1 CO-CONSPIRATORS

A significant connection between Hancock and Guston is their parallel explorations of the imagery and symbolism of the Ku Klux Klan, a fascination that began for each artist in his youth.

In 1913 Philip Guston was born Phillip Goldstein in Montreal, Canada, to working-class Jewish immigrants from Odessa, in present-day Ukraine. Having escaped the pogroms of Eastern Europe, the Goldsteins relocated in 1919 to Los Angeles, where the Klan had an active presence. A vigilante hate group founded in 1865, the Klan aimed to uphold white power primarily through campaigns of anti-Black terror, though it also targeted Jews, communists, immigrants, union workers, and anyone else it deemed "un-American." Guston's earliest works are laden with images of hooded figures and their victims, fixating on the toll of white supremacy in his adopted homeland.

Hancock's engagement with Klan imagery began in art school in the mid-1990s, when he first portrayed himself as Loid, a character who is half-Klansman, half-Klan victim. Raised in a devoutly Christian home in Paris, Texas, where white-supremacist groups still thrive, Hancock created Loid in reaction to two opposing, oppressive forces in his life: on the one hand, the racism his family and community experienced; on the other, the teachings of the Black church that he saw as interfering with free expression and individuality. The artist also became increasingly aware of his own "double-consciousness," a term coined by the civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois to describe the dual self-perception Black people often experience in mainstream society. Viewed as too Black by some, not Black enough by others, Hancock created the hooded character to convey how trapped he felt.

Hancock's development of Loid coincided with his discovery of Guston's work, with which he felt an immediate and profound kinship. He saw Guston as a like-minded spirit who, through his art, had contended with "what it meant to have a tormentor in your life. He provided a vehicle for me to enter into the self-directed study of what it means to be American. To don that robe and hood and go incognito. I needed him to help me figure out how to go undercover."

2

K-K-KAN I HELP YOU?

By the mid-1960s the civil rights movement, which had led to critical advancements for Black Americans, faced increasing resistance and hostility, sparking a resurgence of Klan activity. Guston, who had pivoted away from his earlier, more socially minded work toward Abstract Expressionism, again felt impelled to confront political realities. "I was feeling split," he explained. "The [Vietnam 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*? I thought there must be some way I could do something about it."

Guston's paintings soon became overrun by cartoonish, bumbling Klansmen, an exercise in both social satire and self-condemnation. "They are self-portraits," he proclaimed. "I perceive myself as being behind the hood." Guston's masquerade speaks to an inner conflict: in 1935 he had changed his name from the identifiably Jewish "Goldstein" to "Guston," suppressing his ethnicity at a time of heightened antisemitism in the years leading up to World War II. Three decades on, when it was finally possible to be accepted in the United States as both white and Jewish, the abdication of his birth name felt like a betrayal of the self.

"It was Guston's relentlessness toward depicting the 'self,'" Hancock explains, "that [made me] adamant about my visibility and ultimately grow into a more politically aware being." In 2014 Hancock completed his autobiographical magnum opus, *Epidemic! Presents: Step and Screw!* In thirty black-and-white panels, his alter ego Torpedoboy faces off with Guston's own avatar, the Klansman. Hancock contrasts the dark comedy of these scenes with a sobering, if at times fantastical, timeline that blends Guston's life story with his own and delves into both artists' generational traumas.

3 CONCEPTION AND EXECUTION

Hancock has made a number of paintings that focus on what he calls the “pregnant” moment of exchange between the Klansman and Torpedoboy. In each, the characters participate in a suspicious trade, the hooded figure offering the skeptical superhero an object associated with wisdom, be it an apple, a star, or a head. These collaged interactions sometimes fuse image and text, with words incised directly into the characters. According to the artist, the exchanges are a metaphor for “America’s contract with white supremacy, especially how that contract is negotiated with Black Americans.”

In subsequent paintings, Torpedoboy wrestles with his conditional whiteness, even taking on the guise of a Klansman himself. He ultimately ends his tenuous relationship with the Klansman, thrusting a sword through the hood of his aggressor. At a certain level, the killing of the Klansman is a symbolic patricide. “Guston often spoke of ‘ghosts’ in the studio, voices of predecessors requiring exorcism,” says Hancock. “At some point, you have to stop the chase and confront those voices.” Still, he notes, “It’s an exorcism, but of course, the conversation continues. He’s the artist I can’t get away from.”

4 THE LADDER OF COINCIDENCE

Beyond a mutual engagement with the Klan, Guston's influence on Hancock can be traced through many facets of Hancock's prolific output, revealing the subconscious ways in which creative inspiration works and the indelible imprint that Guston has left on the artist. These monumental paintings—*The Ladder* (1978) by Guston and *The Former and the Ladder or Ascension and a Cinchin'* (2012) by Hancock—with their shared symbolism and visual motifs, demonstrate especially well what Hancock calls his "umbilical connection" to Guston.

Hancock has long been interested in the psychologist Carl Jung's theories of the collective unconscious, or the "lattice of coincidence," as it is described in one of his favorite films, *Repo Man* (1984). Ideas that Guston put forth decades ago find themselves, altered and transfixed, in Hancock's art. If Hancock's painting conveys a subliminal communion with Guston, might it be possible that Guston, too, tapped into something that was unknown to him at the time but is inexplicably present in Hancock's work many years later? It is impossible to find proof of this particular lattice (or ladder) of coincidence, but "I like to think," Hancock says, "that I'm in Guston's pantheon, just as much as he's in mine."

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