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NORMAN LEWIS & PHILIP GUSTON: FROM MODERNIST MARGINS TO  
POSTMODERNISM

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in

Art History and Visual Culture

at

Lindenwood University

by

Joette James, Ph.D.

St. Charles, Missouri

July 2022

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which the African American painter Norman Lewis (1909-1979) and Canadian American Jewish painter Philip Guston (1913-1980) deviated from the dogma of Abstract Expressionism and presaged Postmodernism. The modernist Abstract Expressionist movement placed value on the heroic nature of the painter, the denial of the social and political milieu outside of the work of art, and the formalist quality of the work above all. This paper argues that both Guston and Lewis, in their penchant for experimentation and stylistic fluidity, were prevented from attaining the level of commercial success and popularity of their much better known Abstract Expressionist colleagues, such as Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970). Further, I will argue that the nature of Lewis's and Guston's artistic innovations, such as the retention of an aspect of figuration and/or narrative, the interest in the viewing audience, the multiplicity of interpretations, the interest in hybridity and willingness to fuse "high" and "low" art, all represented the end of Modernism. Lewis and Guston were indeed the *avant-garde*, ushering in the Postmodernist era.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincerest and most heartfelt thanks to all of my professors at Lindenwood University during my sojourn in the Art History & Visual Culture program. In this dedicated group I include the members of my Committee, Dr. Trenton Olsen and Dr. Khristin Landry, with special mentions to my Chair Ms. Kelly Scheffer and Dr. James Hutson, the Department Head of the Program. Your tireless work on behalf of your students is so greatly appreciated. This was my first foray back into graduate education, 16 years after completing my doctorate in clinical psychology. All of you helped me navigate the new and sometimes confusing world of online learning and made the experience academically rich and truly joyful. Earning this degree stands out as one of the best decisions of my life. A very big thanks goes to my brilliant and kind friend Kandra James who introduced me to Lindenwood. I would also like to express my gratefulness to my family who has supported me in my every endeavor. My mother, Dorrett James, read and edited every paper I wrote, so this degree is as much hers as it is mine.

## List of Figures

- Figure 1, Philip Guston, *Drawing for Conspirators*, 1930. Graphite, pencil, pen and ink, colored pencil, and wax crayon on paper. 22 X 14 inches.....61
- Figure 2, Norman Lewis, *Evening Rendezvous*, 1962. Oil on linen. 50¼ X 64¼ inches.....62
- Figure 3, Norman Lewis, *Girl with Yellow Hat* (aka *Woman with Yellow Hat and Yellow Hat*), 1932. Oil on burlap. 36½ X 26 inches.....63
- Figure 4, Norman Lewis, *The Dispossessed (Family)*, 1940. Oil on canvas. 36 X 30 inches.....64
- Figure 5, Norman Lewis, *Conflict*, 1942. Oil on canvas. 36 X 26¼ inches.....65
- Figure 6, Norman Lewis, *Musicians*, 1945. Oil on canvas. 25¼ X 19¾ inches.....66
- Figure 7, Norman Lewis, *Jazz Musicians*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 36 X 26 inches.....67
- Figure 8, Norman Lewis, *Jazz Band*, 1948. Incised on black-coated Masonite board, 20 X 23 inches.....68
- Figure 9, Norman Lewis, *Twilight Sounds*, 1947. Oil on canvas. 23½ X 28 inches. ....69
- Figure 10, Norman Lewis, *Ring Around the Rosie*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 27 X 32 inches.....70
- Figure 11, Norman Lewis, *Processional*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 57¼ X 38½ inches. ....71
- Figure 12, Norman Lewis, *Migrating Birds*, 1953. Oil on canvas. 40 X 60 inches.....72
- Figure 13, Norman Lewis, *Winter Branches*, 1946. Oil on canvas. 40 X 17 7/8 inches.....73
- Figure 14, Norman Lewis, *Seachange*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 48 X 78 inches.....74
- Figure 15, Norman Lewis, *Tenement*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 40 X 18 inches.....75
- Figure 16, Norman Lewis, *City Night*, 1949. Oil on wood. 24 1/8 X 18 inches.....76
- Figure 17, Philip Guston, *Flatlands*, 1970. Oil on canvas. 70 X 114½ inches.....77
- Figure 18, Philip Guston, *White Painting I*, (1951). Oil on canvas. 57 7/8 X 61 7/8 inches.....78

Figure 19, Phillip Guston, <i>Attar</i> , (1953). Oil on canvas. 48 X 46 inches.....	79
Figure 20, Philip Guston, <i>Clock</i> , 1956-1957. Oil on canvas. 76 X 64 1/8 inches.....	80
Figure 21, Philip Guston, <i>Head I</i> , 1965. Oil on canvas. 72 X 78 inches.....	81
Figure 22, Philip Guston, <i>Bombardment</i> , 1937-1938. Oil on Masonite. 42 inches in diameter...	82
Figure 23, Philip Guston, <i>Mother and Child</i> , 1930. Oil on canvas. 40 X 30 inches.....	83
Figure 24, Philip Guston, <i>If This Be Not I</i> , 1945. Oil on canvas. 42 3/8 X 55 1/4 inches.....	84
Figure 25, Philip Guston, <i>The Studio</i> , 1969. Oil on canvas. 48 X 42 inches.....	85
Figure 26, Philip Guston, <i>Courtroom</i> , 1970. Oil on canvas. 67 X 129 inches.....	86
Figure 27, Philip Guston, <i>Cherries</i> (1976). 68 5/8 X 116 5/8 inches.....	87
Figure 28, Philip Guston, <i>Poor Richard (Title Page)</i> (1971). Ink on paper. 10 1/2 X 13 7/8 inches.....	88
Figure 29, Philip Guston, <i>San Clemente</i> (1975). Oil on canvas. 68 X 73 1/4 inches.....	89

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	27
ANALYSIS- Norman Lewis.....	30
ANALYSIS- Philip Guston.....	43
CONCLUSION.....	56
FIGURES.....	61
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	90



## Introduction

...the goal of the artist must be aesthetic development and, in a universal sense, to make in his own way some contribution to culture...I realized that my own greatest effectiveness would not come by painting racial difficulties but by excelling as an artist first of all.<sup>1</sup>

-Norman Lewis, 1949

I can't get away from stories, whether they're heads or lines, or leaves or circles. I don't know. I can't be a pure artist. It's impossible.<sup>2</sup>

-Philip Guston, 1968

It is unclear whether the African American artist Norman Lewis (1909-1979), and the Jewish Canadian American artist Philip Guston (1913-1980) ever met and there are no scholarly texts that compare and contrast their work. Yet, they hold a surprising number of personal and professional details in common: both were members of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists whose careers began in Social Realism;<sup>3</sup> both were involved in the New York art scene; both experimented with figuration and abstraction throughout their careers; and both were social and political activists, part of a group of New York artists who organized an exhibition to help fund the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the sponsors of the

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1. Norman Lewis, "Application for Guggenheim Fellowship, 1949" in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Corrine Jennings (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 65.

2. Philip Guston, "Conversation with Morton Feldman," in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 80-108.

3. Social Realism refers to an art movement that became popular in the 1930s that typically featured figurative works depicting the travails of the working class and Depression-era poverty, and often with a socialist agenda.

famous 1961 Alabama Freedom Rides. Nevertheless, while both Lewis and Guston achieved a modicum of commercial and critical success in their time, they were (and remain) undoubtedly less well known than their famous Abstract Expressionist colleagues, including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Richard Motherwell, and Mark Rothko. Why is that the case? This paper proposes that the relative marginalization of Guston and Lewis within the Abstract Expressionist movement was not primarily due to race (as is assumed with Lewis) or to a bizarre late style aberration (as is assumed with Guston), but to an enduring creative quality in both artists which drove them to produce innovative work, which then pushed them to the edges of the increasingly stringent boundaries of Modernism. Lewis and Guston were both rule breakers, iconoclasts in an art world that, while initially defined by rule breaking, ironically came to be governed by a small group of elites that prescribed both the nature of painting and the individuals who would judge its worth. In essence, both Guston and Lewis in their personal styles evinced the essential qualities that were not held in high value in their own time but have come to be highly esteemed in the current Postmodernist era.

In order to understand the ways in which the paintings of Lewis and Guston deviated from the confines of Abstract Expressionism, one must first examine their personal stories, and particularly the traumas that each artist experienced that facilitated the construction of their individual identities, which in turn influenced their approaches to painting. Lewis, the son of Bermudian parents, was born in Harlem in 1909 and showed an interest in art at an early age.<sup>4</sup> At the age of twenty, and a time that was to become a turning point in his life, he joined the crew of a sailing ship and spent two years at sea traveling throughout South America and the Caribbean. This experience was visually and intellectually stimulating to him, opening his world beyond the

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4. For a detailed account of the life and career of Norman Lewis, see Romare Beardon and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

streets of Harlem and facilitating a life-long appreciation of the multiplicity of cultural influences. The trip also opened his eyes to the racism experienced by groups other than African Americans. Upon returning to the United States and landing in New Orleans, he abruptly faced Jim Crow segregation when he tried to buy a ticket back to New York City. As Lewis related the experience to Henri Ghent in a 1968 interview:

I sat there for about fifteen minutes [in the Whites only waiting room at the station], and it was next to a white woman, she had to move over. She did it pleasantly, there was no--I sat there for fifteen or twenty minutes and a Negro porter came over to me and said--he whispered in my ear, "this room is for white." And it was almost as somebody says "attention" and I suddenly became aware of where I was and I got up as if it were a command and I went into the Negro section of this station. You know, you suddenly become aware of where the hell you are. You are back in America.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis experienced other targeted periods of racial discrimination, for example, while on a short-lived trip to Greensboro, North Carolina as a paid art teacher for the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), and after the outbreak of World War II, he was unable to find work due to his race. He studied marine drafting, but no one would hire him; he moved to Seattle and was hired as a shipfitter, but he could not build a crew because the White welders would not take orders from him. Ironically, it was during this period of disillusionment and frustration with a war being fought for freedom abroad, while injustice abounded at home, that Lewis turned from Social Realism and began to experiment with abstract shapes and forms. Nevertheless, despite his entrée into abstraction, racism and its impact on him personally and his development as an artist, continued to be thematic for Lewis. In his interview with Henri Ghent, he revealed his frustration:

I lived there quite a while [a place between Broadway and Fifth Avenue] until I discovered—the place was something like—I think it was \$15 a month and I

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5. Norman Lewis, "Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis, 1968, July 14," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Available: <http://www.aaasi.edu/collections/oralhistories/trascripts/lewis68.htm>, 7.

discovered that despite the fact that these were a bunch of left-wing artists that I was paying twice as much rent as they. And the whole goddamn thing upset me because these were guys, white artists, who I enjoyed being with and we, at that time, were fighting for a lot of things that they materially benefited from but I didn't. We were trying to set up the unions, teaching unions. We had an artists' union and yet many things that they benefitted from I am still fighting for today.<sup>6</sup> Philip Guston (*née* Goldstein- he changed his name in 1935), was born in Montreal,

Canada in 1913 and the family moved to Los Angeles in 1922. His parents were poor Polish immigrants. As Harry Cooper noted in his essay on Guston's early life, though it has been often repeated that his parents were from Odessa and fled to the United States to escape the Jewish pogroms of 1905, in all likelihood this is a family myth.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the tale became part of Guston's origin story and was reflected in his paintings. He also admired the writer Isaac Babel and was particularly fond of *Red Calvary*, a series of stories purportedly based on Babel's sojourn with the Cossacks, who were often responsible for organizing pogroms. Guston's fascination with the everyday lives of people who committed such atrocities was a rich source for his later paintings featuring Ku Klux Klan (KKK)-like hooded figures.<sup>8</sup> Cooper goes on to detail several seminal traumatic events in Guston's life. Guston's father Lieb committed suicide by hanging in 1923, approximately a year after the California move. There are apparently conflicting accounts of who found the body. The announcement in the newspaper indicated that Guston's mother had found her husband's body on the back porch. However, Guston has reportedly claimed that he found the body in the shed and cut it down. The frequent presence of rope and porch motifs in Guston's work (including the rope held by the foreground Klan figure

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6. Lewis, "Oral History Interview," 9.

7. Harry Cooper, "Guston, Then: Telling Tales," in *Philip Guston Now*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Harry Cooper, Mark Godfrey, & Alison de Lima Greene (Washington, DC: D.A.P./National Gallery of Art, 2020), 1-7.

8. Cooper, 5.

in *Drawing for Conspirators, 1930*) (Fig. 1) have been linked to this tragic event.<sup>9</sup> Art critic and Guston scholar Robert Storr has also related Guston's use of both detritus and menacing figures as reminiscent of the brooding, depressive personality of Guston's father and the humiliating work that he found himself performing in Los Angeles- that of collecting trash throughout the city using a horse-drawn cart.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the prominent motif of piles of disembodied legs (seen in a number of the later "KKK" paintings) in Guston's work has been viewed as a partial memorial to his eldest brother Nate who was killed when his own car rolled over and crushed his legs in 1932.<sup>11</sup>

Dark family tales and personal tragedies aside, it is often forgotten that, as a young man, Guston loved newspaper comics and cartoons. His mother enrolled him in a cartoon correspondence course as a birthday present when he turned thirteen. Guston was particularly fond of *Mutt and Jeff*, by Bud Fisher, as well as *Krazy Kat*, by George Herriman, one of the few African American cartoonists of the era.<sup>12</sup>

As Lewis and Guston developed as artists and as socially conscious young men, their personal lives inevitably tangled with the political. Guston was well known in Communist circles, and his best-known mural was one painted in 1932 with friends Reuben Kadish and Murray Hantman for the local John Reed Club; these were organizations which sought to expand the influence of Communism through writers, artists, and intellectuals. That year, the theme was "Negro America." The news story of the moment was the racially motivated arrests of nine

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9. Robert Storr, *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting* (London: United Kingdom, Laurence King Publishing, 2020), 12.

10. Storr, *A Life Spent Painting*, 12.

11. Cooper, 1-7.

12. Cooper, 1-7.

African American youth known as the Scottsboro boys. Eight were sentenced to death after being falsely accused of rape.<sup>13</sup> Guston's painting of a Klansman whipping an African American man tied to a pole was undeniably haunting and somber. The mural no longer exists because the frescoes were destroyed by the LAPD Red Squad, but that memory of police brutality stayed with Guston, as did a more personal encounter with the KKK itself.<sup>14</sup> As he stated in a talk on art given at a conference at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in 1978:

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 seventeen or eighteen, I had done a whole series of paintings about the Ku Klux Klan, which were very powerful in Los Angeles at the time.... I had a show of [paintings] in a bookshop in Hollywood, where I was working at the time. Some members of the KKK walked in, took the paintings off the wall, and slashed them. Two were mutilated.<sup>15</sup>

Norman Lewis was also an activist; in fact, he believed that political activism was ultimately more successful than political propaganda as depicted in art. Lewis was a prominent member of the Artists' Committee for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The SNCC and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) sponsored the Freedom Rides, whose participants experienced horrific abuse at the hands of the KKK.<sup>16</sup> Lewis belonged to the Artists' Union and taught at the Harlem Youth in Action program (an anti-poverty and youth

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13. Cooper, 1-7.

14. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) Red Squad, known officially as the Public Disorder and Intelligence Division (PDID) was a specialized intelligence unit tasked with exerting countermeasures and gathering intelligence on what were believed to be "radical" and "subversive" political and social groups. These units were established as part of the city police force in large cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The PDID was abolished in 1983.

15. Philip Guston, "Talk at 'Art/Not Art?' Conference," in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 278-286.

16. David Craven, "Norman Lewis as Political Activist and Post-Colonial Artist," in *Norman Lewis Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exhibition catalogue, eds. David Craven, Ann Eden Gibson, & Lowery S. Simms (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 1998), 51-60.

empowerment program) and taught at the Thomas Jefferson School of Social Science, an “alternative” school. He exhibited work at the left-wing Artist’s League of America and, closer to home, helped to organize and actively participated in public demonstrations against the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 and the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971 in protest of racially discriminatory curatorial practices. Lewis also participated in the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.<sup>17</sup> He was a founding member of *Spiral*, a group of artists who strove to address the political concerns of African Americans through art.

Yet, while politically and socially active, Lewis remained a self-proclaimed and proud “loner.” His close friends, such as fellow African American painter Romare Beardon, saw him as, “extremely isolated in asserting his right to paint as he felt.”<sup>18</sup> Ironically, though drawn to a solitary existence, Lewis, nevertheless, professed a longstanding interest in the behavior of groups, particularly in the idea of conformity. He once commented that, “human beings are almost like ants, you know...you notice them going into Macys, everybody goes into the same goddamn doorway waiting for the revolving door yet nobody takes the initiative to open the other door which exists there.”<sup>19</sup> In his paintings, Lewis acknowledged the ways in which the interconnectedness and the sense of solidarity within a group can be a force for good or for ill.

Guston, while widely considered an Abstract Expressionist both in his time and now (although often a latecomer to the movement), similarly could not resist the temptation to use painting as a vehicle for examining human behavior, both that of others and his own. His early works from the 1930s appear to have had more of a documentary and propagandizing role, in the

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17. Craven, 53.

18. Mia L. Bagneris, “Loner in the Dark: The Singular Vision of Norman Lewis and the Evidence of Things Unseen,” In *From the Margins: Lee Krasner/Norman Lewis 1945-1952*, exhibition catalogue, Norman L. Kleeblatt & Stephen Brown (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2014), 80.

19. Bagneris, 86-87.

case of the Scottsboro boys, depicting the horror of the corruption of the judicial system in a direct, powerful, and sobering way. His 1960s and 1970s paintings are no less sobering; however, they deliberately use simplicity and humor to provoke more deeply. This is consistent with Guston's assertion that the later, more figurative "KKK" paintings were self-images and an opportunity for self-reflection:

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...I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan and plot.<sup>20</sup>

Like Lewis, Guston was interested in using his art to explore one's own behavior in the context of society. His earlier works were a direct condemnation of social injustice by a clearly defined hate group, while his later paintings suggested the unsettling possibility that responsibility for injustice rests upon all members of a society, that all are implicated.

It is clear then, that both Guston and Lewis, primed by their life experiences, brought challenges to the Modernist establishment as it existed during the Abstract Expressionist era. Lewis's painting reflected his personal experiences with racism, even in abstraction, in the work's allusion to white supremacy groups and the civil rights movement. Yet racism was not his *only* inspiration, and this paper will show that his marginalization within the New York school cannot be read as *only due* to racism. Rather, Lewis approached painting in a distinctly Postmodernist manner in his consistent use of figuration within abstraction, the way that he fused the visual with his interest in the social, and the multiplicity of meaning that he created in his work, referencing the "real" (and often natural) world. Similarly, from the beginning of his career, Guston showed an interest in narratives, in "telling stories." As will be shown, his late

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20. Philip Guston, 282.



career KKK paintings were not novel in this respect, but merely a continuation of his interest in ideas related to self-exploration and his Postmodernist embrace of opposing concepts, particularly as they relate to personality. Further, like Lewis, some aspect of figuration has always infused Guston's art. Even in his most abstract paintings of the 1950s, his work included a distinct presence, a whisper of personhood. Finally, Guston did not shy away from and in fact cleverly "elevated" the quotidian or what would have been considered "low art" or "kitsch" in the parlance of the Modernist art critic Clement Greenberg. Thus, while both Guston and Lewis have been called Abstract Expressionists, their art stretches beyond the reach of Modernism, entering the pluralistic and eclectic space of the Postmodernist era, where no single narrative reigns.

## Literature Review

### A. Modernism & Postmodernism: The Challenge of Definition

Modernism as a movement sprang from the void created by the loss of a cultural “center” that arose after Christianity and an all-encompassing belief in God began to fall out of favor. In addition, ideals brought about by the Enlightenment, of reason, liberation, and scientific progress faded in the presence of constant wars, human atrocities, crowded cities, and economic disparity. Modernism impacted all aspects of culture—including literature, music, architecture and art—and was characterized by a rejection of traditional forms and the embrace of the “cutting edge,” the *avant-garde*, and the new.<sup>21</sup> As cultural and literary theorist Peter Barry notes, in music, this meant improvisation and experimentation, disregarding melody and harmony; in literature, coherent narratives were exchanged for stream-of-consciousness and plot disruptions; architecture embraced the new materials of glass and concrete, favoring the uniform “International Style” and artists moved away from illusionism and linear perspective towards materiality, emotional expressiveness, and abstraction.<sup>22</sup> Further, Barry situates the period of “high modernism” as the twenty-year period between 1910-1930, with a resurgence appearing in the 1960s. During the period of high modernism in literature, prominent themes included subjectivity, a move away from fixed narratives and omniscient points of view, and an interest in fragmentation, collage, and self-reflexivity- literature that looked inwards and asked questions about its own nature, role, and place in the world.<sup>23</sup> Similar themes were present in visual art. Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), a prominent and outspoken art critic at the height of American

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21. Anne D’Alleva, *Methods & Theories of Art History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London, England: Laurence King Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 143.

22. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2017), 84.

23. Barry, 84.

Modernism (1950s- 1960s), wrote an influential essay entitled “Modernist Painting.”<sup>24</sup> He championed the notion of using self-criticism to divide each art form into its essentials, the unique characteristics that made it different from the others; in painting, this meant a celebration of the flat surface of the canvas and a move towards abstraction in order to distinguish itself from the three-dimensionality of sculpture.<sup>25</sup> Greenberg placed a high value on the formal qualities of painting- color, shape, and line, and in his opinion, the brooding Jackson Pollock, with his all-over, action drip paintings were the *sine qua non* of Abstract Expressionism and Modernism more generally. Modernism in art also reflected the artist’s response to the fast-paced, ever-changing, increasingly complex modern world. In addition to the rejection of traditional materials, artists, at least early on, sought to find an authenticity and honesty in art; these ideas were fundamental to the variety of sub-movements and “isms” (e.g., Expressionism, Impressionism, Futurism) that characterized Modernism.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it was not long before the tradition-breaking aspects of Modernism gave way to an increasingly singular and dominant narrative, which ironically left little room for artistic freedom. It was a narrative that occurred as post World War II America gained political, economic, and cultural capital; the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York City, and critics like Greenberg came to dictate what was most valued in artistic practice. This “heroic” narrative tended to come from the White, heterosexual, male point of view. It largely ignored trends in Modernism that emerged outside of the European (and later American) art traditions.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Clement Greenberg, “Forum Lectures,” Voices of America, Washington, D.C.: 1960.

25. Greenberg, “Forum Lectures.”

26. D’Alleva, 143.

27. D’Alleva, 143.

Postmodernism is challenging to articulate fully; in part, this is because it is difficult to reflect on cultural shifts that are occurring in real time but also because the term has been conceptualized in a number of ways, including as an approach, as a movement (i.e., coming “after” Modernism) and as a reaction or opposition. The word “Postmodernism” was first used in the 1930s, became more commonplace in literary criticism in the 1950s and 1960s, and later became widely applied to visual art, music, literature, and architecture in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>28</sup> In his introduction to his influential collection of essays on the subject of Postmodernism, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, cultural critic Hal Foster posits two types of Postmodernism: a Postmodernism of resistance and a Postmodernism of reaction.<sup>29</sup> He argues that, in the end, a reactionary Postmodernism is no better than another master narrative that seeks to apply a new set of norms. Instead, Foster posits a Postmodernism of resistance: one that deconstructs and critiques tradition, questioning and exploring, rather than dictating and determining. A Postmodernism of resistance does not consider any one way of viewing culture and the world to be correct; it eschews the idea of a dominant narrative and embraces subjectivity and the perspective and experience of the individual. As art historian Anne D’Alleva states in her text, “...in challenging the primacy of Western culture, postmodernism opens a space for the politics of race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, etc.”<sup>30</sup> Postmodernism is eclectic, pluralistic, and is interested in complexity (in interpretation, in presentation, etc.), skepticism, and irony. Postmodernist art does not distinguish between “high” and “low” art forms; it borrows freely from styles, motifs, and influences from the past, blending them with the present.

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28. D’Alleva, 144.

29. Hal Foster, “Introduction,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1988), xii-xiii.

30. D’Alleva, 146.

## B. The Art of Norman Lewis: Innovation within Abstraction

Norman Lewis, as is clear in the epigraph, placed a high value on aesthetics. He most exemplifies the tenets of Modernism and is connected to Abstract Expressionism in the way that he valued the formal qualities of painting. He was particularly interested in the “color” black, which he used extensively throughout his career. In his view, black, which represents both an absence of light and its presence, was a means of evoking and suggesting other colors in the spectrum.<sup>31</sup> It is also clear that Lewis felt strongly about the ineffectiveness of a purely “illustrative” propagandistic art because he believed that it was rarely seen by the audience to whom it was directed. As such, throughout his career, he was adamant about the need to separate art from political and social activism. Instead, like many of his Abstract Expressionist peers, Lewis sought after a formal excellence that would activate universal and transcultural motifs and values. Yet despite his protestations, many of Lewis’s paintings clearly reference and explore themes of race, civil rights, white supremacy, and collective action. KKK members and activities are evoked in the ironic titles and images in paintings such as *American Totem* (1960), a large (73 X 43 inch) work of white hooded figures and *Evening Rendezvous* (1962) (Fig.2), which, while abstract, also reveals a semicircular “group” of white “figures” shown around patches of vibrant glowing red, immediately reminiscent of a roaring fire, and of the plotting and planning associated with the KKK, including the burning of churches and the lynching of Black men and women. The racial iconography in Lewis’s work has led authors to question whether the artist

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31. Anne Eden Gibson, “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York,” in *Norman Lewis Black Paintings 1946-1977*, exhibition catalogue, eds. David Craven, Ann Eden Gibson, & Lowery S. Simms (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 1998), 11-30.

truly fits within the narrow confines of Abstract Expressionism. Mindy Tan, a Lewis scholar, has described him as both a “Social Abstractionist” and an “Abstract Allusionist.”<sup>32</sup> In her view:

Calling Lewis an Abstract Allusionist instead of an Abstract Expressionist thus focuses his creations as a site of interchange between history and subjectivity; his identity as an African American artist, and the aesthetic and social potential of his blackness. It also frees Lewis’ work from comparisons with his contemporaries since his concerns, unlike Pollock’s, were never fully about the spiritual.<sup>33</sup>

Tan goes further to note that, ironically, it was Lewis’s status as an African American man, and the expectation of a “racialized art” by his peers and the art world more generally, that limited the consideration of his work within the Abstract Expressionist movement.<sup>34</sup> It is also clear from interviews with Lewis that he experienced both overt racism (e.g., in the Jim Crow south following his return from a two-year trip around the world as a seaman), and a more subtle racism in terms of the lack of social opportunities afforded him in the New York art scene in order to promote his work.<sup>35</sup> Yet, Tan highlights several reasons other than race that explain Lewis’s marginalization. In the quote above, she notes that unlike Pollock, Lewis did not fully embrace his work as a mystical, spiritual experience, but also saw his art as a means of connecting to others socially. His use of language, through his often allusive and ironic titles (typically eschewed by Abstract Expressionists who preferred to leave their work untitled) was another means by which, according to Tan, Lewis showed his concern for his viewing audience

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32. Mindy H. M. Tan, “Canvas Politics: Norman Lewis and the Art of Abstract Resistance,” PhD diss., (Purdue University, 2015).

33. Tan, 85.

34. Tan, 84.

35. Norman Lewis, “Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis, 1968, July 14,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Available: <http://www.aaasi.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewis68.htm>

and attempted to ensure the accessibility of his work. Further, unlike the Action paintings of Pollock, Lewis's art was not wild or haphazard, but deliberate and lyrical, attentive to color and line.<sup>36</sup> His trademark "little figures" present in many of his works, blurred the line between abstraction and figuration, provided social context and alluded to narration, further alienating Lewis from Greenberg's emphasis on the "purity" of painting and the absence of subject matter.

African American art historian Sara Wood has focused on the relationship between Lewis's painting and jazz music, specifically bebop.<sup>37</sup> She argues that Lewis's career and frequent stylistic changes parallel the improvisation and experimentation characteristic of the genre and that innovation is necessarily opposed to the notion of a fixed artistic identity.<sup>38</sup> She also cautions against seeing Lewis's marginalization within the Abstract Expressionism community as exclusively due to racism. Instead, she highlights his deviations from the Modernist movement and "lack of a signature style" as a function of his "personal and particular artistic dialogue."<sup>39</sup> Wood identifies several ways in which this dialectic was expressed. First was Lewis's ability to use abstraction to create works of ambiguity with multiple potential meanings. For example, in *Harlem Turns White* (1955), the canvas is populated by a crowd of people-like figures; the dense, dark palette of the lower three-quarters of the painting gradually fades into an indistinguishable gray-white mass as the eye travels upwards. The title hints at the potential meaning of the work but is not definitive. Lewis could be referencing an imaginary situation: the Black metropolis of Harlem transforming into the white community that

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36. Tan, 80.

37. Sara K. Wood, "'Pure eye music': Norman Lewis, abstract expressionism, and bebop" in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 95-119.

38. Wood, 115-119.

39. Wood, 98.

historically preceded it. Another reading could be a warning against identity loss in the Black community occurring with White incursions into the neighborhood; it may also reference the popularity of jazz in the 1920s that led Whites into Harlem clubs. The painting may even allude to Lewis's lonely place as one of the few African American artists in the predominantly White New York art scene of the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> Wood additionally argues for a multiplicity of influences in Lewis's work as well as a multiplicity of meanings. Lewis had an avid interest in European Modernist artists, and his paintings reveal the influences of Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee, among others. His careful adaptation of these motifs did not sit well within the world of Abstract Expressionism, in part because as the center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York beginning in the 1950s. American artists distanced themselves as much as they could from European influence and the perception of the continent as effeminate and weak. As Wood notes, Lewis "did not view hybridity as antithetical to originality."<sup>41</sup> However, the mythology of Abstract Expressionism, in its American masculinity and heroism, valued originality, and only in a narrow stylistic sense. Lewis's originality in ideology, both in the way that his paintings fused the visual and the social, and in his referencing of art history in his compositions in novel ways, kept him at the margins of the movement.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, like Tan, Wood argues that Lewis's greatest transgression of the tenets of Abstract Expressionism is revealed in the way in which he showed an interest in the viewing audience, the presence of which was often seen as incidental and unimportant by his artist contemporaries. In addition to using evocative titles to encourage accessibility, Lewis also sought to create a dialogue with the

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40. Wood, 100.

41. Wood, 102.

42. Wood, 102.



viewer and was actively interested in the responsibility of the artist to the larger social world outside of the studio.<sup>43</sup>

Art historian and Lewis scholar Ruth Fine has also commented on the *avant-garde* nature of Lewis's art. Consistent with previous authors, Fine discusses Lewis's fusion of abstraction and social consciousness, describing his chief artistic contribution as "[stemming] from the tensions inherent in developing the image of the black within parameters rooted in abstraction...[expanding] the lens through which Abstract Expressionism could and can be understood."<sup>44</sup> She also re-iterates Lewis's interest in a wide range of artists and artistic styles, including both European and Asian art and inspiration (e.g., African sculptural traditions).<sup>45</sup> Fine further notes two additional aspects of Lewis's practice that differentiate him from other Abstract Expressionists. One was his tendency to work in a mode that was inspired both from memory and visible sources. His inspirations included jazz music, nature (e.g., birds, the sea, plants), nighttime, the figure, and the city of Harlem, with its unique tenement structure. As a result, Fine argues Lewis produced work in multiple discrete series over the course of his artistic career, in a manner much more like late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century artists than his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Fine comments on Lewis's penchant for experimentation with materials and his practice of using mixed media. In addition to oil paint, he worked with opaque watercolor, graphite, crayon, pen and/or brush, and ink. Lewis's complete *oeuvre* has not been

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43. Wood, 103.

44. Ruth Fine, "Abstraction and Identity: Norman Lewis and the 'Activity of Discovery'," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art: The Twentieth Century- The Rise of Black Artists*, eds. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 182.

45. Fine, 182.

46. Fine, 182.

documented in studio records, but Fine estimates that he produced more than two thousand works, including paintings, etchings, drawings, lithographs, and mixed media on panel or canvas.<sup>47</sup> As noted previously, Lewis's interest in a variety of media and techniques (e.g., dry-brush painting) and the deliberate and delicate manner in which he worked, both distinguish him as an innovator within Abstract Expressionism. In contrast, the most well known artists within this movement (e.g., Mark Rothko) tended to exhibit a signature style and work in grand, mural-like proportions.<sup>48</sup>

While not explicitly using the term "Postmodernism," it is clear that the above authors recognized qualities about Norman Lewis and his methods of producing artwork that differentiated him from his Abstract Expressionist peers, marginalizing him, yet when re-conceptualized, placing him at the "cutting edge" of Modernism. Lewis's interest in the viewing audience, his incorporation of multiple influences, the stylistic changes he made over the course of his career, his used of varied materials, and the way in which he simultaneously played with figuration and abstraction, the technical mastery of form and color with social allusion, all represent an early embrace of Postmodernist ideas.

Two texts do more directly associate Lewis with Postmodernist terminology and related theoretical approaches/methodologies. David Craven has described Lewis as a "post-colonial" artist.<sup>49</sup> Post-colonial critique is closely aligned with Postmodernist approaches in challenging the long-held notion of viewing culture from a central narrative. In art, this has largely been that of European and American perspectives. Colonial interference resulted in the notion of the non-

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47. Fine, 182.

48. Fine, 182.

49. Craven, 51-60.

Western “other” and related ideas such as “primitivism,” “Orientalism,” and “exoticism” in the conceptualizing of groups and cultural production, including those of African and Asian descent, as well as people from Indigenous cultures in North America, South America, and Oceania.

Cultural critic and literary theorist Peter Barry discusses the transition of post-colonial literature from one which accepts European motifs unquestioningly as a final authority (“adopt”), to a literature that modifies European ideas to suit the local cultural context (“adapt”), to a narrative that is culturally independent (“adept”).<sup>50</sup> In his description of Lewis as a post-colonial artist, Craven sees him as transcultural, embracing the theory of the Contemporary man, “with its multicultural practices, multilateral sense of time, and multilingual articulation of place.”<sup>51</sup>

Lewis’s 1954 painting, *Mumbo Jumbo*, is a good example of this transcultural quality, in which African wooden masks are evoked within a gentle, glowing field of soft golds, blues, greens, and grays.

In his essay entitled “African American Artists and Postmodernism: Reconsidering the Careers of Wilfredo Lam, Romare Beardon, Norman Lewis, and Robert Colescott,” Lowery Stokes Sims explicitly uses the term “Postmodern” to describe Lewis and several other African American artists.<sup>52</sup> Sims views Lewis’s sampling of Modernist approaches, including Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism, and his re-combining them into something new as a form of Postmodernist *pastiche*, that is to say, Lewis goes beyond simple imitation and into the realm of

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50. Barry, 198.

51. Craven, 58.

52. Lowery Stokes Sims, “African American Artists and Postmodernism: Reconsidering the Careers of Wilfredo Lam, Romare Beardon, Norman Lewis, and Robert Colescott,” in *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View*, ed. David C. Driskell (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution, 1995), 101-120.

innovation.<sup>53</sup> This view is generally consistent with that of Lewis scholars discussed in this paper thus far (e.g., Fine, Wood), differing only in the application of Postmodernist terminology.

Nevertheless, Sims goes one step further in situating Lewis and his African American colleagues within a Postmodernist framework, in that he also suggests that inherent in African American art, regardless of stylistic variations, is a pervasive sense of allusionism and symbolic meaning, in which the figural form need always be present, at least to some extent.<sup>54</sup>

### **C. Philip Guston: High Art, Low Art, and Telling Stories**

Philip Guston had an even more dramatic relationship with figuration and abstraction than Lewis. In one of his earliest works, the 1930 *Drawing for Conspirators* (graphite, pen and ink, colored pencil, and wax crayon on paper- Fig. 1), a hooded figure, clearly a member of the KKK, stands in the foreground, head down and shoulders slumped, holding a rope in his hand, while several other members are huddled in the background with their backs turned. In the upper right corner, a Black man hangs from a tree, next to a crucifix leaning perilously to the side. This is a powerful image, and one that begs for multiple interpretations, but is above all somber and contemplative in its mood. Then fast forward to October 1970, after 20 years as the “poet” of abstraction, with Guston’s “return to figuration” at his first and last solo exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in New York.<sup>55</sup> These new works, figures with fat white hoods with vertical eye slits and oversized hands, smoking cigars, playing cards, drinking, and stuffed into clown-like cars, were at once comical and horrifying and seemed at first blush to bear no

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53. Sims, 108.

54. Sims, 114.

55. Hilton Kramer, “A Mandarin Pretending to Be a Stumblebum,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 25, 1970.

resemblance to anything Guston had ever done previously. The consequences of Guston's stylistic shift were real: he lost his contract at the Marlborough Gallery, and one of his closest friends, the composer Morton Feldman, never spoke to him again. The prominent *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer delivered an acidic review; he called Guston an "urban primitive" who "is so out-of-touch with contemporary realities that he still harbors the illusion his 'act' will not be recognized as such."<sup>56</sup> Kramer accused Guston of pandering to the "low art" of Pop Art, comics, and cartoons- what would have been considered the antithesis of the "high art" as believed to be embodied by Abstract Expressionism. In his review, *Time* magazine writer Robert Hughes decried Guston's art more on the grounds of ideology than style, questioning the current relevance of the KKK, and incurring the familiar Abstract Expressionist mythology that political comment is irrelevant to art.<sup>57</sup> Harold Rosenberg, art critic for *The New Yorker*, was one of the few to see Guston's stylistic change in nuanced terms, and as an innovation within Modernist art. First, Rosenberg recognized the quality of narrative and action in the Marlborough paintings, seeing these "new" works as not truly novel, but as a continuation of and bearing a resemblance to Guston's long-held interest in storytelling, as the artist asserts in the epigraph to this paper.<sup>58</sup> To illustrate his point, Rosenberg begins by describing the 1930s Klansman figures as described above, then additionally cites the presence of "action" in Guston's major compositions of the 1940s, such as *If This Be Not I* (1945), which features children in theatrical costume striking brooding poses, described as a canvas that "abounds with pictorial puzzles, particularities, and

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56. Kramer, "A Mandarin Pretending."

57. Robert Hughes, "Ku Klux Komix," *Time Magazine* (New York, NY), November 9, 1970.

58. Harold Rosenberg, "Liberation from Detachment," *The New Yorker*, November 7, 1970, 138.

subplots” by Guston scholar Robert Storr.<sup>59</sup> Rosenberg continues his argument by commenting on the “characters” present in Guston’s most abstract paintings of the 1960s, which often contained black rectangles that the artist referred to as “heads” and evocative titles such as *The Tale* (1961) and *The Actor II* (1961) that suggested adventure.<sup>60</sup> As such, Guston’s hooded Klansman are merely a continuation: “the Ku Klux Klan triangle-pyramids decorated with dotted squares convert those poetically animated rectangles into insignia of actors with a specific reputation and social history.”<sup>61</sup> Secondly, Rosenberg argues that Guston specifically chose the KKK figures as symbols of terror because they were less newsworthy at that time (than for example, a reference to the Vietnam War would have been), using them obliquely to make a space for art and politics to intersect, but not in an explicit or propagandistic way. In effect, Guston’s new works marked the beginning of a freedom of art from itself. As Rosenberg succinctly writes:

Abstract Expressionism liberated painting from the social-consciousness dogma of the thirties; it is time now to liberate it from the ban on social consciousness. Guston has demonstrated that the apparent opposition between quality in painting and political sentiment is primarily a manner of doctrinal aesthetics. He has managed to make social commitment seem natural for the visual language of postwar painting.<sup>62</sup>

Like Norman Lewis, Philip Guston was unafraid to use painting as a means of political and social commentary, even if it was expressed at an arm’s length and in coded terms. In addition, like Lewis, he did not seek to separate himself from his viewing audience. As David

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59. Robert Storr, *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting* (London, United Kingdom, Laurence King Publishing), 28.

60. Rosenberg, 138-139.

61. Rosenberg, 139.

62. Rosenberg, 141.

Kaufman notes in *Telling Stories*, his exploration of Guston's late works, Guston consciously thought about his style and subject matter and the accessibility of his painting to the public; in contrast to Greenberg "[Guston] did not seek to reject the viewer or split the audience into philistines or cognoscenti."<sup>63</sup>

Also, like Lewis, Guston drew inspiration from a wide variety of sources. These included well-known Italian Old Masters such as Piero della Francesca, Giotto di Bondone, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, and Masaccio, as well as Modernists, especially Giorgio de Chirico, but also Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Max Beckmann, and countless others, including the Surrealists. Guston also brought an interest in mysticism, literature (especially the short stories of Isaac Babel), and Non-Western art to his work. Robert Storr describes Guston as a "skilled adapter of diverse sources, motifs, and mannerisms that came together in his hands as compelling, if still formative, works."<sup>64</sup> Storr goes on to state that, "in some respects the semiotic polyvalence and teleological untimeliness of his work cast him in the role of a 'premature postmodernist.'<sup>65</sup>

In his later works, Guston faced particular criticism for his Postmodernist collapsing of "low" and "high" art metanarratives. Kramer's scathing *New York Times* review referred specifically to Guston's Marlborough paintings as "cartoon anecdotage."<sup>66</sup> It is often forgotten that Guston loved film, newspaper comics, and cartoons (his mother enrolled him in a cartoon correspondence course as a thirteenth birthday present). His favorite cartoons were *Mutt and Jeff*

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63. David Kaufman, *Telling Stories: Philip Guston's Later Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 24.

64. Robert Storr, "Preface: P.G. All in All," in *Go Figure! New Perspectives on Guston*, ed. Peter Benson Miller (New York: The New York Review of Books and The American Academy in Rome, 2014), 9.

65. Storr, "Preface: P.G. All in All," 7.

66. Hilton Kramer, "A Mandarin Pretending to Be a Stumblebum."

by Bud Fisher and *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman. *Krazy Kat* was a particularly interesting choice, since Herriman was one of the few African American cartoonists of the time.

Nevertheless, according to cartoonist Art Spiegelman, the cartoon could also read as allegorical, using humor to address issues of race, sex, and politics.<sup>67</sup> This type of “double consciousness” of meaning is a common strategy of Black visual satire, historically used by African Americans because racism made it potentially dangerous to criticize systems and institutions openly. Indeed, Spiegelman infers that by using several of the satirist’s sharpest tools including exaggeration, caricature, and mockery to provoke contemplation (as had been done by many “high” artists before him, including Leonardo da Vinci and Hieronymus Bosch), Guston was challenging the very notion of the Modernist artificial separation of “high” and “low” culture. Like Spiegelman, Robert Storr also argues for the storied history of caricature, and notes further that in the hands of a skillful practitioner, the genre operates in the same way that a talented abstract artist manipulates form, by taking a social type and using exaggeration or other means to distill it to its essentials.<sup>68</sup> He sees the innovation in Guston’s late work in part as the artist’s ability to combine influences in a manner such that the final product feels completely new. In Storr’s words:

The fact that one could trace correspondences between his new vocabulary and that of Crumb [a cartoonist] or of any number of artists of the past—the Tiepolos, Goya, Orozco...—merely attests to the cosmopolitan richness of Guston’s pictorial culture. That it looks and nothing like the works to which it may be compared based on one or more specific detail, quality, or technique is a measure of how radically new Guston’s post-1967 work truly was.<sup>69</sup>

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67. Art Spiegelman, “KKK+KK=?!,” in *Philip Guston Now*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Harry Cooper, Mark Godfrey, & Alison de Lima Greene (Washington, D.C.: D.A.P./National Gallery of Art, 2020), 140-141.

68. Storr, “Preface: P.G. All in All,” 120.

69. Storr, 120.



Storr argues for the hybridity in Guston's art, including his historicist leanings, as "announcing the birth of what would become known as post-modernism."<sup>70</sup> He also describes another aspect of Guston's work that is related to another key concept of Postmodernist thought, the dissolution of binaries, namely high art/low art, but also others, such as male/female, center/periphery, image/reality, and civilized/primitive. Western art history has long conceptualized work in such binaries, often privileging the first word of the pair over the second.<sup>71</sup> In Storr's opinion, Guston's paintings of marauding Klansman belonged to the domain of the *grotesque*, in his case, not only breaking down binaries, but fusing them- simultaneously presenting the beautiful and the ugly, the comic and the tragic, the sophisticated and the crude. In this way, Guston "sought to have it all," as he had done his entire career, echoing the contrasts that more honestly represent everyday life, as opposed to the rigid hierarchies of an increasingly rule-bound Modernism.<sup>72</sup>

Both Norman Lewis and Philip Guston, while categorized by most scholars as Abstract Expressionists, have nevertheless been shown to demonstrate innovations in their art that set them apart from many of their American contemporaries. These innovations include, but are not limited to, their willingness to create works of ambiguity, their interest in the relationship between art, the viewing audience, and society more generally, the blending of figuration with abstraction, and the view of "low art" as worthy inspiration. In the analysis that follows, it will be argued that it was these qualities that led both artists to be marginalized in their own time, while re-consideration of their work in the present has ironically led to recognizing them both as early practitioners of the Postmodernist approach. Importantly, while the literature has made

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70. Storr, "Preface: P.G. All in All," 122.

71. D'Alleva, 146.

72. Storr, "Preface: P.G. All in All," 129.

references to each of these stylistic aspects individually, with the exceptions of Lowery Stokes Sims (with relation to Lewis) and Robert Storr (with relation to Guston), there have been no scholars of the work of either Lewis or Guston that have explicitly used the word “Postmodernist” to describe them. Further, there have been no scholarly works that have grouped these artists’ various departures from the Modernist canon cohesively under a Postmodernist umbrella.<sup>73</sup>

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73. Sims, 108.

## Research Methodology

Given that the primary focus of the thesis will be on a re-casting and re-conceptualization of the work of Lewis and Guston from Abstract Expressionist to Postmodernist, a Postmodernism framework will be of primary methodological interest. Postmodernism is less a theory *per se* and more a strategy for thinking about various aspects of culture, whether art, music, literature, or film. Postmodernism rejects long-revered ideas of genius and originality and does not distinguish between “high” and “low art;” in Postmodernism, terms such as “pastiche” and “pluralism” represent the cheerful acceptance of multiple points of view and mixing of ideas; there is no rejection of the past, but rather a grafting of aspects of the past onto the present. Postmodernism also reflects a movement away from previously accepted grand narratives and standards of culture, which were typically Western, white, and male, and shifts that narrative to individuals of color, women, and non-Western cultural frameworks. Postmodernism also encompasses a celebration of the image as much as reality, which increasingly resonates in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world of social media and reality television. Finally, as art historian Anne D’Alleva has indicated, Postmodernism collaborates well with other theoretical perspectives such as feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism, giving value to non-Western art and cultural traditions and the consideration of viewpoints shaped by race, gender, ethnicity, and class, for example.<sup>74</sup> In addition, the notions of pastiche and pluralism can be applied to visual images in terms of a consideration of the multiple representations or ideas signified by a single image, some of which may be consonant and others which may create a dissonance in the viewer. Specifically, in this thesis, key paintings from the *oeuvre* of each artist will be examined for their Postmodernist characteristics. In Lewis, the prominent Postmodernism features are his use of allusions to

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74. D’Alleva, 146.

racism, the civil rights movement, and group behavior and abstract inspiration from varied sources (including nature and the urban environment), while in Guston, the focus will necessarily be his penchant for storytelling and his erasure of the boundaries between “high” and “low” art forms through his use of comics. The work of both artists will be explored in the way that they both blend figuration and abstraction and evoke multiple layers of meaning.

This thesis will also utilize aspects of post-structuralist and deconstructionist methodologies. These theories emerged in the 1960s, largely from the field of philosophy, and are closely associated with the literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Post-structuralist approaches emerged as a reaction and criticism to structuralist theory. As articulated by literary theorist Peter Barry, post-structuralism critiques structuralists for not following the logical progression of the theory they propose.<sup>75</sup> If the world is perceived and constructed by language, lying outside of a defined and fixed reality, then it does not make sense to look for universal truths. There is no “fixed” intellectual reference point and no absolutes. Derrida, who coined the term “deconstruction,” took this idea further, and reveled in the playfulness created by constantly shifting interpretations, seeing it as a kind of freedom. Post-structuralist and Deconstructionist approaches to a work look for contradictions, inconsistencies, absences, and imbalances in viewpoints, tone, and perspectives.<sup>76</sup> These theories are as interested in what a work conceals as in what it reveals, and like Postmodernism, are comfortable with the idea of multiple meanings. In many ways, Lewis’s work contained within it a number of contradictions. For example, he was committed to aesthetics, staunchly opposed to overt political propaganda in art and came to see social realism as ineffectual, yet it is difficult to deny, both in the titles of his paintings and in

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75. Barry, 61.

76. Barry, 75-76.

their latent content, the presence of pervasive political and social themes. Similarly, in Guston's simplistic, oversized, white-hooded "KKK" figures, there is a tragicomic playfulness that is at once disturbing and amusing, offering both absolution and indictment.

## Analysis

### A. Norman Lewis: Delicately Dancing Between Figuration & Abstraction

Despite his increasing penchant for abstraction as he moved beyond the Social Realism of the 1930s and 1940s, Norman Lewis never completely lost interest in the figure. In fact, it was through the figuration-abstraction relationship that he maintained a tight tension between his lifelong interest in aesthetics and formal excellence and the communication of ideas important to him, which included expression of the human condition, community, conformity, and the power of collective action. It can be argued that it is through his retention of the figure that Lewis was most aligned with the tenets of Postmodernism, going beyond the artist and his medium to explore multiple, and sometimes contradictory, layers of meaning.

Lewis's interest in this duality of form and social context can be illustrated even in his earliest works that were arguably still rooted in a highly figural and Social Realist modality. For example, the painting most exhibited during Lewis's lifetime, *Girl with Yellow Hat* (1936) (Fig. 3- aka *Woman with Yellow Hat* and *Yellow Hat*) explores elements of Cubism while evoking a pensive, contemplative mood.<sup>77</sup> An African-American woman sits at a three-quarter angle, with her right arm across her lap, holding the elbow of her left arm, which in turn supports the woman's head, her cheek and chin nestled in the palm of her left hand. A large hat, plate-like in its perfect roundness, obscures the expression on the woman's face, but her head is clearly downturned. The color palette is muted, and olive greens, chocolate browns, sienna reds, and shades of yellow reminiscent of a setting sun predominate. The painting reflects the monumentalism of Mexican muralism as well as the geometric forms of a Braque or Picasso, with Cubist references most notable in the woman's sharply right-angled elbow. Lewis's delicate

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<sup>77</sup> Ruth Fine, "The Spiritual in the Material," in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, exhibition catalogue. Ed. Ruth Fine (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2015), 19-103.

brush strokes bring a sense of visual harmony to the painting while encouraging the viewer to ponder the woman's plight. Is she resting her weary head at the end of a long day of work? Has she just heard the news of an imminent eviction? In what dimension of time do her thoughts lie—past, present or future?

Similarly, in his painting *The Dispossessed (Family)* of 1940 (Fig. 4), Lewis dives more deeply into the painterly ideals of Modernism, whereby he broadens his color palette to include shades of blue, as well as black and white, while emphasizing patterns and allowing colors to dissolve boundaries between faces, bodies, and objects. The distorted image of a cup on the left side of the composition and the elongated black and white keys of a piano on the right serve as metaphors for nourishment (or the lack of it) as well as the emotional significance and power of music even in the face of loss.<sup>78</sup> This is a work that is formally complex, harmonizing and unifying three members of a family (with skin of varying hues) in their psychological distress, yet pointing to the larger societal issues of race and class at play. As noted by Ruth Fine, “Line fulfills multiple roles, offering boundaries, pattern, and rhythmic strategy to the composition. The specific identity of the participants is less critical than their designation as archetypes of the Great Depression.”<sup>79</sup>

While most Norman Lewis scholars typically focus on KKK-like images in the red/white and black/white large canvases of the 1960s as the ones most powerfully associated with race, his exploration of oppression, conflict, cooperation, hypocrisy in the context of race actually began much earlier in his more definitive figurative works of the early 1940s, coinciding with the advent of the Second World War. In *Conflict* (1942) (Fig. 5), two men with different skin tones—one White, the other Black— one right-side up, the other upside-down, are locked together in

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78. Fine, “The Spiritual in the Material,” 34.

79. Fine, 31.

struggle, or perhaps in death? Like *The Dispossessed (Family)* (1940) lines define but color boundaries are loose, and the composition suggests movement and a Mannerist complexity in its circular nature. The disproportionately large hands are limp, and there is nothing personally identifiable in the features of the faces. The men could be workers, united or opposed in a social system that bestows privilege on the basis of skin color. On the other hand, they could be soldiers, together fighting the Nazis in a racist war abroad in the ironic context of the oppression and racism present with their own country's borders. Art historian Anne Eden Gibson has even suggested that this painting may even, beyond issues of race and war, suggest a blurring of the lines of sexuality, as the two men embrace each other.<sup>80</sup>

A series of paintings by Lewis in the mid to late 1940s and inspired by his love of music, particularly jazz, reflect the parallel evolution of Lewis's journey into the depths of abstraction—from the standpoint of the figure and in his work overall. In the first, painted in 1945 and titled *Musicians* (1945) (Fig. 6), the two figures are far less discernible as such than in the paintings discussed in this paper thus far. Two large male heads are present at the top of the composition and facing different directions. Angular, thin black lines serve to outline the bodies of the men, the elbow of the figure on the left merging into a hand, or perhaps a head, while the line on the right denotes a foot or maybe a standing microphone. The figure in the center, suggestive of a woman by her dress and/or the bow in her hair, seems to face a woodwind instrument that strongly resembles a clarinet. Despite some relative individuality, there is a sense of togetherness and common purpose in the production of music. As noted by Wood, "This blending of corporeal shapes with images and motifs of musical instruments and equipment foregrounds the expressionistic and communal possibilities of performance, as the musicians visually merge with

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80. Ann Eden Gibson, "Recasting the Canon: Norman Lewis and Jackson Pollock," *Artforum* 30, no. 7 (March 1992): 66-73.



their instruments and with one another.”<sup>81</sup> The second painting in this series, *Jazz Musicians* (1948) (Fig. 7), is limited in its color palette of browns, whites, and reds, but the vibrancy of the red background brings a thrumming vitality to the foregrounded image, which is a tangle of elongated lines that evoke both bodies and instruments, though now in a fashion more “allusive than visual.”<sup>82</sup> Lewis’s rhythmic brushstrokes merge the producers of the music with the sounds that they create. His canvas is a visual representation of music itself, and the social identity of the musician as inseparable from his art. Lewis takes this idea even further in the dense, calligraphic black and white painting *Jazz Band* (1948) (Fig. 8), which was created not with a brush, but with sharp lines incised on a black-coated Masonite board. In this work, any roundness of shape that would distinguish the human form from the linear elements of instrument and equipment is gone, though at the same time ghost-like, shifting references to the heads, necks, and hands of players abound. Lewis’s representation of musicians, even in abstraction, remains firmly connected to notions of social identity, harmony and community and also includes the viewer in the equation. Bebop (a form of small-band modern experimental jazz that emerged in the 1940s), in the way it played with chord structure and tempo, changed the relationship between the audience and the musicians. Music was no longer a passive experience and focused on the pleasure of the listener; audiences were challenged and taken on an interactive journey by the experimental virtuosity of the musician.<sup>83</sup> As commented by Gibson, unlike his Abstract Expressionist colleagues, including Pollock, Lewis did not adopt the structure of jazz while ignoring its roots in African American culture. Instead he “meshed analyses of the structure of jazz with visual references to

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81. Wood, 105.

82. Wood, 109.

83. Wood, 111-112.

its production.”<sup>84</sup> Lewis’s use of the figure as a representation of community was not restricted to music; figural elements also appear in works as diverse as his representation of the hum of an urban populous at dusk (i.e., *Twilight Sounds* [1946] [Fig. 9]), to playful settings in which children gather (i.e., *Ring Around the Rosie* [1948] [Fig.10]).

The paintings featuring figures in the late middle period of Lewis’s career, in the 1960s, those dubbed his “Civil Rights Paintings” (so named for their more direct references to the American civil rights movement of the 1960s) can be distinguished by Lewis’s extensive use of the color black as their backdrop. While Lewis never painted only in black, between 1944 and 1977 he painted over 50 paintings in which black featured prominently, and it is likely significant that this color was predominant in later works that can be read as having racial and social justice overtones. Gibson, in her essay, “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York,” notes that in painting, in order to produce a deep black, it is necessary to start out with a pigment that is already black, such as lamp black, and then mix that color with binders.<sup>85</sup> Black is paradoxically both the absence of light (from a Newtonian physics perspective), but also the presence of all colors at once. Lewis reportedly had an enduring formal interest in using black in his work for that very reason- for him, black was a way of evoking and suggesting other colors.<sup>86</sup> Black can be seen prominently in *Alabama* (1960), *Post Mortem* (1960), *American Totem* (1960), *America the Beautiful* (1960), and *Ku Klux* (1963). Lewis scholar Mindy Tan argues that in paintings such as *Untitled* (1967) and *American Totem* (1960), the use of a stark,

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84. Anne Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 32.

85. Ann Eden Gibson, “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York,” in *Norman Lewis Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exhibition catalogue, eds. David Craven, Ann Eden Gibson, & Lowery S. Simms (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 1998), 11-30.

86. Gibson, “Black is a Color,” 11.

opaque black background has the effect of highlighting the white, interlocking shapes in the foreground, allowing the viewer to see those shapes as human figures more clearly.<sup>87</sup> The foreground “figures” are also emphasized by Lewis’s broad brush strokes, a feature of many of these paintings and a departure from the thin, calligraphic lines apparent in earlier works, such as *Jazz Band* (1948) as described above.<sup>88</sup> The most iconic of these paintings is *Processional* (1964) (Fig. 11), painted a year after the 1963 March on Washington. This large work on canvas has a deep black background, brightly foregrounding a parade of twisted and thickly painted black and white abstracted figures. Its telescopic nature, gradually widening from left to right with the figures densely layered at the far edge of the composition, suggests movement, energy, momentum and the unity of both Black and White people marching together for a just cause. Nevertheless, in *Processional* Lewis also reminds us, as does art historian Jeffrey Stewart, that the road towards ensuring equality and justice for all is a bumpy one- a process- replete with steps forwards and backwards.<sup>89</sup>

Lewis’s use of black in his paintings creates the bridge from a formal to an iconographic understanding of figural imagery in his work. In the same way in which he held seemingly dual notions of denying the political in his art while using politically provocative images and titles, he also refused to hold onto traditional binary symbolic ideas of black and white; that is, the “black” vs. “white” dichotomy is typically one of “evil” vs. “good,” “dark” vs. “light,” and “absence” vs. “presence.” Instead, he proposed an interconnectedness and relationship of black and other

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87. Tan, 31.

88. Tan, 31.

89. Jeffrey C. Stewart, “Beyond Category: Before Afrofuturism There Was Norman Lewis,” in *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, exhibition catalogue. Ed. Ruth Fine (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2015), 161-191.

colors, which extended beyond the formal to the social, and arguably, to a Postmodernist aesthetic. In Gibson's words, "In his Civil Rights paintings...Lewis aimed to suggest not only both the social and the visual aspects of this interdependency, but the constructed nature (that is, the artificiality) of defining black and white as opposites."<sup>90</sup> Race, long believed to have a biological basis, spawning apocryphal ideas of the emotional, social, and intellectual inferiority of African Americans, is now understood to be an entirely social construct. In his "civil rights" series of paintings, Lewis may appear to be suggesting that the viewer re-consider these long-held notions. This concept can also be seen in the way in which Lewis symbolizes group processes in his art. Lewis acknowledged the ways in which the interconnectedness and the sense of solidarity within a group can be a force for good or for ill. Here, Lewis is referencing the psychological concept of "groupthink," in which group cohesiveness is prioritized above the individuality and independent thinking of its members, potentially leading to irrational decisions and behaviors. In this way, he suggests that the activities of a noxious group, such as the KKK and the nonviolent protestors of the civil rights movement, may actually be more alike than different. This is not to suggest that Lewis did not support the Civil Rights movement (a ludicrous idea in light of his vigorous activism), only that he may have wanted to provoke the viewer to consider not only binaries and opposites but the ways in which extremes can sometimes co-exist. Lewis may also be referencing the importance of ritual within groups, which often increases a sense of group cohesiveness and power.<sup>91</sup> For example, it is well known that the architects of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., approached their activities, including marches, sit-ins, and other protests, in a very carefully organized,

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90. Gibson, "Black is a Color," 16.

91. Gibson, "Black is a Color," 11-30.

systematized, and strategic manner. Dr. King included a period of “self-purification,” as one of the four steps in a successful non-violence campaign.<sup>92</sup> This self-reflection was to occur over a specified number of days and involved acknowledging personal motives, such as anger and resentment, which potentially contributed to the individual’s participation and could be addressed in training sessions to assure a defined set of common group goals prior to direct action.

In sum, then, looking across the span of Lewis’s career, from the early days of Social Realism to the late middle period of his oeuvre reflecting his involvement in the civil right movement, Lewis demonstrated a persistent interest in the figure in more and less abstracted ways. He deployed the figure as a tool, a Postmodernist device within abstraction to communicate concepts linked both to the identity of the individual and to the society in which the individual resides.

### **B. Norman Lewis: The Country, the City, and Beyond**

For Modernist art critics like Clement Greenberg, “genuine” art distinguished and “saved” itself from the “kitsch” and depravity of popular culture by a focus on the individuality of each art form. For him, painting was about the two-dimensionality of the canvas, the use of line (an element not found as a contour in nature), and a focus on primary colors versus tonalities.<sup>93</sup> Greenberg’s *avant-garde* art was a “pure” art, which accepted its material limitations, purged itself of the figural, and was devoid of subject matter. In contrast,

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92. David M. Craig, “Debating Desire: Civil Rights, Ritual Protest, and the Shifting Boundaries of Public Reason,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 1 (2007): 152-182.

93. Greenberg, “Forum Lectures.”

(Post)modernist art historians, such as Pepe Karmel, have challenged this reductionist viewpoint, arguing for “abstraction as a form of representation.”<sup>94</sup> Karmel hypothesizes that:

...abstract artists always begin with a visual theme or archetype combining abstract forms with meanings generated by associations with the real world...Furthermore, a history that treats abstraction as a series of formal innovations, invented solely in response to formal problems, is untrue to the messy process of artistic creation. The way artists actually work is to take existing images and then modify them.<sup>95</sup>

Lewis’s work can certainly be traced to real-world inspirations that existed outside of his studio. He was fascinated by nature in all of its forms- plants, birds, and particularly, the expansiveness of the sky and the sea. Despite living in the largest city in the world, he represented nature inside his studio, which housed large tanks of goldfish and exotic and frequently, gigantic plants hailing from all over the world.<sup>96</sup> He fished from a small boat in Long Island, fascinated by the dialectical relationship between man and nature.<sup>97</sup> In his words:

Nature plays an integral role in the life of an artist. It is both conscious and subconscious, but creativity is not a concept. It is a very active state of being, lying somewhere in the labyrinth of memory and insight. Nature is left more to accident and not controlled, nature in itself is beautiful. An artist is a person with highly visual perceptions. His mind’s eye orders rather than takes orders. The painter expresses his visual feelings rather than his emotions. The result is a visual mood experience, a compulsion to express the pulse and spirit of the time in which he lives.<sup>98</sup>

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94. Pepe Karmel, *Abstract Art: A Global History* (London: United Kingdom, Thames & Hudson, Limited, 2020), 29.

95. Karmel, 29.

96. Romare Beardon and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 324.

97. Beardon and Henderson, 324.

98. Norman Lewis, “Oral History.”

Lewis certainly creates a “visual mood experience” in his lyrical painting *Migrating Birds* (1953) (Fig. 12), the winner (and first African American winner) of the popular prize at the 1955 Pittsburgh International Exhibition held at the Carnegie Institute, a competition which also featured work by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in addition to other well known American artists.<sup>99</sup> This painting changes tone from a deep brown at the corners opening into a semicircle of lighter, luminous brown tones covering the middle expanse of the work. On this background are perched a flurry of tiny, delicately fluttering shapes, suggesting birds in flight but also reminiscent of ducks and geese which seem to strut across the canvas, standing upright. They are anthropomorphic shapes, which at once recall the power and beauty of birds as they sweep unified across the sky as well as the bustle and excitement of crowds and city life.

As noted by Fine, many of Lewis’s paintings of the natural world tend to be monochromatic, or at least there is a leaning towards an economization of color.<sup>100</sup> The effect is the dramatic foregrounding of nature, in much the same way that the black backgrounds of Lewis’s “civil rights painting” draw the eye to his marching “little figures.” In *Winter Branches* (1946) (Fig. 13), the vertical composition echoes stark, black, linear branches that snake upwards, close together but each one also slightly varying in their direction. Again, Lewis creates a mood; the viewer is drawn into a moment, feeling the wind, the ice, the snow, and the chill of winter in the air. This painting shares the sparseness of a series of drawings by Lewis that share the same name and were based on black and white photographs of barren trees against a cloudless winter sky.

Lewis had a particular interest in the sea, stemming from his childhood. His father worked as a seaman in Bermuda and was instrumental in the development of Lewis’s enduring

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99. Beardon and Henderson, 315.

100. Fine, “The Spiritual in the Material,” 60.

love of fishing and all things related to the water.<sup>101</sup> Art historian Jeffrey Stewart argues that Lewis's spiritual connection to the sea also reflected his desire to follow in the footsteps of his West Indian ancestors, who, "had gone to the sea to gain sustenance but also to dream of a better life."<sup>102</sup> Lewis's *Seachange* series of works (e.g., *Seachange* [1975], Fig. 14), which he began in 1973, towards the end of his career, represent one of the very few demarcations of stylistic change in his oeuvre. Painted mainly in tones of blue and green, undulating, repetitive circular forms are dominant and reminiscent of waves. The overall effect is dark, atmospheric and moody; akin to the romantic sublime landscapes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where nature's grandeur is awesome in the broadest sense, both fascinating and to be feared. There is an undeniable spirituality and otherworldliness in Lewis's artwork. In fact, Stewart has likened some of the images in the *Seachange* series as "startlingly close to flying saucer imagery."<sup>103</sup>

As much as Lewis took inspiration from the natural environment, he was also captivated by the rhythms of the city, of Harlem, which was his home. He was especially drawn to the city at night. In *Tenement* (1948) (Fig. 15), another vertical canvas, rectangular slivers of various colors, including blues, reds, and oranges appear to glow in a black background. Each colored shape appears to reference the windowpane in a high-rise apartment building, which can be perceived by the viewer despite the fact that there is no anchoring architectural structure. Like in many of Lewis's paintings one simultaneously sees and *feels* the activity of the people behind the windows, both as individuals and as a buzzing, urban collective. Further, the straight-on perspective into the "windows" (as opposed to a view from the ground) conveys a sense of both

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101. Stewart, 172.

102. Stewart, 172.

103. Stewart, 181.



intimacy and voyeurism.<sup>104</sup> In *City Night* (1949) (Fig. 16) Lewis combines his appreciation for the vibrancy of the city with his penchant for nature's mystical elements. This painting has dark, earthy colors as its predominant palette. Elongated shapes hint at the architecture of an urban space at night and/or perhaps its inhabitants, covered by a hovering mist or fog, perhaps referencing a recent rain. The same shapes are partially reflected in the lower part of the composition, suggesting a busy street shimmering in a puddle on the sidewalk. This painting of Lewis's is placed in the "Cliffs, Waterfalls and Fogs," section in Karmel's comprehensive categorization of abstract inspiration. In his view these natural elements reference the sublime in nature and the "poetry of the indefinite," appearing "on canvas...as expanses of a single color, varying in density rather than hue."<sup>105</sup>

Whether through quasi-figural imagery or through inspiration from nature, the city, etc., Lewis marries formal aesthetics with allusions to the here and now, engaging the viewer, creating a mood, and encouraging him/her/them to reflect upon the work on multiple planes. In this way, Lewis brings spirituality and transcendence to his art that is distinctly Postmodern, and distinguished from the heroic, brooding characters of Abstract Expressionism, whose rules demanded a focus on material and method alone. It is for these reasons that it has been argued that Lewis's work, which has consistently defied categorization, can be aptly described as a forerunner to Afrofuturism, a relative of Postmodernism, in its broadest sense.<sup>106</sup> In the words of art historian Jeffrey Stewart:

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104. Tan, 27.

105. Karmel, 123.

106. Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery in 1993, refers to a cultural aesthetic and movement that imagines a just, scientific, and racially representative future world through art, literature, and music. It is most often seen in the exploration of intersections between race, technology, and the extraterrestrial. Afrofuturist themes are apparent in the novels of Octavia Butler, the visual art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, and in movies such as *Black Panther*.

I want to go further and argue that Lewis is on a kind of spiritual quest, not unlike that of the Afrofuturists of the mid-and late twentieth century, who searched for a more universal and spiritual relationship to the world...Lewis's achievement is that he was able to conjure up an alternative engagement with the cosmos by refusing to limit his painting to what he could see representationally in his Harlem "courtyard"...exploring his art is more than a lesson in art history- it is a journey into another way of seeing the possibility that, through art, we might find a new approach to being productively alive.<sup>107</sup>

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107. Stewart, 162.

### C. Philip Guston: Borrowing, Blending, & Telling

Like Norman Lewis, Canadian-American painter Philip Guston was no stranger to contradictions. The long arc of his oeuvre is a study in balancing two seemingly impossibly different ideas together in the same space and/or time. As art historian and critic Dore Ashton notes, while situated within a period of art history (i.e., Modernism) defined by “isms” and the emergence of one movement in defiant response to the last, Guston never took a clear position; his work is cyclical at its core. Ashton writes:

His painting tone alternates, now caressing, now strident. His tastes veer from the sublime equilibrium of certain fifteenth century masters to the dark reveries of the romantics. Irreconcilables are the staff of his life. Guston’s reflexive dialecticism is well known to those who have followed him over the years. They have learned to be comfortable with shifts in conversation from one position to another which, in the long dialogue of his work are finally not inconsistent...The very basis of his art is the holding in balance of seeming antitheses.<sup>108</sup>

Ashton further views Guston as actively resisting the “modernist’s narrow range of experience” through his unwillingness to rule out any sources of inspiration, whether past or present.<sup>109</sup> Like Lewis, he was a prolific reader who could be as inspired by an eighteenth-century poet as by a letter written by a close friend.<sup>110</sup> His artistic forefathers were an incongruent mix of Piero Della Francesca, Michelangelo, Pablo Picasso, Giorgio De Chirico, Max Ernst, and James Ensor. Further, while maintaining a love for art’s formal qualities and the materiality of painting, unlike Clement Greenberg, Guston did not believe that art history should be exclusionary, that is, that it was necessary to reject illusion and perspective while exploring the two-dimensionality of the

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108. Dore Ashton, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1-2.

109. Ashton, 5.

110. Ashton, 5.

canvas.<sup>111</sup> His merging of the two can be appreciated in one of the infamous Marlborough Gallery paintings, *Flatlands* (1970) (Fig. 17). The title of this painting, which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means both “a hypothetical two-dimensional world” and topography without any significant elevation, is particularly ironic.<sup>112</sup> The two-dimensional canvas is glutted with objects, which include analog clocks, books, a ball, a foot, the setting sun, clouds, remnants of buildings, disembodied legs, shoes, and two of Guston’s “hooded” figures, which face each other. The landscape is almost a surrealist and dream-like one. Yet within this canvas of fragmented forms, many of the objects are depicted with a sense of volume and depth, including the brick-like shapes seen on all sides to the immediate right of the setting sun, the reddish pink foot near the center of the painting, and the large book to the bottom right. Guston emphasizes the illusionistic quality of these objects by using devices such as foreshortening, horizon lines, and chiaroscuro-like shading.<sup>113</sup> In this painting, Guston seems to be pushing back at rigid Modernist rules about what art, and specifically painting, “should” be. Guston believed that, “Aesthetic traditions are never definitively discarded...in order for there to be any art at all, conventions must be continuously undone and rethought.”<sup>114</sup>

Like Lewis, Guston’s paintings also maintained an enduring tension between figuration (i.e., in Guston, representation more broadly) and abstraction. In a statement for the 1959 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *The New American Painting*, Guston wrote the following:

It is like the impossibility of living entirely in the moment without the tug of memory. The resistance of forms against losing their identities, with, however, their desire to partake of

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111. Kaufmann, 8.

112. Robert Slifkin, “Guston’s Modernist Follies.” In *Go Figure! New Perspectives on Guston*, ed. Peter Benson Miller (New York: The New York Review of Books and The American Academy in Rome, 2014), 102-104.

113. Slifkin, 102-104.

114. Kaufman, 9.

each other, leads finally to a showdown, as they shed their minor relations and confront each other more nakedly. It is almost a sense of inertia- these forms, having lived, possess a past, and their poise in the visible present on the picture plane must contain the promise of change. Painting then, for me, is a kind of nagging honesty with no escape from the repetitious tug-of-war at this intersection.<sup>115</sup>

Whispers of recognizable form can be seen even in Guston's earliest paintings that are generally considered to be "fully abstract." In *White Painting I*, (1951) (Fig. 18), the palette is monochromatic, consisting mainly of various shades of gray. Yet, Guston's brushstrokes are lively, layered, and tactile. They reference landscapes and a world that is at once chaotic, changing and in flux while also Zen-like, peaceful, and equanimous.<sup>116</sup> Two years later, Guston's paintings began to include forms that, in the context of canvas, convey a certain weightiness and definition.<sup>117</sup> This can be seen clearly in works such as *Attar* (1953) (Fig. 19), whose title references a fragrant essential oil, typically made of rose petals. In this painting, Guston expands his color palette to reds, pinks, and even hints of greens and blues, while still dappling the surface of the canvas with tonality. The eye is immediately drawn to the middle of the canvas, where red and pink predominate, clustered together, and gathering in momentum, width, and presence, moving from the left to the right in space. In the latter half of the 1950s, the titles of Guston's paintings also begin to take on a heavier and more definitive form, and are less allusive and mysterious, matching the brushstrokes on the canvas. For example, in *Clock* (1956-57) (Fig. 20), thick brushstrokes of dark reds, greens and blues are mixed with black rectangular shapes that even in their points and corners suggest an overall circularity and whirling motion. There are

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115. Guston, 20.

116. Storr, "P.G. All in All," 11.

117. Storr, "P.G. All in All," 11.

no numbers, no visible hands, yet the physical nature of a clock, and perhaps more so, a sense of the passage of time, is conveyed.

Beginning in the 1960s, Guston's weighty shapes became dramatically more anthropomorphic, and his titles often reflected the same figurative intent. In *Head I* (1965) (Fig. 21), a solid, square-like black form emerges from the center of the canvas out of a field of grays and pale pink, brushstrokes clearly apparent. It feels like the head of an individual, even though it is not identifiable as a specific person or viewpoint- whether as a profile, from the back, or from the front. It is nevertheless a presence, a being. As contemporary artist Tacita Dean notes:

This awkward black-gray square has no features to identify it, no face to recognize, nor, yet, need of a face, but we nonetheless understand it as a figurative presence. The shape often appears alone but sometimes in company, shifting its scale and morphing in outline, but its cube-like force never changes...the emergent mass has never been rendered or depicted but rather imagined...tellingly it never appears as a face full on to beguile and distract us. Rather it is an immutable solidity, a physical mass that takes up space<sup>118</sup>

This is the stuff of “homeless representation,” a term coined by Clement Greenberg, at least initially with clearly negative connotations, to describe the “heads” in the paintings of Guston, Jasper Johns’ “flags,” and the feminine shapes in Willem de Kooning’s work. It was a specific repudiation of the recognizable image in painting and its perceived association with kitsch and “low art” forms. Yet Guston’s “heads,” which also have a sense of foreboding about them, are consistent with the artist’s anxious and persistent exploration of the world around him and of himself.

Indeed, it may be that Guston’s penchant for “telling stories” in his work comes from an irresistible psychological impulse to investigate and reconcile the trauma he experienced in his

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118. Tacita Dean, “Guston Head,” in *Philip Guston Now*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Harry Cooper, Mark Godfrey, & Alison de Lima Greene (Washington, DC: D.A.P./National Gallery of Art, 2020), 81.

personal life as well as the ongoing trauma in the world, which included the horrors of war, racism, and anti-Semitism. British art historian David Anfam has commented that in his work Guston uses the body- its destruction and its connections- as a focal point for creating vignettes and narratives about traumatic events and offering a space in which to process them.<sup>119</sup> For example, in an early work, *Bombardment* (1937-1938) (Fig. 22), Guston pays tribute to the massacre of civilians in the Basque town of Guernica by Nazi Germany's *Luftwaffe* on April 26, 1937. In this painting on Masonite, tiny bird-like bombers are seen from the sky, with their charges exploding in the middle of the painting, sending bodies everywhere, even foreshortened and into the viewer's space. Guston makes use of primary colors and dramatic plays on light and dark to emphasize the totality of the destruction, which no one escapes- not man, not woman, not child- not even animals are spared. The circular, tondo format of *Bombardment* and its fish-eye perspective add to the painting's impact. In the way that it emphasizes the annihilation of the body and its loss of vitality, *Bombardment* reminds of us of the lynched, limp bodies crucified and hanging from trees in *Drawing for Conspirators* (1930) (Fig. 1). It is also reminiscent of Guston's great mural against fascism, *The Struggle Against Terrorism* (1934-1935) produced in Mexico in collaboration with Reuben Kadish and Jules Langsner. In all of these works, corporeal dissolution and abjection are major themes, linked through narrative outwardly to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi Germany and inwardly to Guston's personal tragedies, including his father's deep depression and suicide by hanging and the accident in which Guston's older brother rolled over his own leg with his truck, eventually leading to his death.<sup>120</sup>

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119. David Anfam, "Guston's Trauma: Ideal/Abject." in *Go Figure! New Perspectives on Guston*, ed. Peter Benson Miller (New York: The New York Review of Books and The American Academy in Rome, 2014), 85.

120. Anfam, 87.

In contrast, Guston's 1930 *Mother and Child* (Fig. 22) is the psychic opposite of the destroyed body. In this painting, reminiscent of both Mexican muralism and Picasso's monumental paintings of women from the 1920s, the oversized mother fills the space with volume. Her caring gaze is directed towards (and directs the viewer's eye towards) the infant whose head is nestled in her chest to the extent that we cannot see his/her face. This is a picture of maternal protection, nurturance, and unity, not unlike the many Virgin and Child paintings from the Renaissance that surely inspired it. Instead of the dissolution of the body, there is connection, almost enmeshment. Anfam notes that this painting was the result of a numerous meticulously completed drawings, and suggests a "preoccupation with order" that is a salve to the anxiety of loss.<sup>121</sup> In his words:

It is this meticulousness that is most relevant to Guston's habits insofar as it may enact a kind of secondary revision, an elaboration whereby what is lost or shattered is summoned back with an obsessive care, in effect a proportionate reaction against what cannot be controlled. In other words, certainty and organization as prophylaxis against insecurity and disorder- anxiety reshaped as form.<sup>122</sup>

One can also point to Guston's work to see the ways he tells tales related to violation of the self, the loss of identity, and silence, versus those associated with agency, subjectivity, and the power of speech.<sup>123</sup> His haunting painting of 1945, *If This Be Not I* (Fig. 24), takes its title from a Mother Goose rhyme entitled, "The Old Woman and the Peddler." Like many children's fairy tales and nursery rhymes designed to teach morality, this story has an equally macabre plot: an old woman on her way to the market to sell eggs falls asleep along the way and is accosted by a peddler who cuts her petticoats "to her knees." Upon awakening, cold and shivering, the woman is so distraught that she no longer recognizes herself. On the surface *If This Be Not I* suggests the

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121. Anfam, 88.

122. Anfam, 88.

123. Anfam, 88.



playfulness of a group of children who have found their way into the backstage area of a play and are gleefully trying on costumes and masks and tinkering with various stage props. However, the dark palette that obscures the images and displays a threatening, clouded sky betrays any notion of enjoyment. Further examination of the painting reveals a scene that extends the obfuscation theme of the work from the darkness and shadows to the actors and/or subjects themselves. Most of the children are wearing masks; the child at the far left wearing a crown holds a cloth in front of him that covers his entire face. A child at the far right has his back towards the viewer and a piece of striped fabric thrown over him such that only the back of his head and neck are visible. The child in front of him, foregrounded in space wears a large hat that extends down almost to his clasped hands in front of him; both hands and hat cast such dark shadows that his face is nearly completely obscured, as is his facial expression. According to Anfam, this painting tells a story of the violation of self and again hearkens back to man's inhumanity to man, played out in black-and-white photographs of concentration camp victims during the Second World War.<sup>124</sup> The striped fabric strewn about the painting alludes to the uniforms worn by prisoners. Dehumanization of victims was part of Nazi strategy, obliterating the identity of individuals, the person lost in piles of clothes, glasses, shoes, and furniture.<sup>125</sup> Those war photographs, which often featured groups of victims behind wire cages unflinchingly looking out towards the camera, like Guston's painting, are about seeing and yet not being seen.<sup>126</sup> They also force the viewer to confront their own inaction in the face of unspeakable atrocities, much like how Guston's later paintings, like *The Studio* (1969) (Fig. 25), in which a hooded "KKK" figure paints a self-portrait, implicate the self for passivity in the context of

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124. Anfam, 88.

125. Anfam, 89.

126. Anfam, 89.

white supremacy. Just as Norman Lewis references the ways in which within groups, individual opinions can be quieted, Guston here suggests a similar aspect of group processes, the diffusion of responsibility and inaction that follows when massacres occur on a large scale and the individuality of the victim is erased.

Opposing concepts that highlight agency, assertiveness, and one's ability to speak for oneself started to take shape as Guston moved most demonstrably back into depicting objects, in the late 1960s. He began at first with small panels (i.e., 10 X 10½ inches), illustrating single items- a car, a hood, a light bulb, a picture frame, a shoe, a clock, a gloved hand- and then the objects morphed into massive canvases that presented them together, words forming a new language, a script for a stage. In works such as *Courtroom* (1970) (Fig. 26), that which was once hidden and done in secret is now out in the open. On the cluttered left side of the painting, a cartoonish hooded figure holds a cigar in his hand; behind him a body is upside down inside a trash can, legs sticking straight up in the air. On the right side, a long arm with an oversized gloved hand a finger points evenly at the hooded figure, directly at the slim rectangular slits that form his eyes. The finger feels accusatory, and the hooded figure is clearly guilty of something. In contrast to paintings such as *If This Be Not I*, where crimes are covered and victims silenced, in *Courtroom* there is a sense of acknowledgement of offenses committed, voice given to the oppressed and the likelihood of a reckoning to come.<sup>127</sup> This painting can not only be “read” as Guston's response to external events such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, but also as a metaphor for painting and art itself. As noted above, while Guston embraced a multitude of stylistic approaches towards his work, he also felt that the artist should never become complacent and should always be “judging” and self-critical, thoughtful about his/her own existence in relation to the canvas. In his words, “The canvas is a court where the

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127. Anfam, 89.

artist is prosecutor, defendant, jury, and judge. Art without a trial disappears at a glance: it is too primitive or hopeful, or mere notions, or simply startling, or just another means to make life bearable.”<sup>128</sup> Guston’s art is an art of multiple stories, multiple narratives.

#### **D. Philip Guston: Traversing Boundaries**

As noted above, throughout his career, Guston was on a constant, restless, and almost spiritual quest to find his place on the canvas. He was stylistically eclectic in nature and he maintained an uneasy relationship with all art “movements,” whether Abstract Expressionism (the category in which he is most often placed), Surrealism or Pop Art. He was interested in elasticity of form, for example, the way in which he would begin painting a shoe, the sole of which would transform into the moon.<sup>129</sup> Like the Surrealists and Pop Art practitioners, Guston was also taken by the way that images changed in time and space, and had a penchant for visual puns. One of his silliest in this genre is the large format painting, *Cherries* (1976) (Fig. 27), which is more than nine feet wide and presents a rather odd, cartoon-like still life of twelve objects which simultaneously resemble the fruit, small bombs, and “cherry bombs” (i.e., a type of small, spherically exploding firework whose fuse resembles a cherry’s stem).<sup>130</sup>

As such, despite his connection to art movements that were either despised or ignored by Abstract Expressionist “purists” and critics like Greenberg, Guston’s own work can be described as a “cross-pollination of the painterly and the linear... a hybrid of his own brand of Abstract Expressionism and his own idiosyncratic understanding of Pop.”<sup>131</sup> As Kaufmann notes, Guston was interested in neither the subject matter of Pop Art- the tongue-in-cheek glorification of

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128. Guston, 53.

129. Kaufmann, 15.

130. Kaufmann, 15-16.

131. Kaufmann, 16.

celebrity, commercialization, and the media, nor in the means by which Pop Art was produced, through processes of industrialization and mass production such as silkscreens.<sup>132</sup> It is ironic then, that when critics like Hilton Kramer lambasted Guston for his 1970 Marlborough Gallery paintings, their derision focused on his perceived pandering to popular culture. This is particularly true when it can be readily demonstrated that Guston's relationship to "low art" was much more complex and arguably as "intellectual" in its presentation as that of the most elite members of High Modernism.

Guston's only foray into "true" cartooning occurred in the summer of 1971, when he created a series of satirical political ink on paper drawings about then American president Richard Nixon. Guston was reportedly encouraged to produce the cartoons by his friend and author Philip Roth, who had recently written a novel about Nixon (*Our Gang*). Entitled *Poor Richard*, the series tracks Nixon's early life from the age of nine when the Quaker family moved to Whittier, California, to his time in the White House, and finally imagines his historic trip to China (which was only in the planning stages at that time).<sup>133</sup> Guston presents ["Dick"] Nixon's face with a satirical eye towards phallic imagery- his nose as an erect penis and his hanging jowls resembling testicles. The KKK hoods of the Marlborough Gallery exhibition reappear in panels that have the president associating with close companions, smoking pipes and playing golf. Guston's cartoons are a searing send-up of what people came to despise most about Nixon, including his self-serving nature and hypocrisy. As writer Sarah Cowan indicates:

He [Richard Nixon] poses for photographs with his arm around the necessary demographics- hippies, blacks, "mom and pop" whites- bearing a grin betrayed by a hungry glare. Guston dresses him in a police uniform, a Ku Klux Klan hood, blackface, and, in the final panels, offensive

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132. Kaufmann, 17.

133. Kaufmann, 29.

Orientalist costumes as he sets sail confidently on his ill-fated “journey of peace.”<sup>134</sup>

In *Poor Richard*, Guston violates a principle that Abstract Expressionists held dear and Postmodernists embrace; he is looking to the external world- the one complicated and convoluted by social, cultural, and political elements- as opposed to only the world inside the studio or himself. However, there is much more to explore in the series. Guston could have easily focused on and exaggerated the habitus typically associated with Nixon, namely his “painfully” hunched shoulders and his tendency to push thrust his head forward; instead he omits these tics, presenting the president’s body as elongated and slim, like that of a young man.<sup>135</sup> In addition, Guston seems most interested in Nixon (and certain members of his Cabinet) at play, for example, lounging on the beach at Key Biscayne (Fig. 28), versus engaging in the explicitly political activities for which he is infamously known. Guston does not present Nixon as the epitome of evil, as does Roth in his novel; like his Marlborough “hoods,” Guston is much more interested in evildoing embedded in the everyday, the banal.<sup>136</sup> Guston’s notion of evil is complex in that his evil is rooted not in deliberately bad acts, but in lack of self-awareness and thoughtlessness, as Kaufmann notes, “self-regard without self-reflection.”<sup>137</sup>

Neither does Guston present Nixon as *only* evil. In another large-scale painting that reprises the *Poor Richard* cartoons, *San Clemente* (1975) (Fig. 29), once again features the American president. The palette is awash in pink and red tones, emphasizing Nixon’s Pinocchio-like nose and bloodshot eyes that stare out at the viewer with a pointed look that does not allow his audience to turn away. Nixon wears a long black coat and pants which end in one normal

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134. Sarah Cowan, “Poor Richard,” *The Paris Review* (New York, NY), December 13, 2016.

135. Kaufmann, 31.

136. Kaufmann, 30-31.

137. Kaufmann, 33.

looking black shoe and foot on the left side, and a swollen, hairy, grotesque, bandaged and exposed foot on the other side. This painting, notes cartoonist Art Spiegelman, “fully expressed Guston’s loathing of Nixon,” yet upon closer examination the eye is drawn to the single tear falling down Nixon’s cheek, a symbol of Guston’s empathy for the president’s pain.<sup>138</sup> Spiegelman writes, “Vitriol and empathy combine in a masterpiece of engaged caricature that transcends categories of low cartoon and high art.”<sup>139</sup> Guston as practitioner of “engaged caricature,” in his complex, incisive observations about human nature and his ability to speak to universal themes that challenge the viewer, collapses the false dichotomies of “high” and “low” art. By contrast, Guston occupies space in a Postmodernist and Post-structuralist universe comfortable with multiple and sometimes contradictory points of view.

It is also worth noting the simple irony that many of Western art history’s “giants” such as Leonardo da Vinci, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Gianbattista, Domenico Tiepolo, and Francisco Goya, were caricaturists as well as practitioners of traditionally more “elevated” art forms such as history painting.<sup>140</sup> Far from being simplistic and philistine, a great caricaturist actually produces work that is intellectually rigorous and in its innovation demands much from its viewers. Storr writes:

And what do caricaturists do? They extract essential aspects of a person or a social type and render them comic through exaggeration. In short, they “abstract” salient forms and manipulate them, much as a non-objective artist might reduce everything to simple geometrics and then shuffle the deck to create a composition. Indeed, much as Sengai Gibon- as noted a wondrously deft and inventive caricaturist- did when he summarized the universe in three shapes. And much as Guston did when he translated the scenes and players of his theatrical

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138. Spiegelman, 141.

139 Spiegelman, 141.

140. Storr, “A Life Spent Painting,” 120

allegories of the 1930s and 1940s into a new, open-ended body of works, the likes of which no one had previously seen.<sup>141</sup>

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141. Storr, "A Life Spent Painting," 120.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored in depth the ways in which both Norman Lewis and Philip Guston who, while traditionally included in the Modernist canon, and specifically within the Abstract Expressionist movement, did not fit there comfortably. Both artists placed a high value on aesthetics and materiality, and Guston in particular never left the world of painterly, loose, and visible brushstrokes characteristic of Modernism generally. Nevertheless, Lewis's and Guston's art exhibited many of the stylistic characteristics of the Postmodernist approach, which, as has been demonstrated, include the use of figuration, inspiration from a variety of sources, social and political engagement, interest in the viewer, storytelling, and the collapsing of traditional art categorical hierarchies. Both were deliberate in presenting work that held layers of meaning within it and suggested a variety of interpretations, culling from the past and the present.

Both artists could be considered at least moderately successful, whether by standards of recognition or commercial success. Guston's work was featured in numerous exhibitions, including solo shows, throughout his career and he secured representation in multiple well-known art galleries (e.g., Sidney Janis Gallery in New York City, which also represented Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko). He was first chosen as an American Academy in Rome Fellow in 1949 and returned to Italy as an artist-in-residence in 1960 and 1971. Guston's paintings were also featured in the Venice Biennale in 1960. Guston has been the recipient of many awards and prizes from prestigious art institutions, which include the Carnegie Institute, National Academy of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Norman Lewis joined the highly regarded Willard Gallery in 1946. Through Willard, Lewis exhibited his first solo show in 1949, and in their continuing association, Lewis mounted



five additional solo shows over the next 15 years. Lewis also participated in numerous group exhibitions. He was one of only two African American members (along with Hale Woodruff) of Studio 35, a group of “advanced” Abstract Expressionists (including Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhart, and Robert Motherwell), who met regularly for intellectual discussions aimed at promoting the new *avant-garde* art form. Lewis was included in the seminal Museum of Modern Art’s 1951 show, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. As noted above, in 1955 Lewis won the popular prize (for *Migrating Birds*, Fig. 12) at the Pittsburgh International Exhibition at the Carnegie Institute. In the 1970s, Lewis received recognition in the form of grants from the Mark Rothko Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation.<sup>142</sup>

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether the success of either artist was attenuated because of their tendency to paint outside of the lines of Modernism. After the Marlborough Gallery show disaster in 1969, Guston retreated from public life for a time, flying to Italy days after the opening and only returning to painting in earnest two years later, in 1971. The critical failure stung and caused him both personal and professional losses. Lewis’s story is more complicated; racism certainly played a part in his marginalization, as did his somewhat naïve and passive personality, which drove him to wait for recognition and to stay in situations long past their usefulness (i.e., to stay in Harlem after most African American artists had left, to remain with the Willard Gallery for more than a decade).<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, it can be strongly argued that, like Guston, Lewis’s reduced commercial success and recognition relative to his Abstract Expressionist peers existed for all of the reasons previously discussed. As succinctly stated by Ann Eden Gibson:

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142. Beardon and Henderson, 327.

143. Beardon and Henderson, 326-327.

The lens that brought Pollock and his work into focus, in the same heroic field of vision that established the U.S. as an international cultural force, clearly lacked the depth of field to clarify the outlines of Lewis' identity and work. His broad and inconsistent stylistic range and his African-American identity were alien to the image of Abstract Expressionism. Not only was his work too small, too elegant, and not "original" enough, but its most notable influences—Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, and African art, to name a few—were sources from which American abstraction was trying to demonstrate its independence. These issues were probably enough to exclude Lewis from the canon of Abstract Expressionism.

Gibson's quote raises an important question. Was Lewis's "inconsistent" stylistic range and the other ways in which he violated the tenets of Abstract Expressionism related to his identity as an African American? That is to say, is there something about the collective cultural experience of a group of people that impacts the form that their art takes? Is there something to the notion of Black abstract art?

Certainly, this issue has been one of central debate within the African American community itself. As poignantly stated by art historian David Driskell, the African American artists of the 1940s had to decide- "whether it was better to be a 'Negro Artist' and develop a racial art or to be an American Artist who was a Negro."<sup>144</sup> The renowned African American philosopher and art patron, Alain Locke, argued stridently for a "racial" art, which concerned itself explicitly with subject matter reflecting the lives and personalities of African Americans as a people. He considered African Art a source of important study, in the same way that artists of the past had looked to classical Greek sculpture as models and sources of inspiration for their work. He was quoted as stating:

[African Art] is as a thing of beauty ranks it with the absolute standards of art...a pure art form capable of universal appreciation and comparison; what it is as an expression of African life and thought makes it equally

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144. David Driskell, "The Evolution of a Black Aesthetic, 1920-1950," in *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (New York and Los Angeles: Alfred A. Knopf and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), 63, 74.

precious as a cultural document, perhaps the ultimate key to the interpretation of the African mind.”<sup>145</sup>

In contrast, the view of African American art historian James Porter was diametrically opposed to Locke. He argued that African American artists had been led to believe the lie that there were fundamental differences between their internal lives and their art and those of their White colleagues. He felt that African American artists should be free to choose their subjects and methods of art production. He warned against the study and referencing of African Art, fearing that the result would be just as derivative and superficial as that of the White artists of the Modernist era who were appropriating art from these cultures without real knowledge of them.

One important way in which African American artists working in abstraction during Lewis’s time differed from their White Abstract Expressionist counterparts is the way in which their work maintained a fidelity to their racial identity. Additionally, this fidelity was often not explicit or overt, thus rendering the message more powerful. As Ann Eden Gibson noted, these artists “did not necessarily reject their African heritage; its submerged presence in their work is frequent and well integrated.”<sup>146</sup> Similarly, in the words of curator and lecturer Mark Godfrey, the mode of communication in the work of this group of African-American artists was one of “commemoration, evocation, and suggestion.”<sup>147</sup>

Finally, the slipperiness of Lewis’s and Guston’s categorization within Modernism raises a more philosophical question about the nature of art history’s stylistic “movements” and how they evolve over time. Modernism’s beginnings were rooted in experimentation, innovation, and

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145. Alain Locke, “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture,” *Howard University Review*, 1, (June 1924) 290-299.

146. Ann Eden Gibson, “The Anonymity of Abstraction,” in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 71.

147. Mark Godfrey, “Abstraction in Tryin’ Times,” in *Four Generations: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Courtney J. Martin (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2019), 96.

“the new.” These innovations were rarely well received at the start. Art critic Louis Leroy coined the term “Impressionism” to poke fun at Claude Monet’s paintings, which he considered unfinished, like an impression or sketch. Édouard Manet shocked the art world at the 1865 Paris Salon with *Olympia* (1863), his uncompromising painting of a prostitute who stared unflinchingly at the viewer, challenging the hypocrisy of the tradition of the female nude. Equally scandalous was Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain*, a porcelain urinal turned upside down. Duchamp, as one of the most famous practitioners of the Paris Dada group, was decidedly anti-establishment. He challenged long held ideas that included art as the skilled manipulation of certain materials and as the product of genius. He even provoked questions as to the nature of art itself. Yet somehow along the way, Modernism lost its edge. In painting, *avant-garde* eventually came to mean that an artist needed to follow a specific set of rules governed by a specific set of critics. According to Anne D’Alleva, “...in spite of its revolutionary aims, in many ways this modernist movement displaced one authority with another, as one overarching view of culture and cultural production displaced another.”<sup>148</sup> This analysis begs the question: Is Postmodernism likely to succumb to the same fate as Modernism? At the outset, an approach that is inclusive, especially of groups previously marginalized within Western art history, and welcoming of multiple narratives and viewpoints, seems to make the slippery slope into cultural elitism unlikely. The question is nevertheless an open one. Postmodernism characterizes the current age. Without the benefit of hindsight, conducting an accurate analysis of its effects is challenging indeed.

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148. D’Alleva, 143.



Figure 1. Philip Guston, *Drawing for Conspirators*, 1930. Graphite, pencil, pen and ink, colored pencil, and wax crayon on paper. 22 X 14 inches.



Figure 2. Norman Lewis, *Evening Rendezvous*, 1962. Oil on linen. 50¼ X 64¼ inches.

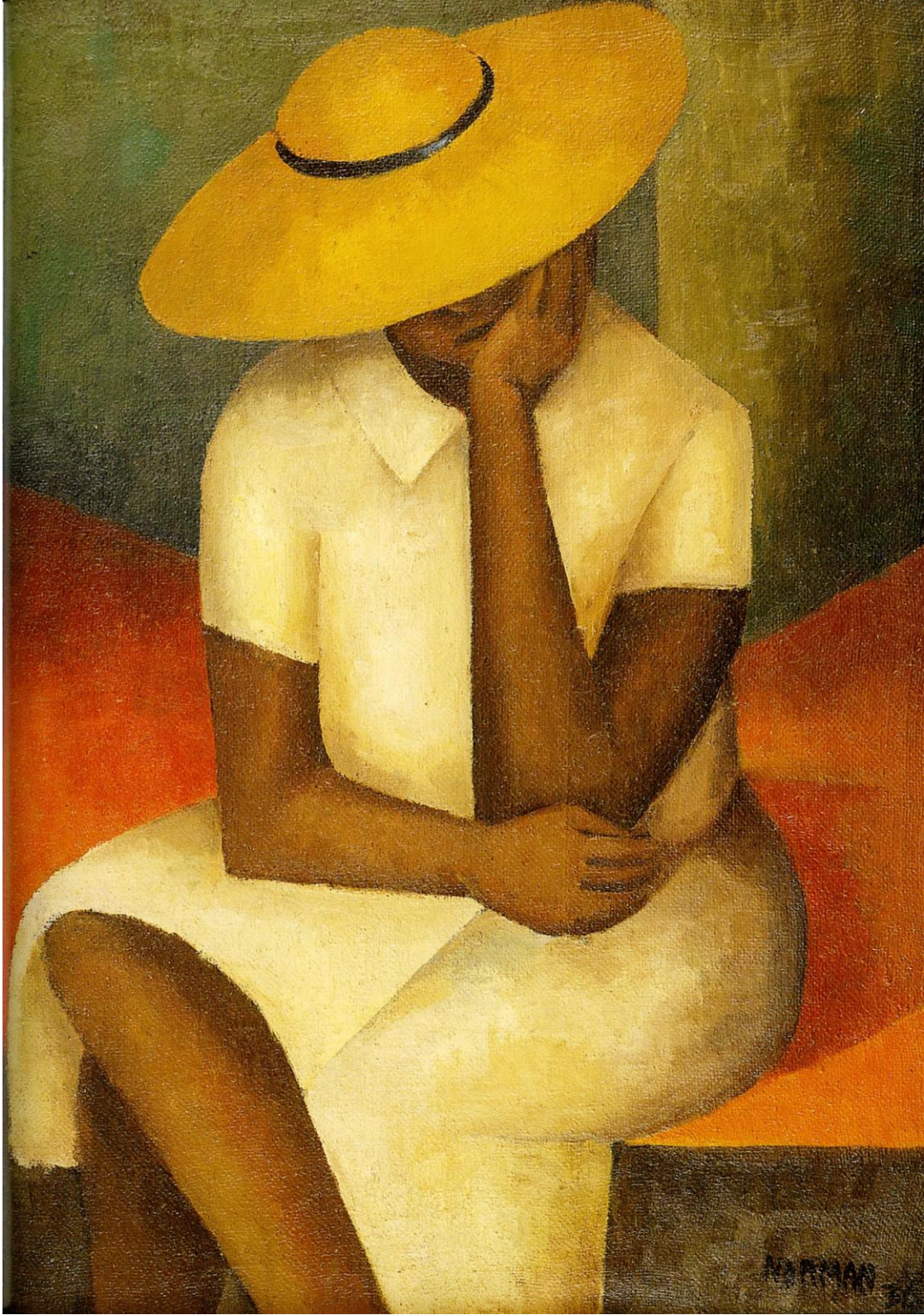


Figure 3. Norman Lewis, *Girl with Yellow Hat* (aka *Woman with Yellow Hat* and *Yellow Hat*), 1932. Oil on burlap. 36½ X 26 inches.



Figure 4. Norman Lewis, *The Dispossessed (Family)*, 1940. Oil on canvas. 36 X 30 inches.





Figure 5. Norman Lewis, *Conflict*, 1942. Oil on canvas. 36 X 26¼ inches.



Figure 6. Norman Lewis, *Musicians*, 1945. Oil on canvas. 25 $\frac{1}{4}$  X 19 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.



Figure 7. Norman Lewis, *Jazz Musicians*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 36 X 26 inches.

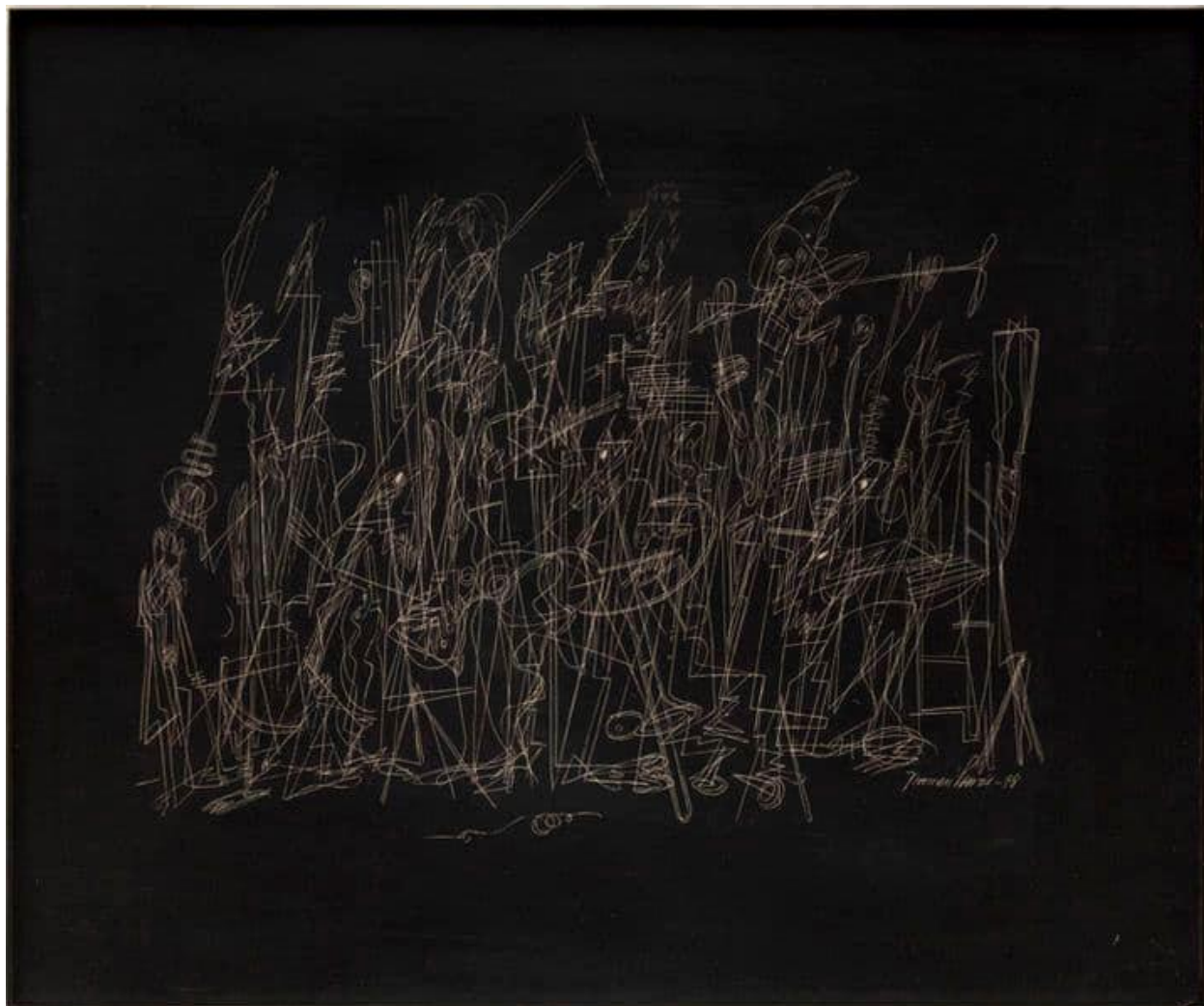


Figure 8. Norman Lewis, *Jazz Band*, 1948. Incised on black-coated Masonite board, 20 X 23 inches.



Figure 9. Norman Lewis, *Twilight Sounds*, 1947. Oil on canvas. 23½ X 28 inches.



Figure 10. Norman Lewis, *Ring Around the Rosie*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 27 X 32 inches.



Figure 11. Norman Lewis, *Processional*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 57¼ X 38½ inches.



Figure 12. Norman Lewis, *Migrating Birds*, 1953. Oil on canvas. 40 X 60 inches.



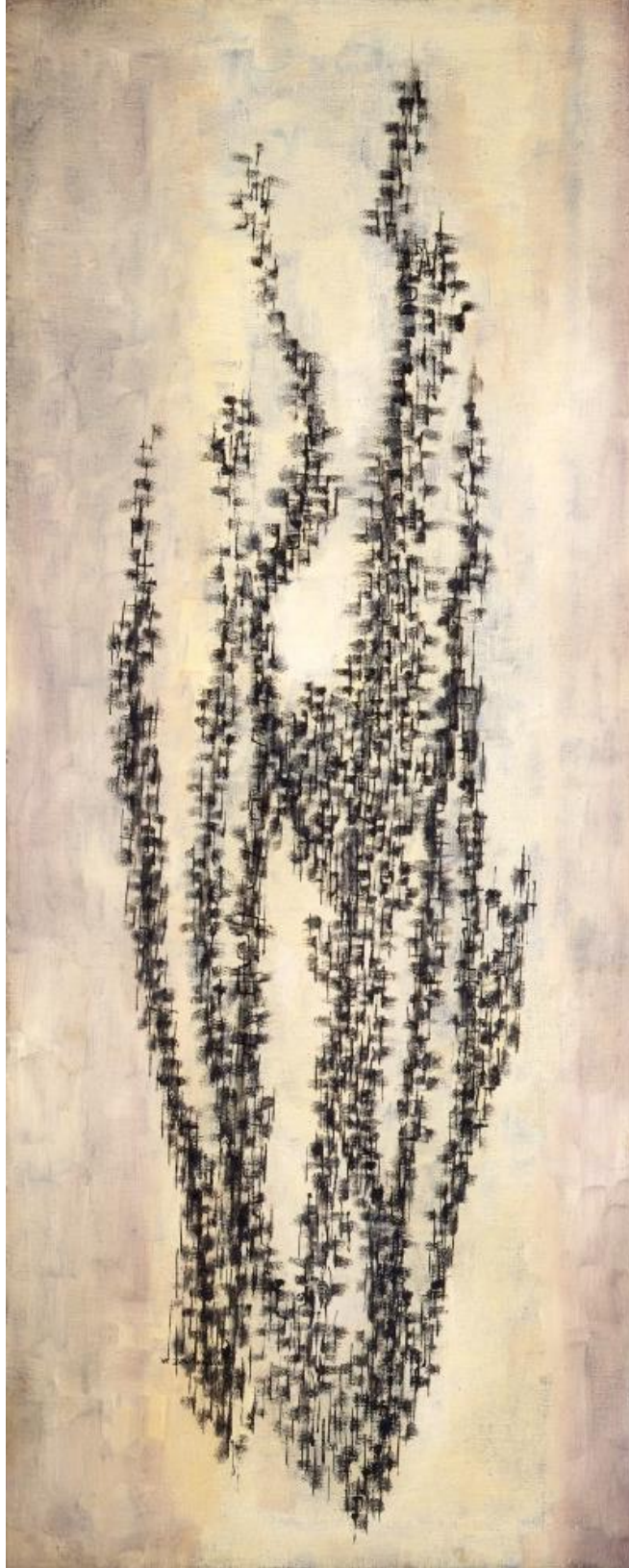


Figure 13. Norman Lewis, *Winter Branches*, 1946. Oil on canvas. 40 X 17 7/8 inches.



Figure 14. Norman Lewis, *Seachange*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 48 X 78 inches.



Figure 15. Norman Lewis, *Tenement*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 40 X 18 inches.



Figure 16. Norman Lewis, *City Night*, 1949. Oil on wood. 24 1/8 X 18 inches.



Figure 17. Philip Guston, *Flatlands*, 1970. Oil on canvas. 70 X 114½ inches.



Figure 18. Philip Guston, *White Painting I*, (1951). Oil on canvas. 57 7/8 X 61 7/8 inches.



Figure 19. Phillip Guston, *Attar*, (1953). Oil on canvas. 48 X 46 inches.



Figure 20. Philip Guston, *Clock*, 1956-1957. Oil on canvas. 76 X 64 1/8 inches.



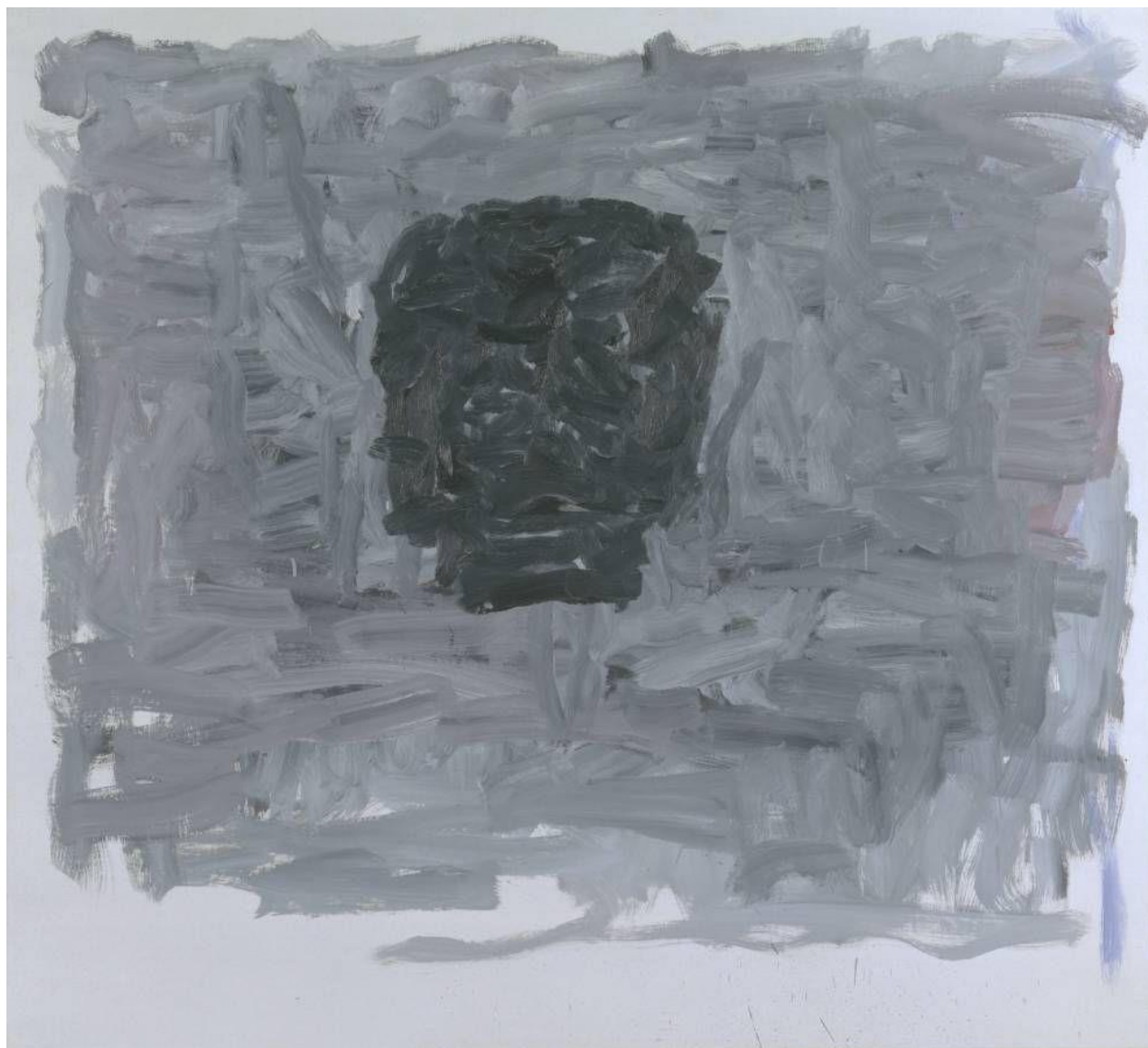


Figure 21. Philip Guston, *Head I*, 1965. Oil on canvas. 72 X 78 inches.



Figure 22. Philip Guston, *Bombardment*, 1937-1938. Oil on Masonite. 42 inches in diameter.



Figure 23. Philip Guston, *Mother and Child*, 1930. Oil on canvas. 40 X 30 inches.



Figure 24. Philip Guston, *If This Be Not I*, 1945. Oil on canvas. 42 3/8 X 55 1/4 inches.



Figure 25. Philip Guston, *The Studio*, 1969. Oil on canvas. 48 X 42 inches.



Figure 26. Philip Guston, *Courtroom*, 1970. Oil on canvas. 67 X 129 inches.



Figure 27. Philip Guston, *Cherries* (1976). 68 5/8 X 116 5/8 inches.



Figure 28. Philip Guston, *Poor Richard* (Title Page) (1971). Ink on paper. 10½ X 13 7/8 inches.





Figure 29. Philip Guston, *San Clemente* (1975). Oil on canvas. 68 X 73¼ inches.

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