

Morbid monsters and the Ku Klux Klan: the crude cartoonish genius of Philip Guston

Guston, who would have been 102 this week, lives on in artwork so gruesome and squalid it makes every painter today look flimsy and effete

Adrian Searle

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I feel as if my eyes are wading through murk. Dragging myself through clumps of daubed and dirtied paint in black, greys and filthy reds, forms start to reveal themselves. Staring into Philip Guston's mid-period 1959 painting *Traveller III*, it seems that there are images buried there, almost as a secret.

Born in Montreal in 1913, to a family who had emigrated from Odessa at the turn of the century, Guston grew up in Los Angeles. In his late teens he painted lynchings and Ku Klux Klansmen, and developed an art that was both politically aware and influenced by Piero della Francesca. Guston moved to New York and briefly sharing an apartment with Jackson Pollock, with whom he had been friends since high school. Add to the mix Marxism and Mondrian, the influences of Max Beckmann, the Mexican Muralists and Giorgio de Chirico, as well as an interest in eastern spiritualism and zen, and an enduring friendship with composer Morton Feldman, and it's clear that Guston carried a lot of contrary baggage.

During the 50s he was discussed more as an abstract impressionist than an abstract expressionist, but looking at *Traveller III* today, I imagine I see the pointy-headed Klansmen who reappeared in his later work. The blob on a stalk in the middle of this painting also reminds me of Giacometti's gigantic 1947 sculpture of a human leg. I don't know how much of this I am imagining, or how much is really there. As we look we project, we remember and we invent. It keeps us looking.

Having emptied his paintings out in the 1950s, Guston slowly filled them up again. The marks he made were always going somewhere. Guston was struggling with something, but who knows what? Maybe he wanted us to struggle, too. Even at their most abstract, his paintings have an urgency. As he painted, Guston told himself stories, and this exhibition of his work, at Timothy Taylor gallery in London, is filled with them, just as it is filled with cartoonish violence and morbid monsters.

Guston's later art became caustic and intemperate, mean and raw. In the late 1960s, at the height of the Vietnam war, his return to bleak figuration shocked many critics. The paintings from the last decade of his career have so much disgusted life in them. Every turn of his brush created startling and gruesome images that still won't go away.

While other painters of his generation stripped their paintings down in their later years,

Guston fleshed his out. He gave his paintings back to bodies and minds and crude, cruel mentalities. His was a thick and glutinous world. He used paint's sluggishness against itself, dragging us down with it. But what horrible humour there is here, too.

Guston sets things out on the canvas as though he were explaining things to a child: here is a mailbox and here is a clock. They are scattered on a wasteland like discarded toys. Here is a Klansman and here is a hand. What is the hand holding? It is a nightstick. Guston's later paintings are filled with familiar and clunky things: a horseshoe, a cigar, an open book. Richard Nixon drags his foot, swollen with phlebitis, across the world. There are black seas, lumps of wood (all the better to whack you with) and pointing fingers.

Guston also painted himself, as Klansman, painter, drinker. The edge of the table is the horizon. A lightbulb hangs like a full moon. On the horizon sits an empty green bottle, and hovering over it, a disembodied head with one huge, cyclopiian eye staring at the bottle. The head is recognisably Guston's own. Above the eye, the brow is furrowed and sweaty, and the ear echoes the rim of the bottle.

The green bottle casts a red shadow like a bloody bruise on the yellow table. A couple of objects sit on the table like stuff washed up on a beach. There's an open book and a paintbrush clogged with the same red as the shadow and the head. The one great eye consumes the bottle's emptiness.

Guston's 1975 *Head and Bottle* is awful and dumb and cartoonish, but then that is the state of the world he depicts. What it really depicts is a state of mind.

Guston was as fond of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* cartoons as he was of the Piero della Francesca postcard of the *Flagellation of Christ* that he kept beside him in his studio. Lots of artists have based work on cartoons: Warhol used *Dick Tracy* and *Popeye*. Roy Lichtenstein used comic books. Chris Ofili invented his own cartoon superhero, *Captain Shit*. The cartoonish is everywhere - especially in the world about us, never mind the funny pages.

The world itself is dumb enough. Guston was a painter of brute matter and even more squalid inclinations. He is a great corrective to so much fancy and flimsy tinkering in contemporary painting. He makes an artist like Anselm Kiefer look effete and mannered.

Guston didn't dumb things down; he dumbed them up. You can't escape how painted his world is, how nuanced and tragic and funny. *Head and Bottle* has a dreadful stillness.

Within the same hour as looking at Guston, I came across a painting by Guston's fellow American painter, Nicole Eisenman, in a group painting show at the Sadie Coles gallery. Eisenman's 2015 untitled painting is a memory of *Head and Bottle*. A figure, foetal on a bed and with a similar ball-like head, peers with its single eye at the little clock on the bedside table. Time passes but nothing changes.

Guston, who would have been 102 this weekend, died from a heart attack in 1980. His late work resists its time. It is magnificent. He is an influence worth having.

· A selection of paintings by Philip Guston is on show at Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, until 11 July.

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