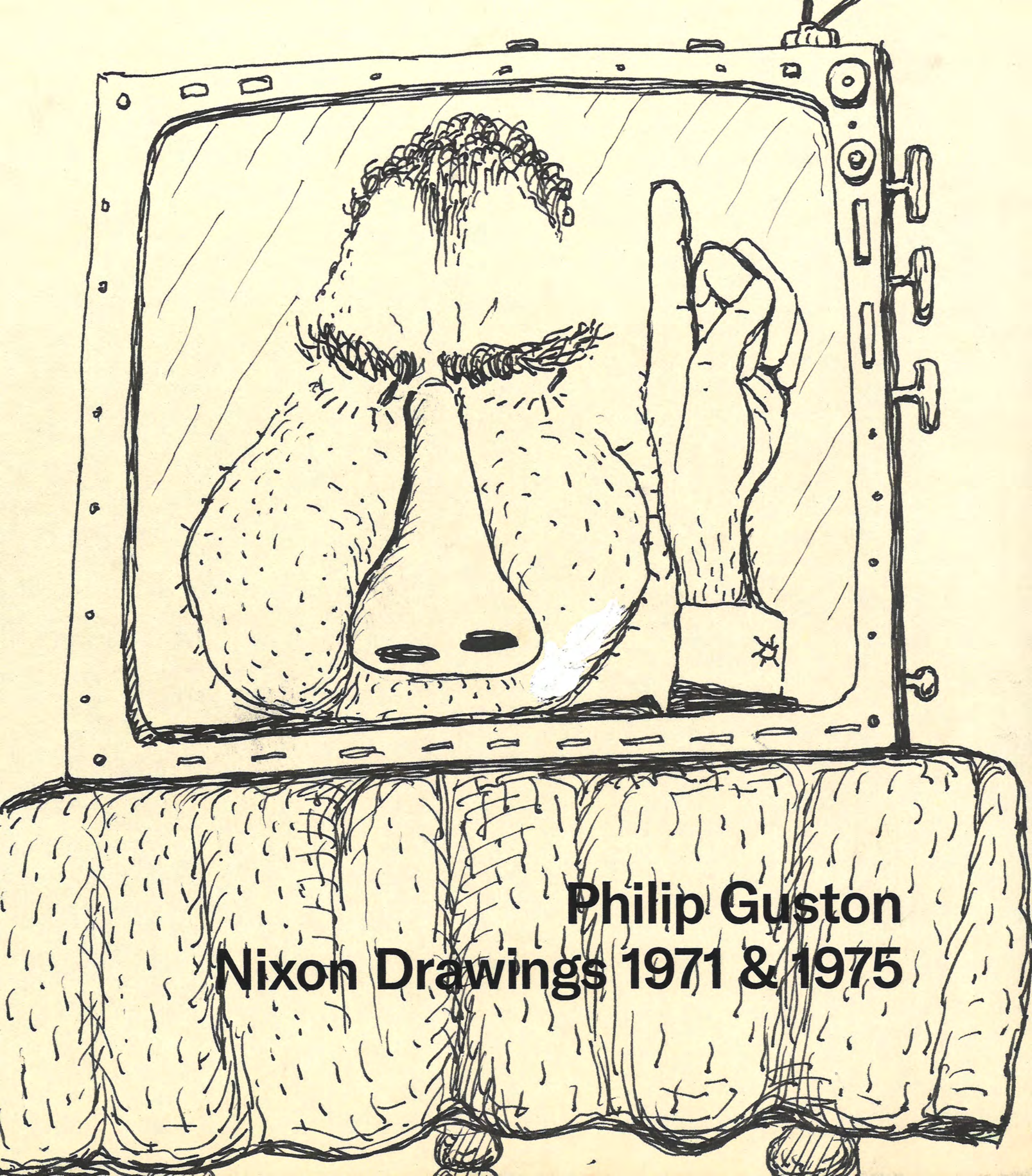




Philip Guston
Nixon Drawings 1971 & 1975

Philip Guston

Nixon Drawings
1971 & 1975

Edited by Musa Mayer
and Sally Radic

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Panel Discussion

Philip Guston: Laughter in the Dark, 1971 & 1975

Held on January 10, 2017, at Hauser & Wirth New York, 548 West Twenty-Second Street. Organized by Hauser & Wirth in collaboration with and moderated by *The Brooklyn Rail*'s Artistic Director and Publisher, Phong Bui, with William Corbett, Robert Mankoff, Irving Sandler, Katy Siegel, and Lisa Yuskavage

Edited by Musa Mayer



[1] *Pyramid and Shoe*, 1977. Oil on canvas, 172.7 × 294.6 cm / 68 × 116 in. Private collection

PHONG BUI The last time I moderated a Philip Guston panel, which was on the occasion of his brilliant retrospective at the Metropolitan in 2003, it was sardine-packed like tonight at Hauser & Wirth.

Guston had “rediscovered the pleasures of narrative,” he told his dear friend—and mine—Bill Berkson, back in 1970. “Pictures should tell stories. It is what makes me want to paint. To see, in a painting, what one has always wanted to see, but hasn’t, until now. For the first time.”¹

It relates to what Toni Morrison said in the beginning of her 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “. . . the first sentence of our childhood that we all remember—the phrase ‘Once upon a time.’” This is what’s so moving and inspiring about Guston’s work—it’s about connecting the dots from where he came from to where he ended up, through his successes and failures. Success was not the criteria of judgment. It was rather a matter of philosophical outlook on life similar to that embodied by the epic 1897 painting by Paul Gauguin *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

I was also thinking of another beautiful Guston show, *Mind and Matter*, for which Renee McKee wrote a small essay. She talked about that painting called *Pyramid and Shoe* from 1977 (fig. 1), where the pyramid represents absolute pure thought—purity. And on the right is the clumsy old shoe, just as big—the everyday object. And they were on equal footing—remarkable.

And that’s how we’re going to start the panel tonight, not with his most disdained and scorned subject, the thirty-seventh president of the United States, Richard Nixon. But we won’t go to that right away because I think it’s important to get a sense of who the panelists are very briefly.

I’d like to begin with William Corbett, who is a poet, essayist, editor, and publisher. Bill knew Guston and collaborated with him, spending time during the seventies with Guston when he came to teach at Boston University. Among his books is a terrific memoir on Guston, on trying to reconcile and understand him.

Katy Siegel is the Thaw Professor of Modern American Art at Stony Brook University and Senior Curator for Research and Programming at the Baltimore Museum of Art. She cocurated the exhibition *Postwar* recently with Okwui Enwezor and Ulrich Wilmes in Munich, and is cocurator of Mark Bradford’s exhibition at the US Pavilion in Venice this year.

Robert Mankoff is the cartoon editor of *The New Yorker*. Bob has created the online Cartoon Bank, which literally has every single cartoon since the magazine’s founding, including many on Nixon. He

1. Philip Guston, as quoted in Bill Berkson, "The New Gustons," *Art News*, October 1970.



[2] Panel Discussion on Philip Guston, Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street, New York, NY, January 10, 2017

is not only a brilliant cartoonist; he is also a great defender, curator, and promoter of the art of cartooning.

Irving Sandler needs no introduction. He has written a second memoir, *Swept Up by Art*, and he actually just finished his first novel. How cool is that? But I want to mention a little bit about his landmark 1970 book, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, because I clearly remember at the end of his essay on Guston, Irving wrote—I'm paraphrasing—that among the Abstract Expressionists, Guston is the most invested in fleeting reveries that are full of fear and nostalgia.

Lisa Yuskavage, a wonderful painter, was part of our Guston tribute in the November 2003 issue of *The Brooklyn Rail*. Her essay was full of insights on Guston. She was staying at the American Academy, where Guston had stayed twice, first in 1948 when he was there on the Prix de Rome, and in 1970, as artist-in-residence. She wrote about seeing the *Metafisica* show at the Quirinale in Rome, and how it made her think of how much Guston deepened his work through his relationship with the Italians from all periods, including de Chirico and Morandi. She wrote, "I always appreciated and needed to see how much Guston didn't flinch from saying that he was the very thing that he feared, that he and the Klansman were the same."

All of us are somewhat familiar with Guston's trajectory, the sense of endurance and of his own trust in the vision of what his true nature cried out for. We know that from the very beginning he was invested in sociopolitical themes, you could even say social realism. But this was always infused with his admiration for old and modern masters.

Looking back at this moment, what are the most visible aspects in the element of his line in the drawings? Let's begin with you, Bill. Has there been consistency in his use of line despite the different phases he went through?

BILL CORBETT In these drawings and in so much of his other work, Philip was a deep diver. He used to speak of going on runs. We know that this (the Nixon drawings) was an incredible run. Most of these were, except for the *Phlebitis* series, all done in a period of a couple of months. He had that level of concentration. Just before this, he had done the minimal drawings, the ones that he reduced to a line or two. And then he went over into the late work.

When he came back from Italy in 1971, Nixon was on his mind. You have to remember that Philip and Nixon were exact contemporaries. Philip knew the town of Whittier, and he certainly knew his man, the way a Jew will know the anti-Semite that Nixon was.

I'll add two small things as context then and now. A young guy came to me when he knew I was going to be on this panel and said, what's the big deal about these drawings? Everybody knew in 1971 what Nixon was. There's a button that I bought on the streets of Boston two days after Nixon's victory over George McGovern. It says, Nixon 49–America 1. You have to remember that when Philip did these drawings, Nixon was riding as high as he ever would.

With wonderful serendipity that Philip would have loved, Nixon has again, as recently as ten days ago, appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* as having told "an aide that they should find a way to secretly 'monkey wrench' peace talks in Vietnam in the waning

2. Peter Baker, "Nixon Tried to Spoil Johnson's Vietnam Peace Talks in '68, Notes Show," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2017, accessed March 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/02/us/politics/nixon-tried-to-spoil-johnsons-vietnam-peace-talks-in-68-notes-show.html>.
3. Lawyer Roy M. Cohn served as chief aide to Senator Joseph McCarthy during his many career-destroying attacks on alleged communist infiltrators and homosexuals in the US during the 1950s, later serving as an advisor to both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. In the last decade of his life before his death from AIDS in 1986, Cohn became a mentor, friend, and chief legal advisor to Donald Trump.

days of the 1968 campaign."² If only Philip had read "monkey wrench," you know it would have showed up in one of these drawings!

[Laughter]

LISA YUSKAVAGE I was mostly interested in talking about the drawings. Something that stood out that you wrote, Bill, was that he (Guston) and you were having a conversation about this, and he decided to not put these drawings out there because he was—and the quote that you say is that he, "... arrived with a binder, excited, but then reversed himself. He didn't want to be known as a Nixon hater." I could imagine that as an artist. And, you know, people are trying to decide, do you want to be known as a hater? Do you want to put yourself out there? And Guston was certainly not a coward.

BILL CORBETT He had dinner with us for several years (during monthly visits teaching at Boston University), from about 1975 to the year before Philip's death (in 1980). We knew right away we were both Nixonologists, and we hooted and hollered about him as often as we could. And Philip said, "Well, why don't you write the text? We'll do the drawings with this." I only saw the seventy-three drawings that became *Poor Richard*.

Philip was a famous, passionate "yes, but" talker. He could begin an evening with saying, "Bill, we're going to do this. Let's get down to it. You call . . ." And by three a.m., it was, "I can't do this, I can't do this." But the context then was post-Watergate, when there were Nixon haters, when you could be identified as that. And he did not want to be seen as that. But equally as important, he did not want these drawings to put in the mind of his critics any deeper the sense that he was a cartoonist, really, and that the late work was not as vital as I knew it to be and he knew it to be. So we went back and forth and up and down. And finally, on his last visit to Boston, he said, "I'd like the binder back," which meant that one of the great after-dinner events at the Corbett house disappeared.

LISA YUSKAVAGE What struck me recently was the presence of Roy Cohn for both Trump and Nixon, that there is a direct relationship.³ I've been reading the paper much more in the past five, six years. I used to be much more just, I'm going to my studio and keeping my head down. But that name, when it popped up, I was really curious about it. And knowing that that is where certain people have learned a lot of their ploys.

BILL CORBETT He was Trump's mentor.

LISA YUSKAVAGE Attacking.

BILL CORBETT The attacker is Roy Cohn.

LISA YUSKAVAGE I was really startled to realize that Cohn was also part of Nixon's life and that he is this kind of bogeyman in a sense. That was interesting to me just as a piece of history. The title of the radio show I was listening to today on my way to the studio was "How Artists Are Mobilizing Against Trump." There were certain people

4. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Part I
 "The Prison Industry," Ch. 4
 "The Bluecaps," in *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956* (New York: Collins, 1974), 168.

calling for all artists to be political. But Art Spiegelman said that artists, quite simply, are *antennae*. And what they pick up may not appear to be overtly political. I had heard of a sound artist who actually had a studio at the World Trade Center. And he recorded the sounds of the buildings. That was part of what he did. I remember hearing the sound of the buildings groaning. This was well before they were attacked. And I suddenly was able to unpack what he was doing and look at the work. Once the World Trade Center disappears, you know, this is something that becomes a record. We never know what's important until time passes or things disappear.

After graduate school, I got quite lost as an artist and found my way back to what to do through looking and reading as much as possible about a couple of artists. And one was Philip Guston. The other was Diane Arbus. I don't know if anybody sees a relationship between them. But the relationship that I started to see was how they both looked outside themselves and saw what are, maybe, freaks or enemies or the *other*—otherness—and I understood that when they use those characters—the Ku Klux Klan and I would even say Nixon—they are never putting themselves outside of the work, that they were always including themselves, that there was always a sense that if you don't understand that the enemy is within, that we all . . . there's a quote from Solzhenitsyn. I can't paraphrase it perfectly, but he said, if it were only so simple, if we could just eliminate evil by cutting it out. But it's part of each and every one of us.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn⁴

I found that to be so profound in Guston when you see that he's a Jew and changed his name to Guston, and then later in his life, he's making these paintings where he's flagellating himself as a Klansman. It was just so overwhelming to me to say, my god, this is someone who is exposing the deepest of hatreds, but also accepting himself as part of that and not pointing the finger outwards.

So in understanding this work, and the reason why I think it's not just cartoons and why I think it's just as valuable and important as any other body of work—and it's an incredible thing to be able to see this—is that I do think that Guston is seeing himself in this character coming and going. Especially that first drawing where he's lying on his back with the penis and balls—that face—is an image that he often uses for himself—lying down, prone, looking up. There's a painting called *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (fig. 3). You know, there are French fries on his chest. And here you have him lying down as Nixon. Now that's my leap. We can't ever really know. But I rather like that idea that all of the enemies that one might see could be brought in and could not be caricatured. When you bring yourself in, it becomes humanizing.

PHONG BUI I think that's a remarkable observation.



[3] Philip Guston in his studio in 1974 with *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (1973) and *Confrontation* (1974)



[4] A 1974 Herblock cartoon

BOB MANKOFF There was an article in *The New York Times* about Guston and this show and the book that Philip Roth put together. And Roth said Guston didn't want to show a lot of these cartoons because he felt he would be sullied as a cartoonist. And Roth said it wasn't really a problem because he was going to be sullied anyway.

[Laughter]

BOB MANKOFF I just want to tell you how hard it is to be a cartoonist just in case you don't know [Laughter]. You do ten or twenty ideas every week. OK, if you do three hundred in a month, that's not that much. So these drawings are very interesting to me. Philip Guston is very interesting to me because he is not a cartoonist. He has a cartoon form, but he's not a cartoonist. And he doesn't aim to do what a cartoon really does, which makes a point, a point that you understand, a point that you get.

Now remember, Nixon was certainly excellent fodder for cartoonists throughout his career. The greatest of them all was Herbert Block, Herblock. And that was actually satire. This is interesting. It's art. It's actually not satire, in that we're not seeing what his point is. When we see the great Herblock—Nixon hanging by a thread between the two parts of the missing tape from 1974 (fig. 4)—we understand deeply. And also, in Herblock's characterization of Nixon, you know, he isn't a head with penis and testicles. Actually, it's too bad Guston isn't around because now we really have a dick-head as president.

[Laughter]

BOB MANKOFF The characterization that Herblock does of Nixon reveals his dark side while still being Nixon. And so that was, you know, very deep. I mean, it's interesting to me, this stuff, and not because I'm pretty much ignorant of Guston's career. These were all done in a period, as someone in the audience pointed this out to me, in which underground comics themselves were a very powerful force. When you look at this style, you see Robert Crumb. What I see is almost is a carnivalization, it's a vilification, through the body itself. And that is fascinating to me because here is the resonance I see between Nixon and Trump, that if you're on one side or the other, you feel repulsion. When Nixon was elected, remember people were incredulous in the same way that people are incredulous now about Trump, in just the same way. There's a cartoon in *The New Yorker* that appeared when he was elected, which just has a guy walking in the street. In the thought balloon, he's just repeating over and over again in his head, "President Nixon, President Nixon, President Nixon," because that's how incredulous they felt, right? And that's the exact same thing, really, that we're feeling now with Trump.

PHONG BUI Thank you. Katy, what about the relationship between abstraction and figuration—I mean, we know early on Guston was trained as a figurative painter.

KATY SIEGEL He actually started with a so-you-want-to-be-an-artist class when he was thirteen, a correspondence course from the Cleveland School of Cartooning—it's something he had in common



[5] *Vessel*, 1960. Oil on panel, 76.2 × 55.6 cm / 30 × 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
Private collection

with Warhol, as different as they were as artists. What's fundamentally there underneath is the idea that a working-class person could become an artist. So on the one hand, he grew up seeing those kinds of cartoons. On the other, politically, at that moment, as a teenager, he was looking at *Americana* magazine, which was publishing people like George Grosz.

In a political moment during the Depression and with the rise of fascism, he would have been seeing caricatures and commercial artists and fine artists who felt pressed to rise to the political moment, and not seeing absolute distinctions between them. I think that's something that's interesting to think about looking at Guston, that even while he was making the beautiful abstract paintings that I think a lot of us saw on Eighteenth Street, in the last show at Hauser & Wirth (figs. 5, 6), those beautiful, mid-sixties paintings that were at the Jewish Museum. That even while he was making those—and he knew you weren't supposed to be making figurative art, that it wasn't kosher, as it were, it wasn't the forefront of art at that moment—he was making caricatures of his friends, of the other artists, the so-called Abstract Expressionists. So it was an impulse that remained alive in him, even when subterranean.

Looking to that original moment of not making such a distinction between fine art, caricature, cartoons, and the ability to cross those lines is really important in seeing this work, and then maybe asking, who's doing this now? And are they artists? Are they cartoonists? Who is able to capture this current moment in the way that Guston captured this moment in 1971?

IRVING SANDLER To answer your question, Phong, except for about three years in his career, in the early 1950s, there was always a figurative element in his painting. Even in the 2016 show that we saw on Eighteenth Street, the way in which circular head forms would appear. This goes right through his career, from the social realist works into the works of the middle fifties down to the end of his career.

I want to come in, really, from left field because we all know exactly what Guston did not like about Nixon. But were there any affinities? I ask myself that question. Were there affinities between Philip and Nixon? And the only thing I could come up with is that both of these people had second acts, where at one point, Nixon gave up politics and said, you don't have me to kick around anymore, then has a comeback.

Guston's entire career is just full of these ups and downs, when he abandons realism and moves to Abstract Expressionism. Early on, he's considered a Johnny-come-lately. Then, in those very gray paintings in the late sixties . . . I had a long discussion with him about the reception of those paintings in the art world in the early sixties. Again, his art world turned against him.

Then, by 1970, he's pretty much forgotten. I taught two graduate seminars at Pratt Institute. Guston was to have spoken there the day I taught, and I recommended to the students that they all go, and I got this look of blank faces. Half the class had never even heard of Guston. The next year, he emerges once more as the most important artist, literally, of his generation—of the abstract generation, just as he did earlier on, even in the early fifties. I just wondered, were there any other affinities between Philip and Nixon?

BILL CORBETT I'd say two more. The obvious ones: they both came out of California, and they both had their success in the East. And Philip, for one, as his daughter Musa found out in her book, did not actually keep up with his family. There's that wonderful thing, I think that her aunt says, when she asks about the name change from Goldstein to Guston. And she says, "well, it's all right, it's just show-biz." Both of them had come to a bigger stage, and both of them were active on that bigger stage. And both of them, I would argue, were at a crucial time in the country, registering the tumult of that, the turmoil. Guston begins to change, knocked out of his marriage for a brief time in the late sixties. Everything is in upheaval.

IRVING SANDLER It's a crucial time in art, too.

BILL CORBETT Absolutely. One of the first things he said to me about the political art of that time was that he remembered sending in something to an anti-Daley show that was mounted in Chicago after the police riot there (in 1968). And he was saying, "Why did I do that? I did that because I read the papers. It's because I'm paying attention to these things." So I think they were both in the moment.

I'm seventy-four, but I remember Nixon's "Checkers" speech. Remember that Kennedy and Johnson, in many ways, did not have the public political life that Nixon did. He was the politician of that time, even through Watergate. And he was *the* politician, after Roosevelt, of Philip's life. That embrace was total. He couldn't have done these drawings if he didn't see some of this in himself.

BOB MANKOFF One other thing that strikes me as really a complete outsider to the art scene are the parallels between politics and the ideologies that inform politics, and the ideologies that inform art. And you see this in this career. You see it's Cubism or it's Abstract Expressionism or it's a different time. People feel so passionately about these things that they become ideologies that inform their whole lives and either make careers or destroy them.

To some extent, when we're looking at the politics today, we see this sweeping movement from Obama and the liberalism that was embodied there, to Trumpism. And in the same way, people become polarized. One thing I will say about Nixon is he was actually a very intellectual guy compared to most politicians, very smart, cunning in a lot of ways, a pretty good politician—not actually that bad a president, liberal by any standard that we have now. He had price controls. He went to China. Obviously, we know all the bad things about him. So when you actually compare Nixon, who was eminently qualified and then disqualified himself, to someone like Trump, who is completely unqualified, that's actually a parallel. It's interesting to look at what a debate was then. When there was a debate between Nixon and Kennedy, it was an actual debate. People actually could say things.

IRVING SANDLER I'd like to jump in again and point out that Philip was a first-class intellectual. He read everything. He knew everything. And I think that's very important in understanding the man.

PHONG BUI Let's come back to how he dealt with that in the sixties, Katy. I think when Irving talks about the looming emergence of those



[6] *May Sixty-Five*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 177.8 × 203.2 cm / 70 × 80 in.
Lewis Family Collection, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

5. Philip Guston, "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility," first published in *ARTnews Annual* (1965/66): 101-3, 152-53, based on notes for a lecture at the New York Studio School in May 1965.

black forms in the middle of the canvas, how did Guston mediate with Minimalism, with Conceptual art and Pop art?

KATY SIEGEL Like most of the Abstract Expressionists, he disliked them. He felt threatened or annoyed because his generation of artists had had such a hard life; it took them so long to come up, and critical financial success came so late, that they felt very bitter about the Pop artists and the enormous attention they received.

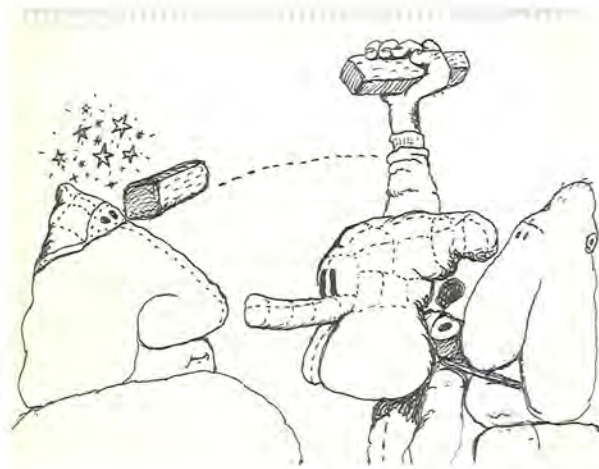
Christopher Wool had Guston in crits one day at the New York Studio School. Guston was the great figure of the school. Christopher was last after around twenty-five artists. Guston had been working all day. And he showed him his painting and Guston said, "Why don't you show it to Jasper Johns?" It was his sort of put down of implying it was a Conceptual painting.

But for that whole generation, there was, with very few exceptions, a general resentment of how quickly and easily things came for other people, who may have seemed glib somehow. And maybe that tiny kernel of self-pity or darkness, is maybe an answer to Irving's question, something other people have written about who knew Guston quite well. That would be one thing that he had in common with Nixon.

But Guston had something that Nixon didn't have. Guston spent the long summer of 1968 analyzing himself, and he came up with an iconography to represent his personal life, like the smoking, the painting, the drinking, the eating. In the drawings, Nixon was *given* this sort of iconography: Kissinger has those black glasses, and Spiro Agnew is the pyramid form. What he had that Nixon lacked was the ability to look at himself and understand himself.



[7] Philip Guston: *Painter, 1957-1967*, Hauser & Wirth New York 18th Street, New York, NY, April 26-July 30, 2016



- [8] 1920 Krazy Kat comic strip by George Herriman showing Ignatz Mouse throwing a brick at Krazy Kat
- [9] *Untitled*, 1971. Ink on paper, 26.7 x 35.2 cm / 10 1/2 x 13 7/8 in. Private collection

IRVING SANDLER We should mention one thing that I do think is important, Katy. Unlike all of his fellow Abstract Expressionists, with the possible exception of de Kooning, Guston loved the Herriman cartoons (fig. 8). And when his work was shown in 1970, his colleagues picked up the Pop dimension in Guston's work, which was one of the reasons so many of them turned against him.

BOB MANKOFF Even in these drawings here of Nixon's face, definitely there's the Krazy Kat influence. You can see it in some of the drawings with the two eyes and the nose.

BILL CORBETT The bricks got flung from there and wound up in the late work all the time.

I would take what you say, Katy, a little bit deeper. Morty Feldman didn't call Philip the "arch crank" for nothing. Philip didn't stop with Jasper Johns. I didn't understand it then because I was too young and unformed. This comes back to a level of embrace that we're talking about with Nixon.

Philip did absolutely want it all, which means that everything was on the table. Everything was to be talked about. Everything was to be scrutinized. And he did that relentlessly, constantly. But not just these artists out there, whether it was Johns—whom he attempted to bring to Boston University, just before he left, Johns had agreed, and the date didn't work out—so that this was not personal, although it may have sounded like that to people who didn't hear him often enough. This was a deep abiding churn of what it meant for him to be an artist. And to be young and to listen to that was absolutely formative, not just to me but to Clark Coolidge, to Bill Berkson.

PHONG BUI In the last show here at the gallery, in the far back room, there was a wall covered with drawings that were incredibly minimal (fig. 7). They are one, two, three lines, as though he's stripped himself down to begin from the very beginning, again.

I remember that incredible article that was published in *ARTnews* in 1966, called "Faith, Hope, and Impossibility."⁵

6. Philip Guston, from "Conversation with Morton Feldman, 1968," in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 90.
7. Lisa Yuskavage, "To Philip Guston," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 1, 2003, ed. Peter Soriano.

To paint is always to start at the beginning again, yet being unable to avoid the familiar arguments about what you see yourself painting. The canvas you are working on modifies the previous ones in an unending, baffling chain, which never seems to finish.

The canvas is a court where the artist is prosecutor, defendant, jury and judge. Art without a trial disappears at a glance: it is too primitive or hopeful, or mere notions, or simply startling, or just another means to make life bearable. You cannot settle out of court.

I want to point this out because it seems that maybe he didn't like Minimalism, yet he kind of started doing it.

KATY SIEGEL You can look at the late work of Barnett Newman, of Mark Rothko, and say, well, they were obviously looking at Donald Judd. And maybe they were. But so what? It's not such an interesting question, except that it's kind of great if you're an older artist and you're still looking around and picking stuff up and not just locked in a box.

But for me, looking at that later Guston work . . . I think we are in a privileged position because it's a later moment. Younger artists aren't caught up in that debate of abstraction versus figuration. It doesn't mean the same thing today as it did then, when there were real camps and each was loaded with real political and also commercial meanings. So now we can look at those Guston drawings from the sixties and see what Irving was saying, that there's not such a huge difference. Or at least there are points of connection between this figurative work around us here tonight, and the gestural fields: both seeks a return to something basic, human, urgent. And a return to finding the answers and the importance of what art is in materiality. So it's not abstraction as purity, which is a European definition of abstraction from the twenties and thirties, and that's what that generations of New York painters reacted against. To see it as materiality.

And that's the continuity.

Ten years ago I wanted to get away from my past. I was tired of what I had been doing or had done. I was somehow exhausted with it, and then I was unable to see it. I'd look at the pictures that are hanging at home, that I have of the past, and consistent with current desires and needs they began to look like stories. Forms were threatening each other or kissing or moving into each other or coming together or leaving each other. I mean, it seemed like fairy tales. You know, stories. And I wanted to get away from that. Well, now that I'm working in this terribly reduced way, they're still stories, I can't get away from stories, whether they're heads or lines or leaves or circles. I don't know. I can't be a pure artist. It's impossible.

—Philip Guston, 1968⁶

BILL CORBETT There's a connection here between what Irving was saying earlier. Nixon said that remark, "you won't have Dick Nixon to kick around," in 1962, after he lost the gubernatorial election in California. He spent the next four or five years working his ass



[10] *Rome Garden*, 1971. Oil on paper mounted on panel, 50.2 × 70.5 cm / 19 3/4 × 27 3/4 in. Private collection

off to get all kinds of congressmen elected. He was not about to go away, but he certainly went underground. It was a period for him, as he was to say later, of clearing the decks, a phrase that Philip later used when he was making those drawings, which I do not think of as Minimalist at all. They are just too absolutely central to belong in that ballpark, at least to my mind.

But when he's doing those, remember that there's also the tug of war he spoke of. Those drawings start in Sarasota, Florida. But by the time he continues them, he's doing one of those on Tuesday. And on Wednesday, he's got a jalopy riding across the paper. He's doing another on Thursday. And then he has one of those beautiful chairs that are in some of these drawings, those chairs from the thirties. At the same moment, Richard Nixon was absolutely—in a phrase everybody who writes about Guston sooner or later loves—*reinventing* himself. And both men came out of that like gangbusters.

I'd ask Guston a question about the fifties. And he'd say, oh, that stuff that you like. One of the things I began to realize, although he never said it directly, certainly not to me, was that the late work was his commentary on what he'd done before. It was not simply, "goodbye to Abstract Expressionism; I've become a new man." I think he really felt, "this is where I wound up because I absolutely belong here. And now I know what to do with it."

IRVING SANDLER There's another aspect in Guston's work that I think runs through his entire late career. And then the attitude is anti-Minimalist. Guston is still very much an Existentialist too.

PHONG BUI Lisa, Morandi seemed to be such a big influence on him.

LISA YUSKAVAGE When I brought up Morandi (fig. 11) with Guston, it was just that knowing nothing as a young artist, they looked very similar to me, and I was trying to figure out what it was.⁷ I studied with Stephen Greene at Tyler School of Art. We talked a lot about Guston and his memories of being a student of Guston's. And when I brought this up to him, I just said, look at these two: what I see is the horizon line of a landscape as a table's edge, being imagined. It's a table's edge as a landscape horizon line. And then the objects in both cases. Guston takes it so much further by then conflating the portrait and using human body parts and heads and scale in that. But that line that is at, you know, a third of the page—that traditional horizon line that both of them come back to often and the quality of the touch. I almost could see in Guston that he'd been looking very much at the touch of Morandi, which is so extraordinary. Especially in his landscape paintings. Morandi's late paintings are almost falling apart, the looseness of them.

PHONG BUI This is where the still life motif became a perpetual condition of how he composed form. Unlike other still-life painters who normally would set up the table below eye level, Morandi actually set up the table right on his eye level. Therefore, the bottle appeared incredibly monumental. And this is so interesting because Guston did talk about Piero della Francesca, particularly *Flagellation of Christ* (fig. 12), that remarkable painting in Urbino, remember? Also loaded, loaded with content.



[11] Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 30 × 45 cm / 11 3/4 × 17 3/4 in. Collezioni Comunali d'Arte, Bologna



[12] Piero della Francesca. *Flagellation of Christ*, 1459–60. Oil and tempera on panel, 91 × 65 cm / 35 3/4 × 25 1/2 in. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino

BILL CORBETT Piero was basic to him. He gave Clark Coolidge and me a copy of the Roberto Longhi book. In Italy, you can read the late work backwards and see the horse's ass in a couple of pictures. It comes directly out of Caravaggio. Some of those body parts come out of Luca Signorelli, whom he was passionate about. And Mantegna. I remember Philip saying, you know, the great thing about those pictures is he doesn't care if a whole army of people goes off the cliff. That's how powerful that picture is, how determined it is to me. We went together, one of the few times I saw him in the city, to a show of late de Chirico. It's the one where de Chirico is on a prancing horse wearing a king's outfit. I mean, I thought Philip was going to have a heart attack with laughter. It was as if, this guy can do anything.

LISA YUSKAVAGE I've been doing a lot of a lot of research on Picabia because I'm doing a panel. I'm not a Picabia expert, so I've been studying like a little schoolgirl trying to come up with something. And I think I found a few things. What really jumped out at me in looking at Picabia in the show, I kept thinking de Chirico, de Chirico, de Chirico. And then, of course, I was thinking about how crazy it is how often these great artists have been censored at the end of their lives when they're really truly free. And obviously, Guston suffered needlessly because he was making probably the greatest art that I think was made at just about any time in history. Too bad he wasn't able to hear that from people. He heard it from some people, but not enough people.

BILL CORBETT He had his enemies too, just as Nixon did.

LISA YUSKAVAGE What I was going to say is de Chirico is still censored, and we still have not seen a total show of de Chirico.

BILL CORBETT I don't know if that's censorship. But a total show would be great.

LISA YUSKAVAGE It has been, because with Picabia, when he had the show at the Guggenheim, they left out those late, so-called porn pictures because they thought he didn't know what he was doing. He went off the cliff. I think that these artists, they all are very resonant of one another, especially because towards the end, they really heated up and disturbed people quite a bit. And I think it was some of the most interesting work. It's still hard for people to look at the late de Chirico.

IRVING SANDLER I want to go back to Piero because we spent the night, my wife Lucy and I, with Guston in Woodstock. And he took out his books on Piero and spent, literally, from about nine to three in the morning going through every one of these. He could tell you exactly what Piero painted on any day. He had studied those works so closely.

BILL CORBETT And a print of *Flagellation of Christ* was on the wall next to Dürer's *Melencolia*. These were foundational works for him, absolutely.

PHONG BUI His repertoire of images has significant symbolic freedom. It goes back to the beginning, and then he takes it to the present even. And somewhere in between it appears or reappears.

BILL CORBETT When we live a little bit longer with these images that Philip has given us, we'll know more about what they were to him. You know, I've been living with these paintings now only for, say, forty years. He lived with some of those images, obviously, his entire life.

I don't want to leave without mentioning one thing, though, something that is off the wall. This does not follow from what we've been talking about. Maybe some of you have seen Norman Rockwell's portrait of Nixon that is surfacing. It is the most un-Nixon image you could imagine, and it will show you that the Guston drawings are much closer in spirit to who the man actually was. Nixon's got his arms stretched out like this and his hand holding his chin. It's just pure fakery. It's pure connivance. It's pure Rockwell, of course, and pure Nixon. But it is not real in the way that these are absolutely real.

BOB MANKOFF It's true. Rockwell is very interesting because he worked completely from photographs and transformed them. I went to the High School of Music & Art and was sort of marinated in art. I was a bourgeois kid from Queens, and I never quite bought it. I still haven't bought it. When I went there, you had to pass an exam to get in. You had to be able to draw. I was always astounded at people who could draw as well as Rockwell. And when you go to the museum and you look at this stuff, there is something stunning, actually, about it. At the same time, I always wondered in my own experience, why do I find it cloying? In other words, why do I not actually like it? So I do think there is something here that doesn't capture—to say it captures something real about Nixon is a delusion. It's a delusion in that we don't know anything, really, about Nixon. We know about our reactions to Nixon. And what it truly captures is for a bunch of people's reactions to Nixon—their almost libidinal reactions to him. So when it captures that type of truth, it captures something.

My view on everything is one of extreme skepticism of my own opinions and everybody else's. That's the nature of being a cartoonist. What I'm most fascinated about here is just this wonderful survey of art that I forgot to pay attention to when I was in school, and just how passionate the discussion is about these various things. They're things that, from the outside, from the point of view of the cartoonist, are to be made fun of, like everything else. In other words, if you look at *The New Yorker* magazine and how it looked at Abstract Expressionism and the whole history of art from the very beginning was . . . What were the two things that Pollock did? It was the spatter and the drip? There's a great Peter Arno cartoon where the guy is standing up in front of a simulation of a Pollock painting and says, "His spatter is masterful, but his dribbles lack conviction."

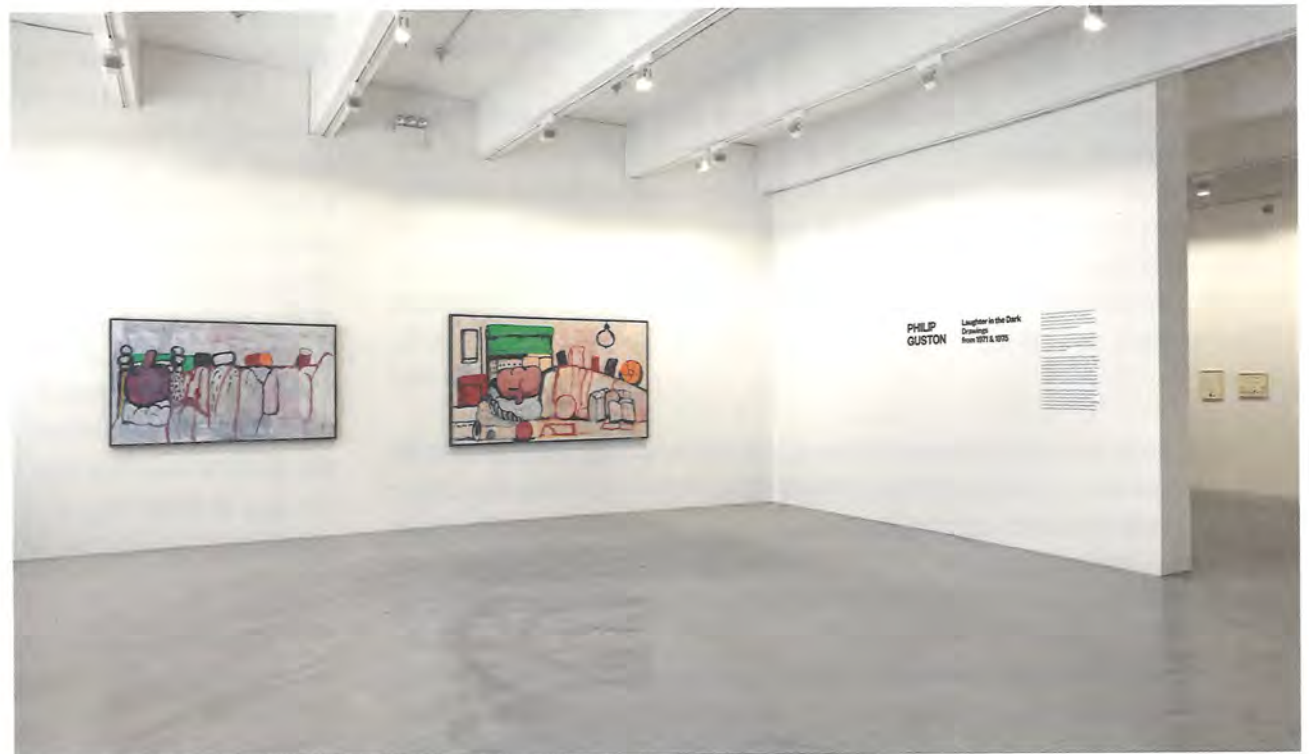
[Laughter]

BILL CORBETT The notion that Rockwell's getting at something that's real in Nixon is a delusion. I can see its appeal, but I can't entirely go along with it. And just as I would propose that when Joyce said, *in risu veritas*, he saw the truth in humor. I said "something real" and I'm not trying to fudge about that. I'm saying that what I see in these pictures is absolutely something that reminds me, powerfully, of who this man was over a period of time. Is that his ultimate, deepest reality? I'm not going to say. I'm not even going to go there. But it's as far as I can go. And that's real enough.

KATY SIEGEL It's Nixon's version of himself. It's not Guston depicting the actual truth of Nixon. Nixon whined about how he was from a poor family, and how he went to school in a clapboard shack. And so there are all these pictures of him in the front of a woodstove, you know, at Duke in law school. It's Nixon's self-mythologization. Nixon was so much about self-image, and was so open about his pathos and his self-pity, and Guston reflects that back.

BILL CORBETT No one without self-pity could write a book titled *Six Crises*.

KATY SIEGEL And I think that that's what Roth picks up on with his book, *Our Gang*. As he said later, "Doesn't this guy believe in anything?" Because one minute he's with McCarthy, and it's Red Scare and anti-China, anti-Russia. And the next minute, he's talking about the People's Republic of China and making a trip there. And I think like Trump and like Ronald Reagan, that was a leitmotif for both Roth



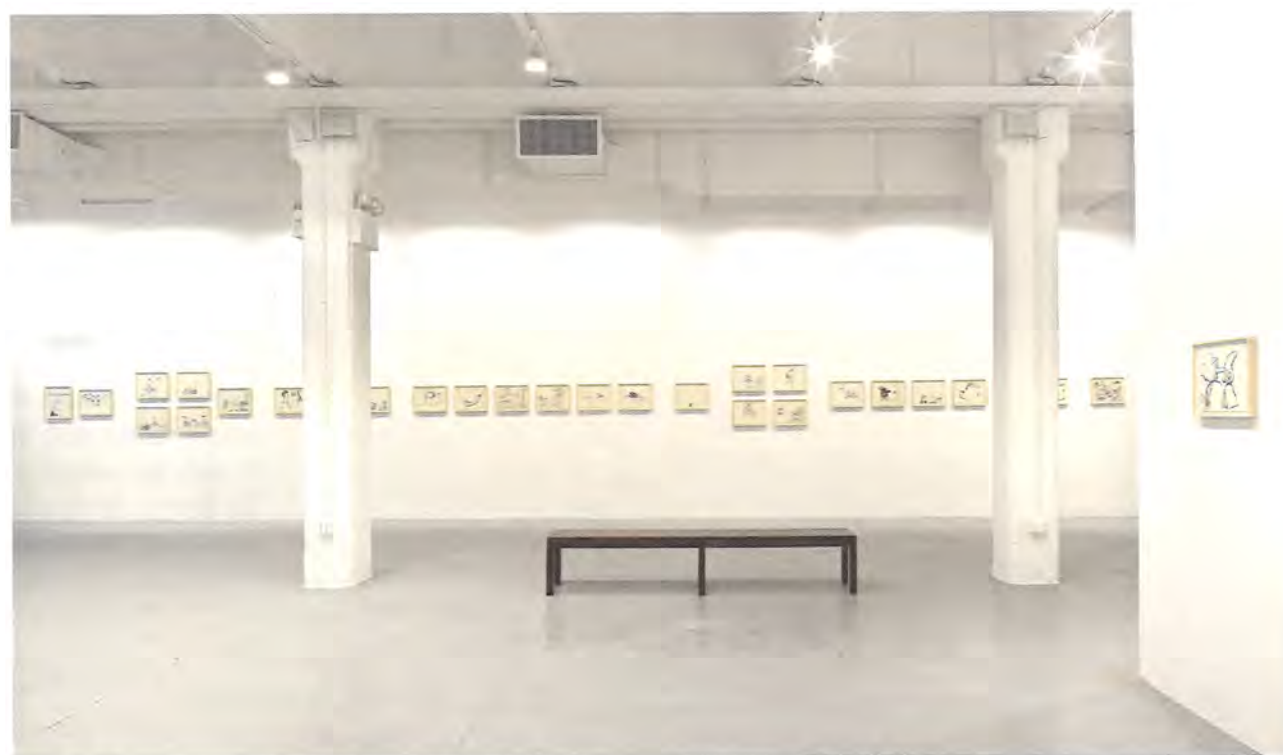
[13] Philip Guston: *Laughter in the Dark*, Drawings from 1971 & 1975. Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street, New York, NY, November 1, 2016–January 28, 2017

and Guston, that there was no real Nixon, in some way, because he would just change his politics, towards civil rights, anti-Semitism, whatever. Whatever worked.

BOB MANKOFF I think one of the things you pointed out to me is that maybe Guston really didn't hate him. I mean, I don't hate Nixon. Nixon is a tragic, pathetic figure, an interesting figure, a fascinating figure in American history. And it's interesting to see him in his humanity. Being really informed by this discussion, I can actually see the pathos. But if you look at these drawings naively, as I did to some extent, you see vilification. It seems to be a guy completely vilifying a figure in a sex-centered, almost pornographic, way. Certainly, if someone who was Nixon's friend looked at this and didn't know anything about them, they'd be horrified. But what's interesting to me are the connections that you find between the two. I guess that's what makes it art.

Could I make just one point about satire? I just want to quote Peter Cook, the comedian with Dudley Moore who said that satire was very powerful. "Just remember what all those clever Berlin cabarets did to stop the rise of Hitler." OK, it has very little effect.

I'm telling you it preaches to the converted. Essentially, if you just want to look at it empirically—what is the effect of satire? Yes, absolutely, it makes you feel good. We did fifty to one hundred cartoons about Trump. Trump is sitting in the White House. This is what I do. I think it might have a slow, acrid drip that changes people's minds a little bit, but it might not. John Oliver on Trump was amazing. These were some of the most fantastic, comic, intellectual, informative riffs ever done—didn't have much of an effect.



[14] Philip Guston: *Laughter in the Dark*, Drawings from 1971 & 1975. Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street, New York, NY, November 1, 2016–January 28, 2017

LISA YUSKAVAGE Well, but these works were done, as you pointed out, in relative secrecy and privacy. And maybe there will be a lot of people doing work in secrecy and privacy that we won't know about until later. *Los Caprichos* are a good example from history; they were politically critical works that Goya apparently kept private and only shared with his inner circle. It is not too far a leap to imagine that Guston must have known and loved those works and been guided by them to do this body of drawings.

KATY SIEGEL The question is, you know, what does art *do*?

I don't think Philip Guston thought he was going to stop Richard Nixon. But I think he understood something about Richard Nixon.

And I think he also said that these were the things that drove him crazy since he was a teenager—from the Scottsboro Boys to the Klan to the Holocaust. And he said that the holocausts of our time—plural—from Chile to Indochina, were the things that he cared about. So it's not some misguided idea of his own importance or misunderstanding of his own social power. I do think it's something profound that adds a dimension beyond a comedy routine about the way the world works.

And I hope there is someone else working away in their studio who's going to show us something similar that I don't understand yet about what's going on.

PHONG BUI I would like to end the panel with a beautiful poem from one of Guston's favorite poets, Rilke.⁸

The Man Watching

*I can tell by the way the trees beat, after
so many dull days, on my worried windowpanes
that a storm is coming,
and I hear the far-off fields say things
I can't bear without a friend,
I can't love without a sister.*

*The storm, the shifter of shapes, drives on
across the woods and across time,
and the world looks as if it had no age:
the landscape, like a line in the psalm book,
is seriousness and weight and eternity.*

*What we choose to fight is so tiny!
What fights with us is so great!
If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need names.*

8. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Man Watching," trans. Robert Bly, in *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1995, first published 1980), 112–13.

*When we win it's with small things,
and the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
does not want to be bent by us.
I mean the Angel who appeared
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:
when the wrestler's sinews
grew long like metal strings,
he felt them under his fingers
like chords of deep music.*

*Whoever was beaten by this Angel
(who often simply declined the fight)
went away proud and strengthened
and great from that harsh hand,
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively,
by constantly greater beings.*

Editors' Note

Philip Roth has our deep appreciation for his help with the exhibition and the book.

Phong Bui organized an excellent panel discussion during the New York exhibition of *Laughter in the Dark*, and we are grateful to him and panelists Bill Corbett, Bob Mankoff, Irving Sandler, Katy Siegel, and Lisa Yuskavage for generously sharing their insights, and for allowing an edited version of their dialog to appear in this book.

Our special appreciation goes to Sara Harrison, Kristen Munk, and numerous others on the Hauser & Wirth staff for their invaluable assistance with designing, mounting, and publicizing the *Laughter in the Dark* exhibitions in London and New York.

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We would also like to thank Debra Bricker Balken for allowing us to reprint the beautiful and insightful essay she wrote in 2001, and for her new Afterword. Above all, a very special thank-you to Michaela Unterdörfer for her editorial knowledge, expertise, and graciousness throughout this project.

Musa Mayer and Sally Radic

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Philip Guston's late figurative paintings met with overwhelmingly negative critical response when first shown at Marlborough Gallery in New York City in October 1970. After the opening, Guston fled to Italy with his wife, spending eight months at the American Academy in Rome. The following spring, Guston returned to a wounded America, still at war in Vietnam, devastated by the assassinations of its leaders, and divided by antiwar protests and the social and political upheavals begun in the 1960s. It was Richard Nixon's first term as president.

Guston's outpouring of satirical drawings was inspired partly by conversations with his friend Philip Roth, at work on his own scathing Nixon satire, *Our Gang*. "When I came back from Europe in the summer of 1971," Guston later said, "I was pretty disturbed about everything in the country politically, the administration specifically, and I started doing cartoon characters. And one thing led to another, and so for months I did hundreds of drawings and they seemed to form a kind of story line, a sequence." Completed during July and August 1971, these drawings were not publicly shown for three decades.

In 1975, after the Watergate scandal led to Nixon being forced to resign under threat of impeachment, Guston created more drawings and a final painting with Nixon as subject: *San Clemente*. This book gathers this extraordinary body of work for the first time in its entirety.

Guston found in Nixon the perfect embodiment of world-historical perfidy, and in satire a way out of his hopelessness regarding the corrupt state of art and politics. Guston's Nixon drawings, alternately, can serve as similar inspiration today. This is art used as a scalpel while the world is on a knife's edge.

—Christian Viveros-Fauné

This exhibition of the complete Nixon drawings raises that ensemble as a whole to the level of being one of Philip Guston's most important bodies of work overall—because of its astonishingly rich, ceaselessly inventive draftsmanship, its comic verve and tragicomic monstrosity, and the unrelentingly vivid fierceness of Guston's satire, a fierceness rivaling that of Goya at his best.

—Robert Storr



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