

The Chameleon Painter

*Even in his most pared-down paintings,
Phillip Guston was digging for
something new.*

By Barry Schwabsky

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My wife and I had spent a good bit of time at the opening of “Philip Guston: Painter, 1957–1967,” the current exhibition (through July 29) at the Chelsea-docked starship that is the downtown Manhattan branch of the Hauser & Wirth gallery. Just as we were about to leave, I said, “Wait a minute—let’s not go just yet. I want to see something.” I’d noticed David McKee walking in, and I wanted to get a sense, if I could, of what the exhibition would look like reflected in his eyes.

McKee was Guston’s dealer from 1974 until the painter’s death in 1980, and afterward continued to represent his estate. In 1967, McKee was working at Guston’s previous gallery, Marlborough, just when Guston was producing the extraordinary array of

drawings that cap the current show. In an interview for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, McKee explained that when he started working for Marlborough, Guston "was reluctant to have me visit, [saying:] 'Well, it's not going to be the sort of work that you're expecting. My work has shifted.'" When McKee finally did visit the studio, he found it full of drawings of meager, abstract lines, like the ones now at Hauser & Wirth. Stark and powerful for all their obliquity, they seem oddly confident in their reduction of the Abstract Expressionist gesture to nearly zero. McKee saw something similar in the studio of another of Marlborough's heavy hitters, Robert Motherwell, although his line, by contrast, was "extremely tentative." McKee realized that both artists "had come to the conclusion that they'd exhausted the possibilities of their fifties and early sixties period. And were now curious about taking their work into other directions.... I never told the other what the other was doing. I couldn't. It was like a secret that I held."

Those drawings really were the end of something. When Guston took up painting again in 1968, he was making figurative work for the first time in nearly two decades. He had changed course completely. (Well, maybe not completely: One of the first of the new figurative paintings, *Paw*, shows an animal appendage, rather than a human hand, drawing a stark horizontal line that might well be one of those in his 1967 drawings.) Raw and confrontational rather than cool and flashy, the new works showed the influence of comics but not of Pop. Instead of being shiny and new and void of the past, they were populated by Ku Klux

Klansmen (a subject that Guston had painted years earlier, as a social realist in the 1930s) and haunting echoes of precursors from Piero della Francesca to Giorgio di Chirico by way of Krazy Kat. Fellow artists at the time responded coldly: They thought Guston had betrayed the cause of abstraction for which they had sacrificed so much. Guston had succeeded in scandalizing not the bourgeoisie, but the self-defined avant-garde. The critics were even crueler: Hilton Kramer's verdict in *The New York Times*—that this was the work of “a mandarin masquerading as a stumblebum”—was only the most quotable censure. Guston's contract with Marlborough was not renewed. Four years later, his new painting show inaugurated the McKee Gallery.

When his gallery shut its doors a year ago, McKee explained: “The art market has grown so vast that our gallery model is in danger: the collector's private experience with art matters much less, as the social circus of art fairs, auctions, dinners and spectacle grows.” He went on to lament, “The value of art is now perceived as its monetary value. The art world has become a stressful, unhealthy place; its focus on fashion, brands and economics robs it of the great art experience, of connoisseurship and of trust.” For McKee, the epicenter of the new gallery model is Chelsea. In 2009, he remarked that he wouldn't want “a big gallery in Chelsea” where “the spaces are anonymous, and they're like cruise ships, where the captain doesn't really know what's going on in the ship.... I like a gallery to have a more intimate

experience. And you know where if you want to sit and talk with a dealer, you can, who's not going to kick you out.”

While McKee declined to adapt to the hypertrophy of the 21st-century art market, Hauser & Wirth—a sprawling enterprise with branches in Zurich, Los Angeles, London, and Somerset, England, as well as New York—is among the alpha galleries of the new environment, alongside Gagosian, David Zwirner, and others. Its Chelsea spaces are among the neighborhood's biggest. The chances of being able to walk in and find Iwan Wirth minding the store and willing to sit down and schmooze about the work with you are close to nil. When McKee walked into the first-ever Guston exhibition in Chelsea (as well as the first with Hauser & Wirth), I was watching him look at art that he knew more intimately than almost any other living soul, and in a context more different than he might ever have expected. The look on his face was that of a man rather stunned—with dismay, or relief, or a little of both, I can't say. I'd like to think that, without necessarily relinquishing his qualms about what the art business has become over the last 40 years, he was reconciled to seeing Guston in this new light by the evident care and respect with which the exhibition was prepared—no matter if it was installed in one those anonymous white caverns he never wanted for himself.

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It's often said that mega-galleries mount shows that might once have been the grand projects of museums, and that's true. The point of an exhibition like “Philip

Guston: Painter” isn’t merely to hang works on the wall that happen to be on the market (most of them probably aren’t); instead, the choices are based on serious art-historical considerations. Another such show is taking place nearby at Zwirner, through June 25: “Sigmar Polke: Eine Winterreise,” curated by the former Tate Modern director Vicente Todolí. Like the Guston exhibition, it is not to be missed.

The Guston show really encompasses three distinct stages in his career. Early in the 1950s, his painterly touch was often considered a bit refined compared with some of his more swashbuckling colleagues. In the late 1950s and early ’60s, when this exhibition picks up the story, Guston’s mark starts to look blunter, more declarative; the paintings acquire a greater sense of the “objectness” of things. They are richly colored, with awkward, hard-won forms that clearly exhibit what Guston once called “an infighting in painting itself.” Then, in the mid-’60s, comes a reduction of color to mostly shades of gray, with loose, almost blowsy brushstrokes massing together to form simple, nebulous shapes. Finally come the drawings already mentioned, with their nearly zero-degree mark-making.

The coherence of the Hauser & Wirth show isn’t surprising, given that it was organized by one of America’s most respected curators, Paul Schimmel, the former longtime chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. His involvement reflects yet another aspect of the changes afoot in the art world. In one of those strangely chiasmic situations

characteristic of the times, MoCA had hired art dealer Jeffrey Deitch as its director in 2010; Deitch and Schimmel didn't see eye to eye, and two years later Schimmel either resigned or was fired, depending on whom you ask. Deitch himself didn't last much longer in his new role and is now back running his gallery in New York. Schimmel left the nonprofit world to become a partner at the gallery whose Los Angeles branch is called Hauser Wirth & Schimmel.

For McKee, seeing Guston in this new context must have meant seeing his old friend's work differently, for better or worse. I saw something almost completely new. That's because I'd always thought of the essential Guston as the figurative painter of the 1970s. His abstract work was good, I knew, but mainly of interest as the precursor to greater work—an impression confirmed by the only large-scale Guston show I've ever had a chance to see, a rather skimpy retrospective at London's Royal Academy of Art back in 2004. This present show has changed my view: Had the 1967 drawings that form the conclusion to it been the last works Guston ever made—had he retreated into silence, which could well have been the next logical step for him after those defiantly reductive works—we would still have to recognize Guston as one of the great artists of his time.

And yet, however logical—and despite Guston's friendship with the apostle of silence, John Cage—silence was probably never in the cards for him. Even his most pared-down work was less about shedding the inessential than digging for something new. The search

for fresh ingredients meant not only poring through the history of art, but also keeping an eye on younger painters. I don't think it's really true that in the late 1950s and '60s, Guston was—as a gallery wall text claims—“very much removed from the public debate, apart and alone in his studio.” Could those final drawings ever have come into being without him having been aware of a younger artist like Cy Twombly, with his sparse mark-making? A group of paintings from 1964 to '65, their gray and black lit up by a bit of pink, seems like an attempt to observe how much can be done by varying and redeploying the fewest possible elements, as if he'd been observing the kind of “systemic painting” that had been in the air (and would be the subject of an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966). In a 1966 interview with Guston, Harold Rosenberg pointed out how the paintings “have a great deal of resemblance to one another. Or let's say a great deal of thematic continuity. It's as if your paintings of the last three years were one long”—at which point Guston cuts him off, as if to avoid facing a verdict: One long what?

All the same, despite the seeming suddenness of Guston's shift to figuration, hints that he was trying to go in that direction (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, trying to avoid an irresistible pull in that direction) are recurrent. They are most evident in the rather awkward work for which the Hauser & Wirth show is titled, *Painter III* (1963), in which the large central black oval is clearly enough the head of the painter whose brush-wielding hand can be made out just below. *Looking* (1964) gets its title from the eye-

like marks that seem to face the viewer from the head-and-shoulders form on the painting's right. *Reverse* (1965) anticipates the head in lost profile (with cigarette and smoke) of Guston's 1978 *Friend-To M.F.* (The composer Morton Feldman was one of the friends whom Guston thought had turned away from him in 1970.) Even earlier works like *Fable II* and *Rite*, both from 1957, earn their titles by the nonspecific figurative connotations of their bunched shapes; it would take only a little bit of further manipulation to turn those forms into the kind of stylized figures found in the paintings that Jan Müller was making around this time, or Bob Thompson just a little later. This was the period in which, as Frank O'Hara would write, Guston's forms "pose, stand indecisively, push each other and declaim." As early as 1961, the conservative *New York Times* critic John Canaday was wondering whether "in the end it should prove that he has really gone in a circle, carrying abstract expressionism back to its figurative start." Just as Guston's paintings explored the porous boundary between sameness and difference, his career was an essay in the single-mindedness of a chameleon.

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The transformed art trade that McKee closed his business to avoid was recently nowhere so fully on display as at Frieze New York, the annual contemporary art fair that's taken place on Randall's Island every May since 2012. I'm still trying to understand the art-fair phenomenon. In so many ways, fairs are contrary to what we think we want from art: an experience that is somehow distinctive, unique.

Gallerists go to great lengths to make us see what's exceptional about the work of each artist they represent; they brand them, you might say. And then they put the artist in a fair, which shows how similar most works are to so many others, how fungible they really are. At the fair, they look like commodities in the strictest sense of the word: goods practically indistinguishable from others of the same grade. "From the taste of wheat," as Marx said, "it is not possible to tell who produced it, a Russian serf, a French peasant or an English capitalist."

But this leveling has a paradoxical effect: If something does manage to stand out at a fair, with a flavor all its own, that might be because it's really good. More stood out at this year's Frieze than at most fairs—perhaps because more of the booths seemed to focus on a single artist rather than a smattering of works from a gallery's stable. Yet the work that first stopped me in my tracks was in the multi-artist booth of the Wilkinson Gallery, London. It was a big, square canvas densely packed with thick, looping cursive strokes of clogged paint, predominantly blue, the word "Blind" scrawled in yellow toward the top. It was almost aggressively ugly, and I couldn't take my eyes off it. This turned out to be *Blind August*, a 1993 painting by Derek Jarman, the filmmaker who died of an AIDS-related illness the following year. Should I have been able to make out the word "August" in there somewhere, too? There were plenty of U shapes, but no legibility—just something like "colored mud" (the phrase is Guston's) whipped up into steamy summer light.



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paintings shown by Hales Gallery, also from London—
works from the early 1980s by Frank Bowling. Born in
1936 in Guyana, Bowling is a painter who has passed
through many distinct phases, and I've found his work
to be inconsistent in quality. But these were some of
the finest paintings of his I've seen, elegant and gritty
at once, their sumptuous yet evanescent color here and
there coalescing into strangely hypnotic ocelli. They
reminded me of late Monet, if only the Impressionist
had painted the surface of Saturn rather than a lily
pond at Giverny.

Another Caribbean-born Londoner was featured by the
venerable New York nonprofit gallery White Columns.
Despite my having lived in London for a decade, this
was the first I'd heard of Denzil Forrester, who was
born in Grenada in 1956; his art has not been
prominently exhibited until now. I suspect that's going
to change quickly: White Columns has a solo show
planned for the fall, curated by the artist Peter Doig
and the gallery's director, Matthew Higgs. On view at
Frieze were works on paper: sketches of everyday life,
observed with great energy and wit, but also with
tremendous formal power. One of my favorites shows
some men in dark-blue raking light, playing cards
around a table that's much too small for the players to
hide their hands from one another. It's an evident
homage to Cézanne, but done with such zest and
freshness that it's the opposite of academic.

Benjamin Senior is also an observer of daily life. But this young painter (he's 34, and another Londoner) approaches it as a mannerist, perhaps even as a kind of understated surrealist who can turn bland everyday scenes of multi-ethnic Londoners strolling in the park, working out, or posing in the studio into something eerie and haunting, thanks to deft stylization and an unexpected accent on patterning and other abstract elements. *The Pink Studio* (2014) shows a nude model seated on a chair in front of a wall with vaguely '60s-mod, geometrically patterned wallpaper; a small potted tree eclipses her, and besides the tree's foliage seeming to be her hair, the bit of her body to the tree's left doesn't match up with what's on its right—it's as though the wallpaper pattern has invaded her body. In *Summer (Lake)* (2016), a young couple with two kids on scooters gaze out at the water (the Serpentine in Hyde Park?); the woman's translucent parasol seems to turn her into a kind of ghost. Senior's work (exhibited by New York's James Fuentes Gallery) echoes that of artists I don't particularly appreciate, such as Balthus, and perhaps some forgotten British painters of the 1930s and '40s (William Roberts? John Luke?), yet I like his paintings the better for being able to make something fresh out of a played-out lineage.

It could be that because fairs are such bad places to see art, they can be good places to find it. Isn't it more interesting to find a ruby in a rubbish heap than in a jewelry store? I was tickled, as I made my way toward the exit, to notice that Galleria Alfonso Artiaco of Naples had a work on display by Lawrence Weiner, the veteran American conceptualist whose works typically

concern objects or materials and their location
expressed as wall texts. This one was a new piece, dated
2016: The Right Thing in the Wrong Place. *Exactly*, I
thought to myself. ●

0 COMMENTS

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