

ART SY

Devin Troy Strother Reimagines Philip Guston's Klan Paintings with Irreverent Humor



Devin Troy Strother

on the way to the rally / undercover brothers / shotgun, 2021

The Pit

Viewing Devin Troy Strother's paintings feels like binge-watching late-night TV awash with absurdist cartoons and provocations. In his works, a singular, swollen eye stares at a crude scribble of a foot; a lit joint rests on a brick wall during an inky night, framed by a metal can and a wine glass; and a Black figure, snug in bed, dreams of burning Klansmen. The Los Angeles-based artist draws from art history, pop culture, and personal observations to create caustic works in a variety of media—including prints, sculptures, and installations—that brim with irreverent humor and a cheeky desire to upend conventional narratives and social scripts.

Strother's current solo exhibition "Undercover Brother," on view at The Pit in Los Angeles until December 18th, features paintings that appropriate scenes and visual cues from artist Philip Guston—specifically his works from the 1960s and '70s that feature flat, cartoon-like renderings of cigarettes, enlarged eyeballs, and hooded Klansmen. Alongside these Guston-influenced paintings are thrifted ceramic figurines with complexions that Strother has painted black.



Devin Troy Strother

Roll it up and pass it to the left, 2021

The Pit

Contact for price



Devin Troy Strother

bonfire of the vanities / recent thoughts / wet dreams, 2021

The Pit

Sold

The show marks a deviation from Strother's past work, which integrated paper cutouts and found ephemera onto canvases, creating collaged explosions of color and outlandish set pieces. "I had been wanting to get away from having a collage aspect of the work for many years, but just wasn't exactly sure how I was gonna actually transition to that," Strother said in a recent interview with Artsy.

Eventually, he became enamored with the idea of removing what Strother refers to as “little tricks and diversions” from his work in favor of an unadorned painting style. This negation culminated in “Smoking and Painting,” a solo exhibition this past May at Broadway Gallery in New York, and marked the “first steps towards” a new direction that involved “just [him] and the canvas and the paint,” according to the artist.



Devin Troy Strother, installation view of “Undercover Brother” at The Pit, 2021. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of the artist and The Pit, Los Angeles.

In an effort to approach painting with fresh eyes again, Strother began making master copies of paintings he admired, a technical exercise he often did while studying illustration at the ArtCenter College of Design. A fan of the daffy visual language of Guston's later works, Strother swapped Guston's salmony figures for Black subjects, absorbing and remodeling the 20th-century painter's gestures into his own screwball figurations. After a few of his Guston experiments received a warm response at Broadway Gallery, Strother decided to continue expanding upon the series, leading to his current show at The Pit.

In *sleeping, smoking, and scrolling while i'm painting* (2021), Strother makes a direct reference to Guston's *Painting, Smoking, Eating* (1973). Both depict their blob-like subjects lying face up on a bed, biding time with a smoke, unable to sleep. While Guston sticks to an analogous color scheme of pinks and reds, Strother's vision has a darker color palette that embraces contrasts, where even a plume of smoke can become a braided swoosh of prismatic colors. In Strother's rendition, Guston's bright embellishments are undercut by paranoid details. The bloodshot eyes of Strother's figures are glued to cell phones, lost in the act of doomscrolling and mesmerized by an image of flames on their screens. On the left of the composition, green window blinds are drawn up to reveal a scene of two Klansmen burning in a fire and screaming for help.



Devin Troy Strother

sleeping, smoking, and scrolling while i'm painting, 2021

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“Undercover Brother” comes one year after four art institutions announced the postponement of a Guston retrospective, citing concerns about his Ku Klux Klan imagery. Many decried the decision, baffled by the museums’ reticence to provide contextual background on the work. Guston, who was Jewish and witnessed the Klan’s brutal anti-Semitism while growing up in Los Angeles, used the hooded figures to explore themes of complicity, self-hatred, and the banality of white supremacy. Strother was fascinated by these recent debates, explaining that “just the idea of ownership over imagery, and who has the license to talk about certain images and talk about certain things, is always interesting.”

Strother has a history of toying with the idea of artistic authority or stylistic ownership. In 2015, Strother and his partner, graphic designer Yuri Ogita, co-founded Coloured Publishing, an independent press dedicated to artists’ books, zines, prints, and T-shirts. Infused with the DIY and punk ethic culled from Strother’s formative years as a young skater in West Covina, California, the press reflects the viewpoints of artists unconcerned with the market impulses of the mainstream art world, and bypasses the stagnant tastes and structure of the traditional publishing industry. In addition to apparel and publications, Coloured Publishing has also sold ceramic vessels by Strother, including a series of terracotta ashtrays called “White Trash Receptacle.” Inspired by a character from the television show *Atlanta* who dons “white face,” the ashtrays are another example of Strother’s eccentric humor—this time, on display at art book fairs instead of fine art galleries.



Devin Troy Strother

the undercover brother / fixing to go the rally, 2021

The Pit

Sold



Devin Troy Strother

Black bait, 2021

The Pit

Contact for price

Though seemingly more innocuous than his paintings, Strother's ceramic works also tap into the energy of winking reclamation. *Black bait* (2021) depicts a weary fisherman, while *Roll it up and pass it to the left* (2021) shows a young child next to a large snowball. The ceramics reference his mother's practice of painting Christmas figurines, which led to what Strother cites as "one of the crucial moments in [his] life," where he realized the creative potential of rewriting popular narratives.

Strother's interest in widening our visual palette extends to endeavors beyond fine art. No matter the medium or material, his first priority is to remain nimble and open. "I feel like a change is always imminent in the work," he said. "It's always shifting and moving, and slightly evolving or devolving...[that's] a lot more interesting to watch." In his many practices, Strother crafts alternative realities that mirror his own particular fusion of memory, influence, fantasy, and nightmare. ●

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