

## The Philip Guston Show Should Be Reinstated

An open letter, signed by nearly 100 artists, curators and critics, accuses four museums of “hiding away” from controversy. A long postponement is an admission these institutions are not up to the job.

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Signatories of an open letter criticizing the four-year postponement of the Philip Guston show include the artists, from left, Joan Jonas, Matthew Barney, Lorna Simpson and Martin Puryear. Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times, Emily Berl for The New York Times, Tom Jamieson for The New York Times, Photo by Shannon Finney/Getty Images

Philip Guston is no longer here to defend himself — but his fellow artists are, and they are angry.

In [an open letter published Wednesday](#) in The Brooklyn Rail, nearly 100 artists, curators, dealers and writers forcefully condemned the decision last week by the National Gallery of Art in Washington and three other major museums to pull the plug on the largest retrospective in 15 years of one of America’s most influential postwar painters.

The show, after years of preparation, will be [delayed](#) until 2024. The stated reason is to let the institutions rethink their presentation of Guston's later figurative paintings, which feature men in hoods reminiscent of Ku Klux Klan members, and which, a National Gallery spokesperson said, risked being "misinterpreted" today.

In the open letter, the artists, "shocked and disappointed," accuse the museums — the National Gallery, Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston — both of betraying Guston's art and of patronizing the public they are supposed to serve.

The postponement, they write, is an admission of the museums' "longstanding failure to have educated, integrated, and prepared themselves to meet the challenge of the renewed pressure for racial justice that has developed over the past five years." They demand that the Guston exhibition take place as scheduled, and that the museums "do the necessary work to present this art in all its depth and complexity."

The initial list of signatories reads like a roll call of the most accomplished American artists alive: old and young, white and Black, local and expat, painters and otherwise. Among them are Matthew Barney, Nicole Eisenman, Charles Gaines, Ellen Gallagher, Wade Guyton, Rachel Harrison, Joan Jonas, Ralph Lemon, Julie Mehretu, Adrian Piper, Pope.L, Martin Puryear, Amy Sillman, Lorna Simpson, Henry Taylor, Stanley Whitney and Christopher Williams.

Hundreds more subsequently signed the open letter, which zeros in on the institutions' refusal to face up to Guston's Klan paintings. The artist first exhibited them in 1970, abandoning his earlier abstractions to face down the evil that he first saw as a young Jewish boy in Los Angeles. Though disturbing, these paintings have influenced generations of later painters; they were exhibited without incident at the last major Guston retrospective, staged in 2003–04 in New York, San Francisco, Fort Worth and London. But today's museum leaders have grown risk-averse to a degree that edges into censoriousness, and their fear has spread from the boardroom to the gallery walls.

"The people who run our great institutions do not want trouble," the artists argue. "They fear controversy. They lack faith in the intelligence of their audience. And they realize that to remind museumgoers of white supremacy today is not only to speak to them about the past, or events somewhere else. It is also to raise uncomfortable questions about museums themselves — about their class and racial foundations."

The letter, which confirms the breadth of opposition to the postponement of “Philip Guston Now,” should be enough to impel the four museums to reinstate the show. Its catalog has already been published and discusses Guston’s engagement with racism and anti-Semitism in depth. This summer, after the nationwide protests following the killing of George Floyd, curators undertook revisions of the wall text, paying special concern to how Black viewers saw the Klan paintings. Yet this was not enough to convince the leadership of the four museums. A spokeswoman for the National Gallery, the first of the four museums scheduled to present the show, told *The Times* that its director, Kaywin Feldman, had unanimous support for the decision from the museum’s trustees.

One of those trustees, the Ford Foundation president Darren Walker, implied that the power of Guston’s art, and the scholarship the curators have brought to bear upon it, was no longer of principal importance. “What those who criticize this decision do not understand,” Mr. Walker said last week, “is that in the past few months the context in the U.S. has fundamentally, profoundly changed on issues of incendiary and toxic racist imagery in art, regardless of the virtue or intention of the artist who created it.”

Put aside, at least for now, the calumny that Guston’s imagery is “toxic.” Put aside that it is wrong to censor *any* artist, toxic or not. Just on its face, Mr. Walker’s stance would exclude from our museums many of the open letter’s signatories, whose “virtue or intention” is not in question. Mr. Taylor, who has painted wrenching scenes of police brutality, or Pope.L, whose performances have regurgitated prejudices of Black men in messy and abject forms, might both be barred from exhibiting publicly if Mr. Walker’s doctrine became the norm. (I don’t even think the National Gallery’s current, excellent show “Degas at the Opéra” — with [depictions of what we would now call child prostitution](#), by the “toxic” Impressionist par excellence — could survive such scrutiny.)

Museums have faced frequent calls for accountability lately, but remember, the postponement of the Guston show is not a case of overreaction to protest. There has been no public outcry, and no contention that the curators sold the work short. This is a precancellation: a case of institutions running scared from phantasms, recoiling from their missions, assuming that their public is too clueless to look and think. Guston’s Klan paintings indeed require interpretation, education and public outreach — but that is *precisely* the job of museums at all times. It should not require four years of runway, and for the National Gallery and its partners to say it does counts as a breathtaking admission that they are not up to the job.

For as the artists suggest in their open letter, the reason to reinstate “Philip Guston Now” is not, or certainly not only, because he passes some anti-racist litmus test. It is to continue and accelerate the transformation of our museums

into institutions that can do justice to the work of *all* artists and the experiences of *all* publics. A museum unequipped to exhibit Guston will never be able to show truly “problematic” artists like Paul Gauguin or Francis Picabia — but just as inevitably it will fail Mr. Barney’s mythopoetic melding of bodies, Ms. Jonas’s culturally hybrid meditations on gender and climate, Ms. Piper’s exacting probes of self and stereotypes.

Really, a museum unequipped to exhibit Guston is barely a museum at all, or else only a museum in the most derogatory sense: a dusty storehouse of dead things.

This week, [at the first presidential debate](#), the incumbent was asked if he would condemn white supremacy outright. His response was to tell one of these white supremacist groups to “stand back and stand by.” It was only the latest reminder that our art institutions cannot afford anything less than a united front against racism and anti-Semitism, and should not be spooked by their own shadows when actual hatred is already at the gates. It’s not too late to reverse this decision, which is shaping up to be an even worse misdeed than the 1989 cancellation of [Robert Mapplethorpe’s “The Perfect Moment”](#) at the Corcoran Gallery of Art: worse because the censorship has come not from philistines outside the museum’s walls but from those within.

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