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Artists Speak against the Postponement of ‘Philip Guston Now’

October 2, 2020

Trenton Doyle Hancock, Mark Thomas Gibson, Jacolby Satterwhite, Tschabalala Self and Gary Simmons respond to the controversial decision to delay Guston’s retrospective

Since the announcement by four museums – the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston – to postpone the highly anticipated retrospective, ‘Philip Guston Now’, many in the art world have been vehemently critical of the decision. The artist’s daughter, Musa Mayer, condemned in **a statement** to *ARTnews*, while dozens of prominent artists signed an **open letter**, published by *The Brooklyn Rail*, demanding that the retrospective continue without further delays.

The museums’ joint decision to set back the travelling exhibition until 2024 comes out of fear that Guston’s Ku Klux Klan imagery – which first appeared in *Conspirators* (1930) and recurred in the late 1960s in works such as *City Limits* (1969) – would be gravely misinterpreted given the current political climate, when racial justice is at the forefront of public conversations around institutions. Ironically, Guston’s paintings endeavoured to do just that: incite discourse around racism and white supremacy. The son of Ukrainian Jewish refugees of a pogrom, Guston was a lifelong progressive who in 1967 abandoned the abstraction that made him famous in order to articulate his opposition to the Vietnam War and the racist dog-whistle politics of Richard Nixon.

We asked a group of artists who have been inspired by Guston’s work to share their thoughts on the decision to postpone the retrospective and the significance of the hooded Ku Klux Klan motif in his work.

— Terence Trouillot

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Gary Simmons

I'm incredibly disappointed. It's not that I don't understand the museums' concerns, but the issues Guston deals with – racism, white supremacy – are currently destroying our democracy. We are literally watching history repeat itself in the worst way. Silencing discussion of these issues is absolutely the last thing we should be doing. This painful reality needs to be unpacked and addressed if we're ever going to move forward in a better direction.

I've been using Ku Klux Klan imagery in my work since the early 1990s. Guston definitely impacted me. He's a master of packing a political punch in aesthetically stunning and often humorous images. We both used the KKK motif to represent white intolerance, hatred and racism. The fact that he was Jewish Canadian and

I'm Black West Indian doesn't really matter. We're both using it as a symbol for the desire to gain homogenous power. I made a piece called *Duck, Duck, Noose* in 1992 that's included in the **Rubell Museum's '30 Americans' touring show**. There have been multiple protests against this work by people who don't know that I'm Black and misread it as supporting the KKK. This kind of misunderstanding forces viewers to rethink their interpretation of the work and, by extension, issues of power, oppression and racism. Art is supposed to challenge viewers to look into themselves and to re-examine how they walk through the world. Guston's work did exactly that, and that's why his retrospective should not be postponed.

Gary Simmons is an artist. In August 2020, he had a solo show at Metro Pictures, New York. He lives in New York, USA.

Jacolby Satterwhite

Guston's work was a major influence on how I understood art-making, which has always been a vehicle for me to interrogate and analyse social monsters and ugly truths. If museums aren't equipped to host challenging works, then they, and the artists they show, have become obsolete. Guston painted the Ku Klux Klan as a device to mirror his audience and society's complicity with white supremacy as an armature for capitalism and how we navigate it. His critique is relevant enough to influence me to employ the same device in my own work and to illustrate how 'division and chaos' is for sale and highly profitable.

Jacolby Satterwhite is an artist. His current solo show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York closes 31 October. He lives in New York, USA.

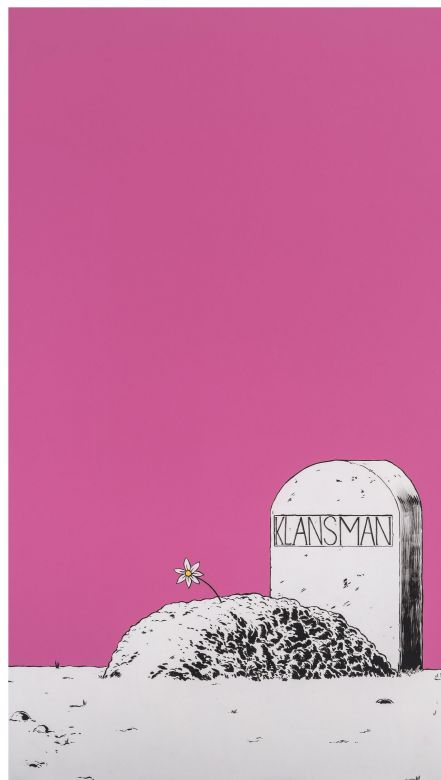
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Trenton Doyle Hancock

I'm definitely disappointed in the decision to postpone the Guston exhibition, since it means this gathering of works won't be seen in the same field of vision as America's current political landscape. We can imagine what it might have looked like, but seeing it is different. More selfishly, I was looking forward to spending time in front of the paintings, because Guston's work means so much to me and to my practice.

I was a budding cartoonist when I first learned of Guston in 1995. At age 20, I was already doing work based on Ku Klux Klan imagery when my serigraphy professor, Thom Seawell, pointed me toward Guston. I responded immediately to his almost-ironic stance of reclaiming the Klan's power for himself. Guston deflated the Klansmen by painting them into a sad comedy of errors, and he did so with the precision of an accomplished political cartoonist or a deadpan comedian.

As a Black American who was raised in an environment with a heavy history of KKK activity, I could never fully divorce Guston's imagery from its grotesque source material and, of course, I'm not meant to. In 2014, I initiated a body of work called 'Step and Screw!' in which my alter ego, a Black superhero called Torpedoboy, squared off with Guston's Klansman. I sought to plant Black characters (specifically myself) into Guston's painted reality, mostly to imagine how his seemingly ineffectual Klansmen would react to the intrusion. The narrative takes the form of a graphic novel and a series of paintings, all of which are typified by 'the chase': Torpedoboy is forever on the run from the hooded aggressors who corner him from time to time. It's in these pared-back moments that I'm able to build a dialogue or exchange between the two characters - a conversation that addresses the very nature of white supremacy, Black exceptionalism and the American dream.



Tschabalala Self

I think if Guston had a history of painting the Black victims of racial violence rather than their perpetrators, the hooded Klansmen, the show would still go on. Images of violence against Black bodies are normalized. However, squarely naming white supremacy as the cause of such violence is still controversial. Placing the burden of racism on white America is controversial. Framing whiteness is still controversial. Guston did this and that is why his work is important. White artists rarely address racism and their own identity politics. Guston's Klansmen paintings were - and still are - transgressive in their use of the white male body as the vessel by which to discuss race. I'm personally interested in Guston because, like myself, he was working with symbology and cultural tropes. He repurposed these destructive and demeaning images and used them toward his own intellectual goals.

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Tschabalala Self is an artist. In 2020, she had a solo exhibition at ICA Boston. She lives in New Haven, USA.



Mark Thomas Gibson

At first, I was shocked; then, after digesting the information, I was angry. At this specific moment in history, it seems pertinent to exhibit 'Philip Guston Now'. The decision to postpone the show knowingly emboldens white supremacy by assuming the position that whiteness sits in a place of unquestioned hierarchy and any examination of that must be stopped or contorted. It is clear, from reading the exhibition catalogue, that the curators did the work, asked the questions and were ready for this conversation. Perhaps the board members of these museums were not.

The choice to postpone this vital conversation does more harm than good. Rather than face the discomfort of self-examination, as Guston did through his work, those implicated chose to glaze over the issue and move on: a true demonstration of privilege.

When I first saw the Ku Klux Klan figures in Guston's work as a young student at Cooper Union, I assumed, *incorrectly*, that they were used as symbols to contextualize events from the past. I learned later that Guston was not valorising the KKK, but instead was implicating himself and American culture at large by questioning whiteness, inside and outside of the hood. As a Jewish person in the US, Guston (born Goldstein) was making a statement about unexamined whiteness. He was challenging the white viewer to look at themselves within a museum or gallery and get uncomfortable. Let's be clear: we, as Americans, have a racist president in the White House who cannot even pretend to condemn white supremacy. We have museums and their directors shutting down opportunities that were intended to open up the conversation about white supremacy, because it is not politically advantageous. Guston's work inspires me in this moment to not sit idly by as the world burns, but to stand up and speak truth to power.

Mark Thomas Gibson is an artist. In July 2020, he had a solo show at M+B, Los Angeles. He lives in New York, USA.

Main image: Philip Guston, Riding Around, 1969, oil on canvas, 137.2 x 200.7 cm. Courtesy: © The Estate of Philip Guston and Hauser & Wirth.