The Jewish Museum

Draw Them In, Paint Them Out: Trenton Doyle Hancock Confronts Philip Guston

STOP LIST

100. Director's Welcome
101. *Paris, Texas Fairgrounds*, 2024
102. Philip Guston, *Drawing for Conspirators*, 1930
103. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Coloration Coronation,* 2016
104. Philip Guston, *Riding Around,* 1969
105. Philip Guston, *The Studio,* 1969
106. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!,* 2014
107. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Schlep and Screw, Knowledge Rental Pawn Exchange Service,* 2017
108. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Step and Screw: The Star of Code Switching,* 2020
109. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Step and Screw Part Too Soon Underneath the Bloody Red Moon,* 2018
110. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *The Boys in the Hoods are Always Hard,* 2023
111. Philip Guston, *The Ladder,* 1978 and Trenton Doyle Hancock*, The Former and the Ladder or Ascension and a Cinchin',* 2012

100. Director's Welcome

JAMES S. SNYDER: This is James Snyder, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director of the Jewish Museum, and it is my great pleasure to welcome you to *Draw Them In, Paint Them Out: Trenton Doyle Hancock Confronts Philip Guston*. This exhibition brings together, for the first time, the work of two trailblazing American artists from different generations: Trenton Doyle Hancock, a contemporary Black artist based in Houston, Texas, and Philip Guston, a white Jewish artist, one of the most revered painters of the mid-twentieth century.

Hancock and Guston each explore the intertwined legacies of white supremacy, racism, and antisemitism in the United States in ways that are emotionally raw and darkly humorous. Guston accomplished this result through his images of buffoonish Ku Klux Klansmen, a series he began in the late 1960s as racial tensions roiled across the United States. Trenton Doyle Hancock uses numerous avatars, among them the Black superhero Torpedoboy, who confronts Guston's own alter-ego, the Klansman. Both artists challenge viewers to consider the deep-seated nature of systemic racism and also encourage us to ponder, through their imagery, the potential for art to effect change in our perceptions and to suggest strategies as counter point to these contentious beliefs.

Your guides for this tour will be curator Rebecca Shaykin, artist Trenton Doyle Hancock, and Musa Meyer, the daughter of Philip Guston and President of the Guston Foundation. At times, you will also hear archival transcriptions of the voice of Guston himself.

In an era of continuing antisemitic and racial violence, exhibitions like this one are more timely – and more relevant – than ever, and we are honored to present these extraordinary works of art at the Jewish Museum.

101. *Paris, Texas Fairgrounds*, 2024

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: The aromas are probably the thing that hit you first, popcorn and cotton candy and candied apples. As you got out of the car, the lights all come into view. It's like fireworks made solid.

My name is Trenton Doyle Hancock, and I'm a painter. I went to the Paris fairgrounds starting in the '70s. The traveling fair would come through town, and it was a very exciting thing to get a balloon ride a ride or two, in my own very rural hometown.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: But as an adult, Hancock learned about the Paris, Texas fairgrounds' darker history. It had been the site of horrific lynchings, including one that made national news.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: In 1893, a Black man named Henry Smith was accosted by an angry mob and dragged to the Paris fairgrounds, where he was burned at the stake.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: That history would propel Hancock in a new direction, one that would put him in direct conversation with a Jewish artist from the past whom he had long considered to be a mentor. That artist was Philip Guston.

MUSA MAYER: My name is Musa Mayer. I am the daughter of Philip Guston and the president of the Guston Foundation.

A Black artist from Texas creating a dialogue with a White Jewish artist who had died over 40 years ago—I just thought that was fascinating.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: I'm Rebecca Shaykin. I am a curator at the Jewish Museum and the organizer of this exhibition. I got the idea for this show back in 2017. That summer the riots in Charlottesville had erupted, with people parading through the streets, protesting the removal of confederate statues, and chanting, "Jews will not replace us." We needed a way to respond to that moment, and Philip Guston, and especially the satirical work he had done about the Klan, was really at the forefront of our minds. Trenton Doyle Hancock was the perfect artist for us to pair with Guston, because he had this very intimate and longstanding dialogue with his artistic predecessor over these past 30 years, we also thought he could help us confront the legacy of white supremacy in the current moment. So I hope that people come away from this exhibition with a better understanding of each artist's work and the role that artists can play in the pursuit for social justice.

102. Philip Guston, *Drawing for Conspirators*, 1930

PHILIP GUSTON: I was born in Montreal, Canada. And at a very early age, family moved to Los Angeles. The KKK, which was very strong in LA at that time, had an immense membership.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: That was artist Philip Guston.

He made *Drawing for Conspirators* when he was only 17 years old. In it, you see a member of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist hate group, standing apart from the other hooded figures, who have just committed the lynching seen in the background. His head is downcast, contemplating the rope in his hands. Notice how the wall seems to close in on him, almost like a self-made prison. Musa Mayer, daughter of Philip Guston.

MUSA MAYER: If you know the history of the Ku Klux Klan, you'll know that they persecuted not only Black people but immigrants and particularly Jewish immigrants. Since my father's family emigrated from what is present-day Ukraine to escape the pogroms against the Jews, they must have been terribly shocked to know that the country that became their adoptive home, that some of the more powerful people were engaging in racist and antisemitic acts. I mean, imagine the impact on a young person taking this in.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: The Ku Klux Klan would reappear in Guston's work in the late 1960s, in a shockingly different form. But the artist maintained his fascination with the psychology of evil and with those who commit terrible acts, while hiding behind a hood.

103. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Coloration Coronation,* 2016

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: *Coloration Coronation* came about around a time that I was thinking a lot about transforming and molting and morphing.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Trenton Doyle Hancock's paintings are filled with characters of his own invention.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: This is the coming together of Painter, who's the Goddess of Color, and Loid, the hooded, cloaked character, into one being named Ploid. And so, this is the coronation of that character.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Loid evolved from a self-portrait titled *The Properties of the Hammer,* which Hancock created as an art student. You can see it nearby in this exhibition.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: I had the camera snap me wearing this hood and a noose and holding a hammer. Little did I know how much I would end up identifying with this character. It was several years later that I created the narrative and the name, Loid.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: The name Loid derives from a skin condition Hancock discovered in a book: *lichen amyloidosis,* which is characterized by ulcerous patches, usually on the legs.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: I imagined this Black man who had been lynched in the South, and as he was hanging, ulcers popped up on his legs and they were glowing pink and created a light show, that blinded the people that were there. If he were to raise up that cloak, you would see the leg ulcers, but his legs end not in feet but in these hammers.

Loid is definitely an alter ego. I would say all of the characters that I create are alter egos because creating characters in narratives are all about the potential of the self. So some things are reporting on what I've done, and then other things are reporting on things that I know that I might be capable of doing. So my work acts as not only an autobiography but a cautionary tale, mostly for myself.

Oftentimes in my work you'll see the quatrefoil pattern. My grandmother's floor was this quatrefoil pattern in various shades of brown and dirty yellow, ochre colors. Many people had the same or similar floor tile in their house in the '70s. Those were very formative years, laying on that floor, drawing on any scrap of paper or cardboard that I could find, and my grandmother would be sitting on the couch, making quilts. So that floor was this magical site that tied us together, but it was also the site of many, many, many family gatherings. So I see each one of those blocks as a family member. Those are ancestors. Those are people that were, people that are and people that will be in my family in that latticework there.

As a small child, I would unscrew all of the colorful tops on the detergents and things around the house. And I would play with those and mix them in with my toys because they were plastic and exciting and stackable. My first lessons about color theory were comparing tops to one another, like a red to an orange to a different red to a blue and a green. I've wanted to find something that I could claim and say, well, this is me. So I began—around 19 and '96 or '7— collecting plastic tops again, and then I started attaching those to the works, and it's something that I'm still doing today.

104. Philip Guston, *Riding Around,* 1969

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: We have three Klansmen in their jalopy, and they are out on the town, and the assumption is they've just committed a crime where bludgeoning was involved or perhaps stabbing or worse, because they're covered in what appears to be blood.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Artist Trenton Doyle Hancock.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: But knowing that Philip Guston himself identifies with these characters, there is this other identity that they might have as painters. This just might be red paint.

I think the composition is a very interesting one. They're sort of dead-ending at the edge of the painting. So there's a futility to their celebration. The clouds feel like thought bubbles that just are never manifested into anything and are going to disappear just as clouds do.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: My impulse, when I look at a painting like this—these puffy pillowcase heads, these sort of empty light socket eyes—is just to laugh. There's a friction there, between the seriousness of what these characters in real life were capable of and how they appear in these paintings as fools.

I think Philip Guston was really interested in investigating the nature of evil. What would it be like to be one of these characters? How do they go about their days? How do they live with themselves?

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Those were the questions he was exploring in these paintings.

PHILIP GUSTON: I felt like a movie director: "Have 'em around a table playing poker," "have 'em drinking beer," "eating hamburgers."

REBECCA SHAYKIN: During this period, Guston also radically reinvented his visual style. Musa Mayer.

MUSA MAYER: He was prolific during the last 12 years of his life. He created fully two-thirds of his paintings in that period. He learned how to access a part of himself that he had struggled mightily with before but that suddenly emerged, sometimes very painfully, and took a form that was unfamiliar to him as much as it was to anybody else.

105. Philip Guston, *The Studio,* 1969

MUSA MAYER: As a teenager, he painted in a closet, and he always describes the single hanging light bulb. If you look at it closely, it has a point to the end of it, the way the old glass bulbs were made.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Musa Mayer, daughter of Philip Guston.

MUSA MAYER: It's a signature form. So is the clock. So is the easel. The green shade in the window. The curtains create a stage-like presence, as if something is being revealed to the viewer. And then of course there is the perennial cigarette. My father always had a cigarette. He chain-smoked all his life.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: In the late '60s, Philip Guston returned to an earlier subject: the Ku Klux Klan. Here is Guston.

PHILIP GUSTON: It's almost as if I instinctively or compulsively, perhaps that's a better word, started to get involved in something that I was involved with much earlier, in the '30s.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: But this time, his approach was radically different. The artist imagined putting the hood on himself.

MUSA MAYER: This is probably the signature work of this period because it depicts the artist himself— not necessarily only my father—caught red-handed, [laughs] as some have said, and it really speaks to complacency or complicity with racism. The art world was so often removed from social conscience. But it's also a very intimate self-portrait. It's an ineffably strange image that always has a kind of mystery and power associated with it.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Trenton Doyle Hancock first discovered Guston's work in college, when he was already working with Klansman imagery.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: There was this uncanny connection between what I was drawing and his work. *The Studio* is one of my favorite works of his. It's about the artist's experience. We're always painting ourselves.

106. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!,* 2014

REBECCA SHAYKIN: *Step and Screw* is a 30-panel comic strip, installed inside a shed beneath a dangling light bulb. The space itself is reminiscent of Guston's paintings of the Klan.

This is a work that Hancock made in 2014, right around the time that he began to learn more about the lynching history of Paris, Texas, where he grew up. I find it so interesting that in that moment, he brings Philip Guston into his work in a very direct way.

This artwork runs on two parallel tracks. There's a comic strip, where one of his alter egos, Torpedoboy, encounters Guston's alter ego, his Klansmen. Along the bottom, a timeline blends Hancock's own family history and his development as an artist with Guston's biography, as well as key moments relating to Klan activity and lynchings that took place in his hometown of Paris, Texas.

The timeline appears somewhat ghostly, handcarved into the paper and rendered in white-on-white lettering. Artist Trenton Doyle Hancock.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: You have this lynching history, which is very hard to look at. I wanted the information to appear almost as a ghost would appear, or how memories get obscured.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: You may notice uncanny correlations between the incidents on the timeline and the images above. For instance, above the date of Guston's death, his Klansman hands Torpedoboy a lightbulb—perhaps indicating a passing of the torch. But Hancock insists that was purely coincidental.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: None of that was planned. Some of the information lines up in such a perfect way that no one's going to believe me. That there's these magical alignments that propel the work forward and let me know that I might be doing the right thing. So I try to leave space for that kind of validation from some mystical source that allows the work to resonate not just with me but for other people.

107. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Schlep and Screw, Knowledge Rental Pawn Exchange Service,* 2017

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Since creating the comic *Step and Screw* ten years ago*,* Hancock has repeatedly returned to these moments of exchange between Guston's Klansman and Torpedoboy, Hancock's own alter ego. The Klansman is always offering him an object loaded with meaning, but Torpedoboy, who is a fairly mediocre superhero, is still smart enough to remain suspicious of the gift.

Here we see the Klansman offering Torpedoboy this glowing red apple. It's very obvious reference, I think here to the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. But he's calling it *Knowledge Rental Pawn Exchange Service,* so this apple represents knowledge that was extracted from Torpedoboy himself.

There's a red serpent that winds its way around the border, another reference to the Biblical story. You see incised on the body of this snake the phrase "schlep and screw" introducing a Yiddish element. Looking more closely, you'll see that there's this dialogue that's incised into their bodies.

I can't look at a painting like this and not think about classic Christian iconography like an Annunciation scene. But this facing off between these two characters also calls to mind classic cartoons where you have Tom and Jerry or the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote, one against the other.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: I thought it was this kind of beautifully pregnant moment where at different stages in my career, I go to him and then he hands me another light bulb.

The *Exchange* moment creates a really flexible architecture for storytelling because here's an infinite amount of objects that can be plugged into the middle of the painting. It's a series that could go on forever because I don't know that I'll ever be really through talking about the power dynamic between these two characters.

108. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Step and Screw: The Star of Code Switching,* 2020

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: Code switching is the ability to toggle back and forth between vernaculars to gain access or to be seen differently. When I was a kid, I might hear how my folks talked to each other at home versus when we're out.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: In this version of "The Exchange," the Klansman offers Torpedoboy a star that can change his skin from black to white. It seems to be working. Artist Trenton Doyle Hancock.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: He's an unnatural alabaster color, and the color has been sucked out of his uniform. The outline of both the Klansman and Torpedoboy is green, and you see green peeking out from behind the star. It's like this relationship to capitalism and power and being able to code switch in order to access that power.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Hancock understands that Guston was adept at code switching as well.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: I believe the changing of his name from Goldstein to Guston was a version of code switching. It's just that he didn't happen to switch back.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Musa Mayer reflects on her father's name change.

MUSA MAYER: My father never spoke about why he changed his name, and he felt some shame about it. There were tens of thousands, maybe even more Jews, who Anglicized their names during the 1930s, when it was becoming increasingly clear what was happening under Hitler. I think it was a mixture of not wanting to be so easily identified as Jewish and a wish to leave his past and his family behind and reinvent himself.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: This was a work that we acquired for the Jewish Museum's collection shortly after it was made in 2020. There wasn't a more appropriate work for us, given that this is a work that speaks so directly to Hancock's own experiences with code switching and referencing Philip Guston's experiences of assimilating as a Jewish-American painter.

109. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *Step and Screw Part Too Soon Underneath the Bloody Red Moon,* 2018

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: Here we have *Step and Screw Part Too Soon Underneath the Bloody Red Moon.* I'll call it a history painting because the two characters are running through the history of their own development. The *Step and Screw* comic, at least the first 30 panels, are reproduced behind them.

The Klansman holds the power in the other works, and he's handing things over to Torpedoboy. That dynamic has shifted here. Torpedoboy has this object of interest and is running away with it, and the Klansman desperately wants it.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Torpedoboy has a football uniform on that gives him protection, and he's carrying a football-like object powered by colorful orbs. Artist Trenton Doyle Hancock.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: This is the merging of another storyline where there's these power orbs, and Torpedoboy has access to this power. Each one of those orbs opens up, and color spills out. So the Torpedoboy character could be seen as a kind of artist, and he's holding onto color or protecting it.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: As Torpedoboy gains power, the Klansman loses it. Parasitic goblins that Hancock calls Vegans are fleeing their dying host.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: Preachy vegans—I thought it was perfect to use peace-loving characters who love animals and the earth and turn them into the bad guys.

There's a kind of reveal that's happening where the Vegan characters are bleeding out of the Klansman as he's running.

I have made a couple other paintings that aren't present here, but the robes totally melt away, and what's left are piles of Vegans that are now the aggressors. They make the perfect villains because they represent kind of a mob mentality. There's millions of them to one Torpedoboy.

110. Trenton Doyle Hancock, *The Boys in the Hoods are Always Hard,* 2023

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: This one goes far into that territory of, "Hey, should I even make this painting?" "Should I even show this painting?"

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Here, Hancock's Artist character is drawing pictures of himself executing the Klansman.

He's referencing that very famous scene from the 1980s movie *Ghost.*

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze, God rest his soul—

REBECCA SHAYKIN: It's very sexy. It's very homoerotic. It's also quite violent and so, so silly. The Klansman is also firmly holding a light bulb in the artist's lap, a different use of that iconic light bulb.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: I told myself I was going to be done in 2020. So this is three years after [laughs] me telling myself and my dealers that I wasn't going to make any more of these, and desperately wanting to do exactly what is happening in those pictures: I wanted to kill this work. I needed to kill the father in order to move forward. Who knows? It may continue to go on forever, but right now it's in a very violent and contentious phase. They're not talking as much.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: There's a lot to be said here about the anxiety of influence. Hancock feels this intense affinity towards Guston's work and yet also feels a need to get away from him. And then also that frustration that Hancock feels in this political moment, where white supremacist groups have been multiplying. And in a very similar way to Guston in the late 1960s, feeling the futility, but using your art as a way to feel like you're doing something.

111. Philip Guston, *The Ladder,* 1978 and Trenton Doyle Hancock*, The Former and the Ladder or Ascension and a Cinchin',* 2012

PHILIP GUSTON: I love painting. I mean, painting is my life. Painting is what I live for.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: That was Philip Guston. He painted *The Ladder* during his astonishingly prolific final years. Musa Mayer.

MUSA MAYER: This was painted two years before he died. He was in failing health. He's leaving one foot behind. And you can't really see how those feet are ever going to get up and over, where this iconic head of my mother's is floating in the sea.

She had had a stroke the year before. It didn't affect her physically. It affected her mentally. She was a poet. She could no longer write poetry. Hence her head is sinking.

It's a painting about contemplating what has mattered, which in the end is really love, devotion. It's a very profound and beautiful painting.

REBECCA SHAYKIN: Trenton Doyle Hancock wasn't consciously referencing Guston's painting when he made *The Former and the Ladder*. It depicts his Artist character defying a common superstition.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK: My stepdad was a carpenter, and one of his superstitions was that you never walk under ladders. If we did, he would make us walk backwards to undo whatever we had done. And I thought, "What would actually happen if I never walked back?"

He had passed away in 2010 unexpectedly, I was grieving, and I took all the color out of my work. This is also around the time I met my current wife, and she helped bring the color back. So this is a piece that is very important to me because it is the coming together and confluence of deaths and births in my life.

My connection to Philip Guston isn't all about the Klansman. [Laughs]

REBECCA SHAYKIN: There is almost like an umbilical connection to this older artist. There's a phrase in one of his favorite movies, *Repo Man*, Hancock uses to describe this feeling of synchronicity: "the lattice of coincidence" I see these paintings as not a lattice of coincidence but maybe a ladder of coincidence. Is Guston coming through in Hancock's paintings, or is it Hancock coming across in Guston's?