

Blatant censorship: Retrospective of American painter Philip Guston delayed four years

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The decision by four major art museums in the UK and US to postpone for four years “Philip Guston Now,” a long-planned retrospective of one of postwar America’s most significant artists, is a cowardly act of censorship.

The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Tate Modern in London, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston claimed in a September 21 statement that Guston’s obviously hostile and darkly satirical images of Ku Klux Klansmen and others could not be exhibited “until a time at which we think that the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston’s work can be more clearly interpreted.”

The museums’ directors said they needed more time to properly prepare the public to understand Guston’s message through outreach and programming. This is evasive and duplicitous. No honest opponent of racism and anti-Semitism would object to Guston’s attack on the KKK and other reactionary features of American society. Those who object to the artist’s supposed “appropriation” of African American suffering are cultural-nationalist elements who insist that race is the category that defines human beings.

The directors may share this foul view or simply feel the need to accommodate themselves to the current atmosphere. In either case, they have helped deliver a blow to artistic freedom.

In the face of a deluge of criticism, the directors of the National Gallery and the Tate have tried to defend themselves. National Gallery Director Kaywin Feldman told *Hyperallergic* this week that in “today’s America—because Guston appropriated images of Black trauma—the show needs to be about more than Guston.” She went on, “Also, related, an exhibition with such strong commentary on race cannot be done by all-white curators. Everybody involved in this project is white. ... We definitely need some curators of color working on the project with us. I think all four museums agree with that statement.”

This is simply disgusting, a craven giving in to racist thinking of the most sinister type, which historically has been associated with the far right. Along those lines, those who object or might object to the Guston exhibition are now generally vociferous in their calls for censorship. These are the same political forces who in 2017 protested against the exhibition—at the Whitney Museum in New York—of Dana Shutz’s “Open Casket,” a painting based on a photograph of 15-year-old Emmett Till, a black youth murdered and mutilated in 1955. Some of the protesters, in fact, went so far as to demand the painting be burned!

To paraphrase what we said in 2017, the subject matter, the

activities of the Klan, does not belong to African American artists or anyone else. It is the common “property” and responsibility of those who oppose, in Lenin’s phrase, “all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse.” These petty-bourgeois nationalist elements are not genuinely concerned with the history of African American suffering or anyone else’s. If they were, they would want it to be exposed and denounced as widely as possible. They are objecting to anyone else, as they see it, gaining some advantage from the “franchise.”

These are selfish, careerist elements who want to monopolize a field for their own prestige and profit. At the same time, the extreme racialism serves the political purpose, pursued by the *New York Times* and the Democratic Party milieu, of attempting to confuse the population and divide it along racial and ethnic lines, diverting from the struggle against social inequality, war and the threat of dictatorship.

In the past three years, the situation has only become more noxious and the racials’ activities more provocative.

The museum directors’ announcement of the postponement was met with dismay by art critics who objected to the overt act of censorship, especially against an artist deeply committed to the struggle against racism, although most seemed resigned to the delay. The artist’s daughter, Musa Mayer, commented, “It’s sad. This should be a time of reckoning, of dialogue. These paintings meet the moment we are in today. The danger is not in looking at Philip Guston’s work but in looking away.”

A forceful demand that the show be reinstated was issued in an open letter signed by 100 artists, curators, art dealers and writers published last Wednesday in the *Brooklyn Rail*, which has since garnered hundreds more signatures. Signed by Matthew Barney, Nicole Eisenman, Joan Jonas, Martin Puryear, Lorna Simpson and Henry Taylor among others, the list reads like a who’s who of today’s most prominent artists, black and white.

The open letter begins by noting that the undersigned artists were “shocked and disappointed” by the four-year postponement. The letter cites the comment by Musa Mayer that Guston had “dared to unveil ... [the] racist terror that he had witnessed since boyhood, when the Klan marched openly by the thousands in the streets of Los Angeles. As poor Jewish immigrants, his family fled extermination in the Ukraine. He understood what hatred was. It was the subject of his earliest works.”

The open letter and the principled opposition of many artists to the museums’ censorship are welcome and objectively significant,

although the signatories weaken their own position by giving in too much to the notion of “white culpability” and other nostrums of identity politics.

The open letter is strongest in denouncing the notion that hiding Guston’s art will somehow improve matters. “The people who run our great institutions do not want trouble,” it argues. “They fear controversy. They lack faith in the intelligence of their audience.” If museum officials feel that the current social eruptions will “blow over” in four years, the letter asserts, “they are mistaken. The tremors shaking us all will never end until justice and equity are installed. Hiding away images of the KKK will not serve that end. Quite the opposite. And Guston’s paintings insist that justice has never yet been achieved.”

The artists’ letter demands the exhibition “be restored to the museums’ schedules, and that their staffs prepare themselves to engage with a public that might well be curious about why a painter—ever self-critical and a standard-bearer for freedom—was compelled to use such imagery.”

Guston (1913-1980) was born in Montreal to Ukrainian-Jewish parents but grew up in California and attended high school in Los Angeles with fellow future painter Jackson Pollock. “Moving to New York,” according to ArtNet, “Guston was enrolled in the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s [like Pollock], where he produced works inspired by the Mexican Muralists and Italian Renaissance paintings.”

Guston became associated with Abstract Expressionism, the loose gestural painting style also known as the New York School that was the dominant artistic school of the Cold War period of the 1950s. Other Abstract Expressionists were Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and, of course, Pollock.

After playing a leading role in the development of abstract art, however, Guston came to reject its approach as too rarefied and confining as a means of responding artistically and politically to the upheavals of the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s. “What kind of man am I,” he once asked, “sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?”

Guston became widely known for his blunt, almost cartoonish images suggesting the thuggish brutality and political corruption of official American society. He developed a distinctive figurative style populated with oversized heads, hands, bricks, shoes and other bizarre objects. The artist’s highly personal iconography also included hooded Klansmen, who began appearing in his work as early as the 1930s. These buffoonish figures often appear crammed into cars like the Three Stooges, if anything more menacing because they seem so omnipresent and ordinary.

Attracted as a teenager to left-wing politics, Guston (then Goldstein) had joined one of the John Reed clubs sponsored by the Communist Party. While the role of the Stalinists was already a negative one, these clubs still attracted artists seeking to fight poverty and inequality. He and his friend Reuben Kadish painted a mural and joined a rally in Los Angeles to raise money for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys, the nine African American teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama.

After the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) backed off the case over fears of repercussions, the youths’ defense was taken up by the Communist Party. This won the CP broad support among radicalized white and black workers, as well as artists and young people like Guston. The painter, like many artists

of his generation, eventually left the Stalinist orbit of the CP in favor of left-liberal politics. However, his commitment to fighting racism and anti-Semitism retained a genuine, democratic character at odds with the current racialist trends.

Often cloaked in left-sounding rhetoric by groups of political activist/artistic collectives who call for increasing the number of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) on museum staffs, boards and among the artists whose work is acquired and promoted, the identity politics campaigns against the “systemic” racism of cultural institutions have nothing progressive about them.

In response, the various institutions have endlessly adapted themselves to and retreated before their racialist critics. In mid-September, the Brooklyn Museum—no doubt in straitened circumstances because of the pandemic-induced closure—announced it would auction 12 works from its collection to raise funds for the care of its collection.

While “culling” work by 16th-19th century European painters Cranach the Elder, Gustave Courbet and Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, the Brooklyn Museum has said that it would not sell any of its work by living, presumably more ethnically diverse artists. The Baltimore Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for their part recently made a point of selling work to acquire more art by women and artists of color.

In another manifestation of the logic of segregation to which this sort of outlook leads, the blue-chip Chelsea gallery and art dealer David Zwirner recently announced it was hiring Ebony L. Haynes as a new gallery director to realize her “vision for a *kunsthalle* with an all-Black staff,” which would offer exhibits of and internships to exclusively Black youth. “There aren’t enough places of access—especially in commercial galleries—for Black staff and for people of color to gain experience,” she said.

But what would “access” on this backward, racially exclusive basis amount to? What sort of art will come out of such a process?

The rotten character of this resurgence of racial-ethnic thinking finds expression in the censorship of the Guston exhibition itself. A show dedicated to the work of an artist who fiercely pursued equality and an end to oppression of all types has run afoul of a privileged, upper middle class crowd whose outlook and activity operate in a very different direction: toward racial-ethnic exclusivism, selfishness and the striving for privilege.



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