Paris, Texas, Fairgrounds, 2024

Conceived and directed by
Trenton Doyle Hancock
Cinematography and editing by Greg Poole

Color video, silent, approx. 2 min.

The fairgrounds of Paris, Texas, were a place of wonder and joy for Hancock in his youth. Only in the last ten years did the true nature of the site come into focus for him. He had known that, in 1893, the Black seventeen-year-old Henry Smith had been executed in Paris by Klan members. They paraded Smith through town, tortured him, and burned him alive before a crowd of ten thousand onlookers, who then scavenged his remains for mementos. What Hancock did not know was that the horrific lynching, so brutal that it made national headlines, had been staged on the site that subsequently became the fairgrounds. Suddenly his fond memories of the county fair were blurred with the carnivalesque horrors of America's haunted past.

Hancock's deeper understanding of this historic lynching came to light in 2014, following the heinous murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, and many other Black Americans at the hands of the police. As the Black Lives Matter movement has made clear, the past remains perilously close to the American present. As Hancock explains, "Klan activity continues to manifest as generational trauma in Black American communities. Hearing emotional personal accounts of KKK terror in Paris, Texas, from my mother and grandmother prompted me to delve deep into the psychology of this terrible organization."

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PHILIP GUSTON
Drawing for Conspirators, 1930

Graphite, ink, colored pencil, and
wax crayon on paper

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Purchase with funds from The Hearst Corporation
and The Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, Inc.

Guston made this troubling image of the aftermath of a lynching when he was just seventeen, demonstrating the artist's early and unflinching engagement with the horror of anti-Black violence in the United States. The artist focuses on a single, imposing figure in the foreground. His head downturned, the Klansman appears to be contemplating the consequences of his actions. This approach to depicting the Klan—less illustrative and didactic, more personalized and complex—burst forth with clarity in Guston's work of the late 1960s and later proved compelling to Hancock.

PHILIP GUSTON
Conspirators, 1932

Reproduction; original in oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown

Image provided by the Guston Foundation

This image represents the painting, now lost, for which Guston created the preparatory study *Drawing for Conspirators* (on view nearby). Unlike the drawing, which considers the mindset of a singular Klansman, this claustrophobic painting of a cluster of hooded men conveys the impenetrable secrecy by which they operated.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Properties of the Hammer, 1993

Gelatin silver print

Collection of the artist, courtesy of James Cohan, New York

Hancock produced this harrowing self-portrait at age nineteen, depicting himself wearing a white sheet and noose, wielding a hammer of justice. The artist later named this arresting figure Loid and gave him a backstory: he was a Black sharecropper from the 1950s who was hanged for having a white girlfriend. Now he embodies the vengeful spirit of a victim of Klan violence.

Emmett Till was front of mind for the artist as Loid evolved. Till's story had haunted Hancock from the moment he learned about the fourteen-year-old Black boy's horrific lynching in 1955 following accusations that he had flirted with a white woman. Hancock was in middle school when he first saw the image of Till's brutalized body, presented in an open casket. He understood that, as a young Black man in the United States, he "had to attend the funeral," a metaphorical rite of passage by which he recognized his own "potential to be this character."

"[This is] a self-portrait developed in a darkroom by me in 1993. I was nineteen years old, and I knew there was something deeply rotten in the area of Texas I grew up in. Insidious behavior and thoughts can be concealed by Southern pleasantries, the pulpits of churches, and suburban attics. I didn't understand what white supremacy was in 1993, but I knew there was something invisible operating on my body. I could feel that much. My folks never sat me down to talk about it, but I was starting to piece something together from observing their relationships with white folks over the years. I was never called [the N-word] to my face (like my parents were), but you don't have to be. There's a zillion other ways to be called that. I was beginning to get that, too. I was naive then and running on pure intuition. My need to express some growing unease came out in my pencil, brush, or camera whether I wanted it to or not. I didn't know what the art world was or what galleries were in 1993, so these images were just for me. Now they're for you, too."

—Trenton Doyle Hancock

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Little Ploid Blue, 2013

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection, London

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
I Got Stood Up Just to Be Sat Down, 2015

Ink and graphite on paper

Collection of Ariel Roger-Paris, Antwerp, Belgium

PHILIP GUSTON
Mural for the Los Angeles Headquarters of the John Reed Club, c. 1931

Reproduction; original in fresco, now destroyed

Image provided by the Guston Foundation

Guston's first public commission was for the Los Angeles headquarters of the John Reed Club, a Marxist organization that believed, as Guston did, that art could promote social change. The assignment was to illustrate the plight of "Negro America." The central panel, painted by Murray Hantman, depicted the Scottsboro Boys, the nine Black teenagers who in 1931 had been falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama and were summarily sentenced to death by an all-white jury. Two additional panels, one by Reuben Kadish and the other by Guston (seen here), showed lynching scenes, the violence in each meted out by hooded Klansmen. In February 1933 the murals were vandalized by the anticommunist Red Squad of the Los Angeles police, aided by members of the American Legion and the KKK.

“Where Vandals Wrecked Paintings”

Facsimile reproduction from the *Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News*, February 13, 1933

Image provided by the Guston Foundation

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Judgment #2, 2000

Acrylic on paper

Collection of Hedy Fischer and Randy Shull, Asheville, North Carolina

In his twenties, Hancock came to understand how lynchings persist into the present day. Making these historical connections imbued Loid, the artist's hooded character, with a new sense of purpose. "I started to feel more like myself," Hancock says. "Loid became closer to who he is now, a harbinger of vengeance. . . . He became the idea of judgment."

Here Loid batters a motley group of figures with the mantra "You deserve less." The phrase derives from the Christian emphasis on humility as a virtue. "There's something within all that language I grew up with," Hancock explains, "that keeps you down, makes sure you stay down so that you can be controlled." The words form a drumbeat of dread as Loid's speech bubbles morph into ropes and tentacles, exemplifying Hancock's facility in blending historical imagery with elements of science fiction, comic books, and body horror.

PHILIP GUSTON

REUBEN KADISH
American, 1913–1992

JULES LANGSNER
American, 1911–1966

The Struggle against Terrorism, 1935

Reproduction
Original in fresco at the Palacio de Maximilian, Morelia, Mexico

Image provided by the Guston Foundation

In 1935 Guston worked on a monumental fresco for the Palacio de Maximilian in Morelia, Mexico. Together with Reuben Kadish and Jules Langsner, he produced a complex, multilevel composition populated by muscular giants surrounded by instruments of oppression and punishment: iron shackles, spiked paddles, and whips. Notably, three hooded figures are pictured with a Bible, a cross, a cat-o'-nine-tails, and a swastika. This jumble of transhistorical iconography links flagellant priests of the Spanish Inquisition—a time of brutal antisemitic violence—with the Klan's fascist ideology in the United States and the rise of Nazism in interwar Europe.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Coloration Coronation, 2016

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, Ohio

Thirty years after his first encounters with Guston, Hancock continues to make new points of connection with his predecessor. Since beginning work on this exhibition, Hancock has conceived Loid as the re-embodiment of the lynching victim in Guston's *Drawing for Conspirators* (on view nearby), a figure with whom Hancock also self-identifies and whose spirit now lives on in the artist's bold new visions. In this vibrant scene, Loid is joined by numerous fantastical creatures from Hancock's comics-inspired Moundverse, a parallel world of his creation where his mythical characters reside.

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled, 1969

Acrylic on panel

Private collection

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled (Sheriff and Suspect), 1969

Acrylic on panel

Private collection

"There's something about this sheriff. His head is so meaty and vulnerable. For me, this picture doesn't rest completely on something nefarious happening between the Klansmen and cops, [in part because of] the softness of the color palette and the whimsy of Guston's line. There's the language of Krazy Kat in those eyes, and Charlie Brown, of course. Those cartoons revolve around pathetic characters, so there's something within the line work itself that culturally we understand as a kind of failure. If these paintings were just about the nightmare, we wouldn't still be looking at them. [The levity gives us] an exit. There's a way out."

—Trenton Doyle Hancock

PHILIP GUSTON
Courtyard, 1969

Oil on canvas

Hall Collection

PHILIP GUSTON
Meeting, 1969

Acrylic on panel

Private collection

This crowded scene of Klansmen, who congregate in a shed illuminated by only a lightbulb, is a quintessential example of Guston's work from this period. Aside from the ominous spirit of the gathering itself, the space carries traces of Guston's personal trauma. When the artist was ten years old, his father hanged himself in a shed; Guston discovered his body. He channeled his grief into art, drawing in the privacy of a closet lit by a single bulb. The motif recurred in compositions throughout his life, a symbol that cannot help but be entangled with his father's tragic end.

The painting may be a subconscious reference point for the shed that Hancock constructed to display his *Step and Screw!* drawings (on view nearby).

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled (Light Bulb), 1968

Oil on panel

Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to
the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

PHILIP GUSTON
Riding Around, 1969

Oil on canvas

Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to
the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

"*Riding Around* at first suggests that the getaway car is moving at a leisurely pace. However, the edges of the painting contradict how the car is moving, if it moves at all. The red buildings bite the back of the car, locking it in place, while the front of the car is wedged against the canvas's right edge, effectively preventing our protagonists' escape. The clouds act as thought bubbles, encasing empty thoughts."

—Trenton Doyle Hancock

PHILIP GUSTON
The Studio, 1969

Oil on canvas

Promised gift of Musa Guston Mayer to
the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Guston's Klan paintings were a radical form of self-identification. This idea is best expressed in *The Studio*, in which the artist-Klansman paints a self-portrait of the artist as a Klansman. This intimate, iterative scene pulls back the curtain, literally and metaphorically, on Guston's true identity, even as he remains masked. He is caught red-handed, not with a smoking gun but with a smoking brush, playacting at being evil.

Toward the end of his life, Guston wrestled with his assimilated Jewish identity. Notably, his Jewish origins, including his name change, were not publicly disclosed until a month before his death in 1980. The secret may explain, in part, his preoccupation with the Klan during this period. Guston's hooded self-portraits take his white identity to its logical extreme, acknowledging his complicity in white supremacy while inviting viewers to consider their own culpability.

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PHILIP GUSTON
Close-Up, 1969

Acrylic on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Bequest of Musa Guston

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled, 1969

Charcoal on paper

Private collection

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled, 1969

Charcoal on paper

Private collection

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled, 1969

Charcoal on paper

Private collection

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled, 1971

Ink on paper

Private collection

The Klan reemerged in Guston's work in the late 1960s, now reduced to lumpy and comical triangular forms. He reimagined these protagonists through the visual language of his favorite childhood comic strips, in particular, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff*, with their lovable losers and violent antics played for laughs. While the white masks and robes of the KKK were meant to instill fear and respect, Guston deflates their self-aggrandizing iconography by portraying them in a ridiculous manner. Humor was needed not just to mock the Klan but also to startle people out of their numbness to the violence inherent in American life.

PHILIP GUSTON
Untitled, 1971

Ink on paper

Private collection

Over time Guston's hoods morphed into caricatures of President Richard Nixon and his cronies. In this satirical drawing, the artist depicts Nixon in blackface, an indictment of the president's disingenuous efforts to gain support among Black constituents.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!, 2014

Ink and acrylic on paper and mat board with excised lettering and gesso

The Menil Collection, Houston

Step and Screw! marks the first time that Hancock deals explicitly with his personal ties to the history of white supremacy in the United States. In this complex, surreal graphic memoir, Hancock interweaves significant moments in his life and in Guston's with instances of anti-Black and antisemitic violence. The prevalence of Klan activity in Hancock's hometown of Paris, Texas, anchored by the tragic story of the lynching victim Henry Smith, looms especially large. Interspersed are imagined biographical details about Hancock's alter ego Torpedoboy. Verging on historical science fiction, the project leads viewers to question reality versus fantasy. With *Step and Screw!*, Hancock suggests that racism and anti-semitism are time-traveling, shapeshifting forces, rearing their heads in every era.

Above the timeline, a comic strip unfolds in which Guston's Klansmen lure Torpedoboy into a shed, where he ultimately becomes their victim. Hancock's gallows humor is strategic: he uses the comic relief of cartoons to describe the darker aspects of the American experience. A central panel shows a hooded figure offering Torpedoboy a lightbulb, an exchange that coincides with the recording of Guston's death on June 7, 1980. This particular pairing of date and image implies that the handoff between the artists' avatars reflects a corresponding transference—of knowledge, power, perhaps even consciousness—from Guston to Hancock. "There's something about making art that isn't just about painting," Hancock has said. "I use the term 'séance,' where you're conjuring up the spirit of the dead in order to have a conversation and have that person speak through you again and come back alive."

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TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw! Part Two, 2019

Ink on paper

Collection of the artist, courtesy of
James Cohan, New York

PHILIP GUSTON
Cigar, 1969

Oil on canvas

Art Bridges

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Schlep and Screw, Knowledge Rental Pawn Exchange Service, 2017

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Collection of Hedy Fischer and Randy Shull, Asheville, North Carolina

In this luscious version of “the exchange,” Torpedoboy and the Klansman meet in an Edenic garden. A red ouroboros winds along the border, the serpent’s body incised with the half-Yiddish phrase “SCHLEP AND SCREW.” The painting is full of allusions to the Bible, as well as to the mechanics of American capitalism. The Klansman proffers an apple, ostensibly from the Tree of Knowledge, but any wisdom it contains has been extracted from Torpedoboy himself. The incredulous superhero asks, “Wait! You are seriously trying to sell me something I already own?,” insulted by the Klansman’s suggestion that he implicate himself in the co-opting and rebranding of Black culture.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Step and Screw: The Star of Code Switching, 2020

Acrylic, synthetic fur, graphite, plastic bottle caps, and paper collage on canvas

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Arts Acquisition Committee Fund

Here we see Guston's Klansman holding out a five-pointed "star of code switching," a talisman composed of Black and white fingers, one brown eye, and one blue. The object is so potent that, without even touching it, Torpedoboy already looks "white as a ghost." Meanwhile the Klansman makes the dubious claim that code switching will help Torpedoboy live longer, and he will be able to turn "back to [his] own color in no time flat."

The painting riffs on Guston's and Hancock's questioning of the conditions under which one might pass into and out of whiteness. "When people talk about code switching, it's often just along racial lines," Hancock explains. "But my understanding of code switching runs deeper. It becomes a superpower at the end of the day, to be able to weave in and out of a range of social situations."

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TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Step and Screw Part Too Soon Underneath the Bloody Red Moon, 2018

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Collection of Mandy and Cliff Einstein, Los Angeles

"This work highlights a chase scene between antagonist (Guston's Klansman) and protagonist (Torpedoboy), each wearing specifically American outfits (Klan garb and a football uniform, respectively). I wanted to suggest a new American flag, its stripes being panels from *Step and Screw!* My Moundverse antagonists, the evil Vegans, are revealed to be puppeteering the giant Klansman."

—Trenton Doyle Hancock

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Globetrotters, 2023

Acrylic and synthetic fur on canvas

Collection of the artist, courtesy of James Cohan, New York

“Following the same logic that Guston followed, Torpedoboy goes inside the hood, to try to get into the mind of the enemy,” Hancock explains. But there is trepidation there. “We are always in danger of slipping past the point of no return, where we become the very thing that we’re fighting against.”

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
It Takes Three or Four to Even the Score, 2022

Acrylic, graphite, ink, paper, canvas collage, and plastic bottle caps on canvas

Collection of the artist, courtesy of James Cohan, New York, and Nazarian / Curcio Gallery, Los Angeles

Torpedoboy and Loid are just two of the avatars that Hancock has created for himself over the years. This painting, Hancock explains, “is a portrait of my three split selves: Torpedoboy, the Artist, and the Bringback. Torpedoboy projects boundless potential; the Bringback, the mystery of memory and desire.” Meanwhile, the Vegans, the goblinesque background characters, “represent religious extremism and its dangers, and they are aligned with the finger of God at top left.” The pointing red hand—creative yet accusatory—also refers back to Guston, as seen in paintings such as *The Studio* (on view nearby).

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Let's Try the Yellow Triangle Angle or The Return of Piss Christ, 2022

Acrylic, graphite, paper, canvas collage, and plastic bottle caps on canvas

Collection of Thomas Rom

The tension between Torpedoboy's attraction to the Klan and his opposition to their villainy is palpable. In the storyboarded background of this painting, Torpedoboy rubberbands between racial extremes. His metamorphosis, however, remains incomplete; no matter how hard he tries, he cannot make his Klan persona stick, and he snaps back to Blackness. His paintings perpetually wrestle with the question of what it means to go undercover and what might happen if one goes too far.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
SKUM: Just Beneath the Skin, 2018

Acrylic, graphite, plastic bottle caps, and paper collage on canvas

Collection of Lisa and Stuart Ginsberg, New York

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Step and Screw: West End Scrap (Four Foot Furry Face Off), 2021

Acrylic and synthetic fur on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum purchase with funds donated by Barbara L. and Theodore B. Alfond

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
The Boys in the Hoods are Always Hard, 2023

Acrylic and graphite on canvas

Collection of Amanda and Donald Mullen

There may be a limit to the time an artist can spend exploring the psychology of evil. As Hancock puts it, “What the hell am I doing with these Klansmen if I’m not there to kill them?” In his most recent paintings, he does just that. This homoerotic send-up of the pottery scene in the paranormal romance film *Ghost* (1990) shows the Klansman and Hancock’s Artist seducing each other. Together they fantasize about the Klansman’s demise in the drawings they prepare on the table, while the hooded tormentor grips the turned-on lightbulb in the Artist’s lap. The title recalls Eazy-E’s 1987 debut single, “Boyz-n-the-Hood,” a nod to the importance of rap in Hancock’s political awakening.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
Lights Out, 2023

Acrylic, plastic bottle caps, silkscreen, and collage on canvas

Collection of Stephanie and Tim Ingrassia, Brooklyn

PHILIP GUSTON
The Ladder, 1978

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
Gift of Edward R. Broida

Guston painted *The Ladder* just two years before his death, at a time when his health and that of his wife were failing. The disembodied legs, tangled on the steps, signify the elder artist as he desperately attempts to reach his wife, whose head is only just visible beyond the blank blue wall.

TRENTON DOYLE HANCOCK
The Former and the Ladder or Ascension and a Cinchin', 2012

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Sydney and Francis Lewis Endowment Fund and Pamela K. and William A. Royall Jr., Fund for 21st Century Art with funds contributed by Mary and Don Shockey Jr. and Marion Boulton Stroud

In this monumental work, Hancock's alter ego the Artist steps through a ladder. The painting is an homage to Hancock's stepfather, who passed away in 2010; the ladder is a potent stand-in for his trade as a carpenter. It was also a portentous symbol in Hancock's early life. To a child with a vivid imagination, a tall ladder might appear as awe-inspiring as a temple, imbued with mystical significance. The idea that ladders might hold magical properties was reinforced by his stepfather, whose superstitions led him to warn Hancock not to walk under them. Here the Artist disobeys that order in a bold attempt to reach him in death. In a different dimension, the ladder is a portal to Hancock's other father figure, Guston, who adopted the same symbol to work through his own feelings of loss and grief.