

Philip Guston (1913-1980)





Philip Guston, *Edge of Town*, 1969, huile sur toile, 195 x 280 cm, Moma, New York



P. Guston, *Riding Around*, 1969, huile sur toile, 137,2 x 200,7 cm.



Philip Guston, *Open Window II*, 1969.



Philip Guston, *Blackboard*, 1969.



Bad Times

1970

Philip Guston

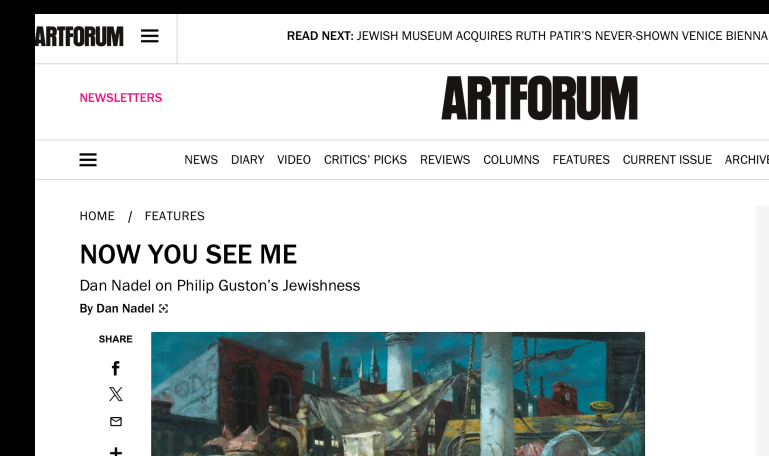
American, born Canada, 1913–1980

In the late 1960s, painter Philip Guston made a radical shift. Previously acclaimed for lush, luminous abstract works, he turned to crude, awkward renderings of often-sinister figures and objects. “I got sick and tired of that purity,” he declared. “I wanted to tell stories.” In an outpouring of figurative work near the end of his career that employed recurring imagery such as cartoonish Ku Klux Klansmen and piles of prone legs with the soles of their shoes exposed, Guston addressed sociopolitical issues as well as his own artistic conflicts. Starkly titled, *Bad Times* is dominated by brushy, almost pearlescent passages of paint that seem at odds with, but that also ground, a graphic scene of violence or its aftermath.



THE FIGURES began to reassert themselves in the black-and-gray abstract compositions with *Painter II*, 1959–60, and carried on throughout the '60s, floating noggins like private dicks in Sunday film matinees. Guston would later remember: “I was definitely becoming involved with some kind of figuration again, even though I couldn’t name it. The unnameable. I definitely was heading towards a figuration, but I wanted it done all at once, just as I did in the earlier, more simple, reduced paintings that I have shown.”¹⁵ In those years, Godfrey notes,¹⁶ Guston gave two interviews, one

Guston, “Talk at Yale Summer School”, 1972



Philip Guston, *Painter II*, 1959–60,
oil on canvas, 69 × 57"

JUNE 27, 2019 (SEPTEMBER 21, 2020)

"Philip Guston Now" Statement from the Directors

Kaywin Feldman, Director, National Gallery of Art

Frances Morris, Director, Tate Modern

Matthew Teitelbaum, Ann and Graham Gund Director, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Gary Tinterow, Director, The Margaret Alkek Williams Chair, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

After a great deal of reflection and extensive consultation, our four institutions have jointly made the decision to delay our successive presentations of Philip Guston Now. We are postponing the exhibition until a time at which we think that the

Exhibition Press Release

[Curator Biography: Harry Cooper](#)

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After a great deal of reflection and extensive consultation, our four institutions have jointly made the decision to delay our successive presentations of Philip Guston Now. We are postponing the exhibition 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.

We recognize that the world we live in is very different from the one in which we first began to collaborate on this project five years ago. The racial justice movement that started in the U.S. and radiated to countries around the world, in addition to challenges of a global health crisis, have led us to pause.

As museum directors, we have a responsibility to meet the very real urgencies of the moment. We feel it is necessary

to reframe our programming and, in this case, step back, and bring in additional perspectives and voices to shape how we present Guston's work to our public. That process will take time.

Collectively and individually, we remain committed to Philip Guston and his work. We plan to rebuild the retrospective with time to reconsider the many important issues the work raises.

This show has been years in the planning, the result of a true collaborative spirit among us. We plan to present a reconsidered Guston exhibition in 2024 and will work together to do so.

MARCH 02, 2023

"Philip Guston Now"

Philip Guston's paintings can be challenging and ambiguous. Through his art, Guston confronted the violence and turmoil unfolding around him. His paintings leave space for us to ask questions and to discover our own answers.



Delay of Philip Guston Retrospective Divides the Art World

“Philip Guston Now” has become Philip Guston in 2024, after four museums postponed an artist’s show that includes Klan imagery.

Sept. 25, 2020

New York Times

The Guston retrospective, the first in more than 15 years, was supposed to open in June at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It would then move to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, then to Tate Modern in London, and finally, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Titled “Philip Guston Now,” it contained 24 images with imagery that evokes the Klan, a spokeswoman for the National Gallery said, and two more where the imagery is less obvious. In total, there would be a selection of roughly 125 paintings and 70 drawings, though the final selection would have been different at each museum because of budgetary concerns and logistics.

This week, the directors of those museums released a [joint statement](#) saying that they were “postponing the

exhibition 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.”

When the news of the cancellation spread on Thursday evening, it prompted a deluge of criticism from inside the art world.



Podcast

National Gallery of Art Director Discusses the Decision to Delay the Philip Guston Exhibition

I talked to Kaywin Feldman to ask why the museum chose to delay the show by the well-known American artist.



Hrag Vartanian October 1, 2020



HYPERALLERGIC • EPISODE 80

National Gallery of Art Director Discusses the Dec...



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Last week, the [*New York Times*](#) reported that the National Gallery of Art's Philip Guston retrospective, expected to travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Tate Modern in London, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, would be delayed by four years. The reasons are many, including the limited demographics of those who worked on an exhibition that is very much about race, as well as the current cultural climate. The decision has caused reactions of indignation and anger in some art circles, causing others to be perplexed over what seems like an overreaction to the delay of an exhibition by a very well-known artist.

In this episode, the director of the National Gallery, Kaywin Feldman, shares her thoughts on the decision, why it was important, and what the National Gallery of Art will do now.

Jason Farago, “The Philip Guston Show Should Be Reinstated,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2020 [texte intégral en PDF]

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.

Sept. 30, 2020



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

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Open Letter: On Philip Guston Now

Over 2,600 artists, curators, writers, and critics have signed the open letter in response to the postponement of the *Philip Guston Now* retrospective.

[Sign the letter](#) [View all signatures](#) [Critical responses](#)

<https://brooklynrail.org/projects/on-philip-guston-now/>

Statement by Musa Mayer on the Updated Schedule for the Philip Guston retrospective



With regard to the postponed *Philip Guston Now* retrospective, there has been real progress in conversations with the directors of the four host museums over the past few weeks. Assurances have been made to me, as the daughter of the artist and President of The Guston Foundation about the importance of sharing with the public the full sweep of Guston's vision in ways that speak to us all in the present day.

While Philip Guston did indeed address racism at key points in his career, his condemnation of social injustice and violence encompassed examples as varied as the Holocaust, the Spanish Civil War, the horrors of the Inquisition, the calumny of the Nixon administration, and police brutality against anti-war demonstrators in 1968. I believe it is essential for the exhibition to contextualize the depth of my father's social conscience, allowing the hooded figures and other imagery to reclaim their meaning, including but also moving beyond specific references to the Ku Klux Klan. Over his 50-year career, Guston's art reflected many other personal and painterly dimensions, including works that show his love of Renaissance painting and the 20th century masters he revered, his celebration of the act of painting in itself, and the confessional intimacy and self-revelation of his late works, with their universal human themes.

What we need now, as so many have pointed out, is to actually see Philip Guston's paintings and drawings in all their complexity, without reductive characterizations. So, I am cautiously optimistic that we will all have a chance to do just that, beginning in May of 2022 at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. I thank all those who have expressed such enthusiasm for my father's work and have called for *Philip Guston Now* to go forward. Your support has sustained me during a difficult time. I hope to join you in celebrating the retrospective when it opens.

Philip Guston's daughter on his Klan paintings: 'They're about white culpability - including his own'



Sean O'Hagan

Sun 21 Feb 2021 13.00
CET

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"I was just stunned," she says. "The show had taken over four years to put together, everything was in place, the catalogue had already been published, and suddenly they had decided it was not happening."

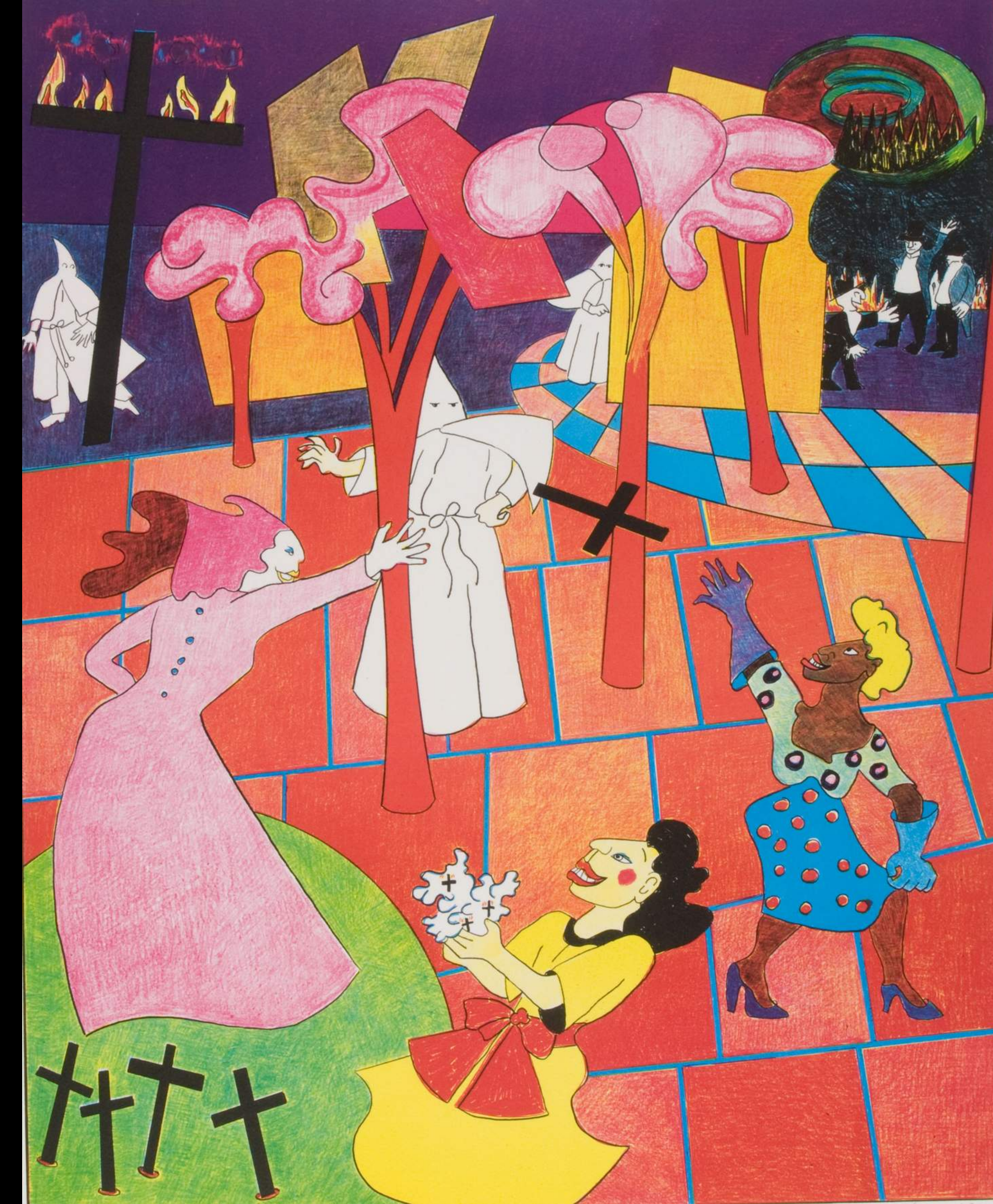
In a subsequent phone call with Teitelbaum and Kaywin Feldman, director of the National Gallery of [Art](#), Washington, she discovered that the decision was prompted by their anxieties about a series of paintings of Ku Klux Klansmen that Guston had made in his Woodstock studio in the late 1960s. In a deliberately raw, cartoonish style, he had rendered them as absurdist caricatures of the real thing, their pointy-hooded heads an extension of their squat, sickly pink torsos, their eyes two rectangular brush strokes.

"The potent images of Ku Klux Klansmen, masked and unpunished, had lingered in Guston's psyche since boyhood," writes Mayer in *Philip Guston*, her newly published book about her father's life and work. In 1930, just turned 20, he had first painted them in a much more straightforward figurative style for an anti-racist mural commissioned by a leftwing association in Los Angeles. It had subsequently been defaced in a raid by members of the "Red Squad", a local police unit known to have officers sympathetic to white supremacists.

21 février 2021

To Mayer's dismay, her father, an antiracist and the son of immigrants who had fled antisemitic persecution, was now having his complex images **misrepresented** and their subject matter **rendered simplistically provocative**. "The history of racism in the United States," she told me, "is one of periods when it is submerged in the popular consciousness, followed by periods of great unrest, like the present one, when it is manifest and no one can deny its existence. My father made those works at a time when the Ku Klux Klan were no longer as menacing as they had been in his youth, but racism was still, of course, a presence in the consciousness of mainstream white America. The paintings are essentially **about white culpability** – the culpability of all of us, including himself. That is why he referred to some of them as self-portraits. He wasn't just pointing the finger at others, he was pointing it at himself. **What hope is there if artists cannot examine themselves?**"





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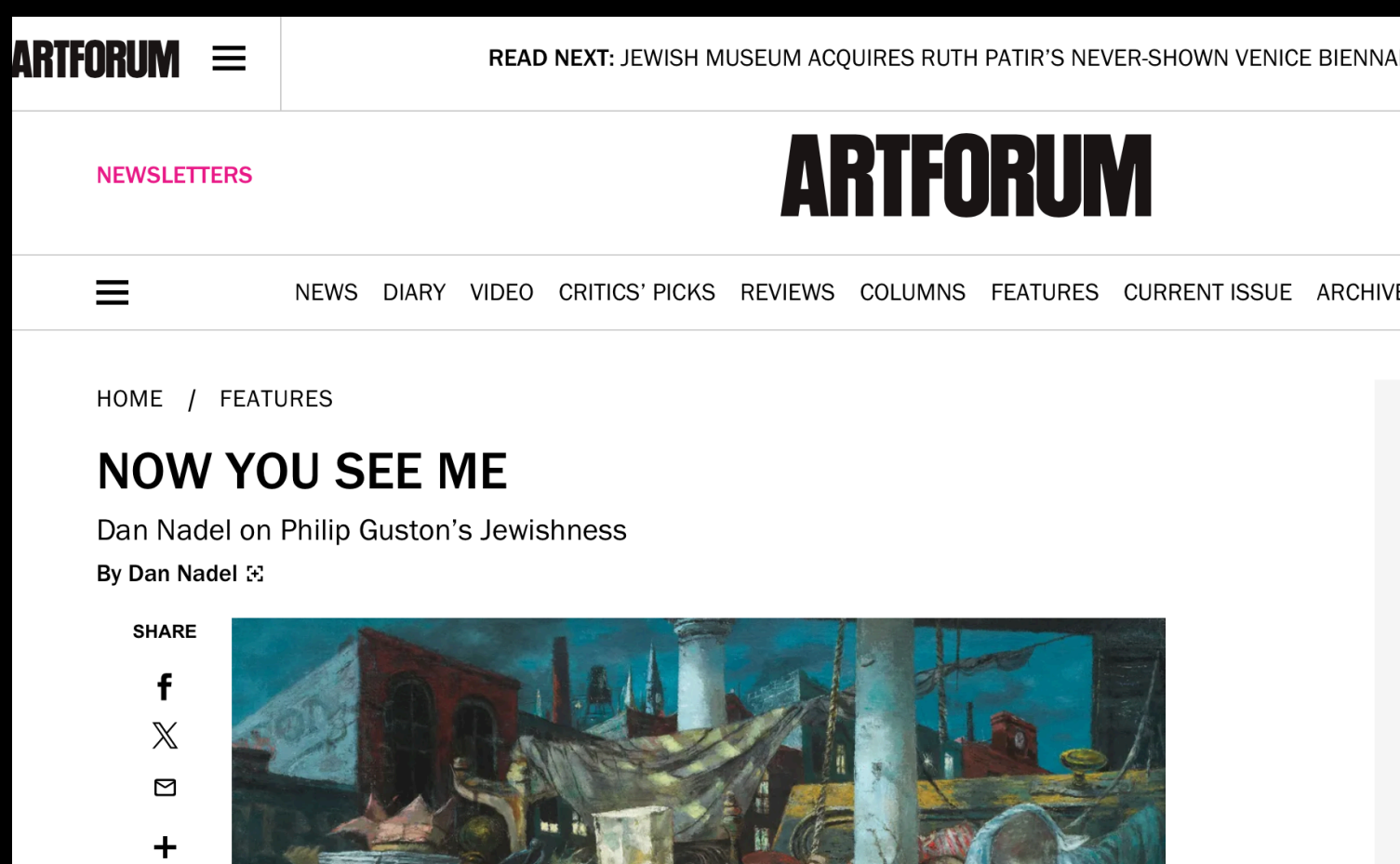
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TATE ETC – 3 JANUARY 2024

White Hoods, White Masks

Philip Guston's paintings call attention to some of the most urgent issues of his time, and ours. But to what extent can art really tackle the problems it portrays? Curators and critics *Tiffany E. Barber* and *Joan Choi* examine Guston's work, influence and ongoing legacy

Camille Billops,
The KKK Boutique, 1994
Philadelphia Museum of Art



opening in 2022). Let’s stick to Jews. I was struck by how casually Kaywin Feldman labeled Guston a white artist who “appropriated images of Black Trauma.”³ Guston, a Jewish artist who was aware that his very existence was contingent on his parents’ having escaped from Ukraine, whose extended past was cloaked by his new name and then exterminated in the Holocaust, was not “appropriating” anything. His family experienced pogroms, he saw the Klan marching, he knew the fear that all Jews feel and was aware of the implications of his imagery. It is unquestionable that Black people suffered most at the hands of the Klan. Anti-Black bigotry was at the organization’s heart. It is also true that Jews and immigrants, members of the LGBTQ community, and, until recently, Catholics were impacted by the Klan and other horrors of the twentieth century. To flatten Guston’s Jewishness and to disallow his use of historically and ideologically loaded symbols is to preclude the nuance necessary for thoughtful interpretation. Just as Guston’s Jewishness matters, so does the fact that his Klan paintings are not themselves racist or anti-racist statements. They are paintings of ambiguity, pain, humor, terror, love, and confession. Actions such as the postponement perpetuate bad-faith readings of artworks and discourage the conversation and thinking that art might engender. Mark Godfrey’s disgraceful

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NOW YOU SEE ME

Dan Nadel on Philip Guston's Jewishness


By Dan Nadel

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put it in later years, to “bear witness.”⁷ His *Drawing for Conspirators*, 1930, imagines the aftermath of a lynching, a Klansman in the foreground fingering a rope as a pious man might prayer beads; for his entire life, he would talk about the Los Angeles Police Department’s defacement of a fresco he helped paint in protest of the wrongful conviction and death sentences of nine Black teenagers in Scottsboro, Alabama; in Morelia, Mexico, at the recommendation of David Alfaro Siqueiros, Guston and friends Jules Langsner and Reuben Kadish painted the sadly-no-longer-extant 1,024-square-foot fresco *The Struggle Against Terrorism*, 1934–35, in which two Klansmen tumble into a multiperspectival space and are met by strong workers and godlike hands holding a hammer and sickle. Painting and politics were one.