Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Conventional wisdom has it that the work of Philip Guston started out very pretty and ended up very ugly. The place in history of this painter—born Phillip Goldstein in Montreal, Canada in 1913 and raised in Los Angeles—has been confirmed, or at least defined, by his movement from one style to another. His embrace of gritty, cartoony neo-expressionism in the 1970s (full of boot heels and white-hooded Ku Klux Klan figures) elevated the abstract-expressionist confections he painted in the 1950s.

Within this dynamic, the actual paintings from either period mean less individually than they do in their relationship to one another and in the mythology behind them. "They have had a cultish influence almost akin to that Cézanne had on young painters a century ago, influence here being partly a measure of the permission one artist gives to another, through example, to be free," gushed the chief art critic for *The New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman, in his consideration of late Guston in 2003.

By comparison, an earlier chief critic for the *Times* had an altogether different take. In a 1970 review titled "Mandarin Pretending to Be a Stumblebum," Hilton Kramer slammed Guston's Marlborough Gallery metamorphosis as a career move by an artist who has "always been a latecomer," one who, in the 1950s, had embraced the "aesthetics of the New York School when it was already well established." Kramer called Guston's late paintings "a form of artifice that deceives no one—except, possibly, the artist who is so out-of-touch with contemporary realities that he still harbors the illusion his 'act' will not be recognized as such."

Kramer was right about all but the public's reaction to Guston. The art world not only came to embrace the artist's reinvention but also found itself energized by Kramer's critique. The politics of the late 1960s, Guston explained, encouraged him to reject "all that purity" of his earlier abstract work. Today the popularity of his "risky" career move has only intensified. In a 2004 sale of a 1975 Guston painting, which realized a hammer price of $1.2 million, Christie's auction house included a quotation from Kramer's negative 1970 review as a selling point for the lot.

For the accepted Guston storyline to work, however—for the late paintings to be considered appropriately impure—the early paintings must exhibit enough "purity" of abstract form for Guston to reject later on. This month L&M Arts offers up a chance to test this premise with a selection of seven large Guston paintings from the "pure" abstract years of 1954 to 1958.[1] Much of the material is well known. Two of the paintings come through major museum loans: *Painting* (1954) from the Museum of Modern Art and *Dial* (1956) from the

1 "Philip Guston: 1954–1958" opened at L&M Arts, New York, on January 15 and remains on view through February 28, 2009.

Whitney Museum. The remaining five consist of work from private collections. One painting on view, *Beggar's Joys* (1954–1955), is today recognized mainly for realizing a Guston auction record of over $10 million at a Sotheby's sale in 2008. (The Sotheby's auction catalogue again praised Guston for going "beyond the attempts of outside observers to judge and define his work, but to subvert his own previous aesthetic assumptions as he evolved stylistically.")

To my eyes, early and late Guston look best when considered side by side in those postage-stamp-sized reproductions you find in textbook surveys of modern art. In person, the early works seem far less pretty than the artist's later ugliness would lead you to believe. At L&M, MOMA's *Painting* is built on a brittle structure of hatch marks with a dominant red that is more scablike than lustrous. The Whitney's *Dial* strikes me as a smudgy floral still life. I enjoyed the circus riot of *To Fellini* (1958)—upon seeing it, I couldn't help humming Nino Rota's theme from *8 1/2*. But I found the ironically named *Beggar's Joys*, all $10 million of it, more cloying than pretty, more a piece of deliberate ornamentation than a great work of art.

I don't much care for Guston's color sense—he carried the same pinks and reds right on over from early to late. His ultimate transformation seems not so much to be a move from pure to impure but from fuzzy to focused. The last work in the show, *Traveller III* (1959–60), outside of the exhibition's 1954–1958 purview, already reveals the beginning of this transition, as a gray form comes forward into sharper relief. The high abstract works at L&M are mannered studies in obscurity: we are expected to look past the murk for the objects buried beneath. Guston's later, cartoonish figures speak to a low-rent private iconography—here we must tune our tinfoil antennas to the evils of society. Both styles operate through assumptions about what exists beyond the painting rather than what is contained within it. This is a strategy that Guston relied on consistently throughout his career.

There is reason to be particularly interested in the abstract painters who came of age in New York in the 1970s. Many of them have been producing excellent work for the past four decades. The British-born painter John Walker, who arrived in New York on a Harkness Fellowship in 1969, is one example. An illuminating exhibition of his drawings from 1973–1975 is now on view at Knoedler—the gallery's fifteenth Walker show in the past twenty-five years.[2]

Many of the painters of Walker's generation have yet to receive their full due. From Jake Berthot to Thornton Willis, the list goes on, and Walker himself is no exception. At a time when theory and criticism focused on the hard-edged, premeditated practices of minimalism and conceptualism, as well as the new figuration of pop art, neo-expressionism, and photorealism, the abstract painters who are sometimes known as the "post-minimalists" or the "third-generation abstract expressionists" stood apart from the mainline of art history by continuing to develop and reaffirm the studio practices initiated by the New York School.

Walker and his generation embraced the same aspects of chance and experimentation that had produced the great abstract paintings of the 1950s and 1960s. They also adopted certain minimalist motifs, adding serialism and programmatic application to their studio repertoire. In this period, the stand-alone, all-over abstractions of an earlier era tended to give way to a sectioning-off of the picture plane—with divisions working off one another—and groups of paintings in formal dialogue. Grids made a recurring appearance. Paintings developed through trial and error, feeding off the dynamics of previous examples. New work added to, undercut, and challenged prior

2 "John Walker: Drawings 1973–1975" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on January 15 and remains on view through March 7, 2009.

progress. Nothing was allowed to get too complete.

The abstract painters of Walker's age may have shared superficial affinities with the minimalists, but their overall approach to art could not have been more different. For the minimalists, it was all about beginnings and ends. For the abstract painters of the 1970s, process was everything. Many of them, now in their sixties and seventies, have arrived at an age when they are doing great mature work. With a studio practice designed to build on itself, they have followed a slow-growth evolutionary process and have now arrived at a masterly sense of painting's possibilities.

In fall 2006, Knoedler exhibited a new body of small, near-abstract landscapes by Walker called "Seal Point Series," painted on a deck of antique Bingo cards. Writing about this exhibition two years ago, I considered it a Bingo moment for the artist. Those found objects, featuring that famous pre-printed Bingo grid, encouraged Walker to examine a single landscape view through serial exploration.

The current Knoedler show takes us back forty years from this recent highlight to a moment when the artist was at the peak of his early development. In the mid-1970s Walker had just completed a series of massive collages, signature early works that were monumental in scale. After a time, they must have also seemed resistant to further development. So Walker began to push against them. He embraced intimate scale and the lightness of ink washes and Japanese rice paper. He also developed deliberately evanescent artistic practices, creating a series of "blackboard drawings" that was the subject of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974—all meant to end in a cloud of chalk dust. "It was as if Walker had re-thought the question 'What is a picture?' and decided to explore it from a point of view antithetical to the one he had taken hitherto," admired the critic John Russell, writing in *Art News* in 1973.

From the start, Walker has been prolific enough to drive the engine of his own development. "Looking around at his contemporaries, he finds no echo, no unit of measurement, no recent track record against which to compete," noted John Russell, and so "Walker has always *worked* his pictures in ways peculiar to himself. The images were his own; but so, equally, was the process."

Most of the drawings now at Knoedler have not been seen for decades. They represent a few different fertile lines of development, all remarkably examined and executed within the same three-year period. The gallery's front room is dedicated to works on paper related to Walker's blackboard series. Fortunately for us, these drawings are not designed to be erased at the end of the show. For the darker works from 1973 and 1975 (all the drawings in the show are untitled), Walker dug something like an etching needle into a black acrylic-covered ground. He carved out a handful of basic forms, reflecting the work he had done in collage, and squiggled them in with a loose hatching of lines. He then went over the black surface of the paper with dry white pigment, filling in the roughed-out edges and leaving a spongy white wash on the paper's black surface that can resemble photo emulsion or the wiped-down blackboard in your old grammar-school homeroom.

I love the effect Walker achieved in these works. Taken another way, the white dust glowing out of these black sheets resembles the stars in a nighttime sky, with the etched lines calling to mind the constellations. In other work, Walker reduced the all-over blackness of the picture plane to a taped-out section of white paper, which he covered with black oil stick before carving it up and rubbing in chalk dust. The effect is altogether different. I nearly mistook it for an act of print-making. All told, these blackboard drawings are more enigmatic and resonant than what you might find by Cy Twombly from a similar period, working his more famous Latin-class hijinks.

The gallery's side room features an extensive series of ink and pencil washes on

Japanese paper from 1974. I could swear they depicted the identical view of the Maine coast found in Walker's Bingo series thirty years later. The gallery director Frank Del Deo assures me that was impossible (I would still like to see Walker's 1974 phone records). The sand, the sea, the reflecting sun, the mountain on the horizon—even if Walker was working here only from abstract forms, taking off from the earlier collages, you quickly recognize the continuity of his spatial divisions.

In the large back room, Knoedler has assembled a series of 1975 Walker drawings in charcoal that recall the moody work of Georges Seurat (I am told that MOMA's recent Seurat exhibition was one inspiration for this show). The best drawings are the messy ones, where Walker has allowed his pigments to rub up and smudge the white borders around his images. Here the studio process comes to the fore. We can see the evidence of the artist at work, although in my opinion at times more successfully than at others. Several of Walker's charcoal drawings seem too concerned with gradations of tone, too enamored with the charcoal catching the texture of the paper. More impressive are his similar 1973 drawings in oil crayon, again dominated by a heart of black, and here taking up even smaller spaces on larger sheets of white paper. This is Walker at his most enigmatic—working through the darkness back into the light.

The artist known merely as Biala was born Janice Biala in Poland around 1903 and died in France in 2000. She spent most of her time shuttling between New York and Paris, living with the English novelist Ford Madox Ford, becoming friends with Willem de Kooning and Harold Rosenberg, and getting to know over her long life just about everyone along art's migratory patterns. She exhibited her own paintings regularly on two continents—sweet, joyful work dipped in Pernod that can leave you tipsy.

I usually take my Biala in moderation, but this month Tibor de Nagy gives us an excuse to indulge with an exhibition of her collages from the late 1950s and early 1960s.[3]

They say it's the sugar that does you in, and here Biala has cut the sweetness with the rough edges of mixed media. Pieces of newsprint, torn construction paper, pencil sketches, and spatters of paint add a degree of toughness to her work. The process encouraged this artist, accustomed to getting by on sensuality alone, to take on a new sense of rigor. The results are superb.

Provincetown (1957), her best work in the show, is a museum-quality streetscape built of painted surfaces and paneled planes—Matisse in Morocco by way of Cape Cod. *Untitled (Château de Talcy)* (*c.* 1961) is a dynamic mass of color chips and bits of spiral-bound paper that is a swirling dynamo—an enigmatic abstract image that works though feeling more than representational content. *Untitled (Blue Tree)*, the work at the entrance to the gallery, is Biala at the top of her form, with collage and brushy spatters of paint exploding with nearly anthropomorphic vigor. *Table Chargée*, a large work from 1963, is so rugged that up close it's nearly impossible to see past the shapes on the picture plane. Step back, however, and a complete still life of table and chair, teapot and spoons come into focus—a wonderful effect.

"In each of the collages," writes Mario Naves in his catalogue essay, "we experience the heady excitement of an artist tussling with process, precedent and the unexpected poetry of the everyday." Process, precedent, and poetry—Biala is an artist who understood there's a place for all three.

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3 "Biala: Collages 1957–1963" opened at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, on January 17 and remains on view through February 28, 2009.