



Art is dangerous. That's a good thing

Robert Armstrong

Fourth Estate

SNAPSHOT

From 'The Plain'
(2017) by
Melanie Friend

"Salisbury Plain", the archaeologist OGS Crawford wrote in 1929, "is already ruined." Parts of the plateau in south-west England had been acquired by the British military only three decades earlier, but manoeuvres were taking their toll. Today, the plain plays host to the largest training ground in the UK, with soldiers sharing the rolling chalk fields with thousands of archaeological sites, some of which date back as far as the Neolithic period.

In *The Plain*, Melanie Friend sets

her sights on the photographic no-man's-land between the bucolic and the bellicose. She finds an uneasy landscape scarred with the props of war, an eerily fascinating theatre of mock battle where cadets march beside Bronze-Age barrows and where cattle graze under the timbers of observation towers. The conflict may be pretend, but its impact on the surrounding area is anything but.

Chris Allnutt

'The Plain' is published by Dewi Lewis

Second-rate art inspires second-rate arguments: academics, critics and fanboys parading their erudition or moral uprightness while the rest of us shrug. A fight over a first-rate artist is something else. We know at the outset that we are going to keep on admiring and thinking about the work. We're stuck with it, because the good stuff doesn't let go. So a disagreement about a picture, movie or novel can take on the character of a bloody-minded family row.

So it has been, in an already bloody-minded year, with Philip Guston. A retrospective for the unclassifiable California painter was set for next year by museums in London, Washington, Boston and Houston. Then, in September, the curators announced the show would not go forward until 2024, igniting a proper art-world brawl.

If you've seen one of Guston's paintings, perhaps jammed between a Stella and a Rauschenberg in some high-gloss permanent collection, you'll remember it. Among the cool and brainy work of his peers of the 1960s and '70s, Guston's lumpy cartoon figures jump off the wall — heaps of sweaty limbs, unpaired shoes, two-by-

The problem for the curators? One of Guston's repetitive motifs is hooded Ku Klux Klansmen. There is no question of Guston being a white supremacist. His obsession with the hooded figures was rooted in disgust. But the curators decided that, given the political environment, it would be best to delay until "the powerful message of social and racial justice that is at the centre of Philip Guston's work can be more clearly interpreted . . . and [we can] bring in additional perspectives".

It's hard not to feel for them. If, in 2021, you're planning a big show that touches on race in America, you'd better be damn sure you've handled it

Curators should be scared of Philip Guston. He's scary, not just at this moment, but since he picked up a brush

right. Guston's stuff is powerful, this is a painful moment, and what's the rush?

But 2020 gonna 2020. The art-world response was summed up in an open letter saying the museums had "acknowledge[d] their longstanding failure to have educated, integrated

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