

TEEN TALKS Hill Art Foundation

Teen Talk on Comics, Cartoons and Video Games by Tony Bluestone

To think about and I don't know how familiar you guys are with the breath of New York art history and all that but I know that you guys have been studying a lot interesting to think about that comics are really becoming popularized in the thirties. And then like hardcore American abstraction comes in the 1940s and 50s. And then that gets kind of rejected and there's a sort of like celebration of comic so there's this back-and-forth that you are going to see throughout this lecture of the hi/lo divide and their sort of trying to smash that together. So I'm going to start my screen share. So I'm starting with Philip Guston who was an abstract expressionist and actually very successful, very popular abstract painter, but he was really, People couched him in expressionism and he was like I'm not really an expressionist, I really care about space, I think of the paint as character. And he was sort of frustrated with that characterization at the time. And so this is a painting that he did in 1957 really at the height of his career and fame as an abstract painter. That is the only abstract painting I'm going to show you in this lecture. This is just to give a sense of what we're building out of and then it what it sort of breaks into. And so at this and 20 years after that painting was made Philip Guston makes this painting and at the time was just people were very upset with him for jumping back into figuration at a time you know it's in 1969 and there is other figurative works happening but he'd been seen as such an abstract painter that this was such a radical break and he really saw objects and people as things that he didn't want you to like look at this and say this is a brush and brush means that it had to liver painted. But he liked the idea that objects could hold an interstitial space between worlds and he really wanted to play around with the type of language that was being used to talk about politics at the time. He was painting in post World War II and then and really thinking about the Holocaust in the atomic bomb but then this is painted during the height of the Civil Rights, and he creates this is called a studio and so it's thought of as a self-portrait where he puts himself in a clan outfit and is painting himself as such and really making this very slippery point about the way in which people can be identified and not. Really tapping into the darkness of the psyche of America at the time and into really playing with the slippery notion of identity and how identity gets presented right. So it's this clan mask right we know when we see it usually how people identify which is white supremacy and aryan nation and then like placing that in the studio with all of these other objects right. Create a sort of slipperiness between what those objects could be. He is after going through all this space of abstraction if you look at some of the first comics from when he grew up, so that early comic book era that I was talking about in the 1930s that's when he was growing up that's when he was a child and if you look at, so here is I'm going to bring us to this this comic book artist named Bud Fisher who was considered one of the first commercial comic book artists and I was like looking at this thing I was like "Oh my god", this guy has a tube tied into another guys mouth and is about to like explode something in this was supposed to just be the sort of like fun comic, that went into the newspaper every week that people are digested and something that Guston grew up looking at and really influenced him and if you look you know at some of the way the stuff is drawn it's very similar to the way Guston is making his work. In terms of the forms that he's really like layering on the thick paint and still using the language of abstraction that you see developed here.

Okay so 1964, Roy Lichtenstein is a young artist who has been studying with the abstract artists making a lot of abstract pieces putting stuff into it, adding figures to like a kind of abstract Landscape, so trying to deal with this sort of the muck of trying to ride out of it really really in that same way Gustin is doing things. And then one day he realizes that the kind of grotesque abstraction is in the Machinery itself of making print. And then what's making the prints, the comics in this Ben Day dot system. So if you look here you will see he is actually painting all the dots that you would normally see in a reprinted newspaper version of that. So he's kind of messing with the specific idea of like the painted image versus the mechanized one. So he's painting the machine as well as painting the image of the crying girl. And he makes a point that women in America at this time are depicted in this very particular way and that have very particular roles prescribed to them and that he's aware of that relates that to the mechanism of depiction. So in creating this image he's sort of doubling down on that as a way to have us reflect on that and that idea.

And then I wanted to show you guys another Lichtenstein image and this is, I have to move you guys around for me to see everything. This is wallpaper with a blue floor interior and he painted this in 1992. And so the reason I thought it was just a cool thing to think about is so this is an artist that is making an art piece reflecting on the way in which commercial comic culture is impartial to the way that we see the world and it's interesting to see how an artist develops that overtime. And so in 1992 he, he has a huge breadth of work from 1964 to 1992 it doesn't end then, but he investigates all these different ways that the commercial images part and parcel our life. This is an advertisement for luxury housing in, you know so much luxury housing is put together so quick and it's almost like it's made out of cardboard or something. It's just pieced together and so he's using that system of image-making and reflecting on that kind of mechanized way of making an image is also a mechanized of making a building which is also then how people think they should live their lives like that's the greatest achievement to get into like a fancy luxury building. But it's all this sort of mirage and so he's pushing that idea of the comic, the prescribed, the mechanical as a way in which we form images of the self.

So this is Gladys Nillson and Karl Wirsum, and these guys were part of a group known as the Chicago imagists and the Chicago imagists were they were in Chicago and super separate from the whole New York scene of everything that was happening there and they were all about using cartoons like they were looking at cartoons which has its relations to comics as well. They were like there's no rules we don't care about like painting or any of the traditional forms. There were three separate groups of Chicago imagists. In one group is known as the Harry who's and they were known for kind of playing around with the grotesque and getting, you know having a certain fun with painting and so here you have on the left is Gladys Nillson and she painted this mouth, that also has feet, who's eating a hotdog which has humans on it I don't know if those are cats watching but there's a sort of like freedom of line and the way that line forms a thought which is a being, which is the character that then engages with the other characters within the painting So using the language of cartooning to develop a sort of psychology to branch out from. And then this is Karl Wirsum he was a friend of hers on the right and this is a pencil drawing and it's called Untitled study for flat foot which is a funny title because as you see in both of these they are also pushing these ideas of flatness and not the way of image or a person is it's not a person right it's a flat thing it's a cartoon but it's also a reflection of a person and the person is

flat and by the circumstances they are put in. So you know on the right you have this weird character who's in front of a police lineup and the way in which like that interaction of subjectivity and when I say subjectivity I mean like having personhood, like with agency, in the world, being able to act for themselves can become limited to these situations like being put in a police lineup that then flattens them so they're taking there's a lot of crazy things happening in the world and they are taking those things and turning them into cartoons that can then play off of each other.