

PHILIP GUSTON

From Philip Guston Talking (1978)

Bad Habits 1970 oil on canvas

There are people who think that painters shouldn't talk. I know many people who feel that way, but that makes the painter into a sort of painting monkey...

I feel that strongly believed in and stated convictions on art have a habit of tumbling and collapsing in front of the canvas, when the act of painting actually begins.

Furthermore I have found that painters of my generation are more candid and provocative in their casual talk and asides, and funnier too. Mark Rothko, after a mutual studio visit, said, "Phil, you're the best story teller around and I'm the best organ player." That was in 1957; I still wonder what he had in mind. So many articles appeared with words like sublime, and noble and he says he's the best organ player around. Franz Kline, in a very easy bar conversation in the fifties, said, "You know what creating really is? To have the capacity to be embarrassed." And one of the better definitions about painting was Kline's.... He said, "You know, painting is like hands stuck in a mattress."

In a recent article which contrasts the work of a colour-field painter with mine, the painter is quoted as saying "A painting is made with coloured paint on a surface and what you see is what you see." This popular and melancholy cliché is so remote from my own concern. In my experience a painting is not made with colours and paint at all. I don't know what a painting is; who knows what sets off even the desire to paint? It might be things, thoughts, a memory, sensations, which have nothing to do directly with painting itself. They can come from anything and anywhere, a trifle, some detail observed, wondered about and, naturally from the previous painting. The painting is not on a surface, but on a plane which is imagined. It moves in a mind. It is not there physically at all. It is an illusion, a piece of magic, so what you see is not what you see.

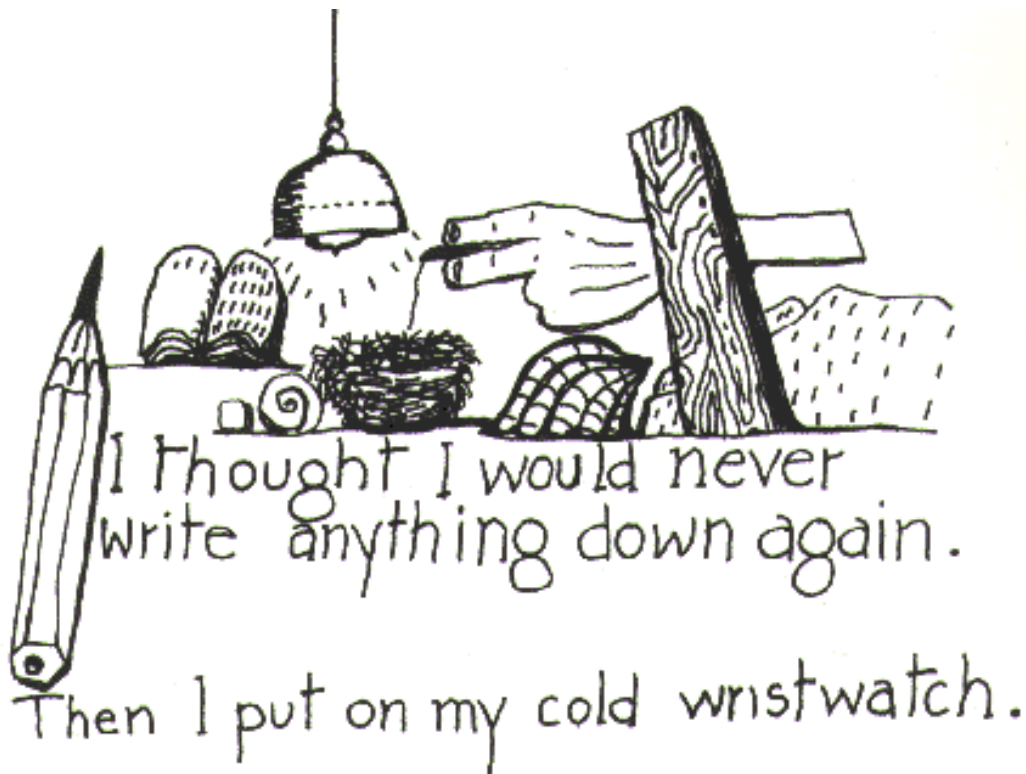
I suppose the same thing was true in the Renaissance. There is Leonardo da Vinci's famous statement that painting is a thing of the mind. I think that's right. I think that the idea of the pleasure of the eye is not merely limited, it isn't even possible. Everything means something. Anything in life or in art, any mark you make has meaning and the only question is, what kind of meaning?" Years back, in the late '40s and early '50s, I felt that painting could respect itself, reduce itself to what was possible; that is, to paint only that which painting, through its own means, could express. I enjoyed that short-lived period. The reverberations of such paintings could be heard.

But in time I tired of this kind of ambiguity. There were better things required from the maker as well as the all-too-willing viewer. Too much of a collaboration was going on. It was like a family club of art lovers. This disenchantment grew. I knew that I would need to test painting all over again in order to appease my desire for the clear and sharper enigma of solid forms in an imagined space, a world of images, subjects, stories, like the way art always was....

I was talking at Harvard and one graduate student thought that I was attacking

minimal painting. I guess I had used the term “stripes” but I said, “No, you’ve got it all wrong.” There would be absolutely no way to prove that paintings of things and objects, real and imagined, are better than stripes. One couldn’t prove it, and I’d be the last to maintain that one could. All I can say is that when I leave the studio and get back to the house and think about what I did, then I like to think that I’ve left a world of people in the studio. A world of people. In fact they are more real than the world I see. I wouldn’t enjoy being in the kitchen, looking out of the window at the studio while having a drink, thinking that I had simply left a world of relationships and stripes in these. So to know and how not to know is the greatest puzzle of all, finally. I think we are primitive really, in spite of our knowing. It’s a long, long preparation for a few moments of innocence.

I think that probably the most potent desire for a painter, an image-maker, is to see it. To see what the mind can think and imagine, to realize it for oneself, through oneself, as concretely as possible. I think that’s the most powerful and at the same time the most archaic urge that has endured for about 25,000 years. In about 1961 or 1962 the urge for images became so powerful that I started a whole series of dark pictures, mostly just black and white. They were conceived as heads and objects.



MUSA MCKIM

Philip Guston and Musa McKim, I thought I would never write anything down again, mid-1970's, ink on paper

After the show at the Jewish Museum in 1966, I knew I wanted to go on and to deal with concrete objects. I got stuck on shoes, shoes on the floor. I must have done hundreds of paintings of shoes, books, hands, buildings and cars, just everyday objects. And the more I did the more mysterious these objects became. The visible world, I think, is abstract and mysterious enough, I don't think one needs to depart from it in order to make art. This painting started out as a hand with a brush and it turned into a paw. So I started thinking about evolution, that is questions such as who was the being, the prehistoric man, who made the first line. I have a large collection of old rusty railroad nails, and they lie around on the table as paper weights. They're big huge nails, and I just nailed one in to a piece of wood. I thought, how would it look if. That's a very powerful "If." . . .

I live out of town, and driving down to New York City I go down the West Side Highway. There are all these buildings that look as if they are marching. You know, by painting things they start to look strange and dopey. Also there was a desire, a powerful desire though an impossibility, to paint things as if one had never seen them before, as if one had come from another planet. How would you paint them; how would you realize them? It was really a tremendous period for me. I couldn't produce enough.

I couldn't go to New York, to openings of friends of mine like Rothko, de Kooning, Newman. I would telephone Western Union with all kinds of lies such as that my teeth were falling out, or that I was sick. It was such a relief not to have anything to do with modern art. It felt as if a big boulder had been taken off my shoulders.

As a young boy I was an activist in radical politics, and although I am no longer an activist, I keep track of everything. In 1967-68 I became very disturbed by the war and the demonstrations. They became my subject matter and I was flooded by a memory. When I was about 17 to 18, I had done a whole series of paintings about the Ku Klux Klan, which very powerful in Los Angeles at that time. The police department had what they called Red Squad, the main purpose of which was to break up any attempts at unionizing. Remember this was 1932, 1933. I was working in a factory and became involved in a strike. The KKK helped in strike breaking so I did a whole series of paintings on the KKK. In fact I had a show of them in a bookshop in Hollywood, where I was working at that time. Some members of the Klan walked in, took the paintings off the wall and slashed them. Two were mutilated.

This was the beginning. They are self-portraits. I perceive myself as being behind a hood. In the new series of "hoods" my attempt was really not to illustrate, to do pictures of the KKK, as I had done earlier. The idea of evil fascinated me, and rather like Isaac Babel who had joined the Cossacks, lived with them and written stories about them, I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan and plot. Then I started conceiving an imaginary city being overtaken by the Klan. I was like a movie director. I couldn't wait, I had hundreds of pictures in mind and when I left the studio I would make notes to myself, memos, "Put them all around the table, eating, drinking beer." Ideas and feelings kept coming so fast; I couldn't stop, I was sitting on the crest of a wave.

In the picture Cellar

I wondered what it would look like to have a bunch of figures, scared, diving down into a cellar. I painted it in about four hours without any erasures. And when it was done I said, "Aha! So that's what it would look like." And that's what I mean about primitive art or cave art, so that's what it looks like. I want to see what it looks like. They call it art afterwards, you know. Then I started thinking that in this city, in which creatures or insects had taken over, or were running the world, there were bound to be artists. What would they paint?

They would paint each other, or paint self-portraits. I did a whole series in which I made a spoof of the whole art world. I had hoods looking at field paintings, hoods being at art openings, hoods having discussions about colour. I had a good time....

When these were shown, my painter friends in the New York School would come up to me and say, "Now what did you want to do that for?" It seemed to depress a lot of people. It was as though I had left the Church, I was excommunicated for a while. Two or three people were notable exceptions. One was Rosenberg, who I think wrote the only favourable review, a really interesting and knowing review in the New Yorker. The other person was Bill de Kooning. At the opening he grabbed me, hugged me and said he was envious, which was flattering, because I regarded him as the best painter in the country and, in many ways, the only one. I mean he's a real mind and a real painter. "Philip," he said, "this isn't the subject. Do you know what the real subject is?" And we both said at the same time, "Freedom." Then we hugged each other again.

Of course that's what it's about. Freedom. That's the only possession an artist has—freedom to do whatever you can imagine. Then I left for Europe, immediately after the show. The art critic from the New York Times, Hilton Kramer, gave me a whole page.

He called it "From Mandarin to Stumblebum," and reproduced The Studio, which I think is a very sophisticated picture. I thought I had put in everything I knew about painting. But he thought, well, that's the end of him. He did a real hatchet job. I had asked the gallery not to send me any clippings, I just wanted to have a vacation....

The few people who visit me are poets or writers, rather than painters, because I value their reactions. Looking at this painting, Clark Coolidge, a poet who lives about 30 miles away said that [Deluge] looked as if an invisible presence had been there, but had left these objects and gone somewhere else. I like that kind of reaction, compared with reactions like "That green works, the blue doesn't work."

I didn't arrange this still life it's just objects picked out from around the studio. It's called ***Painter's Table***. It was fun to paint ashtrays and cigarette butts, which began to look like something else. I draw constantly when I paint, I'll take a week off and do hundreds of drawings. It's a form of germination. I don't follow drawings literally. Once in a while I will indulge in a very loose painting. By loose I don't mean deliberately loose, rather just not having too much on my mind and just stumbling on painting and seizing on whatever happens. I don't remember painting these heads drowning in a basement, that awful feeling of the basement being filled with water in a dream or nightmare.

I use the complete range of everything I've ever learned in painting: To be tight, to be loose, to be conscious, to be not conscious. Sometimes I make sketches of paintings, plan it out and change little in the doing of it. At others I start with nothing on my mind. Everything is possible, everything except dogma, of any kind. These are large pictures, about eleven feet in width. I put rubber castors on the ten foot painting table so that I can move from one part of the painting to the other part very easily, without losing my thought or urgency, and without stepping back to look at it. The worst thing in the world is to make judgments. What I always try to do is to eliminate, as much as possible, the time span between thinking and doing. The ideal is to think and to do at the same second, the same split second.

I ought to explain what I meant by trifles earlier. One morning my wife, after the rain, pointed out a spider that was making a marvelous web, so I started doing a number of web pictures with my wife and myself, and a lot of paraphernalia caught in the web. That's her on the right, with the hair coming down her forehead, and then I thought I'd put a shoe on her head. (*Image not available*) It's a terribly corny idea, but what can you do? It led to a whole series of paintings with both of us caught in the web. It felt good making a web, eleven feet across. I didn't study the web, I don't know what a web looks like. I just invented a web.

Sometimes changing a form is important. I remember that eye, the heavy-lidded eye, was originally shoes and legs upside down; at that point it bored me so I started taking it out and it became an eye, like an all-seeing eye in science fiction. It felt all right. Those two big fingers dangling down below puzzled me. The hand wrapped in the canvas didn't look right until I did the lines on the hand, as if it were a Greek sculpture or an ancient hand, not a realistic hand.

Well, this is a self-portrait. I had been painting all night. I went into the john, looked in the mirror and saw that my eyes were all bloodshot. I came back, picked up a small brush, dipped it in red, and made my eyes bloodshot. Then the painting was finished. You see, I look at my paintings, speculate about them. They baffle me, too. That's all I'm painting for.

Philip Guston. excerpts from "Philip Guston Talking" (lecture at the University of Minnesota, March 1978), in Renee McKee, ed.. Philip Guston (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1982). 49-56.