

“What kind of man am I, 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?”

– Philip Guston, “Creation is for Beauty Parlors” *New York Post*, April 9, 1977

In late September of 2020, almost four months to the day after George Floyd was murdered by police in Fayetteville, NC, curators at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Tate Modern in London, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston announced the postponement of their potentially blockbusting joint exhibition “Philip Guston Now” until 2024.¹ The highly anticipated show, which was set to go on a grand tour lasting through the end of 2021, was the first retrospective of acclaimed artist Philip Guston in over a decade.² The team of directors from the four museums stated that the delay was necessary in order 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.”³ In essence, it seems as if they felt as if the world was wholly unprepared for the messages behind Guston’s work.

What is that message exactly? The show, a collection of about 125 paintings and 70 drawings, consisted of a mix of Guston’s abstract work as well as the darker satirical paintings featuring the cartoon-like hooded figures of the Ku Klux Klan. Once at the frontier of the abstract expressionist movement, Guston radically shifted art styles in the aftermath of the social and cultural movements pre- and post-Vietnam War.⁴ The message isn’t clear, as Guston most likely intended. However, it’s without a doubt that Guston’s art creates unsettling feelings and emotions, forcing viewers to hopefully feel a semblance of the discomfort and challenging emotions the artist felt through his brushstrokes. In this sense, it’s not hard to see why the curators thought that delaying such an exhibition would be wise, given the quickly rising climate of the social justice movement happening at the time.

What the exhibitors did not expect was the torrential backlash they faced in the wake of their announcement. In an open letter condemning the team published by The Brooklyn Rail and signed by over 2,600 artists, writers, and spectators alike, it’s stated that the creators of the show “fear controversy” in their refusal to show their exhibition in the present time. The letter goes on to say, “They lack faith in the intelligence of their audience. And they realize that

¹ Jacobs, Julia. “Philip Guston Blockbuster Show Postponed by Four Museums.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, September 25, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/arts/design/philip-guston-postponed-museums-klan.html>.

² Cooper, Harry, Mark Godfrey, Lima Greene Alison de, Kate Nesin, and Jennifer Roberts. *Philip Guston Now*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2020.

³ Feldman, Kaywin, Frances Morris, Matthew Teitelbaum, and Gary Tinterow. “Statement From the Directors.” National Gallery of Art, 2020. <https://www.nga.gov/press/exhibitions/exhibitions-2023/5235/statement-from-the-directors.html>.

⁴ Cooper, et al.

to remind museum-goers 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.”⁵ Museums have been going through an existential crisis of sorts in the last decade or so; while some struggle to remain relevant altogether, others try to go out of their way to not be cancelled, or deemed as exclusively irrelevant. These institutions have come to fear controversy and its repercussions. In the face of this fear, they revert to their former colonial-stemmed ways in their presentation of art, sometimes overlooking the intentions of the artists themselves in favor of attempting to seem neutral (and therefore, remain extant). The organizers of “Philip Guston Now” failed to realize that there is an abundance of critical conversations that need to happen in the wake of controversy itself. Yes, the imagery of the KKK is potentially triggering and elicits strong negative responses from people, but since when was art created solely for the leisure of the viewer? (Hint: think 19th century post-French Revolution). Change does not happen first without impenitent discomfort.

At what point should an institution be unapologetic in the presentation of potentially problematic exhibitions? Should they test the waters first and see how the community might react? Or should they just stick to their guns and do what the artist intended: make people feel uncomfortable? Consider Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmett Till in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. The painting, titled *Open Casket*, is the artist’s rendition of Till’s brutally mangled features at his funeral, where Till’s mother demanded an open casket funeral to expose the true horrors of white supremacy in the 1950s. The controversy came from many angles; it’s not just that Schutz is a white artist; it’s also the fact that she has been given the space to display her art as an appropriation of the black experience, almost feeding off the trauma experienced by the black community at the hands of the civil rights movements.

That being said, yes, people were uncomfortable and there was indeed quite the controversy surrounding the Whitney as a result. But there was *dialect* and *conversation* about why people felt the way they did and what institutions like the Whitney need to do in the future to both prevent this from happening again and for improving their approach to displaying works of art that may come across as problematic. Philip Guston’s daughter, who illustrates their family’s struggle as Jewish immigrants who fled Ukraine to escape persecution in her father’s biography, said “The danger is not looking at Philip Guston’s work, but in looking away.”⁶ Institutions must realize that in order to stay relevant and true to the communities they serve they must not try their best to steer away from controversy, and instead, they should wholly embrace it.

⁵ The Brooklyn Rail. “Open Letter: On Philip Guston Now.” The Brooklyn Rail, September 30, 2020. <https://brooklynrail.org/projects/on-philip-guston-now/#critical-responses>.

⁶ Jacobs, Julia

Bibliography

The Brooklyn Rail. "Open Letter: On Philip Guston Now." The Brooklyn Rail, September 30, 2020. <https://brooklynrail.org/projects/on-philip-guston-now/#critical-responses>.

Cooper, Harry, Mark Godfrey, Lima Greene Alison de, Kate Nesin, and Jennifer Roberts. *Philip Guston Now*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2020.

Feldman, Kaywin, Frances Morris, Matthew Teitelbaum, and Gary Tinterow. "Statement From the Directors." National Gallery of Art, 2020. <https://www.nga.gov/press/exhibitions/exhibitions-2023/5235/statement-from-the-directors.html>.

Jacobs, Julia. "Philip Guston Blockbuster Show Postponed by Four Museums." The New York Times. The New York Times, September 25, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/arts/design/philip-guston-postponed-museums-klan.html>.