

PHILIP GUSTON

Inevitable Finality

The Gemini G.E.L. Prints

January 18-May 20, 2012



I don't write. I put down my thoughts.

PHILIP GUSTON

Philip Guston's corpus of 25 prints made with Gemini G.E.L. between September 1979 and May 1980 is a lasting testament to his fascination with line and the act of drawing as a potent vehicle for addressing his closing concerns that were primarily about himself, his doubts and a life lived. Guston's devotion to drawing made him a natural for the challenges of lithography yet he rarely worked in the medium. The collaboration initiated by Gemini G.E.L cofounder Sidney Felsen would prove fortuitous for the artist and the many admirers who covet this last surge of graphic inquiry. Seen together, the prints call out the repertory of images that he had put into service during the last decade of his life as well as images utilized before his defection to abstraction in the late '40s.



During his last decade Guston turned his back on the drawing skills that were hard-won; preferring a convincing style of wayward doodling as the means to purity. His childlike expression became the route to a kind of mystical divinity often revered by the avant-garde. Drawing things that were long forgotten became a descent into memory: objects and body parts piled up in an elegy to a world in chaos; flotsam of appendages and drifting heads; and the quotidian remains of everyday existence that he and the author Philip Roth referred to as “crapola.” Guston’s cartoon-like battlefields of junk suggest the existential mysteries that fueled the nightly visits to the studio where his raging imagination was pressing back against the pressure of reality. Guston’s visual diary of self-doubt in the last decade reveals a particular take on the vagaries of the human condition. The prints present a patchwork of symbols and themes of this profound discontent. The extended arms clenching trash can lids in the '40s Social Realism works spoke of self-protection/deflection of young warriors. Rendered here with improvised brevity, the war seems to be against all, a fight to the death of clashing shields. The one-eyed head inspired by the work of underground comix master R. Crumb appears lost and innocuous. The cyclopean creature is cast aside as detritus often looking downward as though into the depths of aging, into the grotesque. Grouped together the heads surface as brutish buoys floating aimlessly in a sea of miasma. While a heap of cherries seem to celebrate life, the social dimensions of the piles of legs immediately bring to mind the Nazi death camps. These crude, brooding comic-book images rendered in heavy lines explore a darker side of the American genre, giving the commonplace a sullen twist. Philip Guston’s figures and mounds of debris exist in a wasteland of their own and of the world’s making. When we experience them in his world we become mindful of their potential presence in our own.

Philip Guston

American, 1913-1980

Group, 1981

Lithograph

29 ½ x 19 ½”

Courtesy of

Gemini G.E.L. LLC

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Philip Guston Inevitable Finality, The Gemini G.E.L. Prints is the first time that Philip Guston’s complete set of Gemini G.E.L. prints have been assembled for a museum exhibition since they were completed by the artist in 1980. The museum wishes to thank Sidney B. Felsen, cofounder of Gemini G.E.L. for sharing his experiences with Philip Guston and providing prints from Gemini’s collection. We are equally grateful Mr. Felsen has donated to the Haggerty a collection of 16 photographs he made during his collaboration with the artist which are also part of the exhibition. We would like also to thank the entire Gemini staff for facilitating this exhibition.

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On April 1, 2011, Wally Mason, director of the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, sat down with Sidney B. Felsen, cofounder of Gemini G.E.L. in Los Angeles.

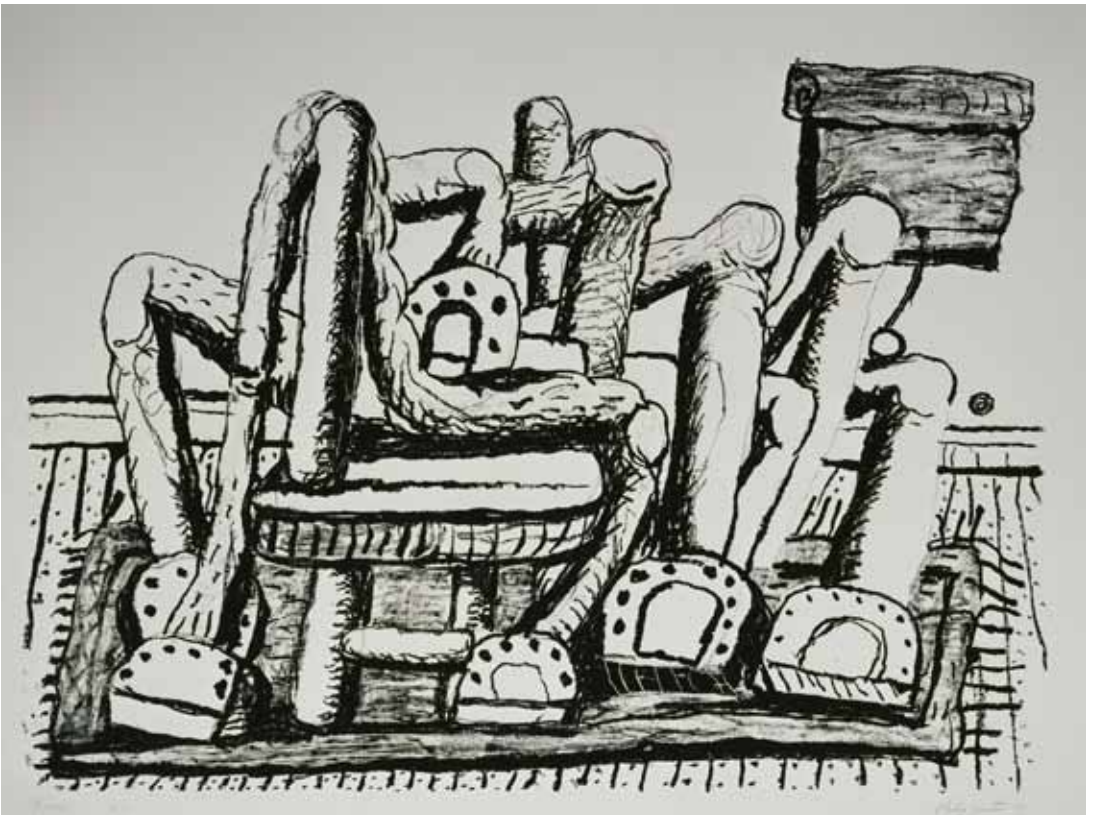
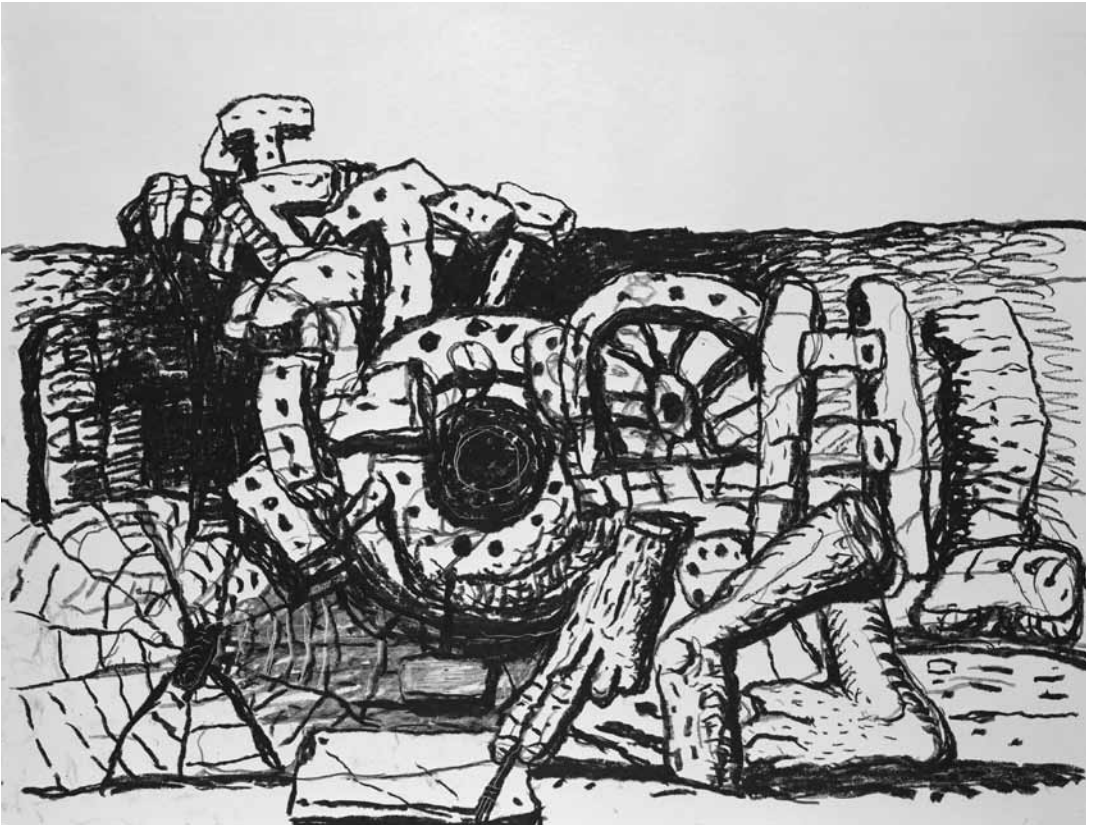
Wally Mason: Can you talk a little bit about how and why you initially started working with Philip Guston?

Sidney Felsen: One of my favorite groups of people as far as asking for advice about who they think we should be working with are the artists. Jasper Johns worked at Gemini for 15 years and he was a personal friend and so in a conversation one day I just said who do you like that you feel we should be working with that we're not and his answer was Philip Guston.

I was able to get Philip's phone number. He lived in Woodstock, New York, so we made plans to visit. When I arrived, we went to a café and one of the things he told me was that he had a massive heart attack approximately one year ago and that his doctor told him not to smoke, drink alcohol or coffee and there he was smoking, and drinking. As he finished talking about this, I pointed to the cigarette and glass and said 'so', and he said if I have to live my life that way, I'd rather be dead.

WM: And with Guston, it was unique that, rather than an artist coming to Gemini, which is typically the way it works, you were bringing him everything he needed for the project.

SF: Yeah, it was difficult because the reality of these projects are that they're so demanding. The proofing sessions—when the artist is actually in the studio working with us and it's trial and error and it's very passionate, it's very high energy—it almost demands the artist to be here. But Philip said he was told by his doctor not to travel anymore so we just worked out a system where the person in charge of the shop, the master printer, Serge Lozingot and I went to see Philip and we talked about how to do things and then that started a series of trips by me. I traveled probably six times from maybe September of 1979 through May of 1980, and I would bring printing plates or transfer paper for Philip to draw on. And then he'd call me and say okay, I've done what I can and I would drive out to his studio and pick them up and bring them back and we'd proof them in the shop and then either I'd bring them back or we'd send them



back. And that went on for this period of eight or nine months during that time he did actually 39 images and somewhere we edited it down to 25 images and that's what we actually printed as editions.

WM:

Can you explain the difference between working on transfer paper and working on plates?

SF:

Both techniques are used in creating the printing element. The more traditional approach is to have the artist paint or draw directly onto a lithographic plate or stone. This earlier of the two approaches produces a printed impression that is a mirror image of the original drawing. The transfer approach allows the artist to make the image in a correct reading format on a separate gum-coated sheet. The "transfer drawing" is then placed face down onto the printing matrix and through a combination of selective moisture and pressure, the image is "transferred" onto the plate. This step reverses the image left to right on the plate so that, when printed, the image reverses back and becomes correct reading like the original drawing.

Artists are self-conscious about wasting material, so if they are not sure what they're going to do some would rather draw on transfer paper than on metal.

Mylar transfers have become more popular of late as they add additional options to the artists' arsenal. Being clear, the Mylar drawing can be transferred onto a pre-coated photo plate in either correct or reversal orientation. This process is similar to projecting a film negative onto a sheet of photographic paper, with the difference being that with the plate-making process, the photo emulsion on the plate is positive working. A positive drawing produces a positive image. The drawing is not destroyed in this process so adjustments can easily be made and the plate can be remade until satisfactory.

The clear Mylar can be placed on the top of a pre-registered drawing or previously printed element to establish perfect registration.

Philip Guston

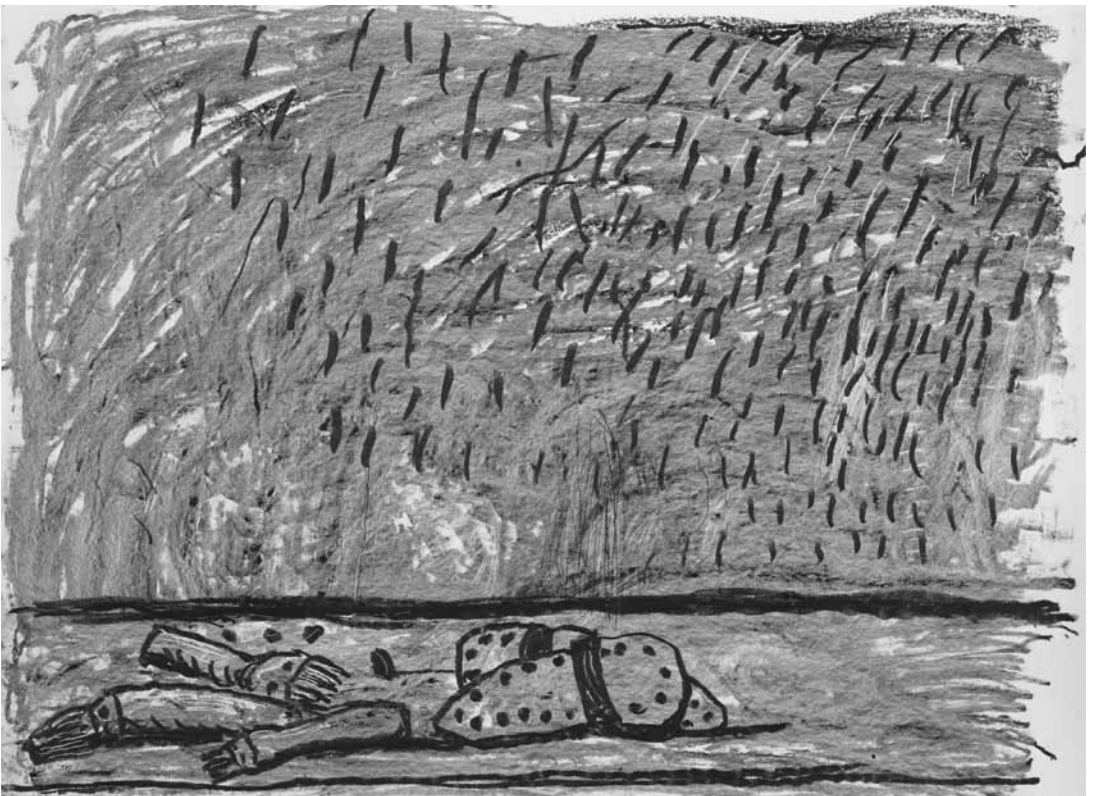
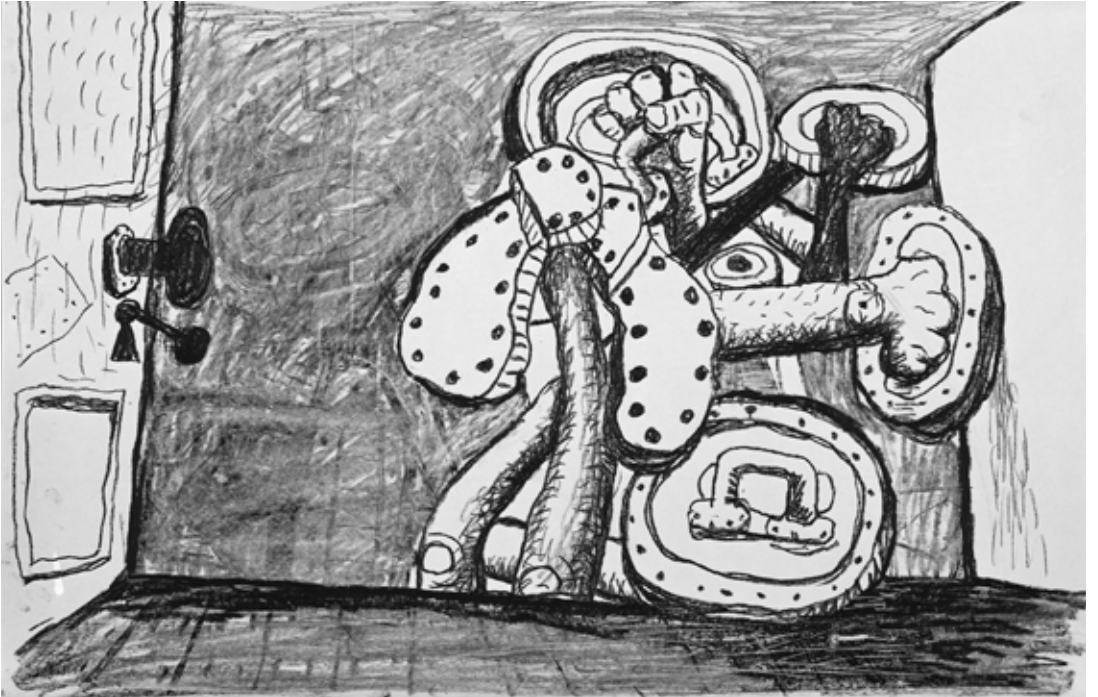
American, 1913-1980
Elements, 1980
 Lithograph
 32 ¾ x 42 ½"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC

Philip Guston

American, 1913-1980
Room, 1980
 Lithograph
 32 ¾ x 42 ½"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC







WM: The one thing I like about the prints is that you have a hard time distinguishing them from the drawings. It is an interesting element in lithography.

SF: I think so. When you look at them, you really feel the essence of the drawings.

WM: Do you think that not having Guston in the studio here made any kind of difference in the prints ultimately?

SF: Philip was so human that he probably would've reflected off the people he was working with but I certainly had the feeling that he was all enthused working in his own studio.

You walk in that studio and there were 25 paintings around, they were all big, he was so interested in what he was doing and looking at this and at that. I didn't get the feeling it was about ego, it's just the enthusiasm about what he was creating.

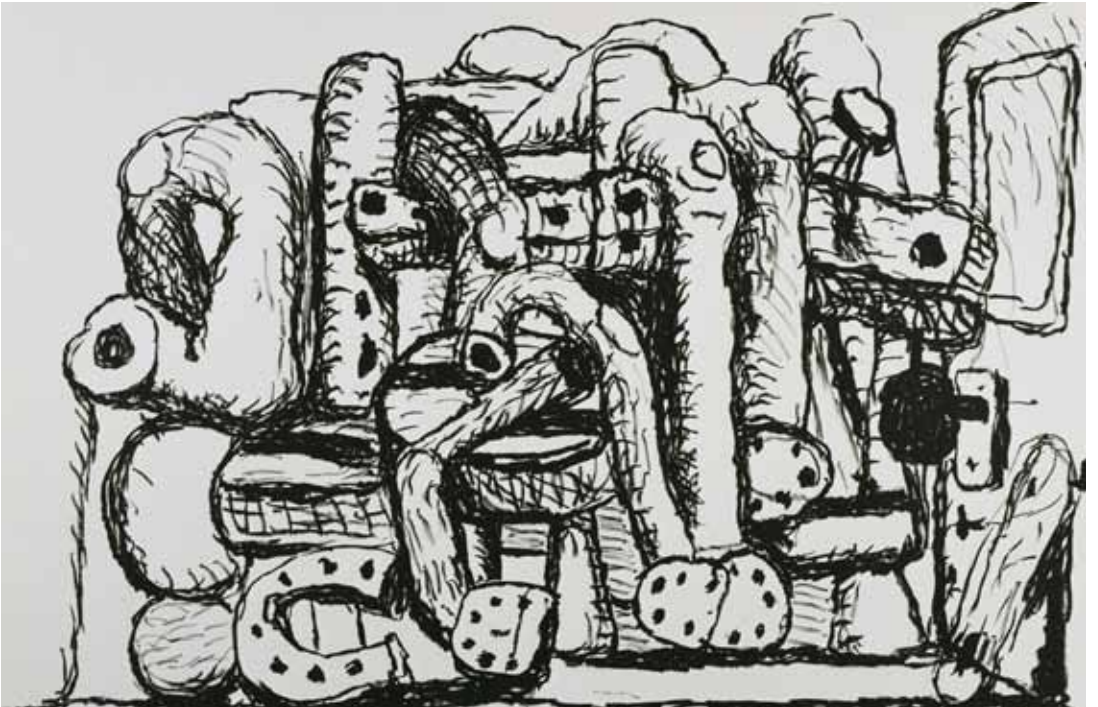
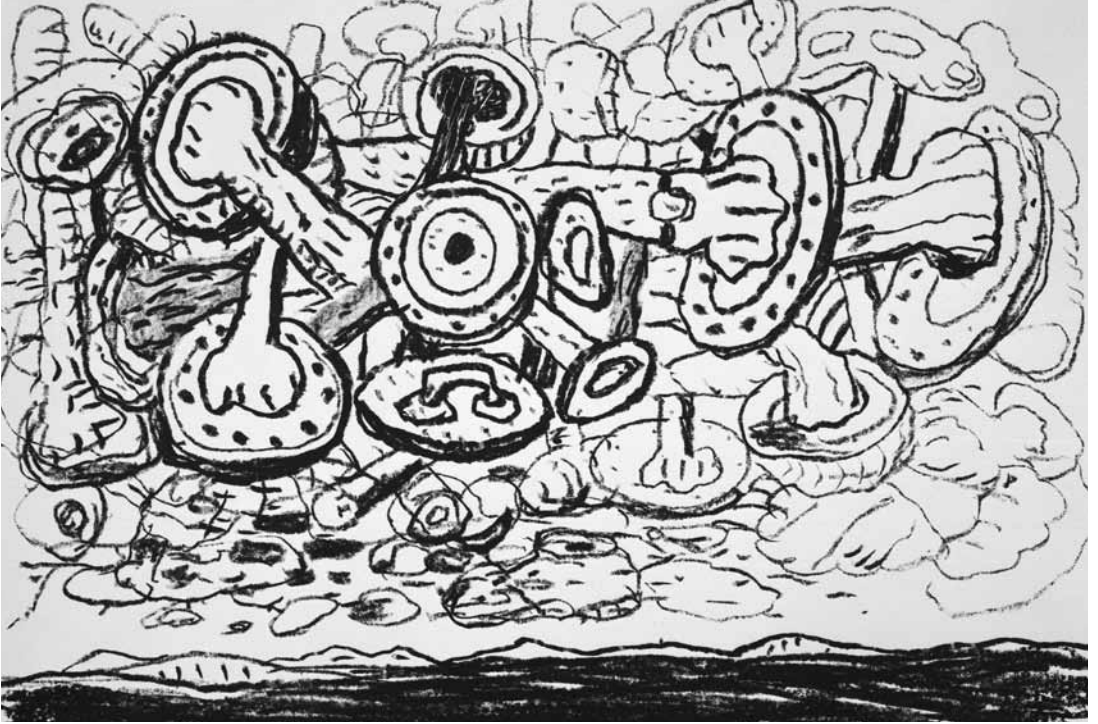
WM: How was it working with Guston? Was there a sense of urgency for him to make these works? Did he have the sense that his life was close to being over?

SF: I don't know the answer to that. I didn't think of it as a sense of urgency, he was so excited to be doing this project. Philip painted every night and so loved to talk about it. I remember I asked him where do you get these images from and he said, I sit down in that chair, (he pointed to a chair at the end of the room), and about eight o'clock I fall asleep and I wake up around midnight and these things are in my head, so I run to my studio and I paint them. But, he would say that I paint for a few hours and then I would draw on some of your plates.

He was just so turned on and he was all excited and enthused because he regularly said I really should've done printmaking a long time ago. And, all the prints that he did with us were black and white but he kept saying I really want to get into color, I really want to get into color. He talked about his exhibition, a retrospective opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in June of 1980, and he talked about even maybe coming to Los Angeles after that and working in color but he died within a few weeks of that exhibition.

Philip Guston
 American, 1913-1980
Door, 1981
 Lithograph
 20 x 30"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC

Philip Guston
 American, 1913-1980
View, 1983
 Lithograph
 30 x 42 ½"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC



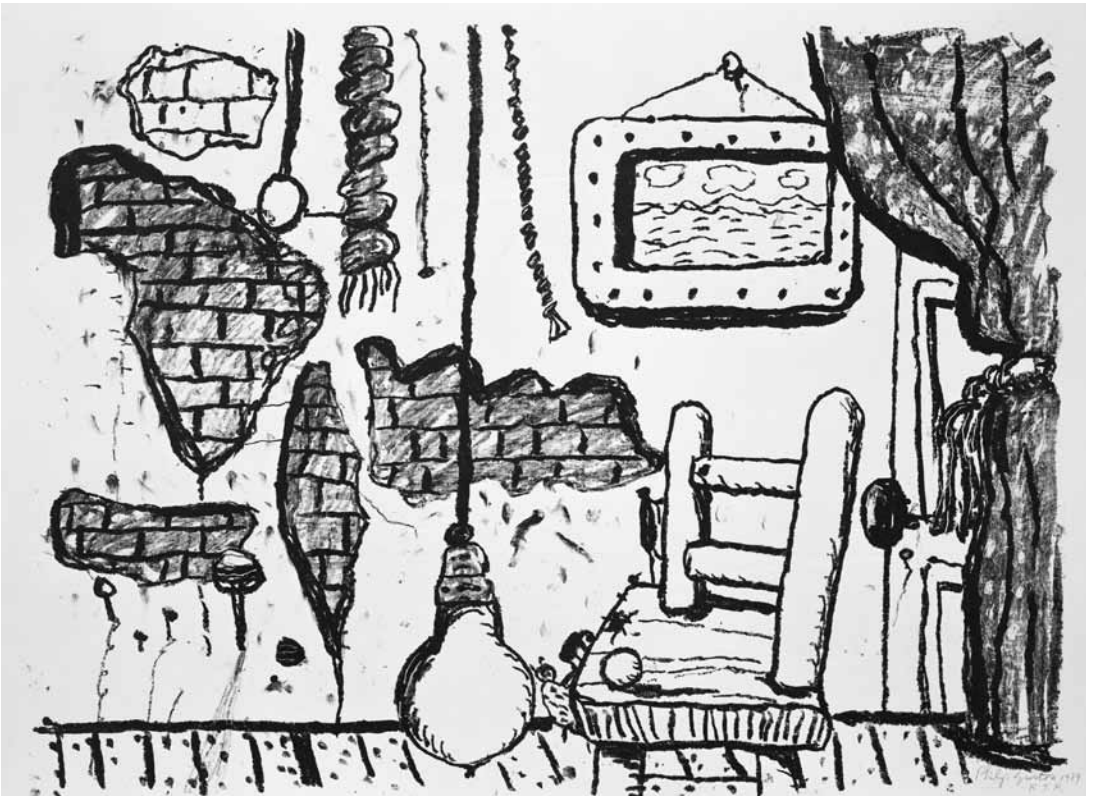
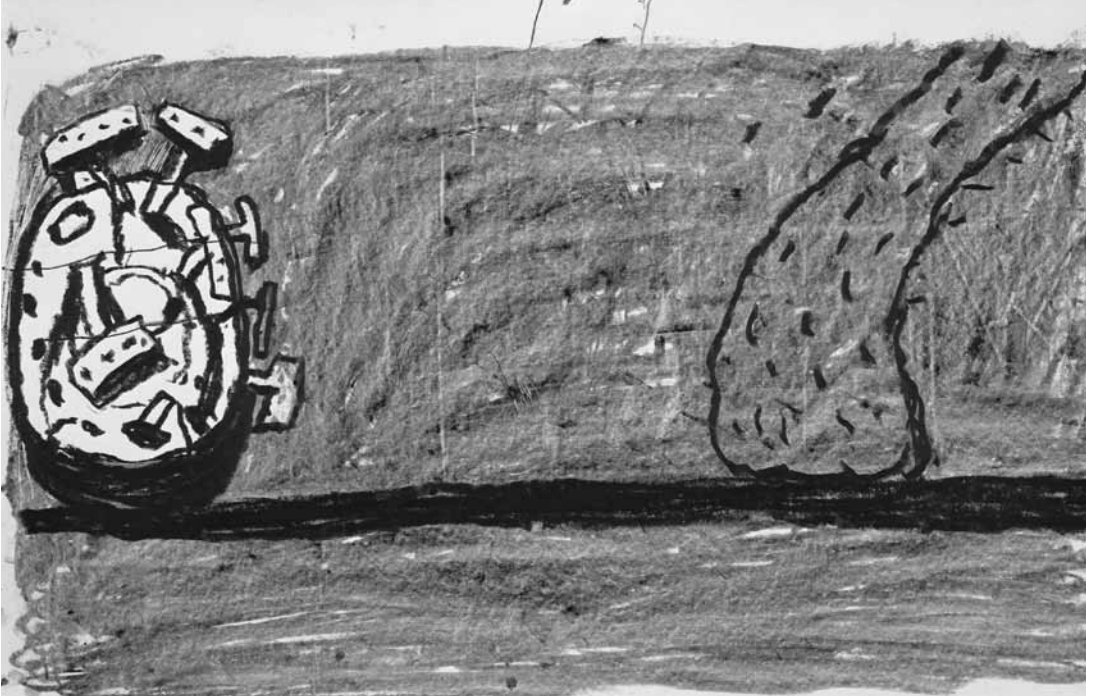
- WM: So it's that idea of I'm painting as fast as I can at this point.
- SF: I think so, yeah. Considering the man had a massive heart attack and he was told all these things, he shouldn't do and was doing them, I would imagine there was something there.
- WM: When you were working with him on the prints, did he talk very much about the images?
- SF: No, not really.
- WM: In the Abstract Expressionist Show at MoMA, they started with a social-realist image of Guston's *Gladiators*, 1940 and then end the show with the hooded Klan figures and the car. I liked that those trash can lids being used as shields showed up in the social-realist era and in the Gemini prints.
- SF: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- WM: That someone could carry that image through. It remained dormant through Guston's abstract period, but then it came right back out again, probably with a different meaning. I find that fascinating.
- You mentioned that there were initially 39 images. Did you actually do proof prints on 39 and then reduced the number down to 25?
- SF: Yeah. We destroyed 14 plates.
- WM: I've read that Guston was quite gregarious and a very good storyteller. Did you experience that?
- SF: Yes, definitely. He was extremely friendly, willing to talk, I remember he would talk about when he and Jackson Pollock went to Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles. And then, he said he went to school but Jackson went to class. Guston said he never went to class, he used to hang around the halls

Philip Guston

American, 1913-1980
Sky, 1983
 Lithograph
 20 x 29 ¾"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC

Philip Guston

American, 1913-1980
Pile Up, 1983
 Lithograph
 20 x 30"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC



distributing subversive literature. And one of the images is a car and he said that's the car Jackson and I had, we used to drive around campus all the time in that car. When you think about it, Jackson and Philip Guston as high school buddies going to school together... It's like Jasper Johns and Bob Rauschenberg who found each other at a very tender age and end up being two of the great artists of our times.

WM: **Is there anything about the project that is unique as opposed to all the other projects you've done?**

SF: The fact that he never was here.

Philip was a draftsman and I remember he used to say I think of drawing like an athlete, who warms up before the game. He said, I like to get up in the morning and draw for three or four hours and then I feel ready to start painting.

There were so many, many drawings all black and white and all line drawings and in a very short time. The fact that I shuttled back and forth was unusual for me.

WM: **Was it a surprise when you brought the prints for him to sign?**

SF: I would arrive and he had these prints up on the board as you can see, or on a wall. You can see in the photographs and he really didn't reject anything. I always thought that he put on the wall everything that he liked and so then, I would just say okay are you satisfied with these, or do you want some changes? Oh no, they're fine. So I said do you want to sign them? Sure. So, he would just walk along the wall and sign them.

WM: **Thank you for sharing your experiences and stories about Philip Guston.**

Philip Guston
 American, 1913-1980
Scene, 1980
 Lithograph
 32 ¾ x 42 ½"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC

Philip Guston
 American, 1913-1980
East Side, 1983
 Lithograph
 20 x 30"
 Courtesy of
 Gemini G.E.L. LLC



Works in the Exhibition

All works courtesy of
Gemini G.E.L. LLC

All photographs by
Sidney B. Felsen ©

Philip Guston

American, 1913-1980

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 01 <i>Car</i> , 1980
Lithograph
20 x 30" | 09 <i>Summer</i> , 1980
Lithograph
20 x 30" | 17 <i>Studio Corner</i> , 1981
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" |
| 02 <i>Coat</i> , 1980
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" | 10 <i>Agean</i> , 1981
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" | 18 <i>Easel</i> , 1983
Lithograph
20 x 30" |
| 03 <i>East Side</i> , 1980
Lithograph
32 ¾ x 42 ½" | 11 <i>Curtain</i> , 1981
Lithograph
30 ½ x 40 ½" | 19 <i>Gulf</i> , 1983
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" |
| 04 <i>Elements</i> , 1980
Lithograph
32 ¾ x 42 ½" | 12 <i>Door</i> , 1981
Lithograph
20 x 30" | 20 <i>Objects</i> , 1983
Lithograph
20 x 30" |
| 05 <i>Room</i> , 1980
Lithograph
32 ¾ x 42 ½" | 13 <i>Group</i> , 1981
Lithograph
29 ½ x 19 ½" | 21 <i>Painter</i> , 1983
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" |
| 06 <i>Rug</i> , 1980
Lithograph
19 ½ x 29" | 14 <i>Remains</i> , 1981
Lithograph
19 ½ x 29 ¾" | 22 <i>Pile Up</i> , 1983
Lithograph
20 x 30" |
| 07 <i>Sea</i> , 1980
Lithograph
30 ½ x 40 ½" | 15 <i>Scene</i> , 1981
Lithograph
20 x 29 ¾" | 23 <i>Sea Group</i> , 1983
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" |
| 08 <i>Studio Forms</i> , 1980
Lithograph
32 x 42 ½" | 16 <i>Shoes</i> , 1981
Lithograph
20 x 30" | 24 <i>Sky</i> , 1983
Lithograph
20 x 29 ¾" |
| | | 25 <i>View</i> , 1983
Lithograph
30 x 42 ½" |

