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Philip Guston Holds His Own Next to the Venetian Masters at the Gallerie dell'Accademia

If you only see one Venice Biennale collateral show, let it be this one.

Lorena Muñoz-Alonso (<https://news.artnet.com/about/lorena-mu%C3%B1oz-alonso-199>), May 12, 2017



Installation view, "Philip Guston and The Poets" at Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Lorenzo Palmieri, ©The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy of the Estate, Gallerie dell'Accademia, and Hauser & Wirth.

Presented by *Cartier*

If you're in Venice and experiencing Biennale fatigue (endless queues everywhere, and so much Instagramming going on) there's a miraculous antidote to all that. At the Gallerie Dell'Accademia—home to a trove of masterpieces by Bellini, Veronese, Tintoretto, Titian, and Tiepolo among many others—the curator Kosme de Baraño has organized the first museum exhibition of the late American painter [Philip Guston](http://www.artnet.com/artists/philip-guston/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/philip-guston/>) in Venice. And it's an epic affair.

Gathering over 50 paintings and 25 drawings dating from 1930 to 1980 (the year he died), "[Philip Guston and the Poets](http://www.gallerieaccademia.org/exhibitions-and-events/philip-guston-and-the-poets/?lang=en)" (<http://www.gallerieaccademia.org/exhibitions-and-events/philip-guston-and-the-poets/?lang=en>) explores the oeuvre of the artist through the lens of five writers who were major influences on his artistic work: D.H Lawrence, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Eugenio Montale, and T.S. Eliot.



Philip Guston, *The Studio* (1969), ©The Estate of Philip Guston.Private Collection.
Photo Genevieve Hanson.

Works from his late period, those featuring his signature cartoonish, bulbous figures are well known and loved by many. Even so, nothing can prepare viewers for the exhilarating spectacle of a massive room full of Guston canvases, one after the other.

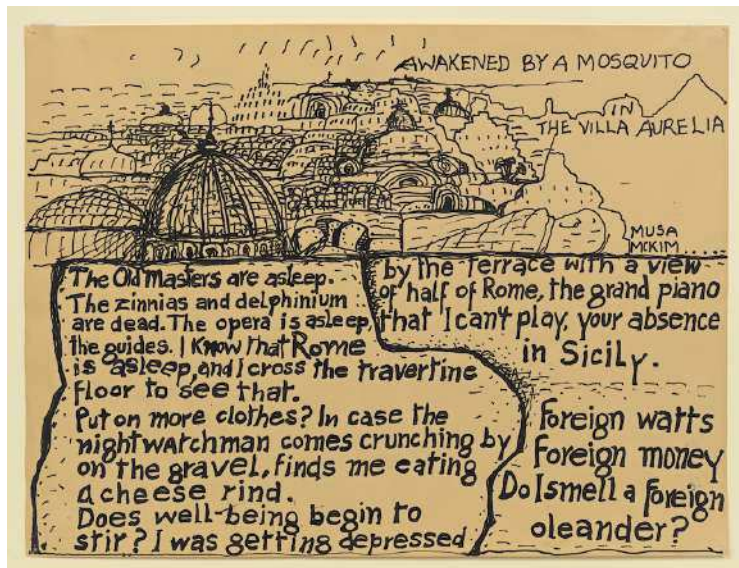
Here we find *The Studio* (1969), *Signals* (1975), *Wave* (1979), and *The Line* (1978), featuring that ominous veiny hand descending from a cloud to paint a line on the earth, open to so many interpretations. Or the poignant *East Coker, T.S.E* (1979), after Eliot's epic poem of the same name and depicting an old man laying on his deathbed, which Guston painted a year before his own passing.



Philip Guston, *East Coker - T.S.E.* (1979), ©The Estate of Philip Guston
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Musa Guston, 1991. Digital Image
©MoMA, NY.

Guston's relationship with poetry was intense, nourishing, very personal, and not limited to just being a reader of the greats. In the show, there's a beautiful section devoted to the works he created to illustrate the poems of his wife, the poet Musa McKim, in the mid-1960s. By the 1970s, he had established a series of artistic collaborations with a number of young poets and friends, including Bill Berkson, Clark Coolidge, and Alice Notley.

The "poem-pictures" he created for them have not been shown often and are definitely some of the gems in this show. Small and humble, just black ink on paper, they are mostly haikus on daily life, like the one made for McKim's observations on a trip to Italy, or existential riddles, like the one for Coolidge's "Next to the painting a painting of a hand painting."



Philip Guston, *Awakened By A Mosquito* (c. 1972 – 1975). Photo Genevieve Hanson.

But perhaps the most surprising part of the exhibition is the one dedicated to his early production. It's in the early works of Guston that we see his love for Italian classical art shine in full splendor. Moreover, the scholarly dialogue staged between Guston's works and the Italian masters he learned from opens exciting lines of art historical inquiry.

For example, Guston drew the figures in Masaccio's *Saint Peter Healing the Sick with Shadow* and *The Tribute Money* over and over again throughout his life, first as a student (these exquisite studies are included in the show), and then with cartoonish flare in his adult life.



Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Child* (c.1470) and Philip Guston's *Young Mother* (1944) at Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Lorenzo Palmieri, ©The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy of the Estate, Gallerie dell'Accademia, and Hauser & Wirth.

Here, we also see Cosimo Tura's *Madonna Dello Zodiaco* (1459 – 1463) next to Guston's *Mother and Child* (1930), and Bellini's *Madonna and Child* (c. 1470) next to Guston's *Young Mother* (1944); two beautiful pairings that

reveal a lesser-known side to Guston's work and how formative the Italian masters were in his development.

In fact, never afraid of revealing his hand, at the very start of the exhibition viewers encounter Guston's *Pantheon* (1973), in which he painted the names de Chirico, Masaccio, Piero, Giotto, and Tiepolo, and which reads like a statement of his influences.

From those formative years based in classic and modernist figuration, the exhibition's journey takes us to Guston's Abstract Expressionist years. Although Guston was very successful as part of the New York School, his output during that time seems inconsistent (even if the works exhibited at the Accademia are all prime examples of Guston at his best as AbEx painter).



Philip Guston, *For M.* (1955), ©The Estate of Philip Guston, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Anonymous gift. Photo Ben Blackwell.

It's almost as if Guston felt some kind of "peer pressure" to join the ranks of abstraction when he moved to New York in the 1950s. Eventually, towards the end of the 1960s, his pull toward figuration was too strong and he returned to it, honing the cartoonish compositions that would become his signature style (however, a documentary shown in the exhibition tells us that, despite how important the distinction between figuration and abstraction may be for those discussing his work, for Guston himself nomenclature wasn't a key consideration.)

Crucially, even in his late work, a myriad of Italian symbols appear, from the monumental feet that reference the country's Greek and Roman heritage to the modern cityscapes in his *Roma* series.

It comes as no surprise that Guston visited Italy extensively. First, when he was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1948, then in 1960, when he represented the US at the Venice Biennale, and then again as an artist in residence in Rome, in 1970.



Installation view, "Philip Guston and The Poets" at Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo Lorenzo Palmieri, ©The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy of the Estate, Gallerie dell'Accademia, and Hauser & Wirth.

But it does seem odd that, despite his love for and knowledge of Italian culture, Guston never showed in a major Venice museum during his lifetime. Which is why there's a certain sense of poetic justice about this exhibition, staged in the illustrious venue that houses some of his favorite artists.

Yet, although the curatorial conceit of pairing his work with the poets who were important for him and even directly referenced by him is sophisticated and well carried out, it sometimes seems to burden the show with too much narrative.

Guston's work, at the end of the day, needs very little trimmings and not very much to lean on: just a room full of his paintings and time and space to enjoy his metaphysical, humorous, and unique pictorial world. Do not miss this show.

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Philip Guston Show at Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice Waxes Poetic

BY *Sarah Douglas* POSTED 05/08/17 12:44 PM

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Installation view of “Philip Guston and the Poets” at Gallerie dell’Accademia in Venice.
ARTNEWS

There is something immensely charming about sitting in an Italian art institution that dates to the 17th century, the Gallerie dell’Accademia, and watching a film of Philip Guston walking around Woodstock, New York, where he had his studio, praising the city’s sturdy old red brick buildings. Stopping before a hulking one, he muses, “There’s something about the fact that it’s not used anymore. It exists as an object. Like a work of art.” Ruskin had his *Stones of Venice*, Guston his bricks of Woodstock. The film was made in 1980, shortly before Guston’s death from a heart attack, and it is on view in a stunning exhibition of Guston’s paintings and drawings that went on view to press today at the Accademia.

Titled “Philip Guston and the Poets,” the show, curated by Guston scholar Kosme de Baranano, is built—somewhat loosely—around Guston’s reading of and relationships with poets. There are the whimsical works on paper he made to illustrate his wife Musa McKim’s poems in 1972–75, and there are the other ones he made to accompany poems by his friend Clark Coolidge. In a drawing that replicates lines from McKim, Guston draws on his own experiences of Italy, sketching vignettes of Italian buildings next to the phrase “Here we are up in

Woodstock/thinking of Venice, Rome, Sicily.” (According to Guston’s daughter, when the Gustons visited Venice in 1960, the Accademia was the family’s first stop.)

And then there are the paintings, many of which are on loan from major institutions. De Baranano convincingly argues that Guston was drawing on imagery from poets like W.B. Yeats, Eugenia Montale, and Wallace Stevens, and also echoing those poets’ sensibilities. (It’s no surprise that, in a show in Italy, Montale, with his *ossi di seppia*, gets the lion’s share of attention.

The most direct relationship between Guston and a poet’s work is the one with T.S. Eliot. Shortly before his death, Guston was rereading the “Four Quartets,” and did a kind of oblique self portrait that drew on his experience of an earlier heart attack, a painting of man’s head in which it is apparent that the man is lying down, seemingly on the verge of death. Guston related the image to the “East Coker” passage in “Four Quartets,” an excerpt of which is on the wall next to the painting: Old men ought to be explorers/Here and there does not matter/We must be still and still moving/Into



Philip Guston, *East Coker—T.S.E.*, 1979.
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

another intensity.” In the film, Guston says, “When I came home from the hospital, I wanted to paint a man dying. That is what happened to me. [I had a] heart attack. I was reading the ‘Four Quartets’ at the same time. I like the ‘Four Quartets’. I didn’t want to do a self-portrait. In the middle of it I became aware that [the painting] was like [Eliot’s poem].”

Here are some other highlights from that film, which, unlike most such films, actually gives a nuanced view into the artist’s thinking and process. Guston refers to the figures in his paintings as “a bunch of dumb creatures, like in the real world.” He says to Coolidge, the poet, “If the artist starts evaluating himself it’s an enormous block, isn’t it?” He describes an image he painted after his wife, McKim, had a stroke, an image of a woman’s head where only the top half is visible, and the rest appears to be submerged in some substance or another, and how this image became a horseshoe, and then a wheel. He talks about the famous show at Marlborough Gallery in New York in 1970, when he made his abrupt switch from abstraction to figuration. Some painters were so offended, he says, that they would no longer talk to him. He was made to feel as though he’d been “excommunicated.” One who didn’t have such a reaction was Willem de Kooning who, Guston recalls, told him, “What do they think, that we are all on a baseball team? Art is about freedom.”

In a happy coincidence, “Guston and the Poets” may resonate interestingly with curator Christine Macel’s biennale, which includes a “Pavilion of Artists and Books.” Guston’s work would seem to generally gel with Macel’s approach to the biennale: he was political in his art, certainly, but he was never pedantic, never preachy. His paintings were, above all, paintings. The biennale opens to select press tomorrow, so we shall see.

Going from Guston’s show over to the Damien Hirst extravaganza at the Punto della Dogana, I couldn’t help but compare Guston’s far less literal self-portraits with Hirst’s extremely realistic one, cast in bronze, holding the hand of Mickey Mouse, in the guise of “the collector” in his elaborate fairy tale about a fictional shipwreck. One is bombastically jokey, the other is modest to a fault. In the film, the interviewer asks Guston if a certain painting of a painter is meant to be him. “This is you at work?” She asks. “Well, yeah,” Guston replies, then amends himself. “The artist. And his tools.”

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Philip Guston: Poetic justice

A new show of paintings and drawings by Philip Guston at the Accademia in Venice focuses on the resonances between the artist's work and that of his favourite poets — and places him in the company of Italy's finest. Claire Wrathall reports

The painter Philip Guston first showed in Venice in 1960. He was 47 and one of four artists chosen to represent the USA. The others were Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline and Theodore Roszak, all of them abstract expressionists, as Guston was then.

He and Jackson Pollock had been friends since their days at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles. And later, when he'd moved to New York, he knew Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Kline. But it is not for the richly chromatic work he was making then that he is best remembered.



Philip Guston, *Position I*, 1965 © The Estate of Philip Guston. Private Collection. Photo: Genevieve Hanson

This summer, Guston, who died in 1980, will become the first American artist to have an exhibition at the Gallerie dell'Accademia, a glorious repository of

masterpieces by Piero della Francesca, Leonardo and Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto and Tiepolo, Guardi and Pietro Longhi, housed in what was once the Scuola Grande of the convent of Santa Maria della Carità.

Poetry fascinated Guston, so the exhibition, comprising 50 paintings and 25 drawings made over the course of his life, will be arranged thematically according to the works' resonances with poems by T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Eugenio Montale, Wallace Stevens and W. B. Yeats.

'When I go north, to Venice, faced with Tiepolo, Tintoretto, Pontormo, Parmigianino, etc, I cheat on my earlier loves and fall head over heels'

Like most great artists, Guston was immersed in quattrocento and cinquecento painting, too — though not exclusively. 'When I go north, to Venice,' he wrote to the poet Bill Berkson in 1975, 'faced with Tiepolo, Tintoretto, and even so-called "Mannerist" work like Pontormo, Parmigianino, etc, I cheat on my earlier loves and fall head over heels.'



Philip Guston, *Mother and Child*, circa 1930 © The Estate of Philip Guston. Private Collection

You can see the influence of Masaccio's monolithic figures in Guston's early figurative work, and he especially revered Piero. 'A different fervour, grave and delicate, moves in the daylight of his pictures,' he wrote in an essay for *Art News* in 1965. 'Without our familiar passions, he is like a visitor to the earth,

reflecting on distances, gravity and positions of essential forms. [It is] as though he is opening his eyes for the first time.'

Originally named Phillip Goldstein, Guston was born in 1913 to Russian Jewish immigrants from Odessa, who initially settled in Montreal, then moved to Los Angeles when Guston — the youngest of their seven children — was six.

Four years later, his father hanged himself; Guston discovered the body and subsequently sought solace by hiding in a cupboard lit by a naked bulb, the image of which would become a prevailing motif in the oddly disquieting, figurative, often autobiographical paintings he began to make in his fifties. 'I think a painter has two choices,' he said. 'He paints the world or himself.'



Philip Guston, *Painter's Forms*, 1972 © The Estate of Philip Guston. Private Collection. Photo: Christopher Burke

These prevalingly pink, cartoonish canvases are populated by books, clocks, shoes, boots, paintbrushes and cigarettes (Guston was a heroic smoker).

Giant heads with stubbly chins glare from a single eye. Ku Klux Klansmen, with cigars clamped between fat fingers, intimidate in their pointed hoods.

‘Usually I am on a work for a long stretch,’ he wrote, ‘until a moment arrives when the air of the arbitrary vanishes, and the paint falls into positions that feel destined... The very matter of painting — its pigment and spaces — is so resistant to the will, so disinclined to assert its plane and remain still. Painting seems like an impossibility, with only a sign now and then of its own light.’

Guston revealed this change of style in a show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York in 1970. He left for Venice immediately after the opening, having asked the gallery not to send him the reviews in case they were savage. Some of them were, not least that of *The New York Times*, where Hilton Kramer called Guston a ‘mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum’. The gallery forwarded them anyway.

‘I think a painter has two choices. He paints the world or himself’

Posterity has taken a rather different view, and Guston is now regarded as one of the great painters of his generation. As Philippe de Montebello, then director of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, put it in 2003, when the museum staged a major retrospective of his work, ‘Guston’s particular genius was in mediating seemingly diverse traditions, and, with fluent brushstrokes that speak to the artist’s hand and brilliant colour, creating works that vigorously defied conventions.’

As to the artist’s own response to the bad press occasioned by that landmark show at the Marlborough: ‘I was angry for about half an hour and then I threw it in one of the canals,’ he said. ‘Why should I be depressed in Venice?’

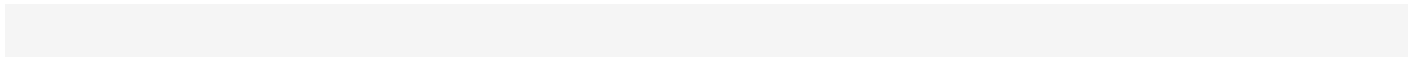
Why indeed? Venice was a place he loved. ‘My father took my mother and me to Italy before I went away to college,’ recalled his daughter, Musa Mayer, at the launch of this year’s exhibition. ‘And the Accademia was our very first stop.

I can still remember his love of the great Italian masterworks there. He would have been deeply touched and honoured to have his own work among them.'

To exhibit at the Biennale may be a tribute, but to show at the Accademia is sanctification.

Philip Guston and the Poets *is at the Gallerie dell'Accademia from 8 May to 3 September*

5 May 2017



Poesía, cristales e "intuición" para la Bienal de Venecia 'alternativa'

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COMENTARIOS 0

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VENECIA, 10 (del enviado especial de EUROPA PRESS, Eduardo Blanco)

Las exposiciones 'alternativas' a los pabellones de los países participantes en la 57 Bienal del Arte de Venecia, distribuidas en algunos de los puntos más emblemáticos de la ciudad italiana, comienzan también a desvelar sus apuestas en los días previos al pistoletazo de salida oficial del evento, en las que la poesía, los cristales o la "intuición" serán protagonistas.

Por ejemplo, letras y pintura se mezclan en la exposición 'Philip Guston y los poetas', en la galería de la Accademia, en la que España también aporta un granito de arena de España gracias al comisionado del exdirector del IVAM Kosme de Barañano. Guston, cuya obra recorre medio siglo XX, alcanzó notoriedad gracias a unos murales invadidos por grandes figuras de rojo y rosa, entre otros trabajos.

La muestra establece no solo una relación de sus piezas con la poesía, sino también con algunos grandes maestros que el artista canadiense consideraba de gran influencia para su pintura. Así, se pueden ver 'in situ' las similitudes de obras de Guston con otras de autores del Renacimiento italiano como Bellini o Cosmè Tura.

Masaccio, Piero de la Francesca o Giorgio de Chirico son algunos de los nombres que resuenan en esta exposición donde la pintura es la protagonista. "El amor de Guston por Italia añade a la muestra una rica complejidad", ha señalado De Barañano, recordando los múltiples viajes a este país que también aparecen documentados en fotos.

Yeats, Lawrence, T.S Eliot o Montale fueron los poetas que influyeron a Guston directa o indirectamente --como así queda patente, entre otros, en el cuadro 'East Coker - T.S.E., una reflexión en sus últimos años de vida inspirada en un poema de Eliot en el que pide a su alma "estarse quieta y sin esperanza" ante la muerte--.

JAN FABRE, EL MAESTRO CRISTALERO

Pero la pintura no es la única que invade los edificios venecianos: Jan Fabre es la apuesta de los comisarios Katerina Koskina y Dimitri Ozerov en la iglesia de San Gregorio. Este espacio de 'reflexión' se verá durante varios meses acompañado por más de 40 escultura de cristal y de esqueletos de animales que recorren desde el año 1977 hasta este 2017 en la obra del autor belga.

Como es habitual en las muestras de Fabre, el visitante podrá encontrarse múltiples piezas colocadas en sitios inesperados para el visitante --las palomas que ocupan una parte del techo de madera del claustro, los pájaros colgando de una habitación en la que parece que se esté celebrando una fiesta--, en una reflexión sobre la propia vida.

"En sus trabajos, Fabre homenajea tanto a los maestros flamencos de la pintura tradicional como a la cuidada labor artística de los cristaleros venecianos. Al elegir deliberadamente estos materiales frágiles y delicados, el artista centra la atención en la dificultad y fragilidad de la vida", explican los organizadores.

INTUICIÓN CLÁSICA Y MODERNA

Pero sin duda una de las exposiciones que más captará la atención de los visitantes a la Bienal será la que tiene lugar en el Palazzo Fortuny, 'Intuición', en la que modernidad y clasicismo se dan la mano en un juego que lleva al espectador a averiguar qué pieza estaba colocada antes de la muestra comisariada por Daniela Ferretti e Axel Vervoordt.

El nombre de los grandes maestros que estarán presentes es abrumador --Picasso, Miró, Kandinsky Léger, Klee o Di Chirico, por ejemplo--, que se juntan con otros nombres contemporáneos Anish Kapoor y su característica esfera, un Basquiat que preside la entrada en la primera planta junta a piezas milenarias o Bernardi Roig y una escultura 'iluminada'.

Todas ellas se distribuyen por un palacio que fue lugar de trabajo del maestro Fortuny y en el que cuelgan muchas de sus telas y también cuadros de su padre. "La intuición es una forma de conocer que no se puede explicar con palabras, sino por el improviso y la imaginación", han explicado los comisarios. Toda esta muestra se complementa con 'performances' a lo largo de esta semana.

Arts

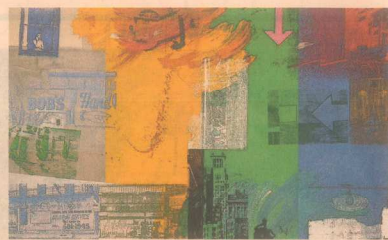
No solo Biennale show this century has carried the authority, conviction and delight in a new approach of Philip Guston and the Poets at the Accademia. Late Guston has a vigour and majesty unmatched by any living painter, and within a day of opening this week the show had hogged the attention of the Biennale crowd, and raised the bar for everything else.

This is a triumphant Biennale for American art. While Mark Bradford at the US pavilion offers far and away the best national representation, beyond the Giardini two further shows, the Guggenheim's Mark Tobey retrospective and Robert Rauschenberg's silkscreens at the Cini Foundation, are also charismatic and unusual. Together with the Guston, these present a rare picture of the US at mid-20th century: not the familiar macho assertiveness, but an art of meditative subtlety and melancholy, resonant with an America that currently seems uncertain of its place in the world.

At the heart of the Accademia show is a thrilling consideration of the relation-

ship between modernist painting and literature. Its highlight is the Museum of Modern Art's masterpiece "East Coker - TSE", an imagining of Eliot on his deathbed, painted in the austere/sensual grey-pinks and belligerent, near-caricatural figurative style of Guston's last period. The poet lies on a stony pillow, shuddering, huge head caught between life and death as recognisable features - long, furrowed face, wide eyes, big ears - seem to mutate in the falling light into something ashen and shrivelled. The mood of dry despair evokes "East Coker" ("the whole earth is our hospital"); the painting, completed in 1979, just before Guston's death, is surely also self-portrait and a clue to his thinking, the opening "In my beginning is my end" distilling his own experiences of life and art.

Guston's beginning was in a poor Russian-Jewish émigré family. At 10 he discovered his father's hanged body, then his older brother died in agony from gan-



Star-spangled Biennale

Venice | Guston, Tobey and Rauschenberg shine in a triumphant year for US art. By Jackie Wulschlager

Clockwise from main: "Story" by Philip Guston (1978); "Catch (Urban Bourbon)" by Robert Rauschenberg (1995); "Self Portrait" by Guston (1944)

The Estate of Philip Guston; Damien Gellies, Arts & Art Museum, Denmark; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; Getteveve Hanson

gre. Unsurprisingly Guston started as gritty and figurative. The Accademia launches with "Mother and Child" (1930), close in hallucinatory manner and metallic hues to de Chirico, and the troubled, full frontal "Young Mother" (1944): fiercely downbeat reworkings of Madonna and Child compositions by Bellini and Cosimo Tura hanging alongside. A subtext here is Guston's dialogue with Italian masters: in "Pantheon" he

scrawls the names Giotto, Piero, Masaccio, Tiepolo and de Chirico around a bare canvas and dangling lightbulb - his sources of illumination.

In the 1950s Guston was an abstract expressionist - "For M" and other messy, tactile tangles of red and greenish black may allude to blood, gangrenous inflammation, trauma. Then in the 1960s he returned to figurative: the banal objects and fragments - shoes, socks, rubbish bins, shells - which the Accademia calls his "savage description of pointlessness". Five beautifully orchestrated galleries, each evoking a poet, tease out how such images, flattened on violent prawn-pink grounds in

furthright yet inchoate compositions - "Painter's Forms", "Magnet", "Story", "Lamp" - share the fractured rhythms, harmony-out-of-disunity and quest for meaning in modernist poetry. Guston is never illustrational, but the approach invites connections: between turbulent seascapes with hooded shapes "Red Sea", "The Swell", "Sea Group", "The Night" and Wallace Stevens' "ever-hooded tragic-gestured sea" and DH Lawrence's ship "faltering and lapsing on the pink flood"; between the self-referential giant hand tracing a pencil mark in "The Line" and Yeats' "images that yet/Fresh images beget" in "Byzantium", whose subject is poetic creation. This is a compellingly allusive reading of Guston's most enigmatic, metaphysical work.

At the Guggenheim, Mark Tobey's delicate tempera tracers forming webs of white writing are another revelation about the nuances of American abstraction/figuration. In the commanding "Threading Light" which gives the exhibition its title, tiny human frames, outlines of animals and still life elements are suspended within thousands of interwoven filigree brushstrokes. In the darker "Flow of the Night", small figures, heads, helmets, are held within a mesh of quasi-geometric shapes, suggesting urban architecture; this is diagrammed more clearly as grids of darting lines, dense and energetic, in "City Radiance" and "New York". The all-over patterns of "Calligraphy in White", "Arctic Plain", "Wild Field", "Trembling Space" and "Northwest Drift" are lyrical abstractions hinting nonetheless at constellations, electromagnetic fields, snowstorms, fog.

Jackson Pollock, star of the Guggenheim's permanent collection, saw Tobey and painted "Blue Poles". Tobey was 40 before he found his voice and his patient, nervy, modest work was then eclipsed by Pollock's showy muscularity. This exhibition excavates Tobey as a global artist for now, concerned with east-west fusion - Japanese calligraphy was a key influence - and eastern philosophical belief in spiritual unity.

Yet these are very American paintings, infused with a mystic response to landscape. "At night through the screen window the train on the Minnesota side looks like a child's toy. Its windows are small squares linked to light squares moving towards Winona. The train is gone. The light breathes in silence - breathes to the moon, to space mysteriously and tantalizingly." Tobey reminisces of his Wisconsin childhood: "White Night", "The Way", "Crystallizations" are rural reveries transformed into dramas of light and space.

While Tobey roamed America and Japan, Rauschenberg opened the windows, turned up the television in his New York studio, and set out to make work that would be, as he put it, "as fresh, strange and unpredictable as what's going on around you". In 1964 his silkscreens, collages of printed material and TV stills overlaid with gestural marks won the Venice Golden Lion. Now the elegant, laconic "Resurgence" (1962), with thickly painted white square hovering above printed drifts in

grey and black, returns to Venice with its descendants: 1990s-2000s series experimenting with different methods of transferring images, poignantly revisiting earlier imagery.

The Cini's small exhibition has examples from the fizzing "Urban Bourbon" series on mirrored aluminium, full of street vernacular imagery; the rich copper and brass "Raffish Tint" and "Crossing", with everyday objects - railway crossing sign, chair - transcendent in passages of golds and bronzes; the "Shiner" series, combines reconfigured with car mirror and crushed metal fan; "Space Invaders", juxtaposing astronauts and Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling transferred in vegetable dye on polyamine, a material used for spacescapes.

Especially affecting are the final "Runs", made after Rauschenberg's stroke: apparently random photographic collages with rhythmic colour repetitions - red lifebuoy, workman's ladder, advertising poster, stall roof in "Reach Beach"; for instance - balanced by white surfaces recalling the stark square of "Resurgence", but now speaking not of potential but of emptiness, simplicity, blankness.

Guston's show ends with a quotation from "East Coker": "Old men should be explorers". In a year when most of the Biennale is playing it light, these three shows offer the counterpoint of a deeply personal, emotional, compulsive late style art that had to be made.

"Philip Guston and the Poets", Gallerie dell'Accademia, to September 5, gallerieaccademia.org; "Mark Tobey: Threading Light", Guggenheim, to September 10, guggenheim-venice.it; "Rauschenberg: Late Series", Fondazione Giorgio Cini, to August 27, cini.it

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Best of the rest in Venice



James Lee Byars' "Golden Tower"

There are nearly 30 pavilions off-site from the Giardini and Arsenalate at this year's Biennale, and as many collaterals and independent exhibitions. Best of these is the Philip Guston show (see review); here are five more worth crossing the city for.

James Lee Byars: Golden Tower
Campo San Vio
Rising above the Grand Canal beneath the Accademia and the Guggenheim, Byars' 66ft "Golden Tower" is a thing of beauty, audacity and craziness. Byars, an American sculptor-performer who died in Cairo in 1997, wanted to outdo the Lighthouse of Alexandria. His tower achieves its inaugural outdoor showing here, and its gilded surfaces wonderfully echo the gold mosaic façades on the adjacent Palazzo Barbarigo. A single armed guard, Lilliputian in scale, underlines the absurd element.

Iraqi Pavilion: Archaic
Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti
What is a national pavilion for? For a war-ravaged country whose cultural heritage is under threat, the answer is obvious: to present its identity and survive to the world. This is a magnificent pavilion, set in the Cavalli-Franchetti's light-suffused, wood-paneled library and juxtaposing rare ancient artefacts - a painted neolithic fertility goddess, 6,500BC, Sumerian and Babylonian model clay boats - with contemporary work including Ali Arday's outstanding documentary war photographs, Sherko Abbas's installation about Iraqi-American music and Sakar Sieman's land art.

Space Force Construction
VAC Foundation, Palazzo delle Zattere
Constructivism holds its own in this Baroque palace, and is reinterpreted by today's young artists: there's Cao Fei's digital avatars referencing depictions of Soviet citizens; Christian

Nyampeta's design interventions; Mikhail Tolmachev's haunting multimedia investigation into the 1923 Solovki gulag. A Moscow-curated exploration of 1920s Russian art, with important loans - El Lissitzky's suprematist designs, Lyubov Popova's constructivist paintings and models of her stage sets, posters and sculptures unravelling the iconography of Lenin - and recreations of spaces such as Rodchenko's utopian workman's café, this is a stunning, immersive show.

Chris O'Hill: Poolside Magic
Victoria Miró, Il Capriccio
A curvaceous nude by the waterside, a steadfast, stylised cocktail waiter, Trinidadian backcloths of luscious sprinkled colour, charcoal lines as assured and dynamic as any that O'Hill has made: this delicate series about metamorphosis and transformation, romance and classical restraint, dream and reality, is good enough to call to mind Picasso's Volland Suite. Unabashedly decorative, distilling O'Hill's grand themes with lightness and grace, it is a perfect launch for Victoria Miró's Venice gallery.

Hadassa Goldvich: The House of Life
Fondazione Querini Stampalia
Far from the madding crowd in the labyrinth of streets behind St Marks, this Israeli artist's quiet, lyrical multichannel video installation asks big questions about fear of mortality, the nature of myth and art's striving for the eternal through the compelling personality of Aldo Izzo, 80-year-old keeper of Venice's Jewish cemeteries, former captain of a merchant vessel and turtle collector. This unlikely contemporary Charon transports us, with humour and pathos, through collective memories and Venetian history to a strange liminal world between the living and the dead.



Goldvich's "The House of Life"