

This new piece has its roots in the teachings of Enrico Riley and in turn, Phillip Guston. On my first day of my introductory painting course, Enrico showed us the breadth of what could be done in painting. I had virtually no art historical education so these paintings struck me deeply. I remember seeing a piece like “Asheville,” by De Kooning with its quiet and balanced violence and knew that was exactly the way that I wanted to work. Correspondingly, looking at the painters that specialized in tight and masterful painting bored me. I was looking for an outlet, a place in my life where I didn’t have to tighten up, where I didn’t have to hold back so this stoicism and mastery didn’t hit for me. This desire for freedom and aggression ruled my practice for the first few months of me painting, and it shows in the work (it wasn’t very good). Then, right before we were supposed to start painting our final pieces, Enrico showed us the film that would radically change the way I thought about painting and my general disposition towards my own personal development, Michael Blackwood’s documentary, *Phillip Guston: A Life Lived*. I could spend a whole essay writing about just one of Guston’s phrases in this documentary but for the purposes of this essay, what is important is that he cites the Renaissance painters, Piero, Giotto, Massacio, Tiepolo, as a core part of his influences and great loves in his early development as a painter. Coming away from the film, this aspect of Guston’s career confused me. How do you get from the biblical scenes and the masterful strokes of these figurative painters to the cartoonish monsters that characterize Guston’s late career, the paintings that spoke to me so loudly.

I didn’t see it. As much as I tried, I couldn’t see the relevance it had for Guston and for broadly, for the modern painter. And more importantly, I just didn’t understand the appeal of these works. Again, what brought me to painting was the freedom of it! The ability to put down color with complete openness, slash at the canvas with aggression and to have freedom over what I wanted to show in an image. What I loved about Guston was his stubbornness. He painted whatever he wanted no matter the backlash.¹ Why idolize these painters who were confined to the same scenes over and over again? who represented complete restriction in my eyes? So, I set out to really look at these painters over the next year. Slowly, I started to enjoy the feel of them and appreciate their display of mastery, as I tried to develop the same skill in my own practice, but I would be lying to say that I really understood them as Guston did.



¹ Guston received widespread criticism for his move from abstraction to cartoonish figuration in 1969 with the infamous Marlborough show, even losing the respect of close friends, most notably, the abstract composer Morton Feldman. Guston continued to paint in this style for the last ten years of his life.

As I was plotting my path through Europe for a post-graduation trip, seeing the works of Guston's pantheon directed my thinking. I knew I wanted to be in Spain, see Madrid and the Prado, and Paris for the early modernists but when deciding to go north to Germany or south to Italy, the frescoes made the decision for me (Enrico helped in this decision as well). Four weeks of looking at the old masters and studying their importance to the history of painting, I finally understood these painters and in turn, fell in love with them.

The shift in my thinking came in understanding the importance of limitation in making. I had thought about this prior in terms of the medium of painting in general. I was curious about how painting happened to maintain its grip on the practice of modern artists despite centuries of artists seemingly exhausting what could be done with paint and a brush. Especially, in the twenty-first century when artists like Duchamp and Warhol had completely torn apart any restrictions on what art could be.² What I found is that it is exactly the limited nature of the medium that allows for its radicality and staying power. When painting, painters are tasked with setting themselves apart from the thousands of artists that came to the canvas with the same pigments and tools. When an artist is limited to these same variables or even further, the subject matter prescribed by royalty or religious institutions, the necessity to stamp one's own particularity grows stronger. It is almost as if the increased external pressures on the artist allow for a more concentrated expression of themselves in the work they make. Analogously, when one has complete freedom, their own particular expression is diluted toward the arbitrary variables that are decided upon in the work. The artist has too much choice. This is not to say that great art can't be made in this completely open space. However, I've found it is difficult to feel the artists in these pieces/exhibitions at times, the distance between the authentic expression of the maker and the demonstration of that expression increased by considerations of abstract variables like space and time.

Applying this consideration of limitation as a means towards a more potent individual expression, we can see the appeal of the Renaissance painters. You have to imagine that these painters hold the same basic dispositions as today's artists: a drive to make and an increased sensitivity to aesthetics. But rather than being able to wholly express themselves through the content of a piece like modern painters, it is largely chosen for them. Where the expression comes in, and thus where the particularity of the artist comes through, is in the form of the painting: the way the scene is constructed, how the figures are portrayed, how the paint is applied.

Look at Piero Della Francesca. Look at the use of color, the mint green and cadmium red and white mixture that dominated Guston's paintings, as well as the expressions on the figures. They are extremely odd. If one were to enter the scene, it feels as if you'd be shrouded in silence, everyone on the verge of sleep. The simultaneous embodiment but lifelessness of these figures could never be replicated by another painter. Massacio, in his short career, mastered the ability to give life to a figure as well as display darkness in some of his scenes, showing the depth of his own emotional world. One only needs to look to the expulsion of Adam and Eve to see the print of Massacio's particularity. Look at the ghouliness of Mary, the mysterious expression of Adam, which could be either grief or ecstasy. Again, the content of the scene may have been recycled but this portrayal is singular. Once I understood this, the whole history of painting opened itself up to me. With the same objective, the particular route at which

² Danto, A. C. (1998). This essay is a beautiful application of Hegel's dialectic formula put forth in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. With the absurdity and the complete disposal of the rules of what art can be that occurred in the sixties with Warhol, Danto concludes not that there is nothing left to do because every rule has been broken, but art is radically free and the artist parallelly unbound. This was akin to the attainment of Spirit in Hegel's journey of consciousness

one gets there becomes clear. All of a sudden, these same scenes, these limited portrayals, are a glimpse into how a painter makes decisions against the background of painters that came before him. There is no wonder why Guston fell in love with these painters.

This realization is what allowed me to access these paintings and understand their relevance for the painter of 2023 but there were also philosophical implications for me in these images. The symbol of the cross has been showing up in my work since I was a kid. Being brought up in the church, the power of that symbol was never lost on me despite largely rejecting faith from the start. Thinking about Christ in an intellectual manner began as I started to read more philosophy in college. The comforts of faith against the absurdity of existence were displayed in some of my works in early 2023 but were plagued by a shallow understanding of the real depth that thinking about the philosophical stance of faith could bring. This only came when I read Kierkegaard at the beginning of September.



I picked up both *Fear and Trembling* and *Sickness unto Death* after I got home from my trip to Europe and was deeply affected by Kierkegaard's message. What struck me immediately was the poeticism in his writing as well as his ability to convince me of the importance of his intellectual venture. The whole preface is an indictment of the philosophers of his time as well as members of clergy who he claims do not have a real understanding of faith as a radical concept. He makes you feel as if you are completely naive not to consider faith as the most radical philosophical stance and to ask "to go further.". He criticizes you saying, if you want more, you really just don't have a true understanding of what it means to have faith.. Again, as a kid that still had the bad taste for Christianity,, I felt called out! It excited me to think that someone could sway me to take on such a consideration. As he gave an in-depth portrayal of Abraham and the radicality of his action in killing his own son in accordance with God's command, I was taken. It was hard to argue against! To portray the ethical character as that of lounging in the comfort of universality, while the figure of the faithful is subjected to the will of God with no safety net, no comfort, and nobody on which to rely, you cannot help but heed his words that this was the most radical stance. *Fear and Trembling* acted as a purely aesthetic venture, thinking about the true philosophical ramifications of the figure of Abraham but then you read *Sickness unto Death* and he lays out to you, the logical argument for why the resistance to the acceptance of faith as a logical misstep. After finishing the two, I walked away, not being able to just throw away the idea of faith as something purely used by people as a comfort for dealing with bare existence, "an opium for the masses."³ I had to consider faith as a real philosophical position. It got me thinking about how faith fit into my own life. Could I bring the radicality of faith as a philosophical position as someone who strongly opposed the idea of a God? This question continues to dig at me.

So, again, I return to my drawing practice, newly set up in New York and cannot get Kierkegaard out of my mind. Then, I think about my time in Europe, still caught up in my newfound love for the old masters. What I felt I needed to portray was these moments of doubt for the figures of the Bible. Kierkegaard emphasizes the struggle of Abraham, the loneliness of his position. No comfort in the universal, no comfort in others. There must have been these severe moments of doubt through which he had to hold his conviction, maintain his faith. This became a worthy contender for what I wanted to portray in my own image but I thought of the scenes that were displayed over and over again : the Crucifixion, the Annunciation, the Resurrection, and the Lamentation. And it was the Lamentation that struck me over and over again when studying the old masters. The portrayal of the lifelessness of this figure that was supposed to be God was intense. The infinite and incarnate, finite and dead. I loved that contradiction. And then looking at Mary, whether the artist portrayed her stoically or in grief. Again, this scene was perfect for studying the ways in which painters were making decisions to show their own particularity. And it was Reubens who showed himself to have exactly the portrayal of this scene of ultimate grief and doubt.

Reubens himself did several renditions of the Lamentation. And you can see the development of his thinking as a painter, how he constructs a composition, how color is used and most importantly, how each figure is displayed in the scene. There is one specific rendition that I feel is the strongest out of the bunch, it is the 1617 painting with Christ laid out displayed vertically. Not only is this a perfect representation of Reuben's mature style, the singularity of the way he renders flesh on display in the body of Christ and the redness of the eyes of Mary, but also it displays this moment of extreme feeling for Mary. In his past renditions, the figure of Mary remains stoic, glancing down at her dead son, as was typical of the scene. In this painting, Mary's mouth is gaping with her eyes open, filled with tears, looking

³ Marx, In an unfinished manuscript

up in terror at the brutality of what has occurred to her son, what happened to the son of God. And in my mind, she looks up to God to ask why? Why would You allow this to happen to Our son? And maybe even more radically, can a God exist who would allow this atrocity to occur? Reubens displays a lapse in faith for the most faithful of all. In my mind, this cannot be done by chance and shows again, the radical stance of these painters. They were not just commissioned craftsmen but intellectuals who worked their thoughts, questions, and personality into the work they made despite the necessity to confine themselves to the scenes of the Bible.



So, this was my task. Can I confine myself to this scene, set the limitation, as well as engage and display my own philosophical contention and particular style. That is what is at hand in “Mary’s Doubt”. I’m writing this piece, a month or so after finishing the piece and although I’ve moved on in what I want to be exploring in my practice, the questions and lines of thinking sparked by Guston, Kierkegaard and Reubens are still very loud. I’m sure Christ will return to the work, as it has constantly over the years.



Bibliography

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