

GLENN LIGON IN THE HOOD

So when the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue.

—Philip Guston

Outrageously magical things happen when you mess around with a symbol.

—David Hammons

Guston's paintings take me there—to the outskirts, to the city limits—where white men in hoods ride around in jalopies, patrolling the borders of "sundown towns," as in "Better get your black ass out of here before sundown." Not to worry, no black asses in these paintings. Willem de Kooning famously said that "flesh is the reason oil paint was invented," but did he mean invented to depict the fleshy whiteness of Klansmen?

"They are self-portraits," Guston, the son of immigrant Jewish parents, said of his paintings and drawings of the KKK from the late 1960s and early '70s. "I perceive myself as being behind the hood." And how do these works detailing the mundane activities of white supremacy differ from compositions such as *Drawing for Conspirators* (1930), which depicts a man in a Klan robe preparing a hanging rope while a black body swings from a tree behind him? "My attempt was really not to illustrate, to do pictures of the KKK, as I had done earlier," Guston explained. "I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. . . . What would it be like to be evil? To plan and plot." Or, to put it another way, what was it like to be an American? Political activist and bad Negro H. Rap Brown once said, "Violence is as American as cherry pie," and in the midst of a corrupt presidency, an escalating war in Vietnam, and unrelenting brutality directed at the civil-rights and black-power movements, Guston, unable to continue going to the studio "to adjust a red to a blue," made a precipitous move from abstraction to figuration in order to explore issues of domestic terrorism, white hegemony, and white complicity. At the time,

paintings such as *The Studio* (1969; plate 116), *The Painter* (1969; plate 114), and *Bad Habits* (1970; opposite) were considered a betrayal not just of New York school abstraction but of the idea that living in a country built on white supremacy could leave one unmarked; that it didn't splatter or stain, or that there were clear distinctions to be made between those who upheld notions of racial superiority and those who didn't.

In a 1977 interview exploring his turn from abstract painting, Guston said, "I got sick and tired of all that Purity! wanted to tell stories!" To be "in the hood" was a solution to a problem, one that enabled Guston to break from the elevated critical discourse surrounding postwar abstraction and dive into the muck and mire of the American experience, allowing him to tell the truth of what it meant to be a citizen reckoning with a particularly turbulent moment in the nation's history. The comedian George Carlin once said, "The reason they call it the 'American Dream' is because you have to be asleep to believe in it." Guston's "hood" paintings, with their ambiguous narratives and incendiary subject matter, are not asleep—they're woke.



Philip Guston, *Drawing for Conspirators*, 1930 (plate 2)