

powerful stage presences deliver master classes in physical tension and vocal control, as well as convincing everyone that they share a magnetic sexual attraction. Williams's Clytemnestra is an impossible act for Orestes to follow.

As the action hurtles towards its climax, when Orestes is acquitted and the reciprocal blood feud in his family ended, the setting moves from the presidential palace of Argos to Athens. During the trial of Orestes for his mother's murder, most of the ensemble don lawyers' gowns and shout at one another. A dishevelled elderly woman, apparently representing a Fury or Orestes' psychosis, wanders around the stage, adding to the confusion. Things become increasingly chaotic as the litigious language flows. There is a rather belated attempt to make the audience think about institutionalized sexism, in line with Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement in *The Second Sex* that the *Oresteia* is the charter text of Western misogyny. The argument was first made in the theatre by Ariane Mnouchkine's unforgettable *Les Atrides* with the Théâtre du Soleil (1990). Mnouchkine's was also the first of many productions, now including Icke's, to

give Clytemnestra a feminist twist by prefacing the *Oresteia* with *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and thus with the execution of Iphigenia.

If the patriarchy theme is inchoate and submerged, Icke's play is clearly motored by two philosophical questions which overlap with psychoanalytical ones. The first question is ethical (how do we make decisions? What are the limits of our freedom to decide anything? How far does our identity as family members put pressure on that freedom?). The second is epistemological (how can we be sure of anything? What counts as incontrovertibly certain information? What is a reliable memory?) Agamemnon takes a long time deciding to kill Iphigenia. But he does so because his priest tells him that this has been commanded by the gods through signs. The madness of Orestes hampers both his ability to deliberate and his cognitive powers, especially his memory. Built on this basic philosophical argument is an oft-repeated insistence on the interconnectedness of everything: all actions have consequences, not just for the agent but for those who interact with him or her. This is an *Oresteia* about the individual's psychic experience of nuclear family trauma, but it is also

complex, joined-up morality for a fast-paced digital age.

This brings us to my second criterion for assessing a modern production of an ancient drama – its intellectual cogency. An interpretation of the *Oresteia* as a study of the implementation of justice, however engagingly it exposes the problematic nature of legal concepts such as “intention” and “evidence”, is rather conventional. It was Katie Mitchell's interpretation fifteen years ago. The *Oresteia* is a much more political work than most modern productions succeed in conveying. It is not only a drama about juridical procedure, but a constitutional chronicle of unparalleled significance for democracy. It gives cosmic authorization to the historical evolution of society from rule by hereditary monarchs in *Agamemnon*, through unaccountable tyrants who have swept to power by a coup in *Libation-Bearers*, to an astonishingly modern-looking and monarch-free constitutional democracy in *Eumenides*. The jurors' vote, taken to determine Orestes' fate, also symbolizes the epoch-making transfer of executive power from the hands of rich dynasties to the 30,000-plus ordinary citizens of Athens who

were male and free, a revolution which had reached a climax just a couple of years before the production of this masterpiece. Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* founds the Athenian democracy and begs her citizens to renounce the murderous factional in-fighting which at the time of the premiere of the *Oresteia* had caused bloodshed in the Athenian streets and the brutal assassination of the radical democrats' leader. The *Oresteia* enacts the resolution of something far more important than revenge killings in an individual family – namely a lethal conflict between the lower classes and the hereditary aristocracy, involving sinister disappearances and acts of terrorism, in which the entire populace of Athens and her international allies had been mired for half a century. In the 1980s there were indeed productions which conveyed something of the magnitude of the trilogy's societal significance – not only those by Stein and Hall but a pathbreaking performance in post-dictatorship Greece, directed by Karolos Koun. It would be good to see our own brilliant young directors aspire to the creation of a relevant, Greek-inspired drama of equivalently magnificent scope and profundity.

The most arresting of the two dozen works on display in the Timothy Taylor Gallery's new exhibition *Philip Guston* is a large, clean, and bright oil painting entitled “Head and Bottle”, created five years before the American artist's death in 1980. The work is dominated by an oversized and disembodied fava bean-shaped head that has rolled into our field of vision from the right, only to be halted in mid-tumble by an overturned wine bottle lying in its way. Admirers of Guston's late figurative work (of which there is vastly more now than when he first abdicated his position as a leading exponent of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1960s) will recognize the stubby and testicular form that stares with its one unblinking eye into the emptiness of the bottle as a recurring shorthand for the artist himself. At first glance, a cartoonish confession to the traumas of alcohol addiction may seem rather too blunt and unnuanced in its visual enunciation to merit more serious scrutiny. Yet something niggles in the spare composition that makes turning away from the painting impossible. The insoluble symbolism of the dangling light bulb to the left of the head and the unreadable pages of a book lying open below its chin, invests the work with unexpected mystery and elevates its achievement from private caricature to public rune.

One hardly needs to know the intimate resonances behind these ciphers to perceive an urgency packed into their deceptively simple figuring. When Guston was ten years old, he found the dead body of his father hanging from the end of a rope. In the ensuing years, the young artist would secrete himself in a closet, illuminated by a single swaying bulb, to copy images from a book of old master drawings. The psychological force of these signs is registered subliminally, as T. S. Eliot insisted great art must, by “giv[ing] power from well below the surface”. Guston's symbols expose nothing explicit about the artist's arduous origins: his father's failure to find better prospects in Los Angeles after relocating the family from Montreal (where Guston was born) or, before that, his parents' escape from Jewish persecution in the Ukraine. Instead, the canvas pulses

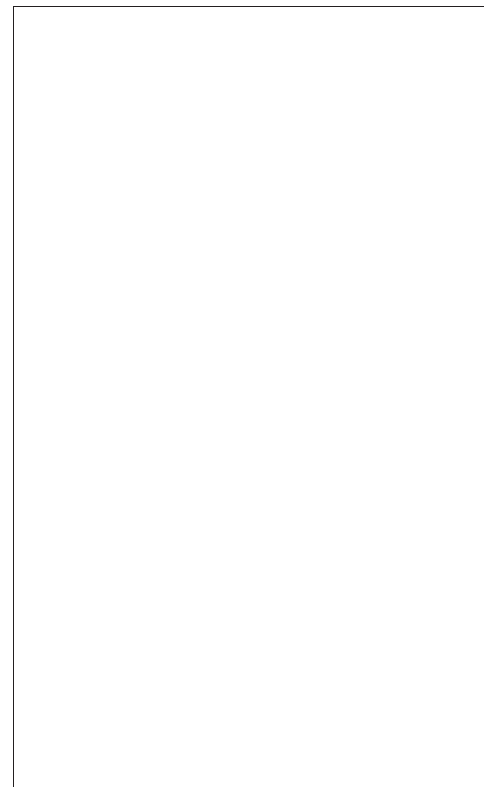
with a universal and ultimately indeterminate pain. The semi-legibility of “Head and Bottle”, which simultaneously reveals and conceals its meaning through an ambiguous grammar of carefully crafted signs, is an emphatic repudiation of the sensibility that informs the abstract paintings with which Guston had established his reputation from the late 1940s to the early 60s – works he increasingly believed were shamefully out of step with the thrust of history.

“What kind of a man am I”, Guston interrogated himself amid the accelerating social unrests of late 1960s America, “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?” The rebuke, of course, was not merely self-directed. It constituted a withering admonishment of the habits and ambitions of an entire generation of non-representational artists such as Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and his former high school classmate Jackson Pollock, who had died a decade earlier. The philosophical ideals of non-figurative art that had been proposed half a century earlier by such pioneers of purified form as Kazimir Malevich, Arshile Gorky and Piet Mondrian, suddenly seemed aloof when set against a backdrop of intensifying racial tensions, countercultural resistance to escalations in the war in Vietnam, and the emergence of a Nixonian majority. As if deliberately endeavouring to fulfil Samuel Beckett's prediction of a few years earlier, that “to find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now”, Guston confessed he had become “sick and tired of all that Purity. I wanted to tell stories”.

AV ARTS

KELLY GROVIER

PHILIP GUSTON
Timothy Taylor Gallery
15 Carlos Place, London, until July 11



rary American culture and the introduction of one of the most arresting visual vocabularies in modern art. The current exhibition of seventeen paintings and eight drawings enables visitors to meditate on the clunky and childlike articulation of Guston's signature hieroglyphs: the blood-splattered hoods of cartoonish Klansmen, hobnail boots, suspended light bulbs, stubby cigars, whirring clocks, and the bulging cycloptic eyes of legume-like heads.

Though the palette of fleshy pinks, scabby reds and fuggy greys is largely consistent with the artist's earlier abstract paintings (a compelling example of which, “Traveler III”, 1959–60, is on display for contrast), the unexpected emergence of bold comic-strip figuration choreographed ambiguously into inchoate scenes of indeterminate menace at once puzzled and appalled critics. When the first clutch of new works was finally unveiled in a now legendary show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York in 1970, some commentators dismissed Guston's rebirth as an ill-judged and belated attempt to enrol in Pop Art. Others accused him of disingenuously scrounging around for a crass primitivism that they felt was calculating, counterfeit, contrived: a “Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum”, as the critic Hilton Kramer disdainfully contended. In truth, Guston's new direction could hardly have been more genuine or effective in its forging, an intuition the current exhibition helps corroborate.

But what sort of storytelling was available to an artist who had turned his back so resolutely on figurative art already once, in the 1940s, to conjure from the smudgy mist of dirty-white canvases hasty cross-hatchings of visionary reds and pinks and blues? Now in his mid-fifties, Guston forced himself to start again from scratch. Confronting a terrifyingly blank slate, he endeavoured to plot his imagination against freshly asserted axes of social relevance and creative authenticity. “I knew ahead of me a road was laying”, he later recalled, “A very crude, inchoate road; I wanted to be complete again, as I was when I was a kid.” The result would be a startling reinvention of artistic self without obvious parallel in contempo-

The exhibition coincides with the publication of *Go Figure! New perspectives on Guston* (157pp. New York Review Books. £35. US \$65. 978 1 59017 878 2), a fresh selection of fourteen interpretative essays, including contributions by David Anfam, Dore Ashton, Chuck Close and Robert Storr. Wide-ranging in its preoccupations (from the persistence of Italian influences on Guston's imagination throughout his career to the haunting impact of childhood tragedies, such as the sudden death from gangrene of his older brother Nat, whose leg was crushed in a car accident), the edition succeeds in compressing more tightly still the unstable energy of Guston's vital, volatile images.