7-2023

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Emily Cooper

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture

at

Lindenwood University

Emily Cooper  July 2023
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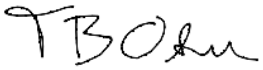
Dr. Trenton Olsen  July 2023
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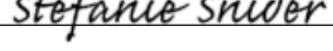
Dr. Stefanie Snider  July 2023
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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July 2023

ABSTRACT

THE IMPLICATIONS OF VENUS IN THE INTERWAR OEUVRE OF JAMES GUY

Emily Cooper, Master of Art History and Visual Culture, 2023

Thesis Directed by: Dr. Trenton Olsen

American Social Surrealist James Guy was a Communist proletarian artist who created works of art that depicted the social inequities he witnessed and experienced during the Great Depression. As a working-class artist, Guy painted images of daily life with recognizable and accessible iconography that allowed his fellow manual laborers to relate to the depicted scene. Guy distorted commonplace experiences through the filter of Surrealism to create absurd, illogical, and nightmarish environments to critique contemporary society. Guy worked to spark the realization of the viewer that they were subjected to the same injustices as the figures in his paintings. In this manner, the political beliefs of the artist directed his production, providing the ideological framework that allowed him to develop the class consciousness that facilitated the recognition of his mistreatment and the disadvantaged position of proletarian women due to their intersectional identities. This thesis will argue that the 1937 painting *Venus on Sixth Avenue (Cinderella)* by James Guy is a visual example of the Communist beliefs of the artist. This piece was created to reveal the negative treatment of proletarian women and the apathy of the upper-class women who established and reinforced the social hierarchy present in this painting. Guy employed the motif of the goddess Venus to demonstrate the opposite experiences of working-class and wealthy women. Guy relied on Venus' associated attributes of sexuality and fertility to build the image of a wealthy, elegant, idealized, 1930s woman. The goddess is placed on a pedestal with a deferential admirer below, while a gagged female telephone operator occupies the foreground and a picketing woman marches along the left border. Venus is indifferent to the violence and danger that the working women experience, representing the lack of concern of the moneyed classes for the visible struggle of the working class. Guy used Venus in two other works, *The Evening of the Ball* and *The Sailors Farewell,* both were likely created in 1937. The repetition of this figure establishes a link between the three compositions. In each instance, Venus is the foil to the proletarian women, serving to highlight the discrepancy in beauty, status, social treatment, and prescribed cultural roles.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Committee Chair Dr. Olsen for his guidance throughout my career at Lindenwood University. His passion as an art historian and educator shines through in every class, conversation, and editorial comment. His insightful perspective and personal method of analysis are inspiring and have pushed me as an art historian. His confidence throughout the process has allowed me to find my own voice and learn to trust my ideas.

I additionally extend my thanks to my committee members Professor Scheffer and Dr. Snider. Their comments pushed me to view my topic from a new perspective, encouraging me to consider additional avenues to clarify and refine my argument. Their meaningful engagement with my writing and the respect they awarded my scholarship were critical components to my success.

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Introduction

American Social Surrealism developed in New York City during the interwar period. It synthesized the aesthetic programs of Social Realism and Surrealism to articulate the compounded cultural trauma of the First World War and the Great Depression. Painter James Guy worked in this style from approximately 1933 to 1942.[1] He employed the Surrealist visual language to render images of Depression-era daily life with biting social critique to depict the absurd, illogical, and nightmarish conditions prevailing in the United States.[2] The beginning of his career coincided with a period of widespread labor unrest that led to the artist's involvement with the John Reed Club, the Unemployed Artists Group, and the Artist's Union. These leftist organizations fought for better wages, unionization, and governmental patronage of art.[3]

The artist's hometown and early training provided the foundation for the development of his politically informed artistic point of view. Guy was born in 1909 in Hartford, Connecticut, the location of The Wadsworth Atheneum, one of the first institutions in the United States to collect Surrealist works of art. This museum fostered a progressive art center in Hartford and was the site of Guy's early career. His first solo show in 1932 was held in an annex of the Wadsworth. These pieces are now lost, but this exhibit indicates the degree of recognition Guy achieved at the outset of his career and the context within which his works were first viewed. [4] From 1933 to 1934 Guy was listed as a Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) artist living in Hartford, but he

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1. Ilene Susan Fort, "American Social Surrealism," *Archives of American Art Journal* 22, no. 3 (1982): 8, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1557395.

2. Fort, "American Social Surrealism," 8.

3. Jonathan Judd, "Between Myth and Movement: The Depression-Era Iconography of the American Social Surrealists," *Space Between: Literature & Culture, 1914-1945* 14, no. 2018 (January 2018): 1, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=hlh&AN=137226103&site=eds-live&scope=site.

4. Ilene Susan Fort, "James Guy: A Surreal Commentator," *Prospects* 12 (1987): 127, 126 doi:10.1017/S036123330000555X.

also moved to New York City in 1932 and spent time in both locations.[5] During this formative period, Guy created both mural and easel paintings. He studied in Mexico for six months with Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco and visited the artist several times while he painted the mural cycle *The Epic of American Civilization* 1932-1934 at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.[6] Guy created a now-lost mural in the 13th St. Communist Workers School in New York City.[7] Guy's manipulation of three-dimensional space and incorporation of propagandistic imagery in this painting likely indicate the influence of Orozco's style.[8] The creation of this mural and its overt political messaging underscores Guy's alignment with the ideologies taught in the 13 St. School that existed as an extension of the Communist party. This mural is the beginning of Guy's politically motivated mature style that developed after his introduction to the artistic climate of New York City.

Guy's American Social Surrealist works of art are visual manifestations of the artist's political ideology, the catalyst for his labor. American art curator and director of the Federal Art Project (FAP) Holger Cahill classified Guy's work as "social content art." He defined this genre by the social consciousness of its imagery. In 1939, in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue of *American Art Today*, Cahill states, "it is evident that the social content artists have been making headway…in their endeavor to create symbols and allegories which will express with dramatic power the social ideas and social movements of our time. …They have been helped to a certain extent by the surrealist method of daring and fantastic juxtapositions which

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5. Fort, "James Guy," 146.

6. Fort, 131. Guy visited at least once with Quirt, corroborating the date Guy moved to New York City and providing a possible influence on the development of America Social Surrealism.

7. Fort, 131.

8. Fort, 131.

reveal the unfamiliar, the strange, and the disturbing in the recesses of the familiar fact."[9] In his paintings, Guy dramatized commonplace situations and environments that were obscured by their familiarity to draw attention to their overlooked occurrence. Guy desired to initiate discourse on overarching societal issues that he believed were "caused by the capitalists or government officials," citing systemic and policy-related issues as the source of the collective strife in the United States during the interwar period.[10]

It can be argued that Guy's public political beliefs stem from the disadvantages of his proletarian status that were exacerbated by the harsh conditions of the Great Depression. This event triggered increased class consciousness and the recognition of the ineffectiveness of capitalism to ensure economic stability.[11] Guy's involvement in the Artist's Union conveys the radical nature of his political beliefs. The Artist's Union used militant trade union tactics to demand reform of federally sponsored art projects. The organization was awarded the nickname "fire brigade" for the enthusiasm and readiness of its members and often, other unions requested their participation in demonstrations, sit-ins, and pickets.[12] The collaboration between trade-specific groups of manual laborers broke down the barrier between artist and subject, fostering the unity of the proletariat strata, the lowest economic class that uses their sole possession of labor to bargain and accumulate wealth.[13] In this process, the Artist's Union redefined the role of

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9. Holger Cahill, "American Art Today," *Parnassus* 11, no. 5 (1939): 36, https://doi.org/10.2307/771699.

10. Fort, "James Guy," 133.

11. Judd, "Between Myth and Movement," 1.

12. Patricia Hills and Gerald M. Monroe, "Art and Politics in the Archives Of American Art Journal: Artists As Militant Trade Union Workers During The Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal* 49, no. 1/2 (2010): 47, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23025800.

13. Judd, "Between Myth and Movement," 1.

the artist in society. Leftist artists adopted the role of cultural workers, conceiving their art as the product of their manual labor.[14]

Guy's increased class consciousness and new role as activist artist allowed him to see the widespread social injustices inflicted upon his class. With this lens, he created hyperbolic representations to render visible the inequitable treatment that working-class women disproportionally experienced due to their intersectional identities. Through his paintings, Guy labored to create social criticisms that illuminated the lack of female agency in society and the apathy of upper-class women to the strife of working women despite their shared experiences of objectification under the heteronormative male gaze, patriarchal social hierarchies, and systemic gender-based inequities. Unlike his contemporaries, based on the repeated subject matter in his oeuvre, Guy prioritized the mistreatment of proletarian women to advocate for an improved quality of life.

This thesis will argue that in the oil painting, *Venus on Sixth Avenue (Cinderella)*, 1937 (figure 1), Guy used the motif of the goddess Venus to critique the inequity between laboring and moneyed classes. In particular, he represents the prescribed oppressive roles for women in interwar America to develop a foil between the upper-class and the proletariat women. He constructed these parallel situations to spark the recognition of the viewer that they were experiencing similar inequitable treatment as the proletarian women. Guy created these images to foster an understanding similar to his conception of his social position that he gained through his belief in Marxist ideologies.

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14. Hills and Monroe, "Art and Politics," 45.; Fort, "James Guy," 128.

Venus on Sixth Avenue is comprised of several unrelated vignettes in a deserted vista. In the foreground, pushed to the very edge of the picture plane is a gagged woman who threatens to invade the viewer's space. Immediately confronted by the face of a woman who is currently subjected to violent treatment, her presence arrests the viewer. The gag over her mouth conveys not only her inability to communicate but also the violence employed to silence her. A masculine hand tightly grips the top of her head, directing her gaze to the right of the viewer, manipulating what she can see. Her finger wave hairstyle and the peter pan collar indicate the contemporary setting of the piece. The badge worn by this woman, cropped by the edge of the painting, reads, "ACY," indicating her employment as a Macy's telephone switchboard operator.[15]

As labeled in the title of the painting, the man in the background stands in front of a statue of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, sex, and fertility. Venus wears a contemporary evening gown that is draped to accentuate her figure. The sculpture is twice life-sized, rests on a pedestal, and is decorated with jeweled teeth. To the right is a man seated in profile, shown from the rear, looking towards Venus. In front of this unidentified figure is a movie screen with a cropped image of a man also in profile. The arrangement of the figural grouping resembles the open book, covered with silhouettes of women, on the opposite side of the composition. Heightening the dream-like quality of this piece, it appears as if the women are stepping off the pages of a romance book. The woman on the left, exiting the book, wears a fashionable dark coat, hat, and a nondescript placard. The sign around her neck references the widespread labor movement at the time of creation (figure 2).[16] She walks in front of an imposing red building that

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15. Fort, "James Guy," 148.

16. This connection is supported by the photograph of women picketing outside of the Alamo Dress Manufacturer, circa 1940.

references the red brick of Macy's original location on Sixth Avenue in New York City. The allusion provides additional criticism concerning commercialism, the rise of big business, and the presence of this employer within the city.

Set within the shared American experience, Guy portrayed familiar compositional elements through the filter of Surrealism, transforming them into grotesque exaggerations to reveal their overlooked presence in daily life. This pre-existing familiarity with the depicted scene allowed the viewer to relate to this canvas despite the accompanying dreamlike, irrational, and unsettling mood. The presence of Venus is paramount to the understanding of this painting. The artist incorporated an iconic image from the history of art to formulate a legible, accessible critique for the Depression-era American audience. The legibility of the subject matter is the style's source of power, creating an entry point for the viewer to establish a personal connection with the images that exist as reflections of their daily lives. Through a relationship with the described scene, the viewer could initiate a process of self-examination that leads to the ultimate recognition of the similar nightmarish conditions under which they live, their exploitation under capitalism, and the surrounding hierarchical social structure that enforced their position.

Literature Review

Ilene Susan Fort's 1982 article "American Social Surrealism" is the foundational text on this style. As the authority, all evolving research stems from the classification of artists established by Fort. She developed a definition of the style through the discussion of singular works of art by its primary practitioners, James Guy, Walter Quirt, and O. Louis Guglielmi. Fort proposed a grouping of this style based on the underlying ideology of the creators and their production. Like Surrealism, from which American Social Surrealism adapted its visual language, pieces in this style are not categorized by adherence to a unified aesthetic program. Fort states that Guy, Quirt, and Guglielmi worked in this style to "creat[e] images as hallucinatory and frightening as European artists' more personal visions while retaining their focus on social problems."[17] She determined that the "juxtaposition of incongruous images" was the Surrealistic device most often employed by Guy and Quirt.[18] The author describes their paintings as "complex compositions of overlapping and intertwining figurative groupings, which were psychologically associated but formally disconnected."[19] Fort notes that the American Social Surrealists represented the shared collective experience of the Depression, whereas the European Surrealists and their followers portrayed the personal, subjective imagery of their subconscious.

The author cites *Newer Super Realism,* the first exhibition of Surrealism in the United States, as the point of exposure of Guy, Quirt, and Guglielmi to Surrealism. On view at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Winter 1931, Guy visited this show in his hometown of Hartford,

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17. Fort, "American Social Surrealism," 8.

18. Fort, 11.

19. Fort, 11.

Connecticut. Quirt and Guglielmi likely saw a modified version mounted at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York at the beginning of 1932. Fort details Guy's and Quirt's involvement in radical political organizations throughout the 1930s and identifies the economic hardship of the Great Depression as the motivation for the invention of this style. The article concludes with an explanation for the move away from this style with the advent of the Second World War and the rise of Abstract Expressionism in New York.

Five years later, Fort published "James Guy: A Surreal Commentator," the sole text to exclusively examine the surrealist period of the artist's career. She notes that the Surrealists created illogical scenes to "disturb viewers and force them out of their preconceptions of the world."[20] Fort perceives a similar connection in the usage of grotesque and unsettling compositional elements by Guy. The author concludes that Guy adopted this type of imagery to shock viewers into a realization of the necessity for social change. Fort connects iconography within specific examples of Guy's paintings to contemporaneous events and personages to illustrate the influence of the surrounding social and political environment on his artistic production and the incorporation of these recognizable situations to trigger a critical examination by the viewer of their own way of life. Guy realized that only Surrealism, with its unsettling and often bizarre imagery, was forceful enough to shock the complacent viewer into a greater awareness of the need for change.[21]

Building on the research established by Fort, Jonathan Judd in "Between Myth and Movement: The Depression-Era Iconography of the American Social Surrealists" indicates that

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20. Fort, "James Guy," 126.

21. Fort, 126.

the socioeconomic status of Guy, Quirt, and Guglielmi during childhood led to their political alignment with leftist organizations after the stock market crash of 1929. Underscoring the importance of the political motivations of the artist, Judd references an alternative title for this style, "Proletariat Surrealism," first used by Grace Clements, founder of the Post-Surrealist collective.[22] Judd introduces the idea that the economic status of the artist shaped their philosophy, and theorizes that American Social Surrealism is a uniquely proletarian style, it could not have been conceived by members of any other class. Judd declares that the American Social Surrealists "mined the aesthetic [Surrealism] for what it could give to the cause of revolutionary image production, showing multiple intersections of space and time, using dynamic montaging techniques and a sense of the aesthetically bizarre, towards the cause of the revolutionary labor movement and class struggle."[23] Judd describes these artists as the "sociopolitical vanguard" who challenged the American Dream within their compositions, revealing the myth of upward social mobility and equitable access to resources. These artists attributed systemic failures as the cause of their suffering rather than personal circumstances.[24] Through their labor, Guy, Quirt, and Guglielmi "provide[d] a framework for those who seek to shake themselves from the powerful 'desire to sleep' by revealing the breakdown of these governing systems."[25]

Neither Fort nor Judd situate American Social Surrealism within the larger context of American art at this time, and both neglect to comment on the perception of this style by those

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22. Judd, "Between Myth and Movement," 1.

23. Judd, 1.

24. Judd, 1.

25. Judd, 1.

outside the leftist community of American artists. The authors insist that the subject matter of this style was applicable and approachable to the general public, but that it was specifically created to trigger a process of self-examination by the proletariat. In her scholarship, Fort exclusively cites the opinions of leftist critics. These critiques present a slanted perspective, providing space for only the opinions of those who were familiar with the objective of the artists and possessed the same ideological beliefs. Judd analyzes American Social Surrealist paintings as symptomatic of the American labor movement at this time, demonstrating the rupture of the American dream and the development of the artist-activist position adopted by practitioners of American Social Surrealism. This style is often studied in isolation, connected formally to Surrealism or iconographically to current events. It is necessary to place this style within the larger context of American interwar artistic production to remove the bias of the modern gaze that desensitizes the viewer to the radical nature of the visual vocabulary of the American Social Surrealists. Only after comparison with parallel artistic movements is it possible to recognize the vanguard nature of the visual program established by Guy, Quirt, and Guglielmi.

"Art and Politics in the Archives of American Art Journal: Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression" by Patricia Hills and Gerald Monroe supports the class-specific lens that Judd uses to examine American Social Surrealism. Hills and Monroe trace the formation and social impact of the John Reed Club, the Unemployed Artists Group, and the Artists' Union, all New York City-based organizations. The John Reed Club, named after the journalist and founder of the American Communist Party, was comprised of radical Marxist artists and writers who fostered community in their shared political beliefs and organized exhibitions, classes, lecture series, and an art school with "emphasis on the practice and theory of

art and art history from a Marxist point of view."[26] This article provides invaluable insight into the manner as to how leftist artists during the Great Depression conceptualized their role and labor. The authors argue that the abysmal economic conditions and the increased labor movement during the Depression radicalized artists, leading to the formation of a trade union of cultural workers that collectively bargained with the federal government for employment opportunities and increased wages.[27] The self-identification of the artist as a cultural worker fundamentally shifts how the art of leftist artists must be classified and understood. This perspective is necessary to incorporate when rationalizing the desire of the American Social Surrealists to adapt the Surrealist visual language to portray scenes of Depression-era daily life.

Guy did not correspond with colleagues about his methods of production, nor did he write about his processes. Because of this lack of primary source information, we are unable to confirm the activities of Guy and must rely on the formal analysis of his paintings to aid in our understanding of his political ideologies. Without a catalogue raisonné or recent retrospective exhibitions, it is difficult to attribute creation dates and provenance without a definitive date range for Guy's period of creation. Foundational texts on the style do not incorporate any primary sources, raising questions about the existence and relevancy of this archival material. Similarly, Hills and Monroe do not reference any American Social Surrealists, but the coded iconographic programs present in works in this style support the activist role adopted by leftist artists during the period. Therefore, it can be inferred that Guy engaged in similar activities as described by the authors. In the available scholarship on American Social Surrealism and Marxist

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26. Garnett McCoy, "The Rise and Fall of the American Artists' Congress," *Prospects* 13 (1988): 325, doi:10.1017/S0361233300005329.

27. Hills and Monroe, "Art And Politics," 45.

artists of the interwar period, it has not been suggested that the role of the artist as a cultural worker was the impetus for the development of American Social Surrealism. I argue that the theories proposed by Hills and Monroe can be applied to the American Social Surrealists through an examination of the painting *Venus on Sixth Avenue* by Guy. This composition is a testament to the political ideologies of its creator, as is evident in the implementation of the iconic image of the goddess Venus to construct a critique of contemporary society by illuminating the inequity between social classes that was exacerbated by the Great Depression. Neither Fort nor Judd mentions the usage of the motif of Venus within Guy's oeuvre, neither do they discuss his conceptualization of his work as labor. Framing *Venus on Sixth Avenue* as a class commentary on the reductive roles assigned to women based on stereotypes and prejudices as demonstrated by the symbolic figure of Venus fills existing lacuna, providing new insight into the work of Guy, the objective of the style, and Depression-era biases against women.

"'At Least Half the Pages Will Consist of Pictures': 'New Masses' and Politicized Visual Art" by Helen Langa provides context for the visual tradition of Marxist imagery employed by Guy. Langa centers this article on a 1925 application for an American Fund for Public Service grant which stressed that at least half of all pages in *New Masses* will contain illustrations. This New York City-based magazine consisted of visual and written "vitriol condemnations of capitalism, racism, and imperialism" from a Marxist perspective.[28] Langa concludes from the layout of these issues that visual images were afforded equal importance to articles, functioning independently as complete critiques. The magazine established a sympathetic readership that similarly attended John Reed Club, American Artists' Congress, and American Artists' School

28. Helen Langa, "'At Least Half the Pages Will Consist of Pictures': 'New Masses' and Politicized Visual Art," *American Periodicals* 21, no. 1 (2011): 32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23025205.

exhibitions.[29] The circulation of *New Masses* provided leftist artists, writers, and organizers a legitimized outlet to promote and disseminate their beliefs outside of their politicized meeting spaces. They now had the opportunity to cultivate a greater awareness within the general population of the included social issues. This publication helped to develop the literacy of the reader to pictorial social critiques from a Marxist perspective. *New Masses* provides insight into the pre-existing visual program employed by Guy to construct the social critiques that are characteristic of his work.

The development of this style in a specific geographic region, by artists of the same economic strata, demonstrates the interconnectedness of the political and artistic motivations of the American Social Surrealists. Living within the most affected class, Guy desired to spark the recognition of their collective exploitation through the creation of thought-provoking pieces that challenged the viewer to evaluate their way of life. Guy's activities during the Great Depression reveal his public political beliefs that served as the driving force behind his development of American Social Surrealism. As a member of the proletarian class, Guy was radicalized by the Great Depression. The Marxist ideologies that he supported influenced his iconographic decisions and motivated the artist to portray scenes of daily life with the intent of improvement.

Guy chose the avant-garde visual language of the European Surrealists to demonstrate the inequitable treatment experienced by working-class women and the blatant indifference to these struggles exhibited by upper-class women. Guy used the symbolic legacy of the image of Venus throughout the history of art to formulate this critique. Guy's ability to recognize this specific social injustice and desire to repeatedly present this systemic power imbalance in his oeuvre

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29. Langa, "'At Least Half the Pages," 44.

stems from his personal political beliefs that were fostered by the radical artistic environment of New York City during the interwar period and his socioeconomic status. This thesis provides an examination of the use of the motif of Venus by Guy and his intent to improve daily life for proletarian women through this artistic production. This is a productive avenue of scholarship as Fort and Judd, the two foremost scholars on this subject, do not contextualize Guy's oeuvre in relation to his role as an artist-activist nor comment on the repeated use of the figure of Venus. Fort focuses on connecting the iconography within his socially conscious pieces to current events and Surrealist precedent. Judd centers his argument on the economic circumstances that led to Guy's adoption of Marxist political beliefs. This thesis remedies the omission of these scholars by describing the divergence of Guy's Venus paintings from concurrent American artistic production, the significance of the artist's decision to utilize female protagonists, and the implications of the use of the Classical figure Venus in his works.

Results

Guy channeled his dissatisfaction with the current sociopolitical climate into his labor, painting scenes with forceful political commentary to portray the disadvantaged situation of his economic class. To construct this critique, Guy employed the motif of Venus within *Venus on Sixth Avenue* to present the constricting experiences of American women based on social position. Guy used the celebrated attributes of the goddess Venus as a foil to the oppressed telephone operator to critique the prescribed societal roles of women that were created to maintain their lack of agency. The proximity of the operator's portrait establishes a claustrophobic, powerless sensation for the viewer that mimics the operator's experience. The protagonist's job as a telephone operator is essential to the success of Guy's critique. In the early twentieth-century, telephone operation was a new, gendered profession. Women were exclusively hired for this job because they were thought to be more polite, docile, and accommodating.[30] Exclusionary hiring practices led to the employment of white women of approximately the same social level as the white middle-class customers. Women of Color and immigrants, those with discernible accents, were not employed.[31] The inclusion of this woman as a representative of Macy's provides insight into their hiring practices and divulges her social status and prioritized value as a white woman. Guy portrays the gagged societal role of the operator who works to facilitate long-distance conversations while she is not allowed to speak. This figure is also unable to look freely, forced to only observe a controlled portion of her environment. The elongated,

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30. Jill Frahm, "The Hello Girls: Women Telephone Operators with the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 3, no. 3 (2004): 271-93, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25144374, 288.

31. Frahm, "The Hello Girls," 288.

fluid arm that extends from the hand on the operator's head to the deferential man in the background in front of Venus directs the viewer to connect these women.

Venus and the telephone operator function as contrasts. They demonstrate the simultaneous experiences of women that occur based on social class. Despite the difference in status, both women lack personal agency and are portrayed as passive figures. Venus is not subjected to violent treatment, but she is fetishized by both men within the composition. Their worship is based on her physical appearance and role as the goddess of sex and fertility. Venus is a divine beauty, and the operator represents the commonplace, working woman, but each are oppressed by their societal roles. The title undergirds the duality of woman present in this piece. Venus and Cinderella are two fantastic, mythical women with opposite origin stories. The inclusion of Cinderella in the title provides aspirational hope, citing Cinderella's transformation to an elevated social position that was merited by her disposition.[32] Through divine intervention, Cinderella became a princess and was saved from the menial labor forced upon her by her stepmother. After marriage, Cinderella was treated similarly to Venus. She ascended to the rank of ruling nobility, accepting offerings and deferential treatment by her subjects. It can be argued that this fairytale occupies a similar ubiquitous popular culture presence to that of Venus. Guy referenced a widely known children's story that involves the themes of kindness and compassion despite adversity, desired attributes socially ascribed to women, and employment-specific requirements for the role of telephone operator.

The image of Venus has been worshipped for her divinely feminine attributes since Antiquity. Guy acknowledges the legacy of this devotional icon throughout the history of art by

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32. Fort, "James Guy," 148.

relying on her associated characteristics from Classical art to construct an image of a wealthy, elegant, and refined woman. Guy assumed the prior knowledge of the viewer, employing an image of popular iconography from the shared visual lexicon to establish a critique of contemporary society. The inclusion of Venus within the title and her elevated status helps the viewer to analyze this painting. Her position on a pedestal conveys the objectification of women and their reduction to desirable attributes under the male gaze. Venus symbolizes the idealized version of a woman that exists like a sculpture to be admired, appraised, and adored. The man to the left of Venus confirms this interpretation.

This man presents an offering of jewels in a slipper to the goddess.[33] His gift references the plot of "Cinderella" and his act aligns with the veneration of this icon throughout history. The worshipper is specifically characterized to appear racially different from the other figures within the composition. His portrayal as a Black man is notable and provides an additional layer of social commentary. Fort does not address his race in her scholarship, but the stretched arms that extend from the indistinguishable figure in the background in the center of the composition thematically connect the telephone operator, the admirer, and Venus. Guy deliberately constructed this tie to encourage the viewer to make a comparison of these figural groupings, prioritizing their examination by the viewer. The gift presented to Venus reinforces her divine status and the references to the plot of "Cinderella" within the composition. The glass slippers could be a votive offering, left at the altar of Venus as a sign of gratitude. Or, as in "Cinderella," the glass slippers were used by the prince to confirm Cinderella's identity and were the entry point to her new lifestyle. The role of this figure is ambiguous, he could be worshipping this

33. Fort, 140.

divinity or offering Venus a better life like Prince Charming. If the figure is to be understood as the Prince, this portrayal carries additional significance because of his ethnicity and the strict racial segregation laws in place at this time. Despite his marginalized social status, he can offer Venus a better life than she currently possesses, allowing her to leave her pedestal, and reenter society, rejecting her vain, selfish life.

Guy's use of popular media to facilitate criticism is continued in the representations of the movie screen and romance novel to the right and left of the goddess respectively. Like "Cinderella," narratives presented in books and in films promote an alternative way of life. In this composition, Guy starkly contrasts the different lived experiences of the two classes of women and the figures that embody the book and movie. The proximity of the man in shadow to the movie screen, and the picketing woman exiting the novel, links these figures to these objects. The seated man in profile mirrors the image of the man on the screen just as the woman wears the same manner of dress as the figures on the cover. Both are reflections of the media they consume. For the man to the right of Venus, the screen is so close that it obscures his vision. He must turn his head to see both Venus and the front and back covers of the novel. Venus looks down over her left shoulder at the man. A woman with a fashionable shingle hairstyle observes the interaction from behind the screen. The picketing woman who walks out of the novel is also caught in his gaze.

The repeated depiction of stylistically different women is significant. The manner of dress of each figure is the only indication of her role and status in society. Guy chose to simultaneously represent three different types of white women to demonstrate their removed co-existence and the nuanced hierarchal class divisions. The picketing woman most likely occupies

the lowest social position, withholding her labor to negotiate for improved working conditions. The central telephone operator is a white-collar office worker. While still a member of the proletariat, she occupies an elevated position compared to a factory worker. Venus is a work of art, a piece of material culture existing for visual pleasure. Venus does not contribute to society but is a static representation of an otherworldly beauty. It is difficult to identify the type the spying woman represents because the majority of her figure is hidden behind the screen. Across the composition, we see images of transformation. The gagged operator could become Venus, like Cinderella became a princess after the return of her glass slipper. The man at the movies and the woman from the book model their behavior from characters they observe just as Guy encourages the viewer to analyze and examine their way of life. Similar to the book and movie, Guy provided the medium to facilitate and transform the lives of the proletarian viewer through the recognition of the inequitable treatment they are subjected to by the self-identification of the viewer with the oppressed telephone operator.

The indifference of the figures to the treatment of the operator is central to the critique developed by this painting. There is a lack of reciprocal engagement. The figures do not acknowledge the presence of each other; they exist in separate planes. The relationship between these vignettes is perplexing. The lack of interaction between figures and the doubt that surrounds their relationships creates a dreamlike sensation. All compositional elements are familiar, but their inclusion within the same setting produces a disquieting effect. The towering red building along the left edge of the composition heightens this feeling. The disjointed, incongruent setting of the painting moves the depicted scene from the plausible to the imaginative, indicating that the subconscious of the artist was the source of the included imagery.

The research of Haim Finkelstein on the Surrealist technique of placing compositional elements on different planes within fictive space provides reasoning for the stylized compositional construction employed by Guy in *Venus on Sixth Avenue.* This information connects his formal arrangement to the Surrealists and provides insight into the fragmented organization. Finkelstein asserts that the Surrealists conceived of fictive space as a linear projection. Depth was relational in proximity to the real. The increased distance of a compositional element from the viewer corresponds to the distance of the image on the other side of reality and its location within the subconscious of the artist.[34] The author applies this rationale to the deep space and empty vistas most notably in the work of Dalí, the greatest influence on Guy. In *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, the elongated shadows cast by the setting sun, the vacant vista, and the cragged pedestal all recall *Invisible Lion, Horse, Sleeping Woman,* 1930, (figure 3) by Salvador Dalí. Using Finkelstein's theories to analyze *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, the gagged telephone operator occupies a position closest to reality.

The close proximity of this figure to the viewer produces an unsettling sensation. The viewer is face-to-face with the incapacitated woman. The unpleasant feeling is a result of Guy's usage of shock, a common Surrealist trope. The experience of shock is connected to the Marxist goal of revealing how exploitation is so insidiously integrated into the processes of daily life that its recognition is imperceptible by the worker.[35] This objective aligns with "experimental modernism's project [is] to make the unnoticed phenomena of daily life explicit."[36] This

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34. Haim Finkelstein, "Screen and Layered Depth: Surrealist Painting and the Conceptualization of Mental Space," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 51 (2007): 189, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167724.

35. Ben Hickman, "Life After the Avant-Garde: Proletarian Realism, Proletarian Modernism," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 62, no. 4 (2017): 589, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45134294.

36. Hickman, "Life After the Avant-Garde," 587.

perspective provides the reference point for the inclusion of shocking imagery in Guy's social surrealist paintings and the link between his compositional arrangement, Communist political beliefs, and class consciousness that led to his desire to reveal the exploitation of working women through his painting.

Fort perceives a similar connection with Guy's use of the symbolic figure of Venus. She argues that the selection of Venus derives from Guy's political beliefs, stating "in days gone by, females were treated as a special case, often put on a pedestal to be admired. Such a female is portrayed in Guy's painting."[37] The author continues, arguing that "to someone like Guy, with socialist leanings, such a woman had no place in the more democratic society that would arise from the ills of the time."[38] In this work, Venus is shown as a distant artifact from Antiquity. She is separated from her surroundings spatially, temporally, and chromatically. She is the only figure rendered in grey scale. The goddess does not wear a Classical robe, but an evening gown with a cowl neck, a popular, Depression-era style. Guy portrays Venus as an idealized 1930s woman. The draping of the garment and the pose she adopts emphasize the contour of her figure, drawing attention to the curvature of her body. Despite her updated appearance, her symbolic presence still carries connotations of Antiquity. Venus' association with Ancient Rome and the legacy of her worship cannot be removed from historical context. Guy intentionally chose an anachronistic figure to demonstrate that wealthy women of this type are outdated, no longer occupying a productive place in society. They now hold a cultural position like a sculpture, a relic of history that cannot adapt or progress. Guy chose contemporary dress for Venus to encourage the viewer

37. Fort, "James Guy," 140.

38. Fort, 140.

to make this connection, to associate Venus with wealthy Depression-era women. Based on her analysis of this piece, Fort concludes that "such a wasted life was evil, and so Guy depicted this modern-day Venus grotesquely transformed by her jeweled teeth."[39] Instead of the typical representation of this goddess, Guy portrays her as disfigured by her wealth, greed, and vanity. Venus is a foil to the other women within the composition, needlessly wasting her money on personal adornment while the women around her are fighting for improved working conditions, and are actively being subjected to violent treatment.

In her scholarship, Fort writes on the depiction of Venus exclusively in *Venus on Sixth Avenue.* She does not examine the use of Venus as a motif throughout the artist's oeuvre, nor comment on the associated attributes of the goddess. Fort simply describes the statue and speculates on the reasoning for her inclusion by the artist. Fort does not discuss the legacy of the goddess throughout the history of art and the sexualization of this figure. Fort devotes the majority of her scholarship to linking the included iconography to current events and the stylistic tendencies of Dalí. She does not connect *Venus on Sixth Avenue* to *The Evening of the Ball* (figure 4) and *The Sailors Farewell* (figure 5), two paintings created by Guy during approximately the same year as *Venus on Sixth Avenue* that likewise feature the symbolic presence of Venus. I argue that Guy's rapid production using the same thematic elements and the repeated appearance of stylistically similar wealthy antagonists link these paintings as three depictions of Venus. In each example, Guy used Venus to represent an idealized upper-class

39. Fort, 140. The jeweled teeth are not readily apparent in the digital reproductions provided by The Columbus Museum nor discussed in the provided description of this work within their digital collections portal. This information is only known because it is stated in Fort's scholarship.

woman as a contrast to the white working woman in the composition, the figure most similar to the assumed proletariat viewer.

In *The Evening of the Ball,* Venus occupies a central position. Similar in scale to Venus in *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, she is rendered twice life-size. Her attenuated form towers over all other figural elements as she walks ashore. Adding to the sensation of movement, Venus wears a diaphanous cloak that billows in her wake. In *The Evening of the Ball,* Guy carefully accentuates Venus' body, using her form as a focal point. The diamond-shaped cutout on the front of Venus' dress openly exposes her breasts, and the ruching on her hips mirrors this shape. These details carve and define her waist while also highlighting specific areas of her body that are associated with fertility. They draw the gaze of the viewer to the smallest part of her body, her celebrated hourglass shape (figure 6).[40] Aligning with *Venus on Sixth Avenue,* Guy specifically updated the clothing of Venus to contemporary dress to signal her presence as a 1930s woman. But, he also constructed this garment to underscore the objectification that this type of woman experienced. In this composition, Guy conveys a similar understanding of her sexualized state as in *Venus on Sixth Avenue* by amplifying the revealing nature of her dress. Unlike Venus in *Venus on Sixth Avenue,* this figure is not disfigured by her wealth. She did not make needless, vain modifications, but her manner of dress can read as vulgar, gaudy, and tasteless like the jewels that reside in Venus' mouth. Blinded by their wealth and social capital, both women modify their outward appearances to an extreme, provocative level.

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40. Page 38 of the August 15, 1938 issue of LIFE magazine features photographs of June Cox, shot by photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, to demonstrate the feminine ideal for 1938. Measurements of the 20-year-old model were included.

The remaining dejected, contorted, and sinister figures in the composition starkly contrast the projected grace and elegance of the antagonist Venus. Like the anonymous man that gazes intently at Venus from the shadows in *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, in this work, there is a silhouette of a man with a cane that lurks behind Venus. His foreboding, shadowy presence recalls the sensation of a nightmare. This sense of unease produces an uncomfortable, unpleasant feeling, similar to the one produced by the gagged telephone operator in *Venus on Sixth Avenue*. These emotions are heightened by the floating abstract shapes in the sky, the towering rock formation that recalls the pedestal in *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, and the humanoid figure that encircles Venus in *The Evening of the Ball*.

At first glance, it appears as if the right pillar of the rock formation rises out of the torso of the seated nude figure to form a head with a beak. The lack of depth and shadow within this piece displays the materiality of the painting. The compositional elements look as if they rest directly upon each other. A similar treatment is visible in the right arm of the man slumped over the movie screen. His arm progressively loses detail, adopting an organic shape that melts into the rock. The crumpled posture of this man, with his low-hanging head, directs the viewer's gaze to the screen that features a factory with a group of figures who run from police officers that brandish weapons. This vignette, like the picketing woman in *Venus on Sixth Avenue,* offers a snapshot of the contemporary labor movement. These references break the assumption of the fictive, imaginary scene, incorporating the violence of reality.

The entire composition possesses a shifting, morphing quality due to the lack of clearly defined contours. In the background, behind the movie screen and the crumbling brick wall, is a man with a mustache wearing a suit and bowler hat. In the distance is a large sailboat. The

inclusion of the boat provides clarity to the setting; without this element, it may be difficult to discern that the left-hand side of the composition is set in water and that none of the figures are on dry land. To the right of the well-dressed man and boat is a second woman who faces away from the viewer. She leans up against the crumbling brick wall with her head down, resting it on her folded arms. Despite her casual utilitarian dress, her body, like Venus', is emphasized. There is a large circle on her backside, highlighting a coveted part of a woman's body within the heterosexual male gaze. The working woman literally and metaphorically stands in the shadow cast by Venus. The shadow connects both types of women in this composition, facilitating a comparison between their two states like the operator and goddess in *Venus on Sixth Avenue.*

In each painting, Venus appears impervious to the surrounding despair of the working class. In *The Evening of the Ball,* she walks with her chin pointed upward, looking above her environment. The provided title reinforces the portrayed disparity between social classes while also supporting an additional connection to the story of "Cinderella." A ball is an event reserved exclusively for the upper echelon, and when viewed sequentially, this piece could function as a continuation of *Venus on Sixth Avenue.* Analyzed in the context of the fairytale "Cinderella," the ball could be the party she is not allowed to attend, a social event from which she is restricted due to her lower status. Venus' ability to attend this event and her comportment signals her separation and lack of integration with her environment, just as the pedestal placed Venus on a different level in *Venus on Sixth Avenue.* Moreover, the repetition of form and similar stylistic treatment of the goddesses by Guy establishes a thematic link to critique the indifference of the upper classes to the plight of the manual laborer and the shared female experience of objectification despite social class.

Venus on Sixth Avenue is the only Venus painting by Guy that explicitly identifies the goddess. When viewed individually, the viewer may not be able to make the connection between Venus and the central figure of *The Evening of the Ball*. Only after a comparison of *Venus on Sixth Avenue, The Evening of the Ball,* and *The Sailors Farewell* is the repeated symbolic motif of the goddess apparent. *The Evening of the Ball* and *The Sailors Farewell* operates at myriad levels depending on the viewer's familiarity with the history of art and their ability to correctly identify the antagonist as Venus. Without her identification as Venus, the coded representation of the central figure still allows the viewer to understand that she is a wealthy, elegant woman, with an aura of femininity, fecundity, and sensuality. The dual title of *Venus on Sixth* supports this assessment. Guy referred to this piece as *Cinderella* when it was rediscovered in 1982.[41] *Venus on Sixth Avenue* was the title given to the piece at the time of creation. Fort does not elaborate on the paintings' whereabouts before this rediscovery and this event is not noted in the provenance supplied by The Columbus Museum, the current repository of the work. The renaming of this piece by the artist demonstrates the lack of permanence between the identification of the antagonist as Venus and the intention of the critique. It is necessary to consider if the social commentary of this piece is less potent with the title *Cinderella* and the influence of each title on the viewer. Removing the Venus title does not negate the critical perspective of this work, but provides greater ambiguity to the presence of this figure in the composition while simultaneously establishing a greater connection to this woman in *The Evening of the Ball* and *The Sailors Farewell.*

41. Fort, "James Guy," 146.

The speculation of the identification of Venus and the repeated characterization of the wealthy 1930s woman is applicable to the figure to the right of the frame in *The Sailors Farewell.* Based on the construction of her strapless evening gown and the emphasis that is placed on her chest and abdomen, she is also Venus. She is almost three times life-size and looks down her nose at the couple to the left of the composition. Venus stands with her left hand on her hip and her right leg bent in front of her body, a pose almost identical to Venus in *Venus on Sixth Avenue*. Her upturned chin recalls the haughty, disconnected demeanor of Venus in *The Evening of the Ball*. In the immediate foreground, Venus confronts the viewer and functions as the entry point to the composition like the telephone operator. Furthermore, both her colossal scale and manner of dress highlight her out-of-place presence in the maritime landscape. There is a similar ruching on this dress to the one worn by Venus in *The Evening of the Ball.* In both paintings, the rendering of the garment draws attention to the hips, creating an inverted "v" shape that extends down across her thighs. Additional focus is also placed on the bosom, once again highlighting aspects of her figure that are deemed desirable, but also possess a unique life-sustaining function.

Venus is depicted in a setting similar to that of *The Evening of the Ball.* She stands at the waterline of a former ocean. The man to the left of the couple in the vista and the puddles of remaining water behind the goddess indicate the desert-like quality of the landscape. The useless boats along the wharf sit on the ground. On the left side of the composition, there is no division between background and foreground. The surfaces morph into one another and the retaining wall does not extend to the other side of the building. The shifting surfaces and the proportions of Venus contribute to the nightmarish quality of the work. The interaction and relationship between elements defy logic. The lack of reason within this piece signals the otherworldly setting that

cannot exist outside the confines of the picture plane. The painting becomes a document of the imagination of the artist. At first glance, idiosyncrasies within this painting are not readily apparent. Through contemplative looking the piece becomes more absurd, a hallmark of Guy's style.

Emphasizing the assumed role of women in society, the coastal setting of this piece is significant. It questions the traditional association of Venus as the goddess of fecundity, who is typically shown emerging from the ocean. In this example, both the mother and Venus are shown as fertile. The mother carries her baby and Venus carries the image of the family within her womb. Both instances contrast the barren, deserted landscape. Only the women are fertile and able to sustain life. The setting additionally recalls the childhood of the artist. Judd notes that Guy developed a "specific connection to the New England shoreline and knew early on the hard laboring conditions of dock workers in the maritime ports of Connecticut and New York."[42] This citation reveals the artist's use of personal experiences, rooted in observation, as the basis for his American Social Surrealist work.

The evaporated ocean is also the impetus for the actions of the couple and the subsequent title of the work. Because of the barren landscape in the background, the sailor must now leave his family and travel to earn a living. He wears waders and boots and carries a harpoon. The harpoon indicates the type of fishing he performs and the level of danger involved in this physically demanding manual-labor job. While saying his goodbyes, the sailor has his right arm around his partner; he leans in to kiss her as she holds a newborn baby in her arms. Together, they walk in the direction of Venus, unaware of her presence. Their image is reflected across the

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42. Judd, "Between Myth and Movement," 1.

composition in the torso of Venus. The contour of Venus' waist indicates that she does not wear an image of this young family on her dress, but they are contained within her abdomen, in the same location where she would carry a child while pregnant. In this example, the hyper-feminine portrayal of Venus illuminates the society-sustaining role of women. Interpreting *The Sailors Farewell* within the gendered binary of the period, Venus represents the female-exclusive job of carrying and sustaining life. The antagonist's body in this work becomes once again distorted, vulgar, and grotesque. The reflected image is unsettling, uncanny, and irrational. The dual image is menacing and ominous, establishing a link between Venus and the couple. The relationship between these vignettes is not explained within the composition.

Fort discusses the use of the double image in Guy's painting, *The Bomb,* from 1939 (figure 7). She claims that the double image was popularized by Dalí to demonstrate the disjointed state of contemporary society.[43] According to Fort, in *The Bomb,* Guy employed the double image to show "the deplorable state of mankind" with a couple who "carries in its shared womb a child, who is destined to be the orphaned generation of the future."[44] The interpretation of this device is equally applicable to *The Sailors Farewell,* which can be read as a commentary on fertility, reproduction, and longevity within the context of the impending Second World War and the desperate economic conditions of the Great Depression. The reflection of their image in the womb of Venus could be a way to force the oblivious couple to confront the ramifications of their decision to have a child during the economic crisis. The double image questions the

43. Fort, "James Guy." 144.

44. Fort, 144.

decision of this woman to follow the traditional path of motherhood assigned to women through the bizarre, uncomfortable, and unnatural relationship between the couple and Venus.

Removed from the situation, Venus exists as criticism from a distance, unaffected by the problems of the proletariat based on her elevated social position. This position allows her to be free from the same constraints as the couple. Her presence forces a contrast between the two groups, she is unable to relate to their financial concerns, the necessity for the sailor to leave for work, and the stress this applies to the young family. Venus, like the figure in *The Evening of the Ball,* is emotionally and physically removed from her environment. She moves through the chaotic composition, impervious to the gravity of the situations that surround her. She does not rest on a pedestal like *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, but her demeanor, scale, and style of dress divide her from the rest of the composition. In *Venus on Sixth Avenue,* Venus is physically elevated above all other figures, but she does look down to the man in shadow. Contrarily, in *The Evening of the Ball* and *The Sailors Farewell,* Venus is on the ground alongside the proletariat, but with her upturned head, they are out of her view. *Venus on Sixth Avenue* portrays a sculpture, whereas the other two paintings show a society woman. Despite their different representations, their symbolic functions within the social critique are similar and they share the same apathy towards the working-class.

In *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, *The Evening of the Ball*, and *The Sailors Farewell*, Guy presented an idealized image of femininity through the distorted, illogical view of Surrealism to reveal the reductive role of women in society. Working from his specific perspective as a white, working-class man, he highlighted their conception as desirable, sensual beings, the disparity between social classes, and the indifference of the wealthy to the struggles of the working-class.

The goddesses in each work are foils to the utilitarian women that undergo emotional and economic hardship, experiences not faced by the removed, idealized high-class women. The beautiful, beguiling women in these paintings are shown at leisure, as distant relics that do not actively engage with their surroundings. The Classical woman and her idealized attributes are placed as the pinnacle of womanhood, revealing the antiquated mindset that enforced the disadvantages of women and the hierarchal social structure of the Depression-era American culture. The stark contrast between the duality of woman in these paintings illuminates the absurdity of the treatment of the contemporary working woman, displaying the inequality of their experience based on social position and physical attributes, exaggerating the ideal woman as conceived by those who vehemently opposed the greater visibility, independence, and education of the New Woman of the early twentieth-century.

Discussion of Results

Currently, minimal provenance is available for the selected works by Guy. The scarcity of documentation mirrors the amount of existing scholarship on the topic. Simultaneous independent and FAP-sponsored work combined with the limited production of the artist and lack of reputation proves difficult to amass a comprehensive understanding of his career, necessitating the creation of a catalogue raisonné and an authoritative source on the artist. Tracing the provenance clarifies the breadth of exposure and level of access to his American Social Surrealist works. Beginning with *Venus on Sixth Avenue,* after leaving the estate of the artist it was purchased by Martin Diamond Fine Arts, a New York City-based art dealer. The piece then entered into the collection of Merrill Berman, a New York City-based avant-garde art collector. It now resides in the permanent collection of The Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia.[45] Because the piece passed directly from the estate of the artist to Martin Diamond, it can be assumed that it did not sell during Guy's lifetime. Multiple reasons may account for this: the artist developed a sentimental attachment withholding its release, the piece was not attractive to galleries and was not selected for exhibition, or the market was not favorable and the right buyer for the right price could not be found. In her scholarship, Fort notes that it was rediscovered in 1982, a year before Guy's death. The emergence of the painting so close to the end of the artist's life adds intrigue to the provenance of this piece. Questions arise concerning its location during the artist's lifetime and what factors contributed to its rediscovery despite ownership by the artist. Without documentation, it is impossible to determine if the cause was mishandling by a gallery, misplacement within an exhibition setting, or the fault of the artist. The

45. James Guy, *Venus on Sixth Avenue (Cinderella)*, 1937, oil on paperboard, 23.5 x 29.5 in., The Columbus Museum, https://columbusmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/DEE5A6CE-0C93-4592-86F4-521253803697.

retention of ownership by Guy severely limited access to this piece, casting doubt on the ability of the work to enact social change through viewership if it was sequestered by the artist until his death in 1983. This act appears contrary to the perceived motivations of the artist who desired to create thought-provoking, critical works of art about unrecognized incidents of class conflict. Additionally, the publicly provided provenance from The Columbus Museum does not include a timeline of ownership. Therefore, the period between creation, purchase, and acquisition cannot be determined. This information would provide insight into the activities of the estate, the amount of time this piece was in private collections before each sale, and the access the general public had to this work.

Less is known about *The Evening of the Ball* and *The Sailors Farewell;* the lack of provenance likely results from their ownership by the federal government under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Archives of American Art is the largest repository for American Social Surrealist works today. An extremely limited number of pieces exist in public institutions and private collections. The current location of the majority of works in this style is unknown. This is a result of the lack of documentation by the WPA during its operation and the intentional destruction of a large quantity of work after the dissolution of the program.[46] The extant examples of this style now possess an archival function, existing as the remaining documents of this style. The resulting pieces are black-and-white photographs of the original paintings taken by the New York division of the FAP to record the production of individual artists. On the reverse of these prints are required credit lines for publication. “Photographic Division / Federal Art Project / W.P.A.” is stamped on the reverse of *The Evening of the Ball*

46. Erika Doss, “Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002): 250, https://doi.org/10.2307/1504189.

(figure 8). This notation is evidence of the ownership and distribution control of the completed work by the federal program and its treatment as a photograph rather than an oil painting. The handling of these pieces as the product of a work-for-hire position by the federal government provides reasoning for the lack of scholarship on this style and the limited exposure of the American Social Surrealists.

The creation of these photographs to form an institutional archive casts doubt on the provided dates of the paintings. The inability to definitively date these examples is indicative of the difficulty that exists in studying works not only in this style but created by any artist under the WPA due to the dearth of records management and collections stewardship. December 9, 1937, is the date listed on the reverse of *The Evening of the Ball;* March 4, 1941, is the date for *The Sailors Farewell.* While both of these dates fall within the timespan that Guy received relief from the WPA, the inclusion of the photographer's name and the negative number on the reverse of each photograph raises cause for inquiry. The included dates mostly likely note the creation of the negative or the resulting contact print rather than the painting itself. The repetition of the motif of Venus and the similar stylization of her figure is consistent across all three paintings, suggesting that they were most likely created within the same year. When viewed together, the motif of Venus unites *Venus on Sixth Avenue, The Evening of the Ball,* and *The Sailors Farewell,* but it is impossible to confirm if these paintings should be analyzed sequentially due to the absence of definitive creation dates. The sustained use of Venus displays the continual work of the artist to reveal the hierarchal divide between working and upper-classes through gender-specific injustices within contemporary society. The reoccurrence of these issues demonstrates Guy's pressing concern for their recognition and reform.

Guy's use of Surrealist techniques and his focus on the female worker deviate from national artistic trends that portrayed labor through an exclusively masculine narrative, despite the statistic that one in six urban families in 1936 was completely dependent on a female wage earner.[47] Guy's paintings actively contested the prolific concurrent artistic production that promoted active, moralizing labor performed by semi-nude male workers. This association is exemplified in *Steel Riggers*, 1936 (figure 9) by Arthur Murphy. Erika Doss argues that images of this type were constructed to establish the concept of manly work, to show male bodies functioning as a "physical icon of national recovery."[48] These coded images of masculinity depict a mythical, idealized version of the modern American man that reverted to the academic example of the heroic male nude. Artists at this time developed a propagandistic iconography of labor to uphold the association of labor with morality and identity during an ongoing crisis of masculinity triggered by the rise of unemployment, factory work, and the loss of autonomy by mass production.[49] Guy intentionally exacerbated contemporary anxieties concerning unemployment, leisure, and the absence of identity-defining jobs for men by portraying the normalized prejudice against lower and upper-class women within these paintings to render visible the disparity of treatment to advocate for improvement.[50]

Guy's leftist political beliefs altered his relationship to labor and his artistic production, leading to the development of American Social Surrealism. Guy experienced economic hardship during the Great Depression and received government funding to continue his artistic career

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47. Erika Doss,"Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1930-1945," *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (1997): 53, https://doi.org/10.2307/1511587.

48. Doss, "Looking at Labor," 255.

49. Doss, "Toward an Iconography," 60-1.

50. Doss, "Looking at Labor," 233-4.

through the FAP. The unemployment aid allowed Guy to present the struggles of his economic class through the lens of Surrealism, incorporating relatable iconography to create an accessible, legible criticism of contemporary American society. Guy employed the identifiable cultural connotations of the goddess Venus to demonstrate the contrasting experiences of wealthy and working-class women during this period. The paintings *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, *The Evening of the Ball*, and *The Sailors Farewell* are evidence of Guy's prioritization of female protagonists. In these works, he employed women as a motif to portray the duality of the female experience based on economic status. The use of Venus acknowledges the objectification that women were subjected to on a daily basis and the shared cultural conception of an idealized woman. The working and wealthy women in each painting function as anonymous stock characters, allowing the viewer to empathize and identify with these figures. In each instance, the apathy exhibited by the upper-class woman portrays the luxury of inaction and indifference afforded to the wealthy classes that remain despite their shared experience as women.

The artist's political beliefs served as the motivation for the development of American Social Surrealism and stewarded iconographic decisions. Guy was a proletarian artist who created from and for his social class. His interwar oeuvre is the product of his manual labor, filled with symbolic imagery that works to advocate for the depicted social group. In this respect, American Social Surrealism is activist art. Created as a socially driven response, the power of this style derives from the legibility and accessibility of its iconography. In contrast to European Surrealism, American Social Surrealism cannot be separated from the political ideologies of its creators. The Marxist perspective adopted by Guy is a result of his economic status. His oeuvre

must be examined within the social context that it was created to understand the included class-specific iconography that stems from his social position.[51]

In Summer 1933, artists in the New York John Reed Club met to discuss the government funding of art.[52] This led to the formation of the Unemployed Artists Group in the fall of that same year, with a name change to the Artists' Union in February 1934. Established as a trade union of painters, sculptors, printmakers, and other artists, the group employed militant trade union tactics such as pickets, demonstrations, marches, boycotts, and extensive sit-ins to negotiate the highest wages in the WPA and set hours and working conditions.[53] Commenting on these tactics, Phil Bard, painter, and Communist activist expressed, "it is generally agreed that it is directly due to the formation, existence and activities of the Artists' Union that government projects on a large scale were brought into being."[54]

Guy's involvement in the John Reed Club, the Unemployed Artists Group, and the Artists' Union demonstrate his level of engagement with the labor movement, the Marxist ideas circulating within his artistic milieu, and the prominent influence New York City played in the formation of his political beliefs that shaped American Social Surrealism. Guy met Quirt at the New York City John Reed Club and both artists taught at the John Reed Club School of Art. Quirt was the secretary of the art section for the John Reed Club and Guy was an early leader of

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51. Peter Barry, "Marxist Criticism," in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory,* 3rd. ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 152.

52. Hills and Monroe, "Art and Politics," 45-6.

53. Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art : The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 25, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=964507&site=ehost-live.

54. Musher, *Democratic Art*, 18.

the Unemployed Artists Group.[55] During this period, in approximately 1935, Guy lived with Quirt and his wife Martha.[56] In late 1934, Guy exhibited the work, *A Kiss for Every Hero,* at the fifth annual John Reed Club exhibition.[57] The occurrence of annual exhibitions provides a record of the exchange of ideas that transpired at this site. With the minimal exhibition information available for Guy's oeuvre, his participation in a John Reed Club exhibit is a testament to the extent and frequency of the artist's involvement with this organization and the politicized space within which he wished his pieces to be presented.

The events on December 1, 1936, illustrated the discontent of New York City-based artists, the success of their collective organization, and the trade union tactics they adopted to demand reform. The January 1937 issue of *Art Front* reported that "the wholesale eviction and clubbing of 219 artists from the New York headquarters of the Federal Art Project by police has demonstrated to the public at large the complete surrender of the Roosevelt administration to reaction."[58] The following month *Art Front* once again described this event, stating, "the request of a mass delegation of the Artists Union of New York that no lay offs take place was met with one of the most brutal police attacks in the history of the country. At the instigation of Administration officials 219 people were beaten, ejected forcibly from the administration headquarters, arrested, put on trial, and convicted of disorderly conduct (asking for the

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55. John Dorfman, "The Return of Walter Quirt," in *Walter Quirt: A Science of Life*, ed. Frederick R. Holmes, (Seattle: Frederick Holmes and Company, 2017), 11, http://www.frederickholmesandcompany.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WALTER-QUIRT-A-SCIENCE-OF-LIFE.pdf.; Fort, "James Guy," 128.

56. "Revolutionary Art School," *Art Front* 1, no. 3 (February 1935): 2.

57. "Revolutionary Art at the John Reed Club," *Art Front* 1, no. 2 (January 1935): 6.

58. Morris Neuwirth, "219," *Art Front* 2, no. 12 (January 1937): 4. *Art Front* was the official organ of the Artists' Union.

continuation of their jobs)."[59] Continuing, the February article defined this event as a catalyst for nationwide sit-ins as "revulsion at these tactics swept the labor movement."[60] It was noted that a mass layoff of 2,000 artists from WPA arts projects was the cause of this public demonstration.[61] The impassioned tone adopted by *Art Fron*t presented this incident from a slanted perspective to align with the agenda of the Artists' Union, but, the occurrence of this event indicates the mindset of the Depression-era artist, demonstrating the volatile work environment of the WPA and role of the artist as a cultural worker. Furthermore, this mass demonstration occurred in late 1936, either just before or during the early stages of Guy's Venus paintings, undoubtedly affecting the life of the artist and his labor.

Guy's work on his Venus paintings coincided with the beginning of his FAP relief. Through this program, Guy became a union-organized manual laborer. His participation in the program from circa 1937 to circa 1941 authenticates his artistic production, displaying his economic status and proximity to his subject matter.[62] Unlike other New Deal programs, the WPA assigned relief based on skill.[63] The artists were awarded relief on a work-for-hire basis instead of direct relief or the dole, which was given to the unemployed to purchase necessities. In this transactional relationship, the artist relinquished ownership of completed commissions and worked without a guarantee of continuation. Audrey McMahon, FAP director in New York from

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59. "For A Permanent Project," *Art Front* 3, no. 1 (February 1937): 3.

60. "For A Permanent Project," 3.

61. Neuwirth, "219," 4.

62. Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, circa 1920-1965, bulk 1935-1942. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Box 9, Folder 47: Guy, James.

63. Chad Alan Goldberg, "Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal: The Workers Alliance of America and the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1941," *Social Science History* 29, no. 3 (2005): 345, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40267880.

1935 to 1943, spoke to Francis V. O'Connor for his anthology *New Deal Art Projects* about the dramatic cuts in the WPA workforce during the "Roosevelt depression" of 1937 to 1938, stating that the pervasive threat of layoffs created uncertain working conditions and a detrimental work environment.[64] This state, coupled with the requirement that each applicant must pass a means test before every re-hiring period, indicates the tempestuous relationship between the WPA and its sponsored artists.[65] From this perspective, the federal relief Guy received provides additional historical context concerning the economic status of the artist, his relationship to labor, and the selective political messages present in his paintings.

The quantitative information supplied in *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* by Sharon Ann Musher aids in the understanding of the extent of relief supplied by the FAP, the degree of economic strife experienced by Guy and his subjects, and the economic conditions that motivated the American Social Surrealists to develop this style. Musher details the organization of the WPA in 1935 by President Roosevelt as part of his New Deal program. During the first year, the federal government spent $27 million, equivalent to $545 million today. A salaried artist employed by the WPA would earn on average $23 a week, approximately $456 today at $11.60 per hour based on a 40-hour work week.[66] Musher references an article written in 1933 by Audrey McMahon, the director of the College Art

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64. The recession from May 1937 to June 1938 is often pejoratively referred to as the Roosevelt Depression as a comment on the economic downturn during this period that occurred during Roosevelt's second term and after the implementation of the New Deal programs.

65. Andrew Hemingway, "Communist Artists and the New Deal (2): From the People's Front to the Democratic Front," in *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 147. To be considered for WPA relief, it was required that each applicant submit proof of earnings to justify their need. Author Andrew Hemingway describes this time as the "halcyon days" of the WPA, alluding to the increased tension and erratic hiring practices as the program progressed.

66. These numbers are based on personal calculations using the Consumer Price Index Data, provided by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Association. Entitled “May the Artist Live?,” this article reports on the statistics of unemployed artists. At the time of publication, in the New York City region alone, there existed 80,000 needy artists, and, as determined by the 1930 federal census, there were about two to three times as many artists in need nationally. This compares to about one-quarter of the national population that was unemployed.[67] Statistical information on the salary that Guy received and the number of unemployed artists within his community provides insight into the climate that Guy lived and created in, and served as the catalyst and subject matter of his oeuvre.

Jared Fogel and Robert Stevens critically examine the types of painting created under the PWAP and FAP, two New Deal initiatives that were formed during Surrealism’s period of influence.[68] The authors argue that these federal programs promoted American Scene painting and the subgenre of Regionalism to produce propagandistic images of American Idealism that were actually incongruous with daily life. They believe that the purpose of public art projects was to “improve morale and advertise the success of Roosevelt’s paternalism,” describing Regionalism as “optimistic visions of America during a time of economic desperation” through images of idyllic pastoral scenes, family life, and patriotic labor.”[69] Fogel and Stevens assert that American Idealism was created as propaganda to illustrate the “goodness” of America, projecting a restored and lively country.[70] The patriotic aim of the New Deal and the objectives of the accompanying art programs promoted an insular point of view that upheld American

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67. Musher, *Democratic Art,* 11.

68. The PWAP existed from December 1933 to June 1934. The succeeding FAP operated from August 1935 to June 1943. Edward Bruce was the director of the PWAP, a program that commissioned artists to create works of art for public buildings.

69. Jared A. Fogel and Robert L. Stevens, “The Canvas Mirror: Painting as Politics in the New Deal,” *OAH Magazine of History* 16, no. 1 (2001): 18, http:// www.jstor.org/stable/25163482.

70. Fogel and Stevens, “The Canvas Mirror,” 18.

Exceptionalism. The rejection of European precedents by American artists at this time indicates the degree of deviation of American Social Surrealism. Guy's work during the interwar period was incongruent with major nationalistic trends in American art. Guy did focus on local subject matter, but he filtered these scenes through a Marxist lens and used the stylistic and theoretical tendencies of the Surrealists as the basis for his artistic point of view.

To compare Guy's FAP work against his colleagues, one can use the exhibition *American Art Today,* on view in the Gallery of Science and Art at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Holger Cahill, the national director of the FAP for the entirety of the program, organized this exhibition as a visual classification of the simultaneous artistic tendencies occurring in the United States.[71] In the accompanying catalogue, Cahill professes the "remarkably high level of competence and craftsmanship in every section of the country."[72] As exemplified by John Steuart Curry's *Wisconsin Landscape,* 1938-39 (figure 10), the author notes the rise of Regionalism with a focus on local subject matter. Cahill discusses the decentralization of artistic production within the United States, believing that independent artists across the country work with an exceptionally high degree of skill. He attributes this proficiency to his observation that American artists are no longer relying on major metropolitan areas on both the East Coast and in Europe for training, inspiration, and subject matter, a system which produced artists "overburdened with conventions and an iconography which have slight relation to his native background."[73] The correlation between East Coast centers and European tradition reveals the public perception of American

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71. The Federal Art Project was a New Deal program from August 1935 until June 1943 that was created to provide relief to visual artists through employment during the Great Depression.

72. Cahill, "American Art Today," 14.

73. Cahill, 15.

Social Surrealism and the active separation from academic tradition that was happening in American art at this time. The conservative ideology which fostered the rise of nativist art promoted interwar artistic tension between those working in the Midwest and East, indicating the negative perception of American Social Surrealism at this time, a style associated with the European avant-garde and developed in the East Coast center of New York by Communist art activists.

A critical examination of American Social Surrealism interrogates the scope of the exhibited works by Guy, the reach of their exhibition, and the demographics of the viewer to determine the relative success of this style. To achieve the objective of the style, the recognition of the disadvantaged position of the working class, it was imperative that Guy used familiar, legible imagery to construct his critique. In my research, the lack of scholarship on American Social Surrealism is supplemented by the application of Surrealist scholarship to American Social Surrealism to illuminate the points of intersection and divergence. The formation of this style in response to the Great Depression and exposure to Surrealism necessitates a study of the activities of the Paris Group of Surrealists, defined and organized by André Breton, to recognize the Surrealist techniques, aesthetics, and ideologies present in Guy's work. The analysis of his oeuvre is not possible without first understanding the successes and limitations of Surrealism. The contemporary reception of American Social Surrealism is an under-researched aspect of the style with virtually no information available on the proletariat's opinion of these works.

The correlation between the Surrealists' professed political beliefs and the resulting artistic production establishes a framework to not only determine the degree of success of American Social Surrealism but also the authenticate engagement of the movement with

prevalent social issues. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen in "The Situationist International, Surrealism, and the Difficult Fusion of Art and Politics" addresses the integration of political messaging within Surrealism's aesthetic program that employed personal, subjective imagery derived from the subconscious. The author details the inability of Surrealist compositions to support the vanguard political beliefs of the movement due to the use of inherently inaccessible iconography mined from an irrational, ungovernable mental state.[74] The doubt surrounding the ability of Surrealist visual artists to faithfully convey the political beliefs of the avant-garde movement established the line of criticism that originated with members of the Paris Group and was transferred to the oeuvres of the American Social Surrealists. Rasmussen explains, "in the eyes of the Communist Party, Surrealism was just another modern art movement without connection to the proletariat, the real agent of transformation. The exploration of dreams and the unconscious did not go well with the Communist Party who was unable to see any revolutionary potential in the suspension of one's self."[75] The conflicting objectives of the Paris group and the Parti communiste français reached their zenith with the ejection of Breton, Paul Éluard, and René Crevel in 1933, all active members since 1927.[76]

Support for Rasmussen's argument is found in the April 1925 issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste.* Pierre Naville, French writer and editor of this publication emphatically declared, "plus person n'ignore qu'il n'y a pas de *peinture surréaliste.*"[77] He argues that "ni l'image

74. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "The Situationist International, Surrealism, and the Difficult Fusion of Art and Politics," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 375, 374, doi:10.2307/20107991.

75. Rasmussen, "The Situationist International," 377

76. Janine Mileaf, "Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 40 (2001): 242, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20167548.

77. "no one is unaware that surrealist painting does not exist."; Pierre Naville, "Beaux-arts," *La Révolution Surréaliste* 3 (April 15, 1925): 27.; my translation.

retraçant les figures de rêve, ni les fantaisies imaginatives, ne peuvent être ainsi qualifiés. Mais il y a des *spectacles*. La mémoire et le plaisir des yeux."[78] Naville supplies an important distinction between the source of Surrealist imagery and its recreation. He argues that Surrealist painting is false because it recreates a previous experience rather than immediately recording the results. With this method of production, the artist becomes concerned with aesthetics and subsequently hinders spontaneous creation, overriding and shaping the organic imagery. Rather than a true document of the exploration of the creator's subconscious, the painting bends to the will of taste and bourgeois aestheticism. Naville's opinion provides insight into the division within the Surrealists, the contemporary conception of the ideology of Surrealism, and the difficult adaptation of Surrealism from literature to the visual arts.

A comparison of the criticism elicited by Surrealism and American Social Surrealism illustrates a common concern for the legibility of subject matter that was not resolved by the application of the Surrealist visual language to social realist scenes. Critics expressed similar doubts despite the more realistic and familiar subject matter presented in American Social Surrealism. "Critique from the Left" by Margaret Duroc is a review of the 1935 John Reed Club show. Published in the January 1936 edition of *Art Front*, the author specifically mentions works by Quirt and Guglielmi. She states, "Surrealism is a false medium for the revolutionary artist. It uses an occult language which needlessly separates the artist from his audience."[79] Duroc continues, expressing that, "in order to succeed, the John Reed Club artists will have to realize for whom they are painting, and what they wish to achieve. At present, they only seem to

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78. "neither the image that retraces figures from dreams nor imagined fantasies qualify. But there are *experiences*, visions, memory and pleasure of the eyes."; Naville, "Beaux-arts," 27.; my translation, emphasis is maintained.

79. Margaret Duroc, "Critique from the Left," *Art Front 2,* no. 2 (January 1936): 7.

indicate that they are allied with the working class. They exhibit their works as tokens of sympathy."[80] Duroc's sentiments question the success of Guy's work and the ability of his paintings to connect with the proletariat, for whom they were allegedly created.

In the same year, critic E. M. Benson published a review of Quirt's first solo exhibition that was held at the Julien Levy Gallery in *The American Magazine of Art.* This site was the location of the first Surrealist exhibition in New York just four years earlier. Benson states, "there is never any doubt about Quirt's pictures." He continues, "[t]he titles do help to tell us what to look for, though we are never entirely dependent on them."[81] While focusing on the experience of the viewer and the legibility of this style, Benson also expresses uncertainty about the ability of Quirt's art to connect with the proletariat, the subject of his work.[82] If this is true, and the working-class were unable to comprehend the social critique that characterized this style, then these works failed to obtain the objective of American Social Surrealism. Additional research is needed to determine if this style was still productive. An examination of the opinions of the working-class towards this style, their opportunity to access these pieces, and the context within which they were viewed is necessary to determine if American Social Surrealism brought about social change despite the inability of this group to fully engage with works in this style.
The critique may have been equally impactful when viewed by the middle and upper-class who were used in these compositions to construct the social critique.

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80. Duroc, "Critique from the Left," 8.

91. E. M. Benson, "Exhibition Reviews," *The American Magazine of Art* 29, no. 4 (1936): 260, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23938717.

82. Benson, "Exhibition Reviews," 260.

The doubt expressed by Benson and Duroc derives from the application of Surrealism to Communist subject matter and the ability of this inherently illogical European style to convey the revolutionary aims of its creators. These exhibition reviews in conjunction with the cited opinion of Naville prove that concerns over the efficacy of Surrealism to portray a definitive political ideology are not unique to American Social Surrealism but stem from the criticism that the Paris group initially received. The opinions of Benson and Duroc present the contemporary skepticism that existed during Guy's period of creation and the perception of American Social Surrealism by influential members within leftist cultural circles.[83] The skepticism of critics and fellow artists paralleled the public's negative perception of American Social Surrealism due to its close connection to European precedent. Because of these factors, it is imperative to examine the field of American studies to situate Guy's work within historical context to better understand the viewer's reaction and the role this style occupied within society.

In his survey, *Surrealism and American Art: 1931-1947,* Jeffrey Wechsler describes the interwar attitude towards European art and the negative connotations it held by the American public. Wechsler defines the influence of Surrealism on American culture through exhibitions. Like Fort, he also dates the introduction of Surrealism to the 1931 Wadsworth Atheneum show and states that "the last comprehensive contemporary Surrealist survey exhibited in the United States" was the show *Abstract and Surrealist American Art,* hung in the Art Institute of Chicago

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83. Hemingway, "Communist Artists," 169. Both Benson and Duroc were contributing editors to *Art Front,* whereas Benson was a prominent American Artists' Congress activist and an editor for the fourth volume of *Art for the Millions*. *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by artists and administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* is an anthology of essays, conceived and compiled by Francis V. O'Connor. It was published in 1973 and dedicated to Cahill,

in 1947.[84] Within this sixteen-year span, Wechsler identifies five subsets of Surrealism in the United States: naturalist Surrealism, automatism or organic Surrealism, magic realism, social Surrealism, and Post-Surrealism.[85] He categorizes social Surrealism and Post-Surrealism as "indigenous styles."[86] Moreover, Wechsler attributes the diversity in American Surrealism to the lack of an organized school. Instead of a faithful adaptation of the style, artists throughout the country worked individually, selecting only portions of Surrealism for inspiration. Describing the reception of Surrealism in the United States, Wechsler states, "there is evidently some fear of infecting America with some sort of unhealthy foreign artistic virus, which even the Europeans want to rid themselves of."[87] He continues, believing that "Surrealism had an uphill fight against the American eye and mind."[88]

The findings of Wechsler on the public perception of Surrealist techniques align with the state of the field. Among Americanists, there is a consensus that interwar artists actively rejected European precedent to intentionally develop an independent artistic culture. European tradition was viewed as a polluting presence. Matthew Baigell in "The Beginnings of 'The American Wave' and the Depression," defines The American Wave as a subject, style, and state of mind. Baigell explains that this term existed in opposition to European Modernism and was the

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84. Phillip Dennis Cate, introduction to *Surrealism and American Art: 1931-1947,* ed. Jeffrey Wechsler (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), 7.

85. original capitalization is maintained

86. Cate, introduction to *Surrealism and American Art*, 7.

87. Jeffrey Wechsler, "Surrealism and American Art: 1931-1947," in *Surrealism and American Art: 1931-1947,* ed. Jeffrey Wechsler (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), 28.

88. Wechsler, "Surrealism and American Art," 28.

culmination of nationalism in American art that developed in the late 1920s.[89] The author cites the shared anti-bohemian stance of American art critic Thomas Craven, *The American Magazine of Art,* and *Art Digest*. Baigell summarizes this mindset as a "virulent strain of nativism that was possessed by fears of the urbanization of the country, of the dilution of the old Anglo-Saxon stock by immigration, and the submergence of old, trusted values."[90] Echoing the opinion of Cahill on *American Art Today,* Baigell explains that many at this time believed that truly American art "would probably arise in the Midwest where the taint of Europe was less strong than in the East."[91] From this perspective, The American Wave acted as a barrier to the changing social and political landscape. It presented an idealized, imaginary construction of national culture to combat external influences. The xenophobic undercurrent of the aesthetic preference of The American Wave illuminates the interconnected nature of political and artistic policy and its development as a reactionary style.

The insular and nationalistic American artistic tendencies at this time indicate the negative reception American Social Surrealism received due to its connection with European avant-garde practices. This information combined with the issue of accessibility was raised in the cited critiques of Benson, Duroc, and Naville, who questioned the ability of Surrealist techniques to resonate with the proletariat, change the perception of the work of Guy, his objective, and the relative success of his endeavors. Additional research is needed to understand the response of the

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89. Matthew Baigell, "The Beginnings of 'The American Wave' and the Depression," *Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (1968): 387, https://doi.org/10.2307/775138.

90. Baigell, "The Beginnings," 388.

91. Baigell, 392.

contemporary worker to Guy's oeuvre and the ability of this style to fulfill the intentions of its creators.

Conclusion

The American Social Surrealists desired to portray a more forceful critique of contemporary living than the existing descriptive style of Social Realism. They incorporated elements of European Surrealism to create a more expansive visual vocabulary that provided the tools necessary to present stylized political commentary about daily life from a jarring, unusual perspective to force the acknowledgment of the described injustices.[92] As demonstrated by the selected examples, Guy rejected the aesthetically pleasing American Scene paintings, the concurrent rise of Regionalism, and images of rugged masculine labor. Instead, his American Social Surrealist paintings distorted daily life through a Surrealist lens by rendering commonplace events uncanny, irrational, and nightmarish to provoke contemplation and reflection on the part of the viewer. Guy utilized the symbolic motif of Venus in *Venus on Sixth Avenue*, *The Evening of the Ball*, and *The Sailors Farewell* to comment on the contrasting experiences of women in upper and lower economic echelons during the Great Depression. In these works, Guy maintained a discussion of class commentary while demonstrating the expectations and idealizations of two opposing types of white women. He depicted their shared sexualization and objectification by men but highlighted the apathy of the wealthy women to the visible suffering of the proletariat women due to their lesser social status. Guy argued that despite their common experience, the wealthy women remained indifferent to their surroundings, refusing to engage with and recognize the maltreatment of other classes.

The Communist beliefs of the artist are visible in his Venus paintings. His personal political ideology directed the included imagery and theme of his pieces. Guy retooled the

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92. Fort, “American Social Surrealism,” 8.; Fort, “James Guy,” 126.

irrational, absurd, and illogical visual vocabulary of Surrealism to shock the viewer into recognizing that they were experiencing the same treatment as the figures within his works. Guy's perception of his social role was shaped by his proletarian status. His working-class background was the impetus for his membership in New York City-based left-wing political organizations that adopted militant trade union tactics to fight for employment opportunities and standardized salaries from the WPA. The actions of these groups coupled with Guy's position as a union-regulated manual laborer under the FAP altered his relationship to his artistic production. In this setting, Guy became a cultural worker, with his labor as activist art.

Guy worked in New York City alongside fellow Communist artists Quirt and Guglielmi to develop a new subgenre of Surrealism that is defined by the expression of contemporary social commentary and directed by the political ideology of its creators. The style is encompassed by Social Realism and Abstract Expressionism within the history of American art. The adaptive nature of the style, which existed to express the beliefs of its practitioners, was a justification for both the formation and decline of American Social Surrealism. This style was practiced from approximately 1933 to 1942. The date range reflects the incorporation of external systemic factors into the personal artistic production and creative process of the artists.[93] Moving towards the end of the decade, the growing probability of the Second World War reshaped daily life, challenging belief systems and personal outlooks. At the same time, in the late 1930s to early 1940s, Guy exhibited an increased interest in Abstract Surrealism. This shift is evident in the composition *Capital Minus Labor*, 1938 (figure 11). Thematic concerns also change. The artist

93. Fort, "American Social Surrealism," 11, 18.

now depicts international political issues instead of domestic social problems.[94] The production of emphatic antifascist art such as *The Death of Fascism*, 1937 (figure 12) by Guy underscores that the foundation of this style was built on the desire to interrogate detrimental aspects of daily life.[95] The transition to forthright political critique does not negate the aim of the style and the objective of Guy at the beginning of the decade, but rather displays the social-driven mission of the creator and the responsive and malleable nature of American Social Surrealism that allowed for the incorporation of new subject matter and social concerns.

Developed in the interwar period, American Social Surrealism is defined by the reveries of violence on artistic production. Despite geographical separation, the artistic sensibilities of both the Surrealists and the American Social Surrealists were profoundly affected by war. The Surrealists absorbed Dada practices, they incorporated their personal experience with violence and Dada's artistic response to the trauma of the First World War. This reactionary visual vocabulary was retooled by the American Social Surrealists to portray the decreased quality of life after the First World War and the Great Depression.[96] The Second World War disrupted Guy's career. From 1942 to 1945, he worked in an aircraft factory.[97] A shift in the iconographic program to incorporate the industrial forms that he worked with is visible in *Industrial Symphony*, 1943 (figure 13). Guy renounced socially conscious art when he returned to his practice full-time after the conclusion of the war. Explaining his new manner of depiction, he

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94. Fort, 16.

95. Fort, 16.

96. Phyllis Taoua, "Of Natives and Rebels: Locating the Surrealist Revolution in French Culture," *South Central Review* 20, no. 2/4 (2003): 71, doi:10.2307/3189786. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3189786.

97. Fort, "American Social Surrealism," 18.

stated, "'national art expressed by superficial subject matter will be buried with Fascism in the ash can of history."'[98]

Approaching midcentury, on the other side of the war, there were no longer the same social and economic conditions that existed beforehand. The stylistic shift of Guy towards abstraction reflects this assessment. The social inequities that prompted the characteristic biting social critique of this style were transformed during the United States' participation in the Second World War. It was considered at the time unpatriotic to continue to critique the federal government given the context of the war.[99] With the alteration of American culture post-World War II, the desire of the artist to continue to work in this style ceased. The termination of this style offers the understanding that American Social Surrealism was reactionary to the lived experiences of the creators, aligning with the conceptualization of this style as the product of the political beliefs of the cultural laborer.

Analyzing the legacy of American Social Surrealism, factors of access greatly contributed to the reputation of the artists who developed and worked in this style. Exhibition locations and quantity of production influenced the extent of exposure to this style and the space the presented ideas occupied in the cultural consciousness. Despite its existence as a subgenre of Surrealism, there is little research on this style, and the lack of extant works proves difficult for exhibition organization. As Surrealism becomes increasingly attractive to artists working today, this provides a renewed opportunity for the rediscovery of American Social Surrealism and its primary practitioners. The ability of a contemporary viewer to identify and construct the

98. Fort, 18.

99. Fort, 17.

embedded social critique, as demonstrated through the supported visual analysis, is a testament to the carefully calculated construction of the coded imagery to represent thought-provoking social types. Guy created successful compositions that operate at myriad levels determined by the knowledge base of the viewer. This style remains relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences through the depiction of commonly shared struggles to illustrate continual problems in society such as the societal role of women, class inequity, the exploitation of the laborer, and the increasing threat of censorship, fascism, and global warfare.

Figures

Figure 1. James Guy, *Venus on Sixth Avenue (Cinderella)*, 1937, oil on paperboard, 23.5 x 29.5 in., The Columbus Museum, https://columbusmuseum.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/DEE5A6CE-0C93-4592-86F4-521253803697.

Figure 2. Harry Rubenstein, *Women picketing outside Alaimo Dress Mfg*, circa 1940, black-and-white photograph, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, https://library.artstor.org/public/SS34445_34445_4466132

Figure 3. Salvador Dalí, *Invisible Lion, Horse, Sleeping Woman*, 1930, oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 25 3/5 in., Centre Pompidou, https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/c6gyMz

Figure 4. photograph of James Guy, *The Evening of the Ball*, likely 1937, oil on canvas, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/federal-art-project-photographic-division-collection-5467/series-1/box-9-folder-47

Figure 5. photograph of James Guy, *The Sailors Farewell*, likely 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/federal-art-project-photographic-division-collection-5467/series-1/box-9-folder-47

(continued)

HEAD: 21½ in.

NECK: 12 in.

UPPER ARM: 9½ in.

BUST: 34 in.

WAIST: 24 in.

WRIST: 6 in.

HIPS: 34 in.

THIGH: 19½ in.

CALF: 13½ in.

ANKLE: 8 in.

THIS IS IDEAL FIGURE THAT MODERN WOMEN WANT

Most women in the U. S. would like to have a figure like 20-year-old Model June Cox. Miss Cox is 5 ft., 6¾ in. tall and weighs 124 lb. According to life insurance statistics, she should weigh 135 lb.

The perfect 1938 figure must have curves but it differs from the perfect figure of past decades in relationship of curves to straight lines. In the 1890's women had full bosoms, round hips. In actual measurements they probably were no rounder than Miss Cox but they seemed so because they were shorter, tightened their waists into an hour-glass effect.

As the American girl stressed sports, she grew taller and flatter. The boyish form became the vogue. With the recent return of the romantic influence in clothes, the soft feminine figure is again back in style. Now, though, the ideal figure must have a round, high bosom, a slim but not wasp-like waist, and gently rounded hips. Because U. S. women sit so much—in autos, at bridge tables, at desks and in the movies—big hips are their most serious figure problem. On the whole, though, they have the sort of figure that prompted dumpy Elsa Maxwell to say "No French woman should be seen on the beach by her lover—all American women should."

Figure 6. Alfred Eisenstaedt, Untitled (Photograph of June Cox), 1938, black-and-white photograph, The LIFE Picture Collection, https://books.google.com/books?id=gE8EAAAAMBAJ&source=gbs_all_issues_r&cad=1

Figure 7. James Guy, *The Bomb*, 1939, oil on panel, 12 1/8 x 16 in., Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, https://www.michaelrosenfeldart.com/artists/james-guy-1910-1983

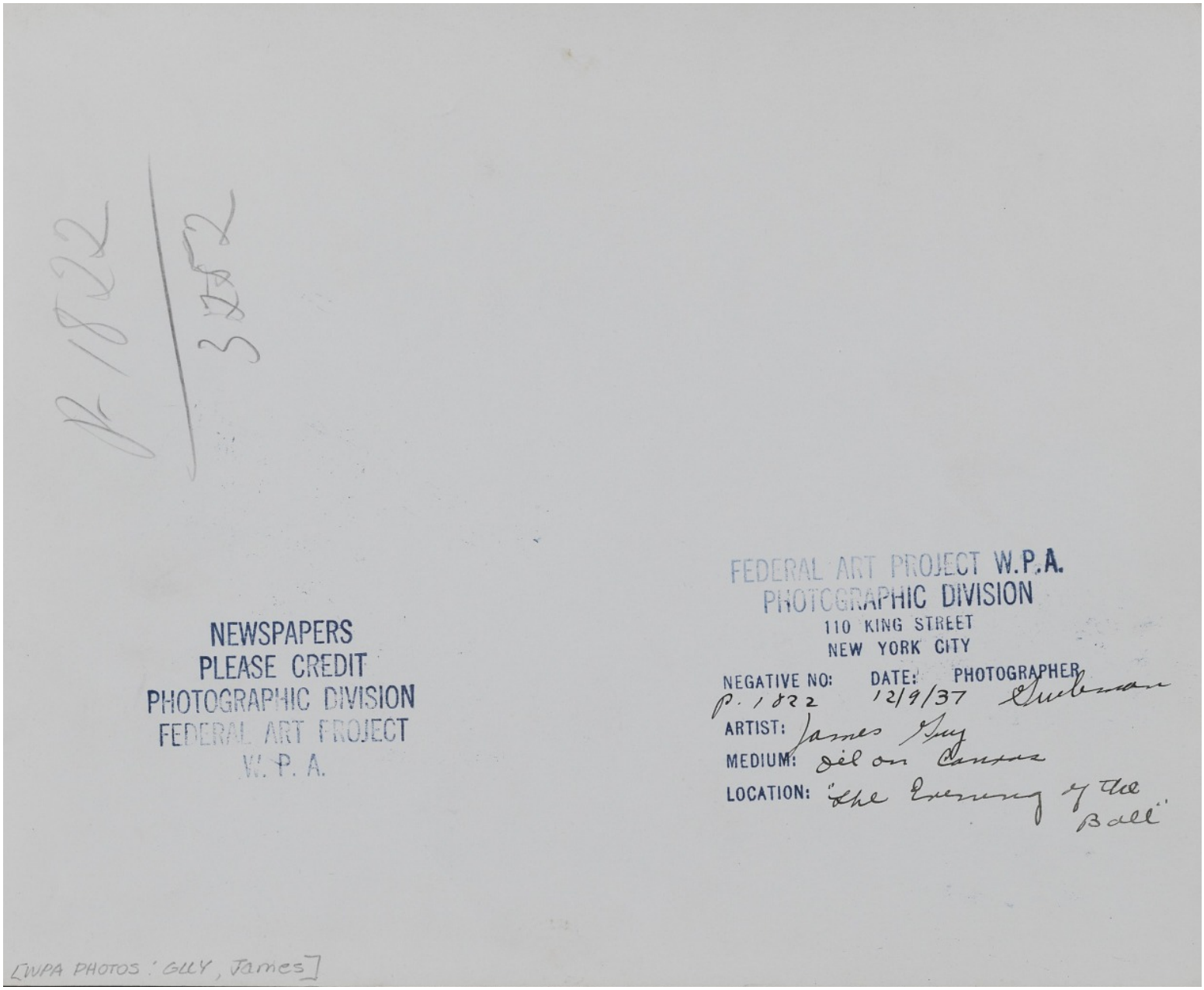

Figure 8. photograph of reverse, James Guy, *The Evening of the Ball*, 1937, oil on canvas, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/federal-art-project-photographic-division-collection-5467/series-1/box-9-folder-47

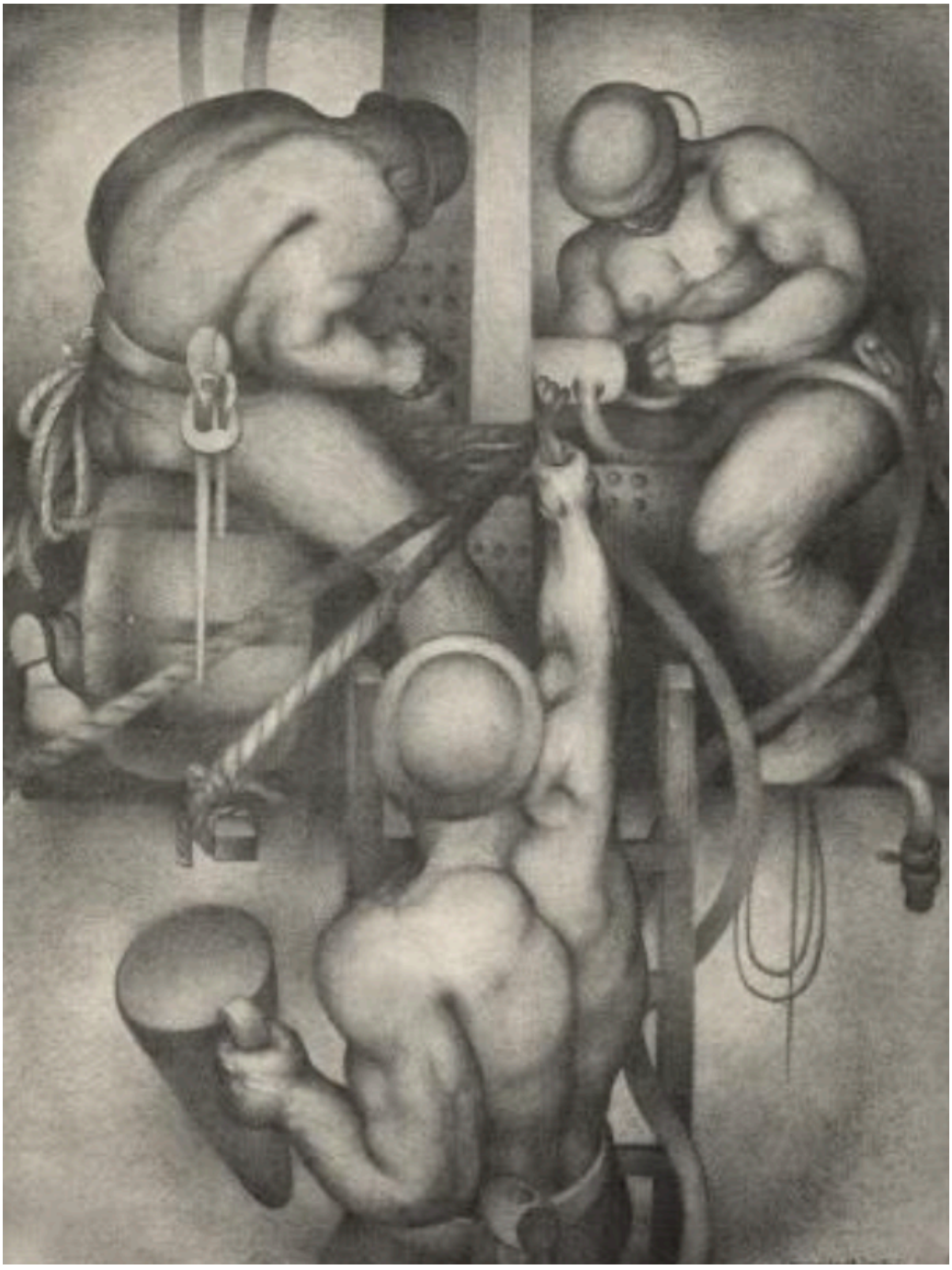

Figure 9. Arthur Murphy, *Steel Riggers - No. 4 - Bay Bridge*, 1936, lithograph on paper, 15 1/4 x 11 3/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/steel-riggers-no-4-bay-bridge-18086

Figure 10. John Steuart Curry, *Wisconsin Landscape*, 1938-39, oil on canvas, 42 x 84 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488030

Figure 11. James Guy, *Capital Minus Labor*, 1938, oil on canvasboard, 14 x 18 in., Private Collection, www.askART.com

Figure 12. James Guy, *The Death of Fascism*, 1937, oil on board, 19 3/4 x 30 3/4 in., Private Collection, www.askART.com

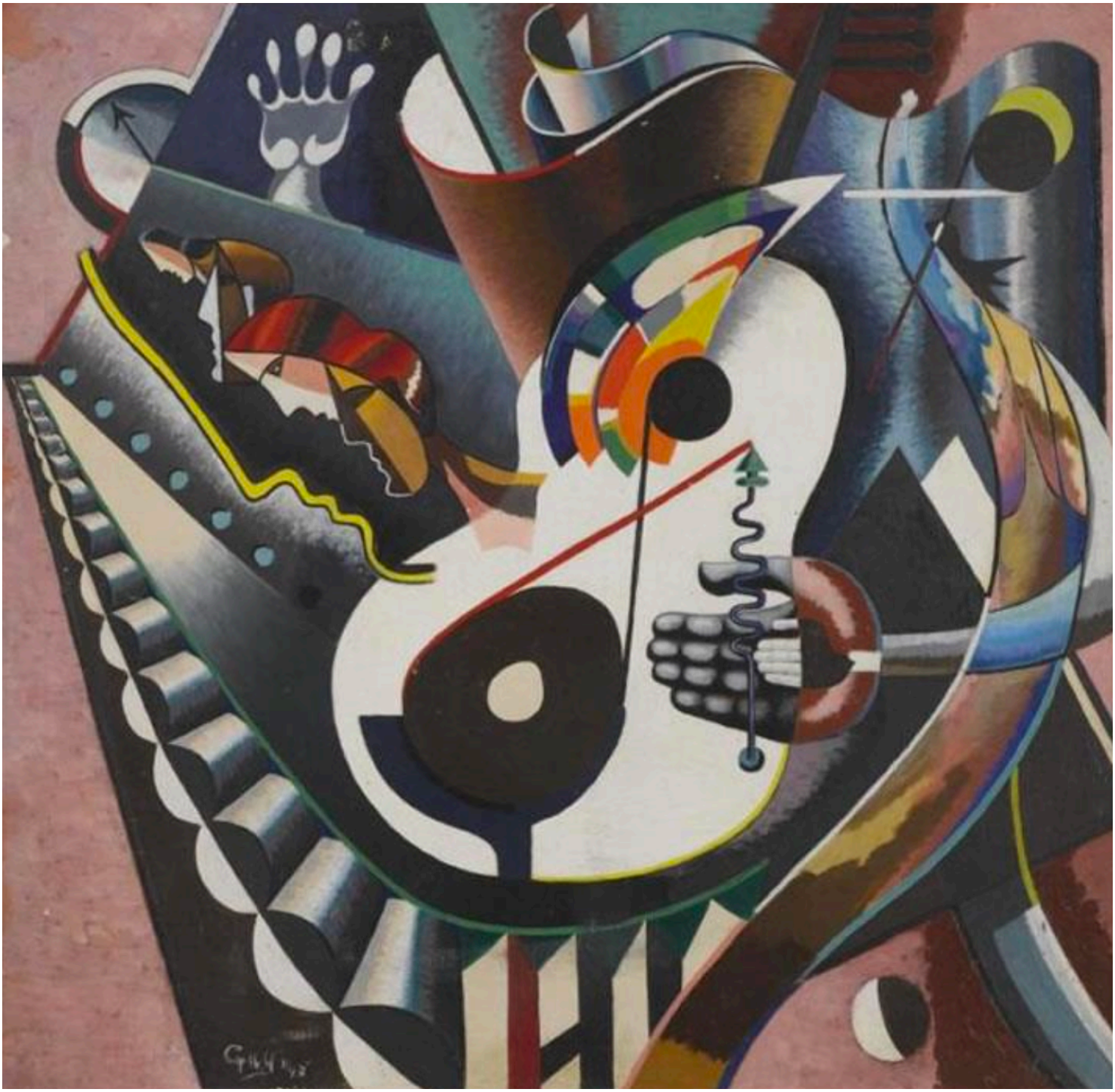

Figure 13. James Guy, *Industrial Symphony*, 1943, oil on canvas, 30 x 32 in., Private Collection, www.askART.com

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