artwork of a younger generation. “He had a show at the Whitechapel Gallery in the early ’80s. Nick Serota curated it, and Norbert Lynton wrote the catalogue essay. At that time, Peter Doig said that the painters at the time had the ‘Guston Rash,’ Burnett says, laughing. He gave painters the permission slip to do what they want. To paint sloppily, to paint cartoonishly, to paint personally.”

The artist Lisa Yuskavage said:

When I look at Guston I think that I have seen that touch somewhere before, and I think of Morandi, and then I see how the horizon line in Guston works like the tabletop in Morandi, placing the subject at eye level, hence the forms became monumental. I suppose I have always felt that Guston is the most important American artist, as he was an epic artist and made work that touched on everything from genocide to self-loathing/self-doubt and anxiety to the love of his wife as subjects. I always appreciated and needed to see how much he didn’t flinch from saying that he was the very thing that he feared, that he and the Klansman were the same.

Looking at the intimate still lifes of Morandi, Guston takes that space and iconic imagery and monumentalizes it through the use of the simplified horizon plane.

What allows an artist to live beyond his time with such great influence? A plethora of curatorial exhibitions over the last twenty years pointing to his influence—like *The Guston*
Effect—as well as “The Guston Rash” and articles about his continued relevance, are often recycled in the art world. Painters, time and again, look to Guston to be reinvigorated—painters have always loved him as a painter’s painter. Through his reinvention at different times during his career—his rebelliousness in doing so, particularly the daring shift in the late ’60s to eschew midcentury abstraction and delve into the visceral anxieties of his times—“Guston represents a way to resist an overall trajectory in history. He was able to step out of the midcentury. He represents, for a lot of artists, the ability to step away from this feeling that you should be wrapped up in a contemporary moment” in the art world. His ability to break free of midcentury abstraction and reintroduce ideas of metaphor with his cartoonish, figurative paintings proved him to be a fearless artist to so many: “The influence of Guston’s late work on artists who have followed him is more than purely visual. It is as if the anxiety he felt about the human condition has somehow been spliced into the DNA of younger generations.”

Aside from the long list of historical painters that were influential in Guston’s development, R. Crumb was an important figure both conceptually and visually in the profound shift that Guston took in the ’60s. The Underground Comix movement that Crumb pioneered with Zap Comix, Fritz the Cat, and Mr. Natural were important to so many artists wanting to speak to a shifting radical politics and sexual revolution of the times. Within Crumb’s work, Guston found the raw, cartoonish images of the large, smoking head and the chaos of the twisted body designated by the animated sole of the shoes kicking its way through compositions.
William T. Wiley, one of many artists who has forged their own voice through Guston’s lens of influence, is a Bay Area funk artist, someone immersed in comics and music subculture; his alter ego Mr. Unnatural, a main character in his paintings and drawings, is a direct play on Crumb’s Mr. Natural, a character that Guston borrowed from Crumb as well.

Susan Rothenberg came onto the scene in the early ’70s—on the tail end of the minimalist era, where most, if not all, imagery had been taboo—with a group of artists called “New Image Painters” who began including recognizable imagery in their work. Other artists included Jennifer Bartlett, Neil Jenney, and Denise Greene, to name a few. This return to painting came after a period when much of the contemporary art scene had been focused on performance, installation, and conceptual art. There is the obvious love and seduction of paint in Rothenberg’s paintings; the immediacy and physicality of making in her paintings; her emotionally condensed, meditative nature; and a lack of cynicism. She, not unlike Guston, believed as much in the reductive possibilities of paint as in the additive. Many believe that Guston was the impetus for this return to figuration with these young artists.

Much of Peter Saul’s work, as with Guston’s later figurative work, comes straight out of the animated raucousness of the underground comics movement. Works like The Toilet Leaves the Room, with messy paint handling and a figure in the bathroom with a cup, cigarettes, other objects, and toilet paper all on top of each other, are reminiscent of Guston’s signature chaotic studio environments. In Saul’s later work, as in OK I Messed Up and Brush Your Teeth, he
employs large-scale, distorted heads that exploit a complex psychological subject that speaks to both a personal drama and political upheaval.

Dana Schutz “addresses the tragicomedy of living in a body—the body’s mutations and vulnerabilities in time and space, its anxieties in culture.”⁸ The paintings “Swimming, Smoking, Crying and Shaking, Cooking, Peeing are verbs that seem incongruous yet coherent painterly actions, which together delineate the contours of the ridiculous and the grotesque.”⁹ Guston’s painting Painting, Smoking, Eating carries the same weight of the grotesque that Schutz’s painting does, only with a stronger personal twist in Guston’s because of the tragic side of his existence as he addresses the addictions that compromise his health.

Trenton Doyle Hancock has been constructing his own fantastical narrative . . . Part fictional, part autobiographical, Hancock’s work pulls from his own personal experience, art historical canon, comics and superheroes, pulp fiction, and a myriad pop culture references, resulting in a complex amalgamation of characters and plots possessing universal concepts of light and dark, good and evil, and all the grey in between.¹⁰

He is clearly influenced in so much of the work by “comics and cartoons, video games, films, music, and toys, as well as a number of artists ranging from Rogier van der Weyden, Chaim Soutine, and Philip Guston. With pinpoint precision, Hancock has extracted the essential qualities of these sources, both high and low . . .”¹¹
Manuel Ocampo has “a reputation for fearlessly tackling the taboos and cherished icons of society and of the art world itself.” Based in Manila, California, and Europe, he speaks to not only “his” cultural and political chaos, but to a larger global dysfunction that also encompasses the digressions of the Catholic faith. Dismembered body parts, scatological references to the body, the plight of the human condition, and the evil that humankind is capable of all nod to so much of Guston’s subject matter, although with a very different hand and sense of speed.

Athena Papadopoulos uses hair dye, Pepto-Bismol, lipstick, and iodine to make her paintings. “Her works have a sense of excess to them. Tablecloths and bedsheets appear used, tainted with the remnants of a messy, fictional party. They are seductively chaotic” and as juicy and, often, as fleshy as Guston’s.

It has been said that Nicole Eisenman’s work is “at once compassionate and angry, empathetic and satirical, tender and tough”; she “is a storyteller, portraitist, social chronicler, allegorist, fantastist, utopian dreamer, and history painter, to name just a handful of her many artistic identities.” The same could be said of Guston’s later figurative work.

In her paintings, Eisenman shifts between different genres and emotional registers seemingly without effort or hesitation. She turns from portraits to epic canvases with dozens of figures, and from records of small everyday incidents to allegorical compositions and complex fictional scenes. As a rule, she does not distinguish between the personal and the political: her most intimate, autobiographical scenes may be read as
commentaries on gender and queer politics, while her social commentary is shaped by her personal struggle to survive as an artist in a capitalist economy. . . Eisenman borrows freely from other artists, from Bruegel to Guston, quoting their compositions, figures, and gestures; briefly adopting their styles; and mixing different modes of representation in painting . . .

Amy Sillman often speaks of Guston as a major influence, particularly in the simplicity and vulnerability of her drawings and in the humor and awkwardness in her paintings with abstracted figures. Her early interest in comics and illustration finds its way into her imagery in much the same way as Guston’s drawn elements into his visceral paintings. The act of painting—drawing, building form, painting the image out, yet allowing the pentimento of its presence to remain, these are all qualities Sillman and Guston share.

[Joe] Bradley’s work over the past dozen years shares breath with Philip Guston’s turn toward the figurative that began in the early 1960s and culminated later that decade with works that both embraced and examined the limits of ’20s comic-strip languages—using a knobby knee, for example, as a departure for a picture about psychological fragility. Two other lodestars for Bradley are H. C. Westermann and, in Bradley’s most recent abstractions, Alexander Calder. Westermann, like Guston, examined his life and surroundings via a graphic contour and decidedly unorthodox approach to sculpture, which grounded surreal juxtapositions in immaculate craftsmanship and North American vernacular symbols. Calder, who in his ’50s and ’60s cosmos paintings used
imperfectly rendered geometric forms to create a whimsical galaxy, was, like Bradley, Westermann, and Guston, a master of scale and the provisional line.\(^{16}\)

“Central to [Jim] Lutes’s work is a key duality, sometimes expressed as the tension between opposing forces and other times as an internal, less definable, human struggle. His subjects come from widely ranging sources including both his own personal history and a greater collective experience.”\(^{17}\) The *Lazy* image is borrowed directly from Guston’s series of lying in the studio paintings.

Elizabeth Murray said, “It hit me like a ton of bricks just how much I owe to Guston. I’d never really thought it until I started my *shoe* paintings,”\(^{18}\) which are typical of the comics *Krazy Kat* and *Mutt and Jeff*.

Murray has had a love affair with comics since she could hold one in her hand; she spent her entire childhood drawing them, making her own, and selling them to friends. The large arc of her career saw her moving away from the more literal comics reference, to a more graffiti-inspired, autobiographical voice, only to rediscover her initial cartoonish imagery at the end of her career.\(^{19}\)

*Carroll Dunham* “has moved all the way from abstraction to full-bodied *figuration*, with various stages in between.”\(^{19}\) He has exposed the “false dichotomy between abstraction and figuration” in so much contemporary painting.\(^{20}\) There are the same strong underlying currents
that persist throughout the work: aggressive drawing; intensely loaded subject matter; odd, incongruous pairing of the physical and the lyrical, its restless search, and perpetual motion.

[Chris] Johanson may not have been the only artist coming out of San Francisco in the later 1990s who inherited its politics and history, its greater sense of karma and community, and with it a real responsibility about the art you bring in to the world. And yet something sets him apart. Why has he, among all of the Bay Area artists who were prominently featured in the touring exhibition Beautiful Losers (2004–09), advanced beyond that particular time and place? If he has gone on to occupy his own, taking that early documentary view—this is my life, this is the world around me—and in every sense of the word universalizing it, allowing us to relate to the high and low tides of our own lives. By making himself open and vulnerable, which should also be understood as personally political, Johanson lets us close to his world, and in that proximity we realize that it may not be far from our own,21

. . . like Guston’s later work.

“Having spent her formative years in the backwoods culture of guns, four-by-fours, and meth in Northern California, and the majority of her adult life in various stages of mental and material abjection, [Cate] White is at home on societal margins. Much of her work is informed by her life on these margins, both in subject matter and a philosophical perspective.”22 “White is
interested in how unconventional experiences made visible can complicate cultural narratives of
gender, race, and class, and counter-normalized notions of beauty, power, and morality.”

“**Katherine Bradford** relentlessly touches on the biggest themes and forces us to confront
them—fear, wonder, vulnerability, hubris, and joy . . . The characters—bicycle riders, ballet
dancers, swimmers clad in bathing suits, underwear, and floatation tubes—are moving along the
surface of the earth, between underworlds and outer space. . . . They have an unearthly, radiant
inner light.”

**Alex Becerra**, a Latino artist with an “erotic grist of adolescent fantasy, homespun
amateurism, the Chicano gang aesthetic,” clearly mines not only the bad-boy Guston gene, but
he also has the painterly chops to express it.

There is a “trangressive comedy and violence” in Bjarne Melgaard’s work, in which
“acceptance is not the goal, and he doesn’t subscribe to the European politically correct attitude
of placating cultural expectation.” He is a general bad boy and has often been mentioned with
the work of Guston in his later figurative work. A direct, raw, simplified drawing sensibility in his
works on paper and paintings links him inextricably to Guston’s poignant later work.

**Gina Beavers** is always included in shows that represent artists influenced by Guston. The
work has a corporeal presence that is palpable, whether her subject is food, makeup, or the
fleshiness of the human figure. Adding pumice and ground glass to her paint, she builds
dimensional physicality, as humor and violence coalesce in a darkly disturbing image.
Michaela Eichwald’s grittiness and absolute lack of preciousness likens to the paintings of Beccera, minus the often-sexualized imagery. Her paintings seem to “operate on a carefully balanced tension between attraction and repulsion”—as a characterization of the social and cultural conditions in which art exists today.\textsuperscript{29}

“Tumultuous canvases, where sexualized figures emerge from a throng of fleshy paint strokes, are Cecily Brown’s creations.”\textsuperscript{30} These canvases, packed with not only figures, but strewn, discarded objects as the remains of events, are obviously connected to Titian, Velazquez, and de Kooning, but also, most certainly Guston.

Laylah Ali makes paintings that are both visually exquisite and emotionally terrifying. Unlike many of the artists I have identified as influenced by Guston, Ali’s paint handling is antithetical to Guston’s in its insistent, flat gouache. I see these as exploring taboos about power and violence that Guston also explored.

Jane Fine said about Guston:

I have learned a tremendous amount from Guston. He famously said that every artist has to kick their predecessors out of the studio in order to really get to work. For me, it is always Guston that lingers. He accomplished much that I greatly admire. In the tradition of great Jewish humorists, he understood the possibilities of marrying anxiety with self-deprecating humor. Like a protofeminist, he combined the personal and the political,
linking disgust over his own self-inflicted violence (too much smoking, drinking, and eating) with a desperate urge to respond to the brutality in American culture.31

There is an obvious connection to Guston in Katherine Bernhardt’s paintings with the cataloging of one’s daily rituals, habits, objects, oftentimes with their connection to addictions—overeating, smoking, caffeine.

Not unlike Guston, Neil Jenney’s work of the late ’60s and ’70s emerged in ways as a direct response to the dominant minimalist climate of the time. “He turned art back to subject matter. He represented the polar opposite of Minimalism. His disquieting landscapes, often reflecting awareness of social concerns . . . adjusted nature with sloppy, sloshy, smudgy strokes, . . . [giving] the paintings a raw poetry.”32

Of Guston’s place in her work, Brenda Goodman writes:

In the early ’70s, I was working with a set of personal symbols that represented myself, my emotions, and important people in my life. Sometimes, a drawing would even include notes to myself and a record of important dates. So, my work was quite personal and diaristic—a direct expression of my most inner thoughts and feelings. But sometimes, an intruder would come into my world. It might happen like this: I would be painting myself lying on the floor of my studio with the things in my life heaped on top of me. It was very personal and meaningful. But suddenly—Oh no! There’s a light bulb and cord hanging down. Oh no! I’m lying on my back. Is it too much like the Guston painting of him in bed
with a plate of french fries on top of him? OK, I knew I loved Guston’s paintings—they spoke to me. But it’s my story, my experience, my images. Still, I couldn’t get away from it—there’s something about Guston.

It never goes away. Sometimes, it doesn’t show up much; sometimes, it shows up a lot; and sometimes, in happier moments, it’s not there at all. Yes, it’s The Guston Curse. You know what I’m talking about.

It wasn’t just the symbols. For a very long time, I have painted blocks of color piled on top of each other. The color was not Guston, the shapes were mostly not Guston, and the paint handling was certainly not Guston, but people still had to say, “Oh, I see Guston in there.” It was my DNA coming out, not his, but when you resonate with an artist, the connection is there. I used to be more defensive about it. As soon as a studio visitor would say “Guston,” I would say, “If I was older and Guston was younger, they would say his work looks like a Goodman!” I don’t do that anymore. If it comes up, I just say thank you.

Once, when I was going through the torture of giving up smoking, I did a painting of me smoking. Someone came into my studio and said, “You can’t do that—Guston already did that!” Very few artists can use red, black, and white anymore without a reference to Guston, no matter how different the work is. Another time I was going through a lot of anxiety about the telephone and waiting for special calls. I did some
telephone pieces, and then one day, I was looking at a book of still lifes by different artists, and lo and behold, there is a Guston painting with the same black telephone called Anxiety. Grrr!

David McKee, who represented Guston, came to my studio in the early ’80s. I was doing a series of symbolic boats with my whole life packed into the boat shape. I was ready to give up the symbols and journey to a new place. He looked at the paintings and said the hair on his arms stood up. He said Guston did a series of boat paintings that had never been seen, but, emotionally and compositionally, my boats had a similar feeling. Maybe a year later, I was at his gallery and asked if I could see an image of one of those boat paintings. It took me aback.

If you have an affinity with an artist, it’s just that—an affinity. And it’s a good thing if you allow it. Guston had influences too—De Chirico, R. Crumb, and George Herriman’s Krazy Kat comics. And I’m an artist who has had a lot of influences—from Morandi to Dubuffet, with many in between. But Guston—he has a special hold on me. The Guston connection isn’t pronounced anymore, but even last week I was working on a painting with a sideways, abstracted head with its nose to the ground. In the back of my mind a Guston painting popped in of a head to the ground. I ran to my Guston books and found the painting. Whew! There was very little connection that others might see, and I was relieved. No matter how different my work has become, I still find The Guston Curse to be a reality many of us painters have to cope with.
Several years ago, Musa, Guston’s daughter, invited me to his home/studio in Woodstock. I was thrilled to be sitting in his space. She opened a cabinet and in it were about two hundred small tubes of Grumbacher cadmium red medium. She said I should take what I like. Being polite, I took just one. When I got home I thought I should have taken another one—one to save and one to paint with.33

**Todd Bienvenue** and **Lisa Sanditz** both share a love for brushy marks that ooze paint beyond their brushes’ abilities. Much like Guston, they can never put enough paint on the brush, allowing the messy chaos of this act to help define the form being painted.


