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Filippo Caramazza: Guston Reloaded

Handel Street Projects London, 10 June - 26 August, 2022

Filippo Caramazza's 'Philip Guston Reloaded' takes its point of departure from the sudden cancellation, in 2020, of 'Philip Guston Now', a large-scale survey of the Canadian-American artist's work, initially intended to be shown at MoMA New York and other major American museums, and also at Tate in the UK (Artnotes AM442).

Following the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota in May 2022 and the worldwide unrest generated by his death, the Guston exhibition was deemed by its organisers as too risky to stage, not least because of Guston's occasional depictions of the Ku Klux Klan. That Guston's politics were decidedly left-wing and his Klan imagery a critical, not celebratory rendition of this notoriously vicious institution was, as various commentators have observed, entirely ignored by the organisers of the exhibition, with their censorious kneejerk political correctness taking priority over all other considerations. Two years on, the exhibition and its tour have been reinstated.

Meanwhile, in an act of defiance regarding the withdrawal of Guston's work and the seeming fait accompli of the censors, Caramazza has made his own Guston survey show and archive, copying around 70 of his subject's paintings and cartoons and a number of related works from postcards and other reproductions. These paintings (all 2021–22) hark back to the pre-photographic practice of disseminating artists' imagery through hand-made or engraved copies, also bringing up questions pertaining to number, scale, originality and mechanical reproduction. There is certainly a sense of labour and commitment here, but as each work measures only 10x15cm, the bulk of the 'Gustons' easily fit into the modestly sized front room of Handel Street Projects, the adjoining annexe of the gallery's entrance hall containing renditions of 16 paintings by artists Guston was known to admire. This studied miniaturisation of works that are often substantial in scale brings a comic edge to the proceedings, literally cutting Guston down to size at the same time as 'bigging him up' through reversing the censors' decision by making his images available, not as mere photographs but as actual paintings. Yet for all their fancy facture, beauty and charm, what we see at Handel Street Projects are works by Caramazza, not Guston. One is reminded of the paradoxes a retrospective by 'arch-copyists' such as Sturtevant, Richard Prince or Andy Warhol might also raise: whose work are we looking at when we encounter a copied image? Whose labour and creativity

is on display and what is the ‘correct’ level of recognition, attention and status we should give to each of the parties involved? The exhibition’s press release refers to ‘the issue of appropriation which artists continue to mine without as yet exhausting it’, a line which brought to mind an imaginary or speculative future in which the status and ‘individuality’ of the artist was based on which established artist they copied, as opposed to the penchant for ‘originality’ that seems to be today’s most naturalised, if hardly ever realised, trope.

The ghost of the prince of appropriation, Marcel Duchamp, also haunts ‘Philip Guston Reloaded’, not just because his readymades critically challenge the auratic superiority attributed to original works, but also because his *Box in a Valise*, 1935–41, a portable museum containing a substantial cache of highly accurate miniatures of the artist’s own works, is a template for all subsequent scaled-down artistic presentations. Caramazza’s exhibition could easily be crammed into a few shoeboxes for storage or transportation, though in its present ‘unpacked’ arrangement Handel Street Projects becomes a kind of domestic rendition of MoMA or Tate, putting on – in several senses of that term – a Guston show while giving us a Caramazza exhibition at the same time.

There is a beautiful absurdity to the act of copying postcards of paintings to make a painting show of postcard-sized works, reinstating after a fashion the aura so famously challenged by Walter Benjamin. These ‘postcards’ are oil paint on zinc or copper, literally adding weight and substance to the reproduced image. Caramazza has assiduously held to the convention of retaining the white border found on museum postcards, a device which can trick the viewer into seeing these paintings as mere printed cards, and which also points to debates around centre and margin as found in the writings of Jacques Derrida, whose complex study of *The Post Card*, 1979, might also act as a handy *vade mecum* for this show. Those who believe that in what Hillel Schwartz has called the ‘culture of the copy’ painting is dead should think again.

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