

Philip Guston

Jasper Johns

October 25 – December 22, 2007



Untitled, 1990

Oil on canvas

18 x 18 inches

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Jasper Johns and Philip Guston!

Until recently this would have been an almost unthinkable pairing. After all, was it not Johns who froze the febrile gestures of the Abstract Expressionists while symbolically putting their manhood in a vise. At any rate, such has been the conventional wisdom since Johns emerged in the late 1950s painting cryptic forms in deliberate strokes that seemed to counter the Ab-Ex model at every level – in the slow speed of his marks, the density rather than space-claiming nature of his compositions, and the apparent emotional neutrality of his basic iconography of numbers, targets, flags, and maps. All the while, the young Turk's elders and legions of their followers continued to reenact existential anxiety and spontaneous self-definition painting after quivering painting.

To this well-worn canard add recent critiques of first generation New York School painting that focus on sexual politics and the suspect heroization of the mythic ruffians of the downtown avant-garde. Here Jackson Pollock plays the heavy and pays the price for a boyhood photo in Cowboy duds, an apprenticeship with all-American Tintoretto manqué, Thomas Hart Benton, and too much hard-drinking, he-manly posturing in Manhattan bars, even though the best of Pollock's work is characterized by an exquisitely responsive sensuality and delicacy. Here Johns's satirical puzzle-pictures – *Painting with Two Balls*, *Alley Oop* and others – are interpreted by various schools of thought as pointed double-entendres designed to undermine the supposedly unequivocal masculinity of Jack-the-Dripper and his cohort, though in the meantime the same commentators have been busily chipping away at Pollock's previously monolithic sexuality.

What relation to Johns could an artist such as Philip Guston – Pollock's rivalrous friend - or for that matter Willem de Kooning – Action Painting's second leading man - possibly have in a framework thus composed in equal parts folklore and speculative theory? What place could they occupy that is not already tagged with disparaging labels? Implicit in qualities all share despite being obscured by art critical half-truths, the answer is the relation and the place that Johns himself has assigned them.

First off, direct evidence of Johns's affinity for Guston as well as for de Kooning, can be found in his private collection of works by other artists, since he owns major drawings by both. His choice of de Koonings instantly explains itself once you see them. Thus two nearly identical and so all the more significantly different black and white gestural abstractions show how de Kooning - contrary to Harold Rosenberg's description of him conjuring imagery from the void - in fact recycled motifs and rehearsed marks with every bit as much care and attention to nuances

and divergences as the young map maker and flag painter. And so it would seem that while Rauschenberg erased de Kooning in an act of Oedipal rebellion, Johns quietly absorbed and adapted to his own distinctive purposes the essence of the Dutchman's deliberative process of statement and restatement, or, at least identified in him a fellow craftsman unafraid of "repeating" himself because he knew that apparent reiteration accents actual deviations that further distill while also diversifying the intrinsic characteristics of an image.

For the link to Guston, one might look to his predominantly grisaille paintings of the early 1950s with their generally abrupt, bundled strokes. And, for underlying confirmation of this correspondence one may recall that these Gustons were created under the influence of John Cage who, relatively soon after meeting Guston, became Johns's mentor, friend, and occasional collaborator. However, it is not Guston's abstract works to which Johns has evinced the strongest attraction, though retrospectively one can't help wondering what he knew of or saw in them when painting his own gray scale quasi-abstractions of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Instead, the Guston in whom Johns has expressed most interest is the aging, brooding, ever-present, ever elusive author of complex allegories alternately bursting with symbols or dramatically stripped down so as to focus on a solitary example, symbols that conflate the banal and the arcane, the obvious with the ambivalent, the desire for intimacy and the fear of coming out from behind the shield of the artist's persona.

In short, I am speaking simultaneously of the "literary" Guston and the "literary" Johns and I could just as easily refer to the later as the "author" of his work insofar as he too "writes" on canvas and paper with sign-objects even as he phrases his thoughts and feelings with the thrust of his hand and the pregnant intervals or supercharged lack of intervals between these glyphs. Of course, once upon a time in post-war America, the worst one could say of any vanguard artist was that he or she was "literary." But no matter how emphatic or convincing the calls for ridding painting of picture-poetry or story-telling were, many ears remained deaf to them and some artists at whom the imperative was directed seem simply not to have heard because they were too busy reading. Guston in particular was a great reader and in addition to a voracious appetite for fiction – Kafka, Babel, Roth being high on his list – he read poetry of all kinds, but especially that of younger Americans such as Bill Berkson, Clark Coolidge, William Corbett, Ann Waldman and Frank O'Hara. For his part Johns has favored Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, who is an explicit source for works such as *Diver* and *Periscope* (Hart Crane) but also O'Hara to whom he dedicated a work titled after one of O'Hara's poems, *In Memory of My Feelings*. At the time it was painted in 1961 - just three years after Johns's public break through - it

was among his most undisguised protests against the view that his art was the chill, unfeeling antithesis of Abstract Expressionism. Finally both Guston and Johns were devotees of Samuel Beckett, with whom Johns ultimately realized the "livre d'artiste," *Foirades/Fizzles*.

Setting the impact of poets aside, the parallel poetics of Johns's and Guston's works hinge primarily upon the uncanniness of the principle sign- or thought-objects they deploy, forms that seem to anchor their compositions yet render them and their meanings inherently unstable. A brief inventory of motifs suggests that some of the correspondences between the two artists are fairly straight-forward. The most "literary" of these images, naturally, is the book. And so, for example, Johns once attached an open book to a canvas and painted over the text thereby transforming it into a bas-relief, and a linguistically mute emblem representing the thing it formerly was in actuality. Guston's oeuvre is replete with floppy books resembling massive tablets on the one hand, and, just as biblically, "The Book" as archetype, on the other. Attributes or scenes of the artist's studio that hint at or effectively are self-portraiture also appear frequently in Johns as well as Guston. The latter depicted himself both as a jowly, stubbly monster and as a Ku Klux Klansman, while in *Souvenir* the former had his impassive Photomat likeness screened on to a saucer he then incorporated into a painted montage and later reprised lithographically. The image of the canvas in front of which the saucer sits is a gray monochrome, and as such strangely similar to the grayish red monochrome that Guston's Klansman stares at in one version of that subject and the green monochrome that hangs above his head in another. The impossibility of reading the expression on Johns's face or of seeing the face under the hood in the Guston works is correspondingly aligned with the basic inscrutability of painting itself. It is as if each time either of these artists removes one mask, another is exposed. What is revealed in each case is the obdurate but protean nature of the unknowable and the hidden.

In Guston's second treatment of this theme - and as much as they were for Johns and de Kooning, repetition and variation were essential to his aesthetic- the Klansman is looking at a naked light-bulb, also a staple in Johns lexicon of mundane things, along with shoes, watches and coat hangers. For his part, Guston favored shoes, wall clocks, and irons, but the function of these pictorial nouns is to reference the humblest aspects of daily existence while estranging them at the same time, and by that means lending them larger but always unreliable metaphoric dimensions. These dimensions are further amplified and complicated by previous art historical renditions such as the shoes of Van Gogh - tokens of mortal being - or the disparate, timeless still lives of de Chirico with their immobilized clocks, though Johns rarely indulges in overtly metaphysical symbolism and Guston only does so with a still

more overt grotesquery. Along the same lines coincidentally, in 1979 Johns and Guston pictured brushes plunged into paint covered receptacles - a Savarin coffee tin in the case of Johns and a sauce pan the case of Guston, who may have eyed his variant as a way of entering into direct dialogue with Johns who had long meditated on the Savarin tin prior to this date. Both images resonate with the compound connotations of beginnings and endings, the intuitive generation of imagery and the suspension or exhaustion of that process, the attraction-repulsion of the colored dirt - that is what Guston called oil paint - and noxious liquids from which beauty is extracted and the mess to which the tools that create such beauty return at the end of the day.

Such variously evocative physicality is plainly manifest in the visual weight of the pigments Guston and Johns used and the tactility of their generally rich paint handling. On both sides of this equation, mastery is a matter of the balance between ambiguity and bluntness. Nowhere is this more crucial than in the numerous works Johns has made using radically simplified details of the human face in combination with other pictographic devices for and quasi-naturalistic representations of watches, wooden slats, veils and handkerchiefs, the Milky Way, plus one pure riddle of a shape that was the puzzling protagonist of many works in the 1990s.

Guston often fragmented the human form, and, in portraits of his wife Musa and others, more or less codified the horizon-hugging, floating eyeball that resurfaces in Johns's work like a snail crawling the inside of a glass tank. But the poignant dispersal and identity threatening dissociation of facial features is Johns's alone. So doing he manages to turn the entire rectangle of the framing sheet or canvas with its internal armatures and decentering separation of parts-to-whole into a ceaselessly morphing countenance in which the alternatively bold, tender, comic, sensuous, awkward and virtuosic touch of the artist becomes the means of summoning deep emotions without the object of that emotion ever emerging from or coalescing out of the contradictory state of shapely definition and structural indefiniteness in which Johns locates and we discover them. For true and truth telling ambivalence to achieve this pitch of intensity, its counter terms must be jarring as well as subtle, lyric as well as prosaic, thought as well as felt. Despite real and supposed differences, Johns and Guston had many things in common, but it was such extremes of understanding and such a range of expression that keeps the sympathetic harmonies and dissonances between them vibrating.

Robert Storr - 2007



Red Picture, 1969

Oil on canvas

24 x 26⁷/₈ inches

Collection of Aimee and Robert Lehrman, Washington, D.C.,

Photo Courtesy of McKee Gallery, New York

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