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## Prepping for art of the provocative

### Postponed Guston show makes return to MFA

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GLOBE STAFF

When the Museum of Fine Arts opens “Philip Guston Now” Sunday, the exhibition will be more than a retrospective of the 20th-century artist’s career: It will be a referendum, of sorts, on just how

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►Exhibit offers new entry points. Review, N1

far the MFA and its peer institutions have evolved when it comes to grappling with the issue of white racism following the murder of George Floyd.

Guston, one of the country’s most influential postwar artists, is perhaps best known for his so-called Klan paintings — a series of works he exhibited in 1970 that cartoonishly depict hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan as fumbling buffoons, driving around in clown cars, smoking fat cigars, moping by a window.

Those works proved too thorny in the racially

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LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

“City Limits” is among many Philip Guston works that contain Ku Klux Klan imagery.

# MFA opens show two years after postponement

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charged pandemic haze of September 2020, when the MFA, alongside the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Tate Modern in London, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, announced they would postpone a long-planned touring retrospective until 2024, when “the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the center of Philip Guston’s work can be more clearly interpreted.”

The backlash was immediate, igniting one of the biggest art-world controversies in recent memory. Critics called the decision patronizing, and an influential group of artists signed an open letter in *The Brooklyn Rail* calling for the show to be reinstated. By postponing the show, they argued, “These institutions thus publicly acknowledge their longstanding failure to have educated, integrated, and prepared themselves to meet the challenge of the renewed pressure for racial justice.”

Now, after shortening the original postponement by half, the MFA will host the retrospective’s first stop—a critical opening argument in how tradition-bound institutions, long dominated by white people and their aesthetic priorities, plan to meet that challenge. (Different versions of the exhibition, which runs here May 1–Sept. 11, will subsequently arrive in Houston, Washington D.C., and London.)

“The postponement was never about the acceptability of Guston’s work, but more about the hospitality of the museum and our ability to create context,” MFA director Matthew Teitelbaum said in a statement to the *Globe*. The expanded timeline, he added, enabled the museum to provide “more historical context, more views from artists and cultural thinkers, and to make more explicit Guston’s work as an artist in relation to the social justice issues that motivated him throughout his life.”

The result is the most dramatic reimagining of the MFA’s curatorial process to date, one that harnesses a multitude of

voices from both inside and outside of the museum in an effort to create a more contextualized, open, and inclusive exhibition.

The show’s original organizer, MFA guest curator Kate Nesin, has been joined by three colleagues: Megan Bernard, the MFA’s director of membership; Terence Washington, a guest curator at the museum; and Ethan W. Lasser, chair of the MFA’s Art of the Americas department. The expanded team took a cautious approach to the exhibition: A message from the curators at the show’s entrance acknowledges the controversial postponement, adding they know they “have not gotten everything ‘right.’”

The organizers met frequently over the past year with a staff advisory group about the show’s direction. They consulted with a diverse group of artists and scholars, and even enlisted a trauma specialist to guide decisions on visitor care and how to give audiences more choice when confronting challenging imagery.

“Museums have been thinking pretty homogeneously about who’s looking at paintings,” said Lasser, who added the show provides a space for visitors to share their thoughts in writing. “We’re trying to change that, and to make sure that when



LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

The curatorial team for “Philip Guston Now” (from left): Ethan W. Lasser, Terence Washington, Kate Nesin, and Megan Bernard.

images of hoods and masks among them.

Born in 1913 in Montreal, Guston was the son of Jewish parents who’d fled persecution in Odessa about a decade earlier. He was haunted by antisemitism and the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, whose murderous racial power crescendoed during Guston’s formative adolescence. Images of racial violence appear early in Guston’s work, as he drew on a range of figurative styles as a young painter during the 1930s and ‘40s.

## “The postponement was . . . more about . . . our ability to create context.”

MATTHEW TEITELBAUM, MFA director

you come in, you have a little more agency than you did in the past.”

If early reviews are any indication, the resulting retrospective has been worth the wait—a survey that embraces the sweep of Guston’s career, while also wrestling with his challenging, ultimately unknowable pictures. The tightly curated exhibition of 100 works, comprising 73 paintings and 27 drawings, is arranged thematically, mixing works from across Guston’s 50-year career to draw out motifs he returned to again and again—

In the 1950s, however, Guston, who had attended high school in Los Angeles with Jackson Pollock, embraced abstract expressionism, becoming one of the most successful practitioners in a movement that eschewed traditional figuration for bold canvases that delivered powerful emotional themes. Even so, he struggled with abstraction’s relevance, particularly amid the roiling 1960s, as political assassinations, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War transformed the country.

“What kind of man am I,” he

once asked, “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?”

Though Guston had been associated with the New York School, he made an artistic about-face around the time workers completed his new studio in Woodstock, N.Y., in late 1967. Renouncing abstraction, he began to develop his signature visual vocabulary: light bulbs, easels, cigars, boots, watches, and, of course, Klan hoods—inscrutable comic images frequently rendered in shades of pink and gray.

He presented the Klan paintings—interpreted today as an indictment of white complicity in systems of racial violence—at New York’s Marlborough Gallery in October 1970, a show savaged by critics, who lamented the artist’s return to the figure, calling the work “outdated” and “redundant.”

But Guston was undeterred, and he continued evolving as a figurative painter right up until his death in 1980 at age 66.

“Philip Guston Now,” the artist’s first retrospective in nearly two decades, reunites several paintings from the Marlborough show, regarded by many as a watershed moment for the artist.

Among them is “City Limits” (1969), which shows a trio of

hooded figures packed tight in a dilapidated car as they traverse a fleshy pink landscape. Nearby, a small standalone space meant to evoke Guston’s own studio presents one of the artist’s most famous works, “The Studio” (1969), which shows a hooded figure painting his own self-portrait.

“We stand in a room filled with hooded images, and you think, ‘You can’t ignore that elephant in the room,’ but they did,” said Bernard, describing how critics at the time ignored the works’ content, focusing instead on Guston’s turn from abstraction. “We want people to be able to reckon with that relationship.”

But only if they want to: A sign leading into the gallery informs visitors of an exit through an adjoining video gallery, and cards are available that urge museumgoers to “identify your boundaries and take care of yourself.”

The postponement also allowed curators to discover what they’ve come to call the “beating heart” of the show: “The Deluge” (1969), a painting whose lower two-thirds Guston flooded with murky blacks and grays, leaving a few forms to float on the horizon line.

The painting, which is in the MFA’s collection, was not on the show’s original checklist. But as curators examined its brush

strokes, they discovered it held a remarkable secret: Guston had painted over three massive hooded figures.

“He just decided to flood those hoods out,” said Nesin, describing how the artist changed direction on the canvas. “In some ways, there’s nothing more to say on a literal level: This was part of his process.” Even so, she added, the painting offers a metaphor about the underlying pervasiveness of white supremacy: “What undergirds museum galleries like these,” she asked, “what structures are all of us affected by that we can now name as white supremacist?”

The show also includes early works such as “If This Be Not I” (1945), an enigmatic painting of children on a stage, a handful of Guston’s evocative abstract canvases, and later works such as “Painting, Smoking, Eating” (1973), which Guston first exhibited in Boston while teaching at Boston University during the mid-1970s.

“We don’t want the story of the pause to be the story of this show,” said Lasser, describing their efforts to move past the initial controversy. “We want this to be about Guston and what he means for our time.”

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