▾ Art

Master Baffler

How Philip Guston gave form to doubt

BY R.C. BAKER

'Philip Guston, Painter 1957–1967'
Hauser & Wirth
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hauserwirth.com
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Endlessly animated: *Fable II* (1957)

"Paul Valery once said that a bad poem is one that vanishes into meaning," Philip Guston told an interviewer in 1966, adding, "In a painting in which this is a room, this is a chair, this is a head, the imagery does not exist — it vanishes into recognition.... I want my work to include more."

The abstractions on view at Hauser & Wirth contain much more than what we can see. Painted between 1957 and 1967, they culminated two earlier phases of Guston's life's work and previewed a final act that would leave many of his contemporaries despairing for him — and later viewers rapturous.

When Guston (1913–80) was about ten years old, his father committed suicide, and it was the youth who discovered the body hanging from a rafter. He reacted by escaping whenever he could into a closet with a single light bulb, spending hours drawing in solitude. His mother enrolled him, at thirteen, in a correspondence course from the Cleveland School of Cartooning, hoping to coax him out of his isolation. A couple of years later, in high school, he became friends with Jackson Pollock, and a teacher introduced the boys to Picasso, de Chirico, and other modernist painters; both students were ornery and were eventually expelled for distributing a leaflet satirizing the school's elevation of sports over the humanities. By his early twenties Guston had become a skilled muralist, working first in Mexico, then California, and ultimately in New York City, where, at age 26, he won first prize for his mural *Work – the American way*, painted on the façade of the Works Progress Administration building at the New York World's Fair.

In 1940 Guston completed another WPA mural, at the Queensbridge housing project, which exudes a hopeful earnestness through the community of musicians, basketball players, workmen, and roughhousing children depicted across its forty-foot expanse. But he was getting fed up with the government program — at one point federal inspectors ordered him down from his scaffold while they investigated the possibility that a dog's tail curling around a boy's leg in the Queensbridge mural (a composition inspired by Guston's intensive study of Renaissance masters) might actually be a camouflaged hammer and sickle. More significantly, he was beginning to chafe against the aesthetic complacency of figuration at a time when his colleagues in the nascent New York School were struggling to find paths to abstraction beyond Picasso's cubism, Kandinsky's squiggles, and Mondrian's geometries.

By the early 1950s, as Pollock was refining the explosiveness of his drip technique, Guston was atomizing his figures into fields of delicately tuned color. In 1966 he told another interviewer, "In the Fifties I entered a very painful period when I'd lost what I had and had nowhere to go. I was in a state of gradual dismantling." His sense of being caught in limbo is manifested in those early abstractions as crosshatched clumps of color that dissipate into tinted fogs as they spread across a white tract.

In the later works on display here, ranging from two to seven feet across, those scattered clots of pigment have coagulated into forms that gain metaphysical heft from such open-ended titles as *Fable II* and *Rite*. With pink, red, orange, and green wedges parrying around black fulcrums, these two paintings (1957) feel as endlessly animated as the waltz of a Calder mobile. Painted with a wet-into-wet vehemence that pushes beyond Guston's earlier elegance to achieve an earthy gusto, the images refuse to drift into biological allusion or cubist grid. Twinkling humor radiates from the rounded square with depending tail in *Traveller III* (1959–60), which levitates to the top of the composition like a balloon. Whether it is filled with helium or dialogue is an unanswerable question. In all of these works, Guston's forms shamble up to the brink of representation (one might flash on the convolutions of the human brain in that scramble of orange and black brushstrokes) but inevitably shear off into abstraction. Narratives gibber behind the thrumming colors, visceral textures, and shifting proportions but never quite cohere. "Doubt itself becomes a form," Guston told the poet Bill Berkson in 1964, and you can sense in these emphatic shapes the artist searching for a reason to let the classically derived figures he'd abandoned twenty years earlier re-emerge.

Guston mixed much of his color right on the canvas, but the smears here never degrade into mud. Instead, they positively glow. Quick struts of blue or crags of black partially obliterated by squalls of white create translucent layers as luminous as the sun through smoke (a haze that perpetually surrounded Guston, a chain-smoker — it is a rare photograph that doesn't portray him with either cigarette or brush in hand).

'WHAT AM I WORKING WITH?' GUSTON ONCE ASKED. 'IT'S ONLY COLORED DIRT.'

"What am I working with?" he once asked the composer Morton Feldman. "It's only colored dirt." And while Guston probably wasn't grandiose enough to equate his own painting with fashioning Adam from dust — or even a golem from clay — he was tireless in trying to make something that had never existed.

That day came with Guston's startling 1970 exhibition of galumphing cartoon paintings — those comical heads — which was nearly universally panned as willfully retrograde in an age when abstraction was already under assault from minimalism and conceptualism. John Perreault, writing in this newspaper, was one of the few critics to realize the breakthrough he was witnessing, a perspective that would be ratified more confidently by each generation: "It's as if de Chirico went to bed with a hangover and had a Krazy Kat dream about America falling apart...a lot of people are going to hate these things, these paintings. But not me."

Perreault was dead-on about the hatred that followed — Feldman and Guston's friendship was actually destroyed by the cartoon paintings — but that coming pain and revelation was still unknown to the artist when he painted the abstractions in this show. He was working his way to surprising even himself, telling Berkson, "I want to end up with something that will baffle me for some time."

He got his wish — and so have we, for half a century and counting.