

# Trying Not to Die

Gord Bond

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Trying Not to Die” is the title of a series of paintings which are part of my Masters of Fine Arts thesis exhibition. The paintings speak directly to the work of, painter, Philip Guston. In this paper I will discuss “Trying Not to Die” with reference to the process-based approach Guston employs and the themes of the grotesque and anxiety present in his work. This paper uses Philip Guston as a foil, comparing and contrasting specific works by Guston to works in “Trying Not to Die”. By locating key differences and similarities between Guston’s work and my own, the paper unpacks specific elements of my painting process and expands on the themes of caricature, the grotesque and anxiety about death in my work.

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## Introduction

“Trying Not to Die” is my graduate painting series which represents a paradigm shift facilitated by my introduction to Philip Guston’s paintings. This paper is broken down into two parts discussing the formal and thematic elements of my work. It is important to explain the context of the title because it provides insight into to the process and critical thought used to create this body of work. “Trying Not to die” is a reference to the painter, Philip Guston, who in reply to a question about his abrupt change in styles between the 60’s and 70’s, responded: “You know, comments about style always seem strange to me -'Why do you work in this style or in that style?' - as if you had a choice in the matter. What you're doing is trying to stay alive and continue and not die.” (Blackwood). Guston is speaking to the process of painting and the importance of exploring new methods and techniques. This exploration is what drives Guston’s work - to stop exploring would be to come to a creative dead end or as Guston puts it: “die”. “Trying Not to Die” is an explicit reference to Guston’s interest in the exploration of techniques and processes of painting but it also suggests a thematic interest in the anxiety of mortality. Using Philip Guston as a foil, I will unpack the processes and techniques within my body of work while also considering the relationship of the paintings to personal anxieties based on death and illness.

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## Part One

***“Well, then I proceeded to destroy it. And then I had to rediscover again and again that I guess I’m not interested in painting. That is I’m not interested in making a picture. Then, what the hell am I interested in? I must be interested in this process that I’m talking about.” – Philip Guston (Coolidge 61)***

It is Guston’s insistence on process that provides this new paradigm to consider my practice. Philip Guston’s paintings such as “Moon” (see fig. 1) and “Painter in Bed” (see fig. 5) are at first glance, crudely rendered images of assorted detritus. However, if you spend any time with one of these paintings you will see the complexity lies in the formal decisions made and techniques used to create the painting not the subject. While creating my series entitled “Trying

Not to Die” I became conscious of the formal decisions I was making, allowing me to explore my understanding of painting. These decisions make an impact on the aesthetic qualities of my work. In Part One of this paper I describe various painting techniques and processes I employ and how Philip Guston, Mike Kelley and even cartoon artists such as Charles Schulz and Gary Larson influence my painting process.



**Fig. 1 Philip Guston, *Moon***

The process of painting is about making a series of decisions. Decisions are based on lessons learned from previous paintings, which allow me to discover what works and what doesn't. In the documentary about Guston "A Life Lived" Guston speaks about his process in regard to several specific paintings. I find Guston's description of how he arrived at the composition for the work "Moon" (see fig. 1) resonates profoundly with my own process. Guston describes how he moves the moon throughout his work: "Once the moon was here, it looked terrible...it actually wrecked it...it just felt wrong." After moving it to the top he feels the composition is resolved saying: "Even cut off it looked right." (Blackwood). He speaks about the painting like it is a series of actions and reactions where the momentum of one decision pushes or pulls him towards the next one. The "Trying Not to Die" series is based on actions and reactions. A good example of this process is shown in my work "The Shoe is on the Other Foot (Wherever that is)" (see fig. 2) I use this painting to explain how actions and reactions guide my decision making process.



**Fig. 2 Gord Bond, *The Shoe is on the Other Foot (Wherever that is)***

The inspiration for “The Shoe is on the Other Foot (Wherever that is)” is to create a central form, focusing on a single element of the body. I begin with an oil pastel outline of a hand but after seeing the hand on the canvas, the composition looks flat. In reaction to this I choose a foot. The foot bears weight. I want something substantial to anchor the center of the composition. I stylize the foot in a kidney bean shape thereby drawing comparisons to the similarly shaped “Head” (see fig. 3) by Philip Guston. Next, I begin blocking in areas of colour starting with the ground. Initially I paint a variation of the cadmium yellows and reds which I used in the previous nine paintings of the series, but the combination of form and colour isn’t working. After applying the ground, I become concerned that by using a similar palette throughout my entire series the viewer may become disinterested and simply gloss over paintings like one homologous glob of paint. However, if I cause a break in this pattern I will be able to keep the viewer guessing. Searching for a break from the previous palettes, I cover the ground with a rich black. However, I don’t want this painting to feel isolated in the series. To prevent this I create the black using an assortment of ten different hues used in the previous



paintings. To further exaggerate the relationship to the previous palette, I apply the paint thinly in areas allowing the original ground to show through. I then begin to paint the foot. In my excitement to move on to the next layer, I find the black ground is still tacky. Since the black is in a state between wet and dry, the warm flesh tones of the foot begin to mix in a unique, somewhat marbled effect. Unexpectedly, I stumble on a solution to integrate the background with the foot in the foreground. I explore this effect, allowing the paints to mix and areas of the ground to show through. As the foot is nearing completion, I return to the original oil pastel drawing of the hand. In the painting, the hand sits subtly beneath the foot and just barely above the black ground, providing another way of moving between the background and foreground. Despite deciding to use the foot instead, it is important to note how the drawing of the hand comes back as a significant piece of the composition. Ultimately, the exploration and freedom to make mistakes or abruptly change direction within the process are what helps me negotiate the final composition. This step-by-step guide outlines the typical series of actions and reactions which occur throughout the process of creating a painting.



**Fig. 3 Philip Guston, *Head***

Building a successful composition is reliant on understanding the significance of the formal tools applied within each painting. Contrasting Philip Guston's paintings with my "Trying Not to Die" series I explore the role of tension, depth, layering of paint and use of mixed media

within specific paintings.

Encyclopaedia Britannica describes tension as “a balance maintained in an artistic work (such as a poem, **painting**, or musical composition) between opposing forces or elements; a controlled dramatic or dynamic quality.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Guston’s painting “Head” epitomizes the use of tension I attempt to achieve in my work “I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You)”. (see fig. 4) The tension in “Head” arises between the form of the head and the negative space on the right of the canvas. This negative space is filled with repeated short brush strokes of muted cadmium red and a few isolated white marks. While this area doesn’t make any claim to representation, the space seems to hint at the presence of another head, pulling the viewer between the contrasting components of the composition. Accentuating this tension is the energetic application of paint Guston uses throughout his work. In the text “Philip Guston”, critic/curator Robert Storr says “...the primary formal tension is between the physical weight of the paint and the anxious activity of the artist’s brush” (Storr 67). Guston uses the weight and energy of his paint application in “Head” to animate the negative space and create tension with the form of the head.



Fig. 4 Gord Bond, *I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No, I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You)*

In contrast to Guston's "Head", my painting "I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love *You* So Much I Could Just Eat *You*)", uses the competition of forms and contrasting densities of paint to create tension instead of negative space. What keeps the composition of "I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love *You* So Much I Could Just Eat *You*)" from falling apart are the intestines being eaten in the center. The figures on either side appear to both push and pull towards the guts. It is important to ensure the intestines convey enough weight and definition, otherwise, the figures and guts will sit inactively on the same plane, destroying the tension. By mixing colours directly on the canvas I am able to achieve exaggerated flesh tones while animating the forms with anxious brush strokes like those of Guston's. The cadmium reds and yellows of the flesh create tension, forcing the viewer's eye between the warmth of the figures and the sickly greens and yellows of the intestines. In contrast to Guston, I also explore the effects and textures which oil pastel provide. By layering oil pastel and acrylic paint repeatedly over each other, the paint gains a rough yet, fleshy texture. This exaggerated texture builds tension between the forms of the painting. Contrasting "Head" and "I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love *You* So Much I Could Just Eat *You*)" provides an example of how various techniques can be used to achieve tension in a painting.



Fig. 5 Philip Guston, *Painter in Bed*

While viewing Guston's painting, "Painter in Bed" (see fig. 5), at the Museum of Modern Art, I find myself marveling at the depth of it. The paint possesses a history which leads you

deep within the work. Guston describes a compelling aspect of his process which may explain this history and depth: “Sometimes I scrape off a lot. You have on the floor, like cow dung in the field, this big glob of paint... and it's just a lot of *inert* matter, inert paint. Then I look back at the canvas, and it's not inert - it's active, moving and living.” (Blackwood). There are many accounts like the one above where Guston discusses how he will create a painting and then, in frustration or displeasure with the painting, scrape it all off leaving only a thin layer to work with. In another quote Guston describes this act of scraping the paint off as “destruction” (Blackwood), he tears down the painting leaving only the rubble of what once existed there. This is an important part of the painting process for Guston, the image is gone but what remains are vestiges - a history of his process. These vestiges are reflected in the final painting through the sense of depth and the layers built on top of each other. There is an overall aura to a Guston painting which leaves the viewer sensing an argument between the artist and the forms on the canvas.



**Fig. 6 Gord Bond, *MY GUTTSSS!!***

Painting the series, “Trying Not to Die”, my process is based on creating work which is immediate and compulsive. Whatever forms first arrive on the canvas are the ones that remain there. For instance the painting “MY GUTTSSS!!” (see fig. 6), was created in a feverish 4 hours where my sole aim is to place the image in my head on the canvas. Painting like this allows me

to be quite prolific and work through a large number of ideas. While this is helpful when establishing a new body of work, it ultimately leaves the paintings feeling superficial and unengaging. Sensing a need to create a more immersive body of work I take a page out of Guston's book and begin destroying all my previous work.



**Fig. 7 Gord Bond, *Spare Parts***

The painting "Spare Parts" (see fig. 7) is the first painting I destroy. It begins as a completely different form - a stake with a decapitated head placed unceremoniously on top of it. Thinking the head on the stake is finished I leave it to go on to another painting. After returning to the painting over the next few weeks I become unconvinced by the composition and destroy it. Unfortunately, the act of destruction is not as straight forward as replicating the scraping off of oil paint like Guston performs. I am using acrylic paint which dries shortly after application posing a new problem: How do I achieve the level of depth and history in Guston's work using acrylic paint? To solve this problem I build a new ground on top of the previous one using thin layers of paint allowing shadows of the forms below to peer through. By embracing these phantom forms I can use them to guide the next composition, further building on the history of the painting. For instance, the silhouette of the head in the original painting can still be seen and its' dark values anchor this area in the overall composition. Continuing this process, I destroy the painting 5 more times before resolving the image. When the painting is complete, only some of the layers can still be detected. However, these hidden layers along with the visible layers create a discernable history or lineage to be perceived in the depth of the painting.



**Fig. 8 Gord Bond, *You Played Yourself***

The process of building up and destroying layers of paint causes a type of cross-contamination where layers can intertwine with each other. This becomes an important formal tool for integrating the layers within the painting. Without this intertwining, layers would be forced to sit unsettlingly on top of each, offering no passage into the depths of the painting. The painting “You Played Yourself” (see fig. 8) offers a prime example of how this intertwining is used effectively. In the bottom section of the painting the erratic lines in pastel break through the top layer of paint, challenging the viewer to consider the relationship between these layers.



**Fig. 9 Philip Guston, *Yellow Light***

This is similar to another of Guston's techniques as shown in his painting "Yellow Light" (see fig. 9). Guston allows a form in a lower layer to protrude through a thin layer of paint he has applied as a ground. This pushes the viewer deeper into the painting creating a reverberation between foreground and background.

To further emphasize the movement between layers I begin considering how the contour surrounding the figures might be employed in a similar way. The contour becomes more than a way to solidify forms, it is a thread which I can weave between layers. This allows me to pull forms together or drive them to recede. Guston also arrives at this revelation, although he employs it in a subtler way. Upon close inspection of Guston's painting, "Head", you can see how the contour of a previous drawing is allowed to be covered by the ground in some areas while other areas sit firmly above the surface of the painting. Guston uses this technique to marry the elements and layers of the painting together, creating a cohesive composition.

Returning to my painting "You Played Yourself" I employ the contour line in a similar way allowing it to dip between foreground and background. Furthering this method, I use a line which moves not only between layers of the painting but between media as well. The choice to use oil pastel is made to emphasize this dynamic between layers of paint. Oil pastel is not covered as easily by acrylic paint because of the physical properties of the two media, therefore it creates a resist allowing lower layers to show through. By intertwining layers and intertwining

paint with pastel I am able to create a more immersive composition.

This action brings me back to my interest in drawing, stirring a reaction. It gets me thinking of my love for the great cartoonists I read as a child. I experiment using oil pastel to replicate their simplicity of line and form, providing me with another process to explore.



**Fig. 10 Gord Bond, *I Just Saw Him the Other Day***

Using oil pastel and relying on line, my work becomes a hybrid between painting and drawing. The drawing technique I use in my work is a tool for exploring formal and thematic ideas. In regards to the role of drawing in his own work, Guston states: “It is the bareness of drawing I like. The act of drawing is what locates, what suggests, discovers.”(Storr 113). As Guston suggests, drawing allows the artist to explore. My explorations lead me to exaggerate and stylize the forms of the figure. Looking at “I Just Saw Him the Other Day” (see fig. 10), there is a visible history of this exploration. The arms and hands are haloed by vestiges of previous drawings which mutate during the discovery of the figure. Drawing with oil pastels I marry my compulsion to exaggerate with my interest in exploring the figure.



**THE FAR SIDE**—by Gary Larson



**Unbeknownst to most historians, Einstein started down the road of professional basketball before an ankle injury diverted him into science.**

Fig. 11 Gary Larson, *The Far Side*

Drawing also serves as a way to pay homage to cartoons. Just as Guston's love for cartoons like *Krazy Kat* and *Zap Comix* are echoed in his work, my fondness for cartoons such as Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and Gary Larson's *The Far Side* find a place in the stylization of my figures. Using the conventions of artists in the genre and their simple line drawings, I am able to pay tribute to their influence. Examining the forms of my figures, there are distinct connections to Gary Larson's *The Far Side*. In his cartoons, Gary Larson creates bulbous, quasi-humanoid creatures, often lacking defined features like necks and eyes. Larson's necks often amount to glorified chins and in an effort to obscure the eyes he draws glasses or large Neanderthal brows (see fig. 11). Similarly, the figures in the painting "I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You)" lack necks and eyes, instead their heads sit stoutly on their shoulders and their eyes are essentially scribbles. This painting shows the influence cartoonists such as Larson have on my current body of work.

Cartoons are not a common mode of representation within art, however the urge to exaggerate form has led some artists to cartoon-like stylization. Mike Kelley wrote an essay titled "Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature" in which he discusses the place of cartoon or as he refers to it, caricature, in art history. A caricature is essentially a likeness created through "abbreviation" (Kelley 117). By taking the forms of a figure and distorting them to create a more essential depiction of a person I am working in the vein of caricature.

For instance my piece "I Just Saw Him the Other Day" the portrait is broken down into basic forms. The eyes and cheeks become circular and lacking definition, while the nose becomes triangular with gaping round nostrils. These are the type of characterizations that Kelley defines as abbreviation in his description of caricature.

Trying to locate caricature in the hierarchy of art, Kelley places it very low in the mind of the "educated" art lover" even suggesting it may "provoke indifference or disgust" (Kelley 117). As if echoing the themes in my paintings, Kelley suggests caricature succeeds in art when it establishes a relationship with the grotesque. At this point Kelley stops to define the grotesque and provide its relationship to caricature. Kelley states: "In the fifteenth century, the word "grotesque" was used to describe the fantastic, intricately patterned decorations - pastiches of satyrs, cupids, fruit, foliage, festoons, knots, bows - found in the ruins of ancient Rome."(Kelley 119). These grotesque images were pagan creations which soon became labeled as "foul and ugly" with the rise of Vitruvian notions. By the 19th century Kelley states caricature and the grotesque were essentially interchangeable, however he makes sure to outline the distinction between the two terms: "In caricature, distortion serves a specific purpose, in most cases to defame, while in the grotesque it is done for its own sake, as a formalized displacement of parts. The only purpose of the grotesque is to surprise the viewer." (Kelley 127). These definitions provide an interesting context for my own work, which falls into both categories.



**Fig. 12 Gord Bond, *All My Friend's Heads are Falling Off***

Let's take "All My Friend's Heads are Falling Off" (see fig. 12) as a reference for discussion. If we analyze the painting using the definition of caricature, the painting does serve as an act of defamation, not for a specific person in this case, but of the body in general. The unabashed destruction of the body in my work is a way to shame it for falling apart and giving in to illness or death. On the other hand, if we consider the painting in terms of the grotesque, there is an emphasis on how the body can be disfigured to explore its' formal qualities. For instance, the head is removed from its body in an interesting juxtaposition of how the viewer would normally encounter a head. The composition also exaggerates the form of a head to consciously engage and activate the square canvas it is located in. "All My Friend's Heads are Falling Off" is an example of how caricature and the grotesque play an important role in the mode of representation I use in my work.



**Fig. 13 Gord Bond, I'm Guttled**

Considering the use of caricature and the grotesque throughout art history, we can once again look at the work of Philip Guston. In the book “Yes, But...” Dore Ashton describes the formal qualities of caricature and its place in Guston’s work: “Caricature is at its best a *characterizing* gesture.” Ashton continues with respect to Guston, “His characterizations of cups, heads, and even figures can be read in the massed brushstrokes and identified” (Ashton 137). In Guston’s “Head” we can see how he has used a “characterizing gesture” to distort the form of a head while maintaining its identity. Ashton also comments on the grotesque in Guston’s work suggesting the relationship exists because of Guston’s preference towards “subversion” (Ashton 137). Dore Ashton elaborates: “Painters’ dreams are very often peopled with objects and creatures that defy the natural order.”(Ashton 138). Ashton is referring to how the stylization of Guston’s paintings, is a method of subverting nature and thus his work enters the realm of the grotesque. My painting “I’m Guttled” (see fig. 13) epitomizes the place of caricature and the grotesque in my own work. The pile of guts acts as a moment of absurdity where the ambiguous forms characterized by the lines and colours come together to form various organs and entrails. In “I’m Guttled” the grotesque is also achieved by reducing the organs to ambiguous shapes. This creates a pause for the viewer as they try to understand what it is they see. The use of

caricature and the grotesque provides an interesting perspective on art's role in subverting the assumptions made by the viewer.

The grotesque and caricature also contain connotations to the modern cartoon strip allowing Guston and myself to elicit humour from our paintings. Since the popularization of the daily cartoon within culture, we are programmed to read caricature as something humorous. The grotesque on the other hand, seems to be more often associated with a sense of pathos. In "Yes, But..." Ashton suggests that despite the pathos, the grotesque also possesses a type of humour, he writes: "Laughter caused by the grotesque, as [Baudelaire] said, has something profound about it, and many artists have understood the world in terms of a finally absurd puppet play, a Punch-and-Judy spectacle in which forces of stupidity and violence work mysteriously." (Ashton 139). If we consider the relationship of the grotesque and caricature to be these "forces of stupidity and violence", humour derived from the grotesque and caricature becomes an interesting meditation on the human condition. As Ashton elaborates on this profundity, he comes back to the idea of subversion, suggesting, "no matter how much it is disguised in masquerades, slapstick, and absurdity, remains a serious and inescapable matter." (Ashton 140). This subversive quality of caricature and the grotesque allows me to engage both humour and anxiety. For example, in the painting "All My Friend's Heads are Falling Off", the viewer is confronted with a cartoon-like severed head and ambiguously styled organs bursting from it. This painting elicits a comical response but its' humour is rooted in anxiety about death and illness. By exploiting the subversive qualities of caricature and the grotesque I am able to engage the viewer on several levels.



Fig. 14 Philip Guston, *The Studio*

Guston uses the subversive quality of the grotesque and caricature in a similar way. Superficially the image of the hooded Klansman working at the artist's easel in "The Studio" is quite comical but the crudely stylized forms act as a mask covering Guston's discussion of racism and personal guilt. Robert Storr describes the events experienced by a young Philip Guston, along with a group of several other artists. After completing a mural depicting the Scottsboro Boys<sup>1</sup> in a L.A. civic building, a group of American Legionnaires destroyed the mural, even shooting out the eyes and genitals of the figures (Storr, 13). Guston's hooded figure is a symbol of this traumatic event and his social awareness. The hooded figure also represents Guston, who before moving east, changed his name from Goldstein to avoid being labeled as Jewish (Mayer 21). Guston subversively confronts both his own shame and his heightened awareness of racism by using the humour of caricature and the grotesque as a facade to engage the viewer.

This subversive humour-anxiety relationship exists in popular culture as well. While

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<sup>1</sup> The Scottsboro Boys were a group of 9 black teens who were falsely tried for raping two white girls in 1931. The case is well known as one of the worst acts of injustice in American history because of the racism and prejudice dictating the trials.

creating my series “Trying Not to Die”, cartoons in particular, were a constant reference material. I will often leave cartoons strips open beside me while painting. *Peanuts* is a mainstay beside my easel because the creator, Charles Schulz, masterfully used his hilarious 4-panelled pathetic anecdotes as a guise to explore aspects of the human condition. For example, take this dialogue between Charlie Brown and Lucy for example:

Lucy: Why do you think we were put here on Earth Charlie Brown?

Charlie Brown: To make others Happy.

Lucy: I don't think I'm making anyone happy...

Lucy: Of course, nobody's making me very happy either...

Lucy: SOMEBODY'S NOT DOING HIS JOB!!! (Loria 44)

In this dialogue, Lucy poses a question about the meaning of her existence. Charlie Brown responds with a commendable answer to the question of why we are here: “To make people happy”. Lucy, like a lot of people does not seem content with this answer and she responds by angrily placing her blame on some unknown force. It is this type of playful dissection of the human condition that allows Charles Schulz to engage his audience on several levels. I attempt a similar feat in my work “I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat *You*)”. I use the title like a caption you would see in a cartoon. I then allow the cartoon-like stylizations of the figures with their huge gaping mouths and apathetic expressions to frame the situation as a comedy. These indicators serve to subvert the ulterior motive of the painting which seeks to speak about the anxiety of losing a loved one. Like *Peanuts*, these paintings speak to the human condition, however my paintings explore darker aspects of our lives such as anxiety, illness and death. Formally, “I Love You So Much I Could Just Eat You (No I Love *You* So Much I Could Just Eat *You*)” quotes a compositional technique employed frequently by Charles Schulz. He places two characters in a frame and allows the dialog in the speech bubble to form a connection. The same tactic has been applied here but replacing the speech bubble is a pile of intestines overflowing from both figure's mouths. While this is a humorous exaggeration it also suggests the expression of deep-seated anxieties. By referencing cartoons I am able to highlight the humour of the painting while subverting personal anxieties.

Although my process emphasizes reacting and exploring during the act of painting, the decisions are carefully considered and conscious of the ideas they invite into the work.

Throughout Part One I examine how formal decisions regarding tension, depth, layering of paint and use of mixed media invoke references to caricature, the grotesque and cartoon. By analyzing the formal decisions with regards to specific paintings in the “Trying Not to Die” series I am able to contextualize my art practice within a tradition epitomized by the work of Philip Guston.

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## Part Two

**“Every one of these cartoons is just something that drifted into my head when I was alone with my thoughts. And, for better or for worse, I “jotted” them down. It was only later, when perhaps I received an angry letter from someone, that it struck me: Hey! Someone’s been reading my diary!” (Larson)**

In Part Two I focus on the thematic elements of my work which speak to personal anxieties of death and illness. Using fragmented diary entries from the first three deaths I experienced in my life, I attempt to unpack how anxiety affects my relationship with my art and how it is represented formally in the series “Trying Not to Die”.

For me, the process of painting is similar to writing in a diary. Thoughts are unedited, jotted down with a lucid, feverish energy where the discoveries are often unknown to my conscious self. The exploration of the unknown becomes the drive to create. This latest diary entry, “Trying Not to Die”, is a series of paintings where bodies are falling to pieces in a variety of absurd tableaux. There is an overwhelming sense of death and anxiety but the question is: where do these themes intersect with the process of painting?

The individual is a cultural sponge, we absorb trends and events occurring around us and internalize them, providing our own critique. In an interview with The Brooklyn Rail, painter Dana Schutz explains the cultural relevance of the individual's role in art:

The issue with painting maybe, is that people always tend to see it as



being in first person. But I think that's not quite true. The experience of painting is much more diffuse and complicated, actually disembodied in a strange way. I love that Art 21 Mike Kelley interview when he says that people initially thought his work was about his personal abuse, and then he says something like, yes, but it's not just my abuse, it's our abuse. (Earnest)

The statement "it's *our* abuse" is particularly important to the artist's role in creating an image because expression isn't *of* the self it is *through* the self. The painting process is a diffused view of the world, which has passed through an individual. Creating a painting about death is not only my view of mortality but includes a collective view of it.

**April 19th, 2004 (Grade 9)**

*Yesterday Aunt Lynn died. My mom was crying so much, I have never seen her so sad. She was yelling and crying harder than I knew possible. At first I didn't even understand what happened. I was really worried for her but my dad told me and Evan to go to our room and wait. We just sat there confused and sad for mom. Eventually dad came to get us and he told us that Aunt Lynn died. I felt confused because I wasn't as sad as my mom was. I miss her but I am not that sad. Evan doesn't seem sad either. Should I be sadder?*

**April 24th, 2004:**

*My mom is still really sad. I feel like I am missing something inside.*

The body harbors death, it keeps it hidden deep in our gut until our body betrays itself one day. In these paintings I am dissecting the body, rooting around to find where death is hidden within us. When my Aunt Lynn died, it was caused by a congenital heart defect, a hole in her heart. Once we were told the defect was genetic, my mother had us tested to make sure we weren't going to find the same fate. Waiting for my mother and brother to get tested, I could hear their hearts beating. It is such a strange sound to hear a heart beat so loud and clearly. It transports you, as if you were enveloped in their body. I remember vividly, my own heart beating during my test, it was much quicker than the rest of my family. This concerns me. Is there something wrong with my heart? The technologist said it was not a concern but the quick rhythm has stuck with me. It has placed a seed of doubt in my mind. I wish I could open myself up and take a peek just to make sure the doctors weren't lying to me. My Aunt Lynn's death has made me question the human body and its ability to preserve life. In my paintings, I open up

countless bodies searching for the root of my anxiety. Within each new dissection my anxiety eludes me.

In the painting “MY GUTTSSS!!”, the figure sits squatted looking down with a pile of his own organs in his hands. The figure in this painting is clearly confused and anxious about his dire condition, mirroring my own anxieties about the body’s ability to protect life. There is no evidence of violence in the painting, it’s as if the guts simply decided to reject his body. This is not dissimilar to the feeling of hearing my heart racing as if trying to escape my body. To emphasize the corporal within my work, I specifically choose a palette of cadmium reds and yellows which exaggerate the warm tones of flesh. The essential aspect of these paintings is the human body and the contradiction it represents between life and death. While the human body is a truly remarkable structure, it is also full of flaws. It flaunts mortality in our face with every sickness, scrape and medical scare.

**August 18th, 2005:**

*Grandpa has been sick for a really long time now. He hasn’t been himself. Mom keeps telling us to visit him but his medication is making him really hard to talk to. He doesn’t remember anything.*

**January 29th, 2006 (Grade 11):**

*I was waiting to pick up Lisa from work and I had this really weird feeling. I felt like my Grandpa died in that moment. I just started to bawl uncontrollably. I stopped before Lisa came out so I don’t think she noticed. It was really weird. I don’t want to tell anyone. It sounds like something religious, I don’t believe in that kind of thing. When I got home I found out that Grandpa passed away that night. It was probably just that I knew he wasn’t doing well and I just kind of pieced it together at that moment, still can’t shake how weird it was.*

The body *will* betray itself. Organs give out unexpectedly. Our strength can leave us. Our skin can be sliced by the slightest brush against it. Wounds can be left to fester. There is a never-ending list of ways that the body will fail the individual. And, what’s more, if we live long enough the body does not reward us, it betrays us. It gives up, and falls to pieces, one organ failing after another. These paintings are explorations, opening up an understanding of my own mortality and confronting my anxiety.

My Grandfather was not young and we knew his death was getting closer. It did not shock anyone. However, this didn't make it any easier to bear. The body is the vessel for life, we expect it to sustain us and keep us safe. It is an eye-opening event to see the last few years of a person's life. The body begins failing, piece after piece the armor cracks, allowing death to find another way in. When my Grandfather was younger he stood tall and strong but nearing the end of his life his failing back caused him to be hunched over, constantly looking at his feet. As we age our organs struggle to do their job and we supplement them with drugs to help facilitate their failing functions. The pills may help the dying organ but they simultaneously wreak havoc on the mind, slowing it down and fogging it up.

Traitorous seems like the most apt term to describe our bodies upon death. In the painting "All My Friend's Heads are Falling Off", the severed head sits in the canvas with a baffled look on its' face. Confused, it seems to ask: "Why did my body leave me? It was supposed to protect me." The body is missing as if it had run away ashamed to have let the head down - the same way my grandfather's body let him down. The bodies in this entire series elicit a sense of confusion and betrayal. Confusion is what helps me navigate these compositions. I am searching for a composition where the forms create a state of flux, producing anxiety for the viewer. The confusion can be read in the poses of the figures or the unbalanced way the limbs are stacked in heaps.

**January 30th, 2006:**

*I cried this time. I am much sadder than when Aunt Lynn died. I feel like I am crying for both of them. Everyone is really sad. I have cried a lot over the last week. I feel really bad that I didn't hear all of Grandpa's stories he tried to tell me and Ev while he was around. I should have gone to visit him more like mom said. I'm crying writing this. I hate this.*



**Fig. 15 Philip Guston, *Source***

Philip Guston dealt with many anxieties while creating his work. In the book “Night Studio” Musa Mayer, Guston’s daughter, describes a particularly anxious time in Guston’s life when his wife (and her mother) had a stroke, losing the ability to write her poetry. This deeply affected Guston leaving him distraught and anxious about the fragility of life. The work Guston created following this moment is heavily based in the events surrounding his wife’s stroke. Musa describes a painting of her mother which is particularly captivating, “In the emblematic *Source* (see fig. 15), done in 1976, her head, haloed like a saint’s, eyes looking up at heaven, rises - or is she setting? - like an inspiration, a muse, a sun over a bright blue, slightly tilted sea.” (Mayer 129). The most telling part of this description is “or is she setting”. While Musa may have hoped her mother was rising up, the ambiguity of Guston’s painting hints at his anxiety about his wife’s condition.

While it is not specifically death Guston is referencing, it is an anxiety based on loss like my own. The ambiguous nature of his paintings place the viewer in a state of unknowing, mirroring the anxiety Guston is channeling in his work.

**March 5th, 2006:**

*We were at the Shaw’s for dinner and Bill told us he has cancer...*

**March 5th, 2006:**

*I don’t get how Bill could have cancer. He is so healthy. He runs and wins 10K’s all the time. He runs to work in Oakville, which is like 30km away!! It’s not fucking fair. It’s bullshit, it doesn’t make any sense.*

**April 12th, 2006:**

*I saw Bill today he was lying on the couch in the white room. He looked so skinny. He had on a toque and his beard was white. He looked like an old fisherman. I really hope he beats his cancer but he doesn't look good. He's too young and healthy to die. If anyone can beat cancer Bill can.*

Bill's death was the most personally traumatic death I have experienced. When we were kids, my brother and I spent as much time as possible at the Shaw's house, Bill became a second father to us. Hearing he had cancer was like hearing my own dad had cancer. There is a feeling when you are young that your dad is invincible and will always be around for you. Bill was no different.

**April 23rd, 2006:**

*Bill died today. Mom said it wasn't a good idea to go see him in the hospital before he died. Zack and the rest of his kids got to go. I know I'm not one of his kids but I felt like I was. I should have gone.*

**April 23rd, 2006:**

*I can't stop crying when I'm alone. I don't know how people deal with death all the time. All I can do is think of everyone that's died and all the things I should have done with them well they were still around. I really hope no one else dies. I feel like I am just waiting for someone else to die. I don't think I could stand it if Mom, Dad or Evan died. I can't even imagine being sadder than this.*

The day Bill died the illusion of invincibility was removed. This was the moment death became something real and even worse it was random. I began to understand there was no logic to death, it could come for anybody at anytime. In the series "Trying Not to Die" the crudeness of representation references the grotesque and caricature but it also echoes the randomness of death. I look to painting to find somewhere to place all the energy that comes with anxiety and mourning. After Bill's death I attempted several portraits, but every one fell short. Bill was transformed, with his death he was no longer a single person instead he was my loss of innocence and the embodiment of my anxiety.

The painting "I Just Saw Him the Other Day" is another attempt at a portrait of Bill. It

eventually becomes clear a portrait of Bill is impossible. As the painting progresses, anxiety comes forward as the subject, using my portrait as its' container. The lines of oil pastel become frantic and the paint application is full of energy. While the figure in "I Just Saw Him the Other Day" may be a self-portrait to a degree, it is truly a record of the anxiety I now foster as a result of these three deaths.

There is an interesting discrepancy between the source of my anxiety and the images I create. The anxiety is based on a consciousness of the inherent mortality shared by humanity. This consciousness of mortality is in opposition to the gruesome images in the paintings, which despite mortal wounds, seem to defy death. These deaths, as reflected in both my diary entries and my paintings, have a profound affect on me. The painting process has become energetic and contemplative while the paintings themselves explore compositions and palettes which stress the anxiety of death and the body's fragility.

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## **Conclusion**

The impetus for "Trying Not to Die" is my introduction to Philip Guston's work. After toying with the consideration of exploring new processes and ideas, Guston's work gives me permission to experiment. As discussed in this paper, I developed a body of work situated in my interest of exploring the possibilities of paint while relying on personal anxieties to guide my process. Using Guston as a foil I am able to contextualize my practice within art and culture. Looking outwardly, I draw parallels to the grotesque and caricature outlined by Mike Kelley and to cartoonists such as Gary Larson and Charles Schulz. Looking inwards, I filter my anxieties around death and illness into energy expressed in the process of painting. "Trying Not to Die" shows me actions create reactions and expands my understanding of painting by pushing my process to explore new techniques and materials.

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