GUSTON'S GUSTO

"Processional," 1957,
oil on canvas,
48 x 42 inches,
Private collection,
San Francisco

by Bruce Helander

It is a rare opportunity to view a small suite of paintings by a great artist through a modest temporary window of a significant time capsule. This chance allows us to briefly look out and all around to observe a static landscape of consistent marks and idiosyncratic gestures that all share an identifiable commonality of visual spirit. It is even more unusual and enjoyable to have the opportunity to examine an important series of works in a beautiful, uptown New York gallery space that offers a concentrated focus and peacefulness, without the typical distractions of a museum environment along with the accompanying crowds that necessarily inhibit the full contemplative experience.

In Philip Guston: 1954-1958, L&M Arts in Manhattan has gathered a select group of seven related paintings, all about the same size, from this extraordinarily creative period, including loans from the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and other private collections. This powerful, small assemblage of paintings from only four specific years of studio activity could be considered the closing arguments and indisputable visual evidence sealed for a jury of his peers that Guston is still arguably one of the greatest American abstract expressionists that ever lived. As an odd but appropriate parallel, this show brings to mind other professional "performers" requiring substantial natural skill, a sense of rhythm and unique talent, such as Muhammad Ali's greatest fights or Federico Fellini's most memorable films or Thelonious Monk's rendition of Gershwin's "Nice Work If You Can Get It," times seven. It's Pavarotti's best concerts all in one compact CD, combined with Jack Nicholson's consistently erratic, gutsy and somewhat abstract performance in "Five Easy Pieces." These connections are all about poetic movement with entirely different applications. But unlike the scratchy black and white footage of a young Cassius Clay or a pre-digital taped piano recording of Monks' best foot forward, the original pictures on the wall here are as fresh and clear and true as the day they were made in the artist's studio.

"To Fellini," 1958, oil on canvas, 69 x 74 inches,
Private collection

Philip Guston, known for his eclectic style and experimentation with figuration as well as abstraction, was born in 1913 in Montreal. In about 1920, his family moved to Los Angeles and with an interest in art, he was encouraged by his mother to take a correspondence course in cartooning. He attended the Manual Arts High School, where he became a friend of Jackson Pollock, a fellow student. After being expelled from the school, which seems to happen to artists more than others, Guston independently and intuitively pursued his interest in art, including comics, as well as delving into various philosophical theories. In 1930, he received a scholarship to the Otis Art Institute, which has a long, prestigious list of artists who made big names for themselves, but even with good intentions the young painter headed for the hills after enrolling for only three months.

There is a curious and lengthy list of highly talented art students who find the academic environment stifling or are simply too excited and ambitious to sit still. David Byrne, the innovative musician and photographer, left the Rhode Island School of Design during the second semester of his freshman year and headed for New York, reappearing a few months later at the Mudd Club and CBGB's. Others who broke their mothers' hearts and wasted a non-refundable tuition deposit on a dream that finally did come true are legendary among the art stars of the last century. But aside from the academic environment that is necessarily restrictive in its purposeful elementary curriculum, the greatest benefit to artists has always been the discourse between them that tests theories, argues points of view and assists in tearing town taboos and conventional wisdom. Guston got his chance when he dropped out of the art scene in California and moved to lower Manhattan in the winter of 1936. It was here that he worked on murals for the Works Progress Administration as part of their Federal Art Project, which also supported other artists like de Kooning, strengthening their career goals and convictions while enabling them to have a roof over their heads. The works from his WPA period tend toward realist social commentary, but also suggest his exploration of more abstract approaches to the picture plane. Guston taught at the State University of Iowa, the first of many teaching positions that allowed the artist to reflect on his own progress, but forced a certain

articulation of extemporary theory to a live audience that drew naturally from his own experiences and opinions and helped to reinforce and stabilize the direction of his own work.

In 1945, Guston compiled enough work for his first solo exhibition at the Midtown Galleries and a first prize award at the Carnegie Institute. In 1947, when he had a summer home in Woodstock, New York, Guston came to know quite a number of promising painters, including Bradley Walker Tomlin, and became more attentive to the abstract art that was a hallmark of New York's art scene. In 1948, the Prix de Rome took him to Europe, after which he moved to New York City, becoming part of a circle of artists, composers, and writers including Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko and John Cage. The potential strength of these kinds of bohemian unions, where the collective creative energy is harnessed in a kind of de facto artist cooperative of discussions, is often the turning point in one's career. The notorious Black Mountain College had the same indelible effect on its students, from Robert Rauschenberg, Dorothea Rockburne and John Chamberlain to Ray Johnson and Kenneth Noland.

During the 1950s, Guston entered a new phase of abstract expression. Thick strokes in lush hues were woven into complex surfaces, with the brighter colors massed at the center of the canvas: these works became hallmarks of the artist's style. They were well received, with the Museum of Modern Art purchasing one of his paintings in 1956. The rest is history. Next came an influential trip to Europe in 1960 and a major retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1962. In 1967, he moved to Woodstock permanently, and began painting in a symbolic style that revived the cartoonlike forms and figures that he drew as a young man, which he continued working to develop until the end of his life in 1980.

What is it about the extraordinary, unforgettable quality of these iconic paintings created during a short period that has made this exhibition one of the most important surveys in recent memory? Well, for one thing, the ironic consistency of seven

"The Mirror," 1957, oil on canvas, 68 x 60 1/2 inches, Private collection

Installation view of Philip Guston's exhibition at L & M Arts, New York City, 2009

different canvases where the author's recognizable touch is clearly evident throughout, since non-narrative canvases tend to go off in all directions and are rarely as tightly lined up as these are, ready to march in step as slightly differently dressed participants in the same fast moving parade. And on a scoreboard that deals less with elapsed time and more with the quality and consistency of the final shot, these are all winners that would be pretty much impossible to rank from one to seven. These works also depict a poignant struggle between burgeoning figuration and abstraction, structure and raw sentiment. The artist's distinctive brushstrokes are free and exploratory and confident in their final journey. Each beautiful painting offers a subtle clue to a direction taken through impulse and intuition and an informed eye. The viewer is fortunate to have for comparison the picture titled "Painting," 1954 as the earliest image in this show, as it serves as a revealing visual document in an unfolding, almost cinematic storyboard of abstract marks. After 1954, the habitual color field of vertical and horizontal marks leaps to the center of later canvases that follow a successful formula of give and take, as the larger forms simultaneously emerge and dissolve, offering an engaging ride in the passenger sidecar that Guston spins around without signaling a turn. He appears to first form his own loose, undulating soft grid where some initial areas are already blocked off to make way for another shape. As he gently moves outward towards the perimeters of the stretched canvas, the artist begins to weave a kind of soft cubist network of blurred rounded squares that is subtle enough not to conflict with the painting's central ingredients, which cling together like a flock of swirling birds reminiscent of the works of the late Robert Goodnough. Philip Guston is clearly enjoying the exploration of a treasure hunt that has no exacting plan to get started and no script for an ending.

And, there is no one standing by to signal the approach of the finish line. It's up to the artist to find his way from the starting gate through a crisscross of newly worn paths of his own making, opening up opportunities to take an impromptu detour without going far from home. Guston's painting, "Processional," 1957, offers a delicate composition that requires no foundation to support the towering expansive shapes above. Instead, the artist relies on his instinctual vocabulary of mixing odd shapes and organic forms together to create a balanced, floating, beautiful composition of astonishing emotion and personal drama. In the painting aptly titled "To Fellini," 1958, an homage to the filmmaker, the artist reveals his sleight of hand as the visual plot thickens with aerial formations of imaginary, meandering neighborhoods and backyard gardens that push outward east and west. In this series, there is no point in conjuring up a subtle recognizable image or two, as the powerful non-narrative format created has its own strong, independent vocabulary that overpowers anything in its way. There are few artists that can point to a handful of their works as consistently good as these, who have earned their respected position so permanently in the hierarchy of contemporary painting, as Philip Guston has. ◆

Bruce Helander is an artist who writes on art. He knew Philip Guston and Robert Motherwell during his tenure as the director of the Provincetown Fine Art Workshops. He is currently writing new books on painter Hunt Slonem's "Bunnies" series and sculptor Marc Sijan's hyper-realist lifesize figures.

"Prague," 1956, oil on canvas, 63 1/4 x 60 inches, Private collection, New York, Courtesy Richard Gray Gallery