

# Philip Guston

With a lecture given by Philip Guston  
at the University of Minnesota in March 1978  
edited by Renée McKee

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TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY





*Untitled (Red spot)* 1969 acrylic on panel 18 × 20 in / 45.7 × 50.8 cm



*Condition* 1971 oil on canvas 78 × 102½ in / 198.1 × 260.4 cm





*Tower* 1970 oil on canvas 72 × 80½ in / 182.9 × 204.5 cm





*Stage* 1975 oil on canvas 68½ × 85½ in / 174 × 217.2 cm





*Crescent* 1976 oil on canvas 78 × 116 in / 198.1 × 294.6 cm





*Inside-Outside* 1977 oil on canvas 68½ × 74½ in / 174 × 189.2 cm





*Calm Sea* 1977 oil on canvas  $68\frac{1}{2} \times 85\frac{1}{2}$  in /  $174 \times 217.2$  cm





*Cloud* 1978 oil on canvas 48 × 60 in / 122 × 152.4 cm



Philip Guston, *Ledge*

Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 in. (121.9 x 152.4 cm)



*Ledge* is a painting by Philip Guston, an American abstract painter. The work is an oil on canvas, measuring 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm). It depicts a complex, abstract structure of red and brown forms, resembling a mechanical or architectural assembly, resting on a light-colored, rectangular ledge. The background is a solid blue. The painting is signed 'Philip Guston' in the lower right corner.

*Ledge* 1979 oil on canvas 48 x 60 in / 121.9 x 152.4 cm



## **Philip Guston Talking**

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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.

Today I am going to show you slides of work and I have limited the selection to the last ten years, for the most part, skipping about two decades of painting.

I'm going to focus on what I've been doing up until last year. However, I thought I could say something before I start the slides. I would like to make some comments, but not about what my paintings mean. That's impossible, totally impossible for me to do. I'm certain that professional art writers could do it much better than I could. Besides I have developed a tendency to disbelieve what artists say in their official statements. Nevertheless I will try to be as candid as I can be.

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 stuffing 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?' But then, it may be a matter simply of appetite, what one has a hunger for. There are painters, I almost said aesthetes, who do know what to make and how to make what they know. Expectations are fulfilled; however the air then becomes tepid and domesticated.



Years back, in the late '40s and early '50s, I felt that painting *could* restrict 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, and too much sympathy was 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 desires for the clear and sharper enigma of solid forms in an imagined space, a world of tangible things, images, subjects, stories, like the way art always was.

At the first exhibition of Barnett Newman's paintings, de Kooning was in the gallery. We left together in total silence, down the elevator and through to the street. More silence. Then after a coffee he said, 'Well, now we don't have to think about *that* anymore'. I have an uneasy suspicion that painting really doesn't have to exist at all – I mean, it didn't come down from Mount Sinai; it's not written in the ten commandments – *unless it* questions itself constantly. I mean, what can it tolerate? For myself, it can tolerate a lot, nothing can be excluded in art, in order to test it. There can be puzzling detours, contradictions, images and styles which are irrational, and so on. The strange and the familiar, the everyday, can live together in a painting. I enjoy having a subject to paint. But it's not very controllable, in fact totally uncontrollable, because meaning keeps shifting and so does the structure. In this necessary engagement images appear, then as quickly disappear. Failure is always around, waiting. It has always been mystifying to me, why, on a *lucky* day, the images do take hold,



grip, and there is no urge to clear it off. This temporary satisfaction, very temporary, is always a surprise to me. Then a sort of chronic restlessness enters the studio and you begin again.

Regarding the general situation in art today, which I suppose is the subject of this conference, I haven't really too much to say. It has become official, obviously; it is so insured against failure, against bad painting, against risking. But something must be wrong somewhere, because there is this overwhelming success and at the same time such an overwhelming apathy. Everyone knows about art, except the artist. He, it seems, must find out not about art, but how to stay on the treadmill. Each time he paints he must discover how to trust himself, his instincts, without knowing how it will turn out. It sounds easy until you try it. I think it was Picasso who was interviewed and who was asked 'What has been the most important thing in your life, master', and he replied, 'Self-trust'. He said that it had taken him a life time to learn how to trust his inchoate urges and instincts. And it's not easy to achieve because we don't even recognise the extent to which we are victims of the institutionalized art which is all around us. Nor how often we check ourselves. You have a feeling or thought – check, check, check. Of the two writers that I've admired the most for years, Franz Kafka and Isaac Babel, Isaac Babel gave a lovely, ironic speech to the Soviet Writers Union. It was 1934. He ended his talk with the following remark. 'The party and the government have given us everything, but have deprived us of one privilege. A very important privilege, comrades, has been taken away from you. That of writing badly.' Isn't that beautiful? Where am I? Doesn't anyone want to paint badly?

And now we are going to look at some slides. Can we turn down all the lights? ... Pitch black. I'm going to start with a painting



I completed about a year ago, and about which I wrote some notes, in the form of a letter to a friend, the poet and novelist Ross Feld. I'd like to read it to you as you look at the slides. I wrote,

'I have recently done a painting which continues to baffle me, a highly desired state. I admit vacillating between trying to explain, or not to. Here are some thoughts then on a matter which should perhaps not be talked about at all. I also think the only real things to talk about are not possible to talk about. The painting might well say, 'What do you want from me? I'm only a painting. Let me be'. But I can't prevent my old habits of analysis and speculation. To be specific, as I recall with this painting, changes occur very fast, groups of forms are painted rapidly and then as quickly painted out. I felt as if I were *living out* the painting rather than painting it. Time was speeded up or else stopped. Quite suddenly, the work was done. Nothing felt arbitrarily placed in space, but rather *irreversible*; the only way, at this moment, the painting *could* be. The forms, which touch and bump and overlap each other, strain to separate themselves, yet cannot exist without one another. While they strive to become independent, a condition of delirium persists, as if these forms desire to configure other combinations of themselves. What a restless and startling state for forms to be in! It's like life. So in a painting, sky, ground and solid forms resist being taken apart. Yet, clearly on the plane of the painting, a singular combination of forms is fixed, held, to be contemplated.'

'Perhaps the image being presented is really a *natural* one. And I have learned a primary lesson after traversing a vast circle of thoughts and impulses, and the lesson is this: if forms are to be represented in a painting, this is the way they would behave and affect one another.

Shall I think of the painting then as a kind of mirror reflecting a family of forms, as it were? This mirror mirrors change then, or rather the promise of change. Ross, I know this may sound too circular, but it is here – precisely – where the mystifying area in creating enters. For, if, as I believe, one is changed by what one does – what one paints – continuous creation can be furthered only in *time*. That is, to *maintain* the condition of continuity – or as we might put it, the subversion of an intolerable finality. Not to do so would be to enter the wax-works museum, which is comic and hilarious – a sort of mock death. Further in refusing this wax-works state, one is propelled to make what one has not yet made, nor seen made. What one does not yet know how to make. I must say though, that to dwell overly much on this unknown character of time, in art, may be inutile. Perhaps we are not permitted to know more than we do know.

‘Not permitted to know’. Yet these questions are old friends that have been turned over and over in one’s mind and even the very aspects of these questions have become unrecognizable. It could be this that makes the work resist being consumed, or conversely, consumed too easily. That’s possible in a packaged facile way, like being put into a slot. This is your category, stay there. 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 there. So to know and how not to know is the greatest puzzle of all, finally. I think that 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. 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 to think about 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 realise 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 was very powerful in Los Angeles at that time. The police department had what they called the 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, 'Ah ... , 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.

This drawing (for the *Conspirators*) was done in 1930. I discovered it about five years ago in a drawer, in a package of old drawings. It's a sketch for one of the early Klan paintings, though now the paintings are totally different. So one never forgets anything, one never goes forward and forward, you are always moving in a circular way, and

*nothing* is ever finished, nothing is ever finished until you leave.

The paintings have very simple titles, as Harold Rosenberg called them, laconic titles. This is called *A Day's Work*. Before they were shown at Marlborough, Tom Hess, who was then editor of *Art News*, heard something was up, so we went over to the warehouse to see them. He looked at this painting here, one with a piece of lumber with nails sticking out, and he said, 'What's that, a typewriter?' I said, 'For Christ's sakes, Tom, if this were 11 feet of one colour, with one band running down on the end, you wouldn't ask me what it was'. I said, 'Don't you know a 2 by 4 with red nails?'

This is called *Scared Stiff*, I put them in courtrooms being judged. 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. We were in Venice in November and in a weak moment I went to American Express for mail. The 'xerox underground' had caught up with me and in it was the article from the *Times*. I was angry for about half an hour and then I threw it in one of the canals. Why should I be depressed in Venice? So, when I returned about 8 or 10 months later, I was at Yale and a student asked, 'How did you feel when you read the review in the *Times*?' I explained to him that I was in Venice and then I started thinking, 'That's a hell of a review. Jesus, what if he had *liked* it, than I would have *really* been in trouble'. So that solved that problem.

So I came back. I had finished with the hoods, they were done, you can't redo a thing once it's done. I started painting things around me again. The road outside, a couple of telephone poles, paint cans, a pile of junk. The line between the two poles was the last thing, and it felt very good. I felt like a telephone linesman. I made this line all the way across the canvas and it was finished. I started doing pictures of my wife and I in bed. Then I did a whole series of paintings of smokers smoking; it's me. When I show these, people laugh, and I always wonder what laughter is. I suppose Baudelaire's definition is still valid; it's the collision of two contrary feelings. Many of the following paintings are paintings about the painter. This is called *Painting, Smoking, Eating*. There is a guy lying in bed eating a bunch of french fries, imagining this big pile up of stuff above him.

I have a horror of telephones. I have a gadget so that you can turn it off, so that I can call out but nobody can call me. It's a very selfish

thing to do, but I indulge myself in the luxury. And there's a luncheonette not far away, and they have the most marvellous bacon and egg sandwich. That's what this is. I was painting the hated object and the desired object. There was a lot of bacon sticking out and it started looking like a body.

When you paint things they change into something else, something totally unpredictable. The telephone looked terrible. I started to scrape it out and it began to look o.k. The black was scraped out with a knife and it looked like the effect you get when you are a kid and you put paper over a coin and rub ... So then I thought, I should make a painting of it, put something between those two objects. I didn't know what to do, so I made them into two pictures, one a picture of the telephone and the other a picture of the sandwich, and that seemed o.k. Then I started a series of several dozen paintings of paint tables. I began working at my painting table and then the water above it gave me the idea of a flood, with people drowning. You really can't explain why you do certain things. I got a kick out of those two drawn heads, one guy looking and the other guy looking at the guy looking, with the other head half submerged in water. This is another flood, in fact I call it *Deluge*, like an end of the world picture. Three quarters of it rising from the bottom was black with strange creatures moving around, then a few little objects on the red horizon: a little painting, a little clock, a little sun. Then I asked myself, 'what would it be like if the flood disappeared, what would be left in this wasteland?' This is it. And the strange thing, the most peculiar sensation, was that I felt I hadn't changed at all from the work of the '50s. I painted this picture without stepping back to judge it. I started on the right and just kept going all the way to the left. I didn't know



whether it was organized or disorganized. I took my chances with it.

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 it 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 'The 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 ash-trays 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, not to be 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 judgements. 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 think in my studies and broodings about the art of the past my greatest ideal is Chinese painting, especially Sung painting dating from about the 10th or 11th century. Sung period training involves doing something thousands and thousands of times – bamboo shoots and birds – until someone else does it, not you, and the rhythm moves through you. I think that is what the Zen Buddhists called satori and I have had it happen to me. It is a double activity, when you know and don't know, and it shouldn't really be talked about. So I work towards that moment and if a year or two later I look at some of the work I've done and try to start judging it, I find it's impossible. You can't judge it because it was felt.

What measure is there, other than the fact that at one point in your life you trusted a feeling? You have to trust that feeling and then continue, trusting yourself. And it works in a reverse way. I know that I started similar things in the past, 20 to 25 years ago, and would then scrape them out. I remember the pictures I scraped out very well, in fact some of them are sharper in my mind than the ones that remained. Well then, I would subsequently ask myself, 'why did I scrape them out?' Well, I wasn't ready to accept it, that's the only answer. This leads me to another point: it doesn't occur to many viewers that the artist often has difficulty accepting the painting himself. You can't assume that I gloried in it, or celebrated it. I didn't. I'm a night painter, so when I come into the studio the next morning the delirium is over. I know I won't remember detail, but I will remember the feeling of the whole thing. I come into the studio very fearfully,



I creep in to see what happened the night before. And the feeling is one of, 'My God, did *I* do *that*?'. That is about the only measure I have. The kind of shaking, trembling of ... 'That's me? I did that?' But most of the time, we're carpenters, we build and build, and add and prepare and when you drag yourself into the studio, you say, 'Oh, that's what I did. It's horrible. All of it has to go'. This is one of the last minute touches. Often at the moment you're playing your last card and are ready to give up, another kind of awareness enters and you work with that moment. But you can't force that moment either. You truly have to have given up. And then something happens. You see that book down below? When I was doing it I automatically put that question mark on the book. Then I went to the john and, in the country you're not going to the john you are going to the moon, when I eventually came back I thought that's a corny thing to do, that question mark, but I left it there.

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 marvellous 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. 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.