Beyond This Momentary Pausing

Asa Horvitz

What is at stake in the recent retrospective *Philip Guston Now* is a struggle between two contrasting visions of art. On the one hand, art as something reducible to communication and knowledge, art which provides answers and instructs us how to live, art which takes sides and has a clear moral position which can be expressed in language. And on the other hand, art whose job it is to break apart the consolidating force of knowledge, art which is not afraid of the disturbing ambiguity of images, art which results in a transformation of perception which is non-directional and not determined in advance.

The debate surrounding the curators' decision to postpone the original 2020 show, and the subsequent backlash, has been widely discussed and written about. What is striking today, at the exhibition's last stop at the Tate Modern in London, is the tension between the curators' efforts to position Guston's work and the paintings themselves. In wall text after wall text, we are reminded and assured that Guston, a socialist Jew, was a progressive social activist, anti-war, anti-racist, questioning his own privilege and position and yearning for a more just world. Don't worry, the texts seem to say, he is on "our side." Although some texts briefly acknowledge the open-ended nature of Guston's work, the dominant idea seems to be that the images in Guston's paintings from the 1960s and 70s, specifically the disembodied white hoods of KKK members, need not disturb us because Guston painted them to tell us that they are bad. (The absurdity of the notion that someone would need to come to a Philip Guston exhibition in 2024 to learn that the KKK is bad seems to be lost on the curators). This is Guston as critical art, taking a stance against, revealing what is wrong with us and our world, helping us improve ourselves. One has the sense that these texts were written not primarily for visitors themselves, but perhaps for an imagined internet audience who might be incited to frenzied calls for cancellation by a posted photograph. What we are left with is the plastering of Guston the man—his admirable political and ethical position, his musings and reflections on society, his identity as a progressive Jew—over the work.

Thankfully, the paintings do something else. The position of the images in the work of the 1960s and 70s is profoundly ambiguous. Take "Flatlands," a wide white landscape filled with detritus, painted for the 1970 Marlborough show. The KKK hoods are sentinels, sinister, almost cute, vacant yet intelligent, anonymous yet individual, plotting, gathering, and thinking, introverted yet speaking, familiar yet alien—Wallace's boys, yet Kafka's doorkeepers. What are the strange red outlines with short, stubby lines they sit on? Where do their gazes point? Are they stitched together or riveted like an airplane? Do they see the orange sun, the white ground, a block of wood with nails? What is their relation to a pair of boots attached to legs, a pink clock, a pointing hand? Where are they going and where did they come from? Nothing can be resolved or interpreted. The images are held in a field of tension, points in a net. A static force charges the work, something unnamable is stirred in the viewer.

Flatlands by Philip Guston. Oil on Canvas 1970

In an unpublished talk at the New York Studio School in 1971, Guston spoke about the paintings of Piero della Francesca, saying,

> I like the word place because it's an illusive imaginary place where forms of this world… momentarily come to rest… I think my great attraction to Piero is the sense of pausing. That is, as if all these forms, these figures, could have an existence beyond this momentary pausing. A lot of other painting, which doesn't deal with the plane with this kind of intensity or pressure…and that means that the forms have no future, they don't give any promise of continuity.

Reading this, one thinks of Aby Warburg, who in an almost Neo-Platonist reading of art history wrote of the flow of autonomous images through time, images which have their own desires and agency. In Warburg's thought, images might suddenly surface in a painting or popular culture, with different intentions and outcomes in different eras. It is these images' autonomy and their power to grab and possess us that gives them their disturbing, even terrifying force. In Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas, the afterlife of images across hundreds or thousands of years is explored and amplified through juxtaposing seemingly unresolvable images from different eras on a black background. The viewer must traverse the images; meaning is generated in the tensions and gaps between.

It is the terrible and terrifying power of images to persist, to remain, to continue, to haunt, the sense that they have an autonomy, a life of their own, a continuity, that appears again and again in Guston's paintings of the 1960s and 70s. The images as signifiers disturb—one cannot look at Guston's white hoods without seeing lynchings, cross burnings, and Klan rallies, snapshots of racialized violence from *Birth of a Nation* to Charleston. But equally disturbing is the sense that Guston's hoods have their own unpredictable desires and agency, mysterious lives among flat and alien cars, streets, buildings, and objects. Something feels intimate and inescapable, as if at any moment they might leap from their world into ours. One stands in front of "Flatlands" captured, gripped, horrified, frightened, almost laughing, confused, delighted, disturbed, with something stirring inside that can't quite be described. There is no reassurance of a solid moral position, a good "us" united against an evil "them." Instead one is pulled out of oneself into an indifferent world of images, certainty breaks down, there is a loss of language and a wrenching expansion of perspective, one is anything but confirmed. A gap appears, new territories open.

In Western neoliberal democracies, imagination as the capacity for invention has failed to deliver a just or sustainable future. In other words, capital has co-opted imagination. Under such circumstances, what we need from art is not simplistic messaging, but rather the presence of contingency. We need artistic experiences which cause a transformation of perception in audiences, but a transformation whose outcome is not determined in advance.

Given the cultural climate of the 2020s, it is understandable that the curators of *Philip Guston Now* attempted to reduce Guston's work to a series of morally defensible positions, to consolidate the images in language and knowledge. However, it is also a cowardly decision, and one that forecloses on many other, more important opportunities. If art as a series of moral positions reducible to knowledge in the form of performative language were going to transform society, it would have already done so. The fact is that we can't imagine ourselves out of our current predicaments using the imagination as a tool for re-arranging the given.

Rather, the art we need today is in fact what Guston provides, in remarkable painting after remarkable painting—art which destroys and undoes knowledge, throws us into experiencing that we are not necessarily who we think we are, art which breaks knowledge apart, leaving space for something that we cannot yet imagine.

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Weapon of Survival

Jules Bentley

Little Bones
by David Baillie
307 pp. Macabre Ink 2024

David Baillie's grimy subcultural thriller *Little Bones* nails how a dead-end town's punk scene feels when you're still fairly young and fairly new to it. The rejects and dropouts around you, linked mostly by poverty, geography and addictions, are a secret street coven of tragi-heroic archetypes, and a precarious cobweb infrastructure of basement bars and unvacuumed apartments seems like a fascinating multipolar underworld. To say this book reads like a teenage runaway's daydream is praise; this feeling is special and ephemeral, and *Little Bones* manages the feat of not just capturing but maintaining it.

The tourism bureau of Hamilton, Ontario, presumably waging a steep uphill battle to begin with, is unlikely to promote *Little Bones* as hometown literature. The late-80s Hamilton that readers are submerged in here is vividly, relentlessly unpleasant, a wild frozen ocean of industrial decay echoing the nightmare Glasgow of Alasdair Gray's Lanark. All the alleys reek of piss and all the buildings teeter on collapse. The city is phantasmagorically unclean, every angle spangled with richly-described filth.

Filthy too are the characters, a jumble of capitalism's discards who smell bad and complain a lot. Unlike the hellscape of Hamilton, however, they are charming. Beneath their patinas of ash, they're also quite a virtuous bunch. With the exception of a child murder in its opening pages, *Little Bones* is for all its grit and grease a wholesome novel, undergirded with an optimistic moralism and centered on flawed and traumatized people who remain reliably decent: they respect women, correct misgenderings, and when they're racist to the slightly too-righteous indigenous character it's usually accidental. This may not be in keeping with some people's experiences of working-class punk. At the risk of belaboring the point, a quasi-homeless scammer promptly paying a girl back money she's lent him strains credulity in a way the book's overtly supernatural elements never do.

A spooky underlying mystery gradually unravels, but *Little Bones*' animating tension is more immediate. Scotty, a character who seems unable to fend for himself, is losing his subsidized housing. This hook is a smart choice to keep the plot clock ticking. *Little Bones*' structure, while conventionally sensible, also feels punk in the sense that it's less concerned with destination than with the present moment. The emphasis is on experiences, relationships and access to spaces. A narratively obliging horde of Nazi skinheads provide a lurking threat and episodes of active antagonism, perfectly in keeping with how high-stakes these types of tribal street feuds can feel. The climax is a tight, exciting action sequence, though it does rather make one wish there'd been more fist-fights earlier on.

Little Bones is an ensemble piece in which the protagonist is the subculture itself, slowly coalescing to try and help Scotty. Scotty, who doesn't speak aloud, is the book's most memorable, fully alive character and its anchor. We spend a lot of time in his idiosyncratic psychic interior, and it's to Baillie's credit that Scotty's innocence and unusual thinking are neither wearying nor tainted by even a whiff of neurotypical condescension. Ballie's melding of down-and-out gutter realism with elements of the uncanny is also satisfying and successful. It makes a compelling setting for this tale of solidarity, the weapon of survival in a world of shit.