

**‘Philip Guston: Laughter in the Dark, Drawings from 1971 & 1975’.
Curated by Sally Radic, of The Guston Foundation, and daughter
Musa Mayer. Review by Laura Moreton-Griffiths**

It's all cock and balls. Literally. Before me hang ink and pencil drawings of Nixon. The resemblance is uncanny, though the face is a hairy scrotum, the nose a penis and the chin a sagging septum. Irreverent and seemingly effortless, akin to the biro drawings of a belligerent teenager channeling the strength of youth set against authority.

This series of drawings is called ‘Poor Richard’, and with the other drawings that make up the compellingly titled ‘Philip Guston: Laughter in the Dark, Drawings from 1971 & 1975’, they wrap around the walls of Hauser and Wirth, Saville Row. The drawings are hung in narrative order, like a comic strip, calling on the visual language of American counter culture. The outer sequence is punctuated by two paintings of sleeping sojourners. Both evoke the gravitational sadness of life and the disappointment of the American Dream, seeking temporary relief from the loathing, the fear, the Reds under the bed and the stark realisation that you are chronically and institutionally being fed a lie. This is a male world lit by the unforgiving light of a bare electric bulb.

But the inner walls of the gallery are the most compelling. Alive and bubbling with protest and acerbic resistance, Guston’s little-seen drawings of the rise and fall of Nixon will make you both laugh and wince. Nixon blacked up with crosshatching; present but not participating in an orgy; nose up evangelical America’s arse; fucked in the head; bollocks plugged with corks; the menace of Communism everywhere; his own reflection as Chinese arch villain Fu Manchu. Nixon. Hairy. Testicular. His distended nose getting bigger and bigger with every untruth, like Pinocchio, the puppet that wanted to be a real boy.

At the time, America was reeling from scandal. The leaked ‘Pentagon Papers’ had exposed how the public had been misled about the US’s involvement in the Vietnam War. This was soon followed by the investigation into a break-in at the Watergate Hotel. Corruption, illegal electioneering and secret surveillance involving the CIA, the FBI, White House staff, the president himself and a group of loyal men known as the ‘rat fuckers’ – a provocative and manipulative coterie operating covertly to assure the re-election of a corrupt president. Angry at the cynical trickery, Guston’s work was his way to fight back. He drew the key players – those who had Nixon’s ear – using easily understood codes and symbols: Spiro Agnew, vice president – cone; Henry Kissinger, secretary of state and national security advisor – glasses; John N. Mitchell, campaign manager and later attorney general – pipe.

Drawing helped Guston feel his way into painting. These drawings helped him feel his way into ‘Virulent: in San Clemente, 1975’. A gross masterpiece, imposing on the inner back wall, typical of the squashy, pink world Guston painted. Cadmium red, mars black, titanium white. Landscape the texture of dry marshmallow. Raw,

sore painterliness. Nixon in shame and decline, his oversized foot swollen with phlebitis, his coat flailing behind, pens and the tools of the artist in pocket. Did Guston begin to inhabit his nemesis' skin? They were born in the same year. Perhaps the painter was sympathetic to the ravages of age and, after his own treatment by the art world, perhaps he understood Nixon's pitiable isolation.

Guston moved in and out of abstraction, though really he "... wanted to tell stories!" The American art market then dealt only in Abstract Expressionism, which denies narrative. His late satirical and figurative work was condemned. Hilton Kramer's 1970 New York Times review of Guston's Marlborough Gallery show saw the painter as 'A Mandarin Pretending To Be A Stumblebum.' Circles closed.

Fragile and rejected, Guston broke away. Somehow, however, he drew himself up and used the freedom of seclusion to invent and create the work that he wanted to make. He assembled hundreds of drawings to publish as a book but the fear of the critical response resurfaced. 'Poor Richard' didn't see the light of day until many years after his death. Poor 'Poor Richard', so bitingly brilliant and post modern before post modernism.