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Philip Guston's Poor Richard

Debra Bricker Balken

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In 1971, as the race for the presidency heated up, the artist Philip Guston (1913-1980) created a series of caricatures of Richard Nixon titled Philip Guston's Poor Richard. Produced two years before Watergate and three years before Nixon's resignation, these provocative, searing condemnations of a corrupt head of state are remarkable, prescient political satire. The drawings mock Nixon's physical attributes--his nose is rendered as an enlarged phallus throughout-as well as his notoriously dubious, shifty character. Debra Bricker Balken's book is the first book--length publication of these drawings.

A visual narrative of Nixon's life, the drawings trace Nixon from his childhood, through his ascent to power, to his years in the White House. They incorporate Henry Kissinger (a pair of glasses), Spiro Agnew (a cone-head), and John Mitchell (a dolt smoking a pipe). They depict Nixon and his cohorts in China, plotting strategy in Key Biscayne, and shamelessly pandering to African Americans, hippies, and elderly tourists.

As Balken discusses in her accompanying essay, these drawings also reflect a dramatic transformation in Guston's work. In response to social unrest and the Vietnam War, he began to question the viability of a private art given to self-expression. His betrayal of aesthetic abstraction in favor of imagery imbued with personal and political meaning largely engendered the renewal of figuration in painting in America in the 1970s. These drawings not only represent one of the few instances of an artist in the late twentieth century engaging caricature in his work, they are also a witty, acerbic take on a corrupt figure and a scandalous political regime.

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