

From realism to abstraction  
and back, Philip Guston's painting makes  
him unique in his generation.

By April Kingsley

# Philip Guston's Endgame

"Painting is a clock that sees each end of the street as the edge of the world," wrote Philip Guston in 1958, about midway through his career. Abstraction and representation seem to have occupied the two ends of that street during this century, and Guston has lived in both houses. When he wrote this enigmatic and somewhat foreboding statement, Guston was one of the famous pioneering abstract expressionists who had just recently wrested center stage from the artists of Europe. He was pouring his emotions onto the canvas in a stream of impulsive marks and agitated strokes, but unlike Pollock and de Kooning, he had given up a highly successful career as a figurative artist to do so.

Considering the magnitude of his commitment to abstraction, it seems ironic that about ten years after making that statement Guston weathered an unprecedented storm of criticism when he returned to representational painting of a decidedly odd-ball sort. The cigar-puffing goons in his plotless pictorial dramas of the seventies that linger somewhere between Franz Kafka and Crazy Kat do indeed seem to reside at the "other edge of the world" of painting.

Guston's statement may also be telling us about painting's role as a teller of past, present, and future time. In the 1930s his Picasso figures set in compressed surrealist spaces often referred back to Renaissance masters like Piero della Francesca and Uccello, despite their modernist manner. The abstract-expressionist paintings of his middle period were in perfect temporal tune. His recent, quirkily cartoonish canvases with their tragi-comic imagery are right at home in our manic-depressive era, an era that has learned to live



on a daily basis with terrorism—but in other ways these new paintings also look backward and forward in time.

In fact, few artists have predicted the future nearly as accurately as Guston did when he startled everyone with these eccentric figure paintings in 1970, works which since then have spawned a whole generation of odd-ball clones. We'll probably be seeing even more evidence of his influence on the younger generation now that his enormous traveling retrospective (which opened last month at the San Francisco Museum of Art) and accompanying monograph from Braziller by Ross Feld

will bring his underground reputation as the guru of "New Image Painting" to the surface.

At sixty-seven, Guston is a chain smoker who seems beset by perpetual anxiety. He divulges his vast knowledge of art, music, and literature in intense monologues that seem in direct contradiction to his own sadly florid, heavy-jowled, truck-driverish appearance. Guston's hypersensitivity germinated during his upbringing in Los Angeles where his parents had moved from his Montreal birthplace in 1919 when Guston was six years old. As an adolescent he took a correspondence course in cartooning before being kicked out of Manual Arts High School, along with his friend and fellow-rebel Jackson Pollock, for satirizing the teachers in a caricature-filled broadside.

Guston was still the nonconformist later when he was on a scholarship to the esteemed Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles; he piled up all the classical plaster casts he was supposed to be drawing from individually and painted the whole mess. Though eighteen-year-old Guston was busily copying Giotto, Mantegna, and Piero from reproductions, he was also poring over art magazines for glimpses of the latest modern art, some of which he was also fortunate to see in the flesh at the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg, who housed their fabulous collection of Dadaist and cubist works in a Hollywood Hills mansion designed by none other than Frank Lloyd Wright.

As a raggedly handsome young man, Guston did stunts and bit parts in the movies—including one prophetic role as the high priest in the film of H. Rider Haggard's *She*. His lifelong habit of marathon movie viewing

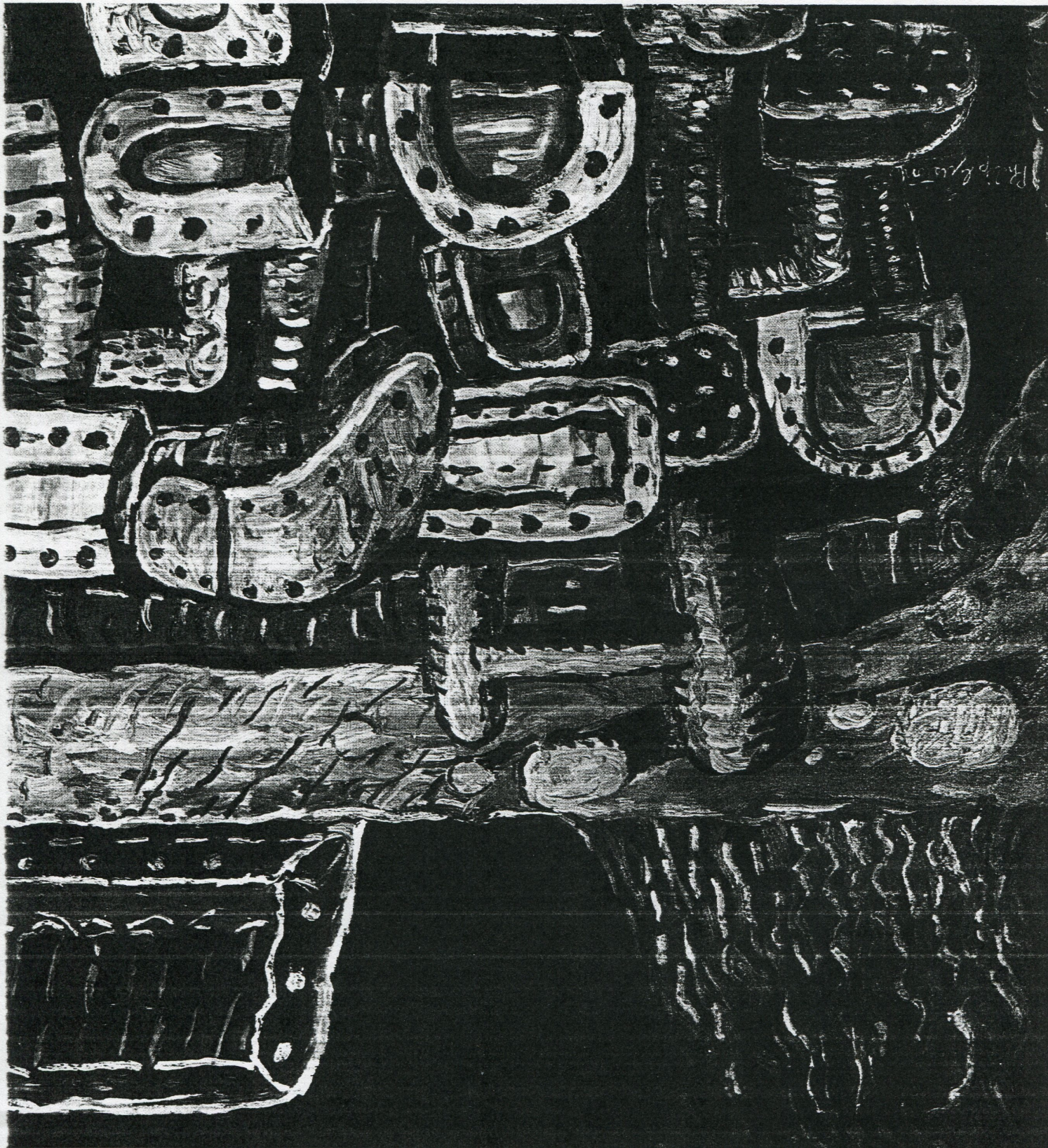
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April Kingsley's article "The Sacred and Erotic Vision of Balthus," appeared in the December 1979 issue of HORIZON.

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Left above: Philip Guston at sixty-seven.

Right: Green Rug, 1976, oil on canvas, 68½ x 94 inches.



## Guston's middle period was mistakenly labeled "abstract impressionism."



Left: *The Mirror*, 1957. Above: *Bad Habits*, 1970, oil on canvas, 73 x 78 inches.

With its hood-draped figures, *Bad Habits* is reminiscent of *Conspirators*.

then put his head down on his arms for what appeared to be a much-needed nap while Guston delivered his lengthy monologue. As soon as the floor was opened for questions, someone from the audience, ignoring all Guston had said, as panel audiences are wont, infuriatingly, to do, asked, "Isn't it true, Mr. Guston, that you're really influenced by Monet and that you're not really an abstract expressionist, but rather a sort of latter-day impressionist?" Before Guston could respond, Kline's head shot up and he said, "Don't answer that, Phil. Next question!"

The subjects of those classic Guston abstractions are truly ambiguous. When red and pink take over, as they do in *The Mirror*, 1957, one is reminded of body tissues, blood-filled veins, and flushed skin. The raw, flayed quality of these surfaces makes them too urgent and pain-

ful to be compared to an idyllic journey through petals and primroses. In fact, these paintings of the fifties come as close to the mythical image of a painter bleeding on the canvas as anything labeled abstract expressionist ever has.

Guston claims none of his work was ever fully abstract, and shortly after this burst of "pure" painterliness, clumps of darker strokes began to form compact shapes. No true figures are discernible, but the way these forms are interwoven with the surrounding atmosphere in *Painter's City* or *Fable I*, 1956-57, suggests

### Guston Retrospective

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 15-June 29

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., July 18-September 2

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, November 12-January 11, 1981

Denver Art Museum, February 25-April 26

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 24-September 13

figures moving in space. By the time of his huge retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 1962, many of his paintings with suggestive titles like *Poet*, *Actor*, *Traveller*, and *Painter* seem to contain locatable figures. Heads, torsos, standing couples were even more obvious in the paintings included in his 1966 Brandeis-Jewish Museum update exhibition. We should have been better prepared for the surprise of the more literal and bizarre imagery of his breakthrough 1970 show at the Marlborough Gallery, but at the time it seemed he was sliding away from something rather than moving toward a whole new style.

"I got sick and tired of all that purity," he said. "I wanted to tell stories." And so he did. In 1969 he painted six comments on the art world in a cartoon-strip format. When his new paintings were unveiled they caused a furor in the art world. Many people had seen him erroneously as a gentle, lyrical painter, and these crude images of abandoned boots, Crazy Kat bricks, and black-eyed Klansmen wielding whips were taken as a personal affront, a shoe lobbed in the face of good taste. Undaunted by the negative critical response (Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times*, for example, called him a "mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum"), he painted in a fury for the rest of the seventies, unable to keep up with "all the images and situations . . . flooding in on me. I'm in a place where I literally can't do anything else," he said in 1974. "How marvelous to be a victim."

He could be illustrating one of his favorite Samuel Beckett stories which he tells with great relish: After getting a teaching job at a great English university with help from friends such as James Joyce, Beckett would sleep all day with a sheet over his head or arrive late for class dressed in clothes that could stand without him, a bottle of stout in his pocket, and then take all the students out pub-crawling instead of delivering a lecture. When the school's angry administrator asked what it was that he really wanted out of life, Beckett answered, "To sit on my duff, fart, and think about Dante."

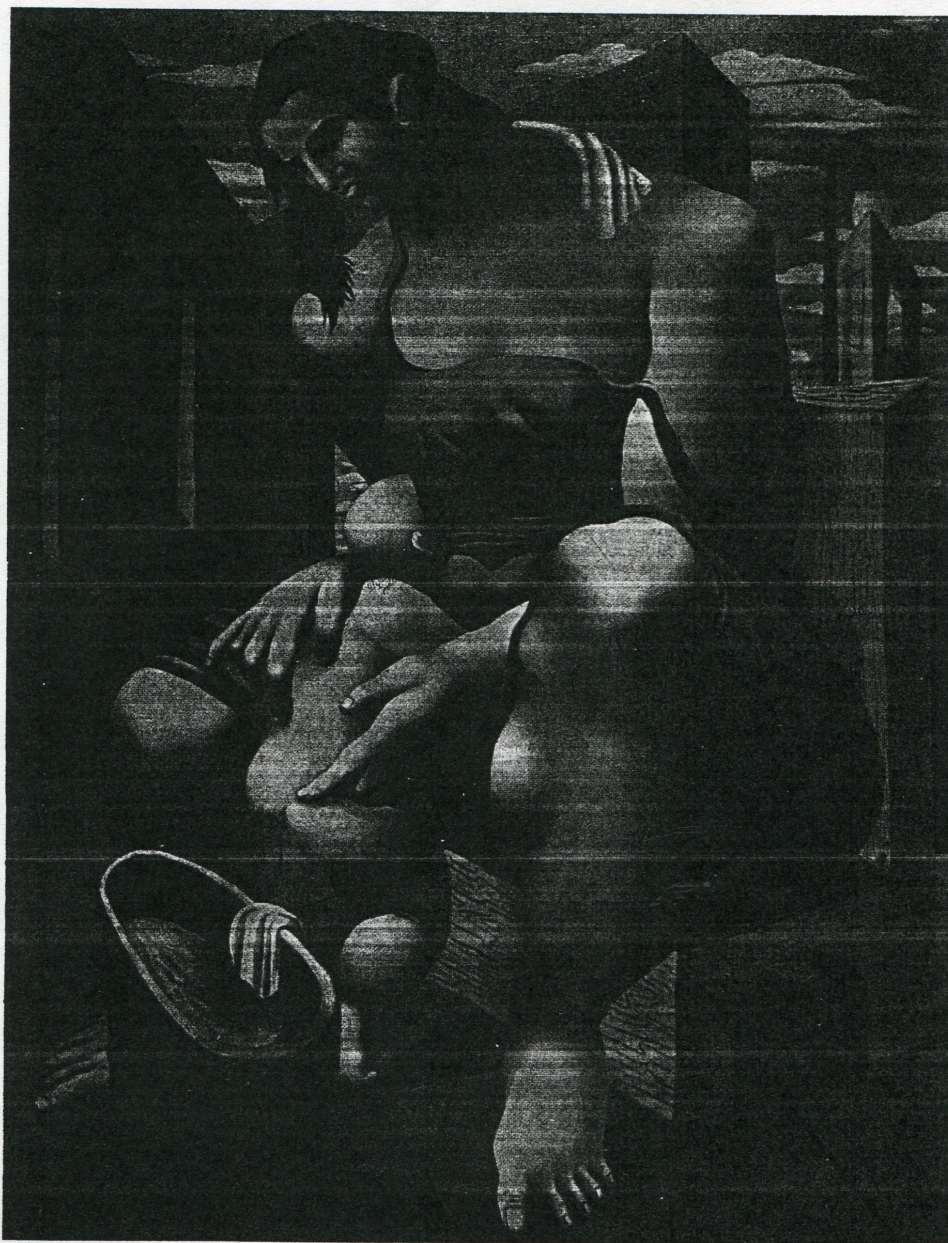
Beckett's bleak, wall-like horizon is a continuous presence in Guston's recent work, much of which is unearthly illuminated in a manner close to Dante's infernal gloom. Blood-red seas are awash with paintings, tires, and blunt instruments of no known good use; claustrophobically sealed rooms are full of piles of humanoid limbs (that pile of plaster casts at Otis?) and shoes turn sole (soul?) outward. Bugs crawl over a mountain-torso, paint

started then, as did his voracious appetite for books. He delved into Eastern mysticism with Krishnamurti and into left-wing politics with the workers and strikers in violence-torn Los Angeles of the Depression era, where the Ku Klux Klan was an active force. All these early influences play roles in his pictorial conceptions at one or another time, but most important is the fact that he continues to find his principal inspiration in literature, from Kierkegaard to Beckett or Kafka to Philip Roth. A recent painting which expresses Guston's existential despair is named *East Coker* for the poem by T. S. Eliot which opens with the line: "In the beginning is my end."

In the 1930s Guston did a propagandistic mural for the Marxist John Reed Club depicting a bound black man being whipped by a KKK member. His first true fresco, it was literally shot full of holes by raiders from the "Red Squad" and the American Legion who were abetted, it was said, by the police. When he and the other artists whose works had been damaged decided to sue the perpetrators, the judge—in Guston's first personal exposure to the injustice of justice—tried to throw the blame on the artists and let the criminals go. This experience, and his work with Siqueiros on murals in Mexico, made him one of the best qualified and most inspired artists to work in the WPA Mural Division when he arrived in New York in 1936. He was fully occupied with "the project" until he moved to Woodstock in 1940 (with his painter-turned-poet wife Musa McKim) to concentrate on easel painting.

Again, at this more intimate undertaking, he was a success. *Martial Memory*, 1941, his first completely personal statement in oil paint, was praised for its spiritual symbolism of the war-torn world, and at this point his fusion of sources is so total none is highly distinct. He went on to explore the theme of urban youth playing at war for the next six years, his densely packed paintings becoming increasingly introspective. *If This Be Not I*, 1945, culminates this trend with its brooding, broken furniture, and jumbled facades. Guston had decided that he'd "rather be poet than pamphleteer."

For Guston, the forties ended as had the thirties—in flight from success and a return to Woodstock. He had just won the coveted Carnegie International Prize with a picture he felt was overly sentimental, and he had been the subject of a *Life* magazine feature story. But this time his struggle with himself nearly ended in a mental breakdown at the age of thirty-



Above: *Mother and Child*, circa 1930, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Right: *Detail of Conspirators*, circa 1930, oil on canvas. This is the only known photograph of this painting, which was destroyed in 1930.

four. The somber, nearly abstract imagery of *Tormentors*, 1947–48, expresses his dark state of mind. Its ritualized stasis harks back to Piero, and the pointed hood shapes make a link with his mural of the flagellated Negro, but it also predicts the linear networks of his recent paintings. This, and the sketchy drawings of Italian hilltowns he made while traveling on a Prix de Rome in 1948, make the transition to his abstract-expressionist period where small, agitated units of color are distributed in a thick or clogged atmospheric space.

At the century's halfway mark when Guston



Philip Guston

## Literature and left-wing politics influenced his early work.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

*The Tormentors, 1947-1948, oil on canvas, 40¼ x 60⅛ inches was painted while Guston was nearing a nervous breakdown.*

made the breakthrough into this kind of painting, he moved back to Manhattan to immerse himself in the mainstream, feeling a tremendous freedom. His new abstract works were no longer complicated symbolic depictions—now the act of painting itself was symbolic of a spiritual journey, of anxiety made manifest. “I wanted to see if I could paint a picture without stepping back to look at it,” he has said subsequently, “not only to suspend criticism but also to test myself, to see if my sense of structure was inherent. It’s like molding something with your hands,” he explained recently. “You reach a different kind of sight and you can’t stand back to look. You’re so deep into

the middle of so many complex [painting] events that even though you may want to go to the right, your hand may go to the left, and you have the total freedom of no choice.

“I remember I couldn’t ever get to the edge of the canvas in time,” he says. “I kept trying to get more mileage out of the feeling, but suddenly the satori came, and that was that!” (Zen references are natural here since he’d been attending D. T. Suzuki’s lectures at Columbia University during this period.) When Guston was painting “those pink cluster paintings” as he calls them now, his studio was next to Willem de Kooning’s. One day when they were going out to the automat for breakfast at noon, de Kooning said, “Well, Phil, they’re imitating you now instead of me, putting all the paint in the middle. They always imitate the part you hate the most about your own work.”

This period—still his best known—was the shortest of his long career, lasting only a few years. Nevertheless, these paintings led to a false new critical term—abstract impressionism. Guston was compared to Monet, and his brushwork was described as impressionist. He despised the category, disavowed any connection with impressionism, and claimed to dislike Monet’s paintings intensely. But despite his disclaimer, the label abstract impressionist was attached to him all too frequently. For a panel discussion in Chicago, Guston prepared a statement detailing his true commitment to Piero della Francesca and the Renaissance and to the existential processes of abstract expressionism. The painter Franz Kline, who was a speaker that day, showed up for the panel rather the worse for wear after a night on the town. He made a short, breezy statement and

## Guston's latest work is poignantly autobiographical.



squishes out of tubes like congealed blood, and only a ladder (crucifixion prop or symbol of hope?) stands between us and the abyss. Only rarely does his wife's head and heaven-directed gaze send rays of golden light through the depths of Guston's emotional gloom. There's humor here, but it's black; the paint is sumptuously applied with masterful audacity in large, self-assured strokes, but its gorgeousness is perhaps a mockery of painting itself.

Essentially these are self-portraits, as *The Mirror*, 1957, may have been, and as so many of the early works were. (Guston once said that Rembrandt had been the chief influence on his work.) They tell the story of an artist who eats, drinks, and smokes too much, who is torn by doubts, who finds refuge in bed, books, and the goads that force him into action, and who, to put it simply, is as the mercy of his own art. "He has," Thomas Hess once wrote, "a romantic's fascination with death and violence—floggings, whips, corpses, blood—and like de Sade, identifies with both the victim and the tormentor." His is a saturnine temperament, as was many a great artist's, and fittingly a reproduction of Dürer's *Melancholy* hangs in his kitchen and the following Dickens' quotation on his studio wall: "I hold my inventive capacity on the stern condition that it must master my whole life. . . ."

His desolate, though opulently painted, recent canvases are the desperate outpourings of an artist with one eye on the clock that is telling him there may not be much more future time for him, or for anyone else, and the other eye on the clock of art history that keeps reminding him of how much great painting has already been done. He is truly painting as though he sees "each end of the street as the end of the world."

Despite a recent heart attack, Guston is hard at work on yet another of his end-of-the-decade series of exploratory drawings and small studies that could conceivably even send him once again in the other direction—toward abstraction. The consummate overview provided by his San Francisco Museum of Art retrospective and the Braziller monograph soon due for publication, may be only an interim report on an artist who's been more interesting in more different ways than any other of his generation. □

*Pit*, 1976, oil on canvas, 75 x 116 inches.  
Guston's return to representational painting has provoked a storm of criticism.

Courtesy David McKee Gallery, New York