

American Social Surrealism

Ilene Susan Fort

“The creative artist cannot escape his period”

O. LOUIS GUGLIELMI (1951)

During the Great Depression the struggle to survive was the dominant concern of all, and as a result every sphere of American life became heavily politicized. In art, Social Realism prevailed because it seemed the most appropriate style in which to describe social conditions and the one most easily understood by the public. Other aesthetics, however, were also adopted for political expression, and, in fact, some of the most vehement protests were those of a small number of artists who employed surrealist techniques. Osvaldo Luigi Guglielmi (known as O. Louis Guglielmi), Walter Quirt, and James Guy became known as the principal exponents of Social Surrealism. To a lesser extent, Peter Blume, Francis Criss, and David Smith also adopted Surrealism to express their criticisms of contemporary society.

Pure Surrealism was based on psychic automatism, the concept that the artist's unconscious dictates the creation of images without the intervention of conscious influences. In surrealist works, images of an irrational, dreamlike, and hallucinatory quality usually evolved, which, without the viewer's knowledge of the artist's personal psyche, often eluded interpretation. How could such imagery convey social criticism if it was not premeditated? Such a question is basic to any understanding of the nature of Social Surrealism.

The problem is twofold, involving both the creative process and the imagery formed by that process. Psychic automatism was probably not completely understood by the Social Surrealists, and not until the Abstract Expressionists appeared did American artists adopt it whole-heartedly. Quirt did not experiment with automatic writing until the early 1940s.¹ Guy came closest to expressing a sentiment similar to the European point of view when he stated, “When I'm half-way through with a picture, I discover that it has social meaning, and I'm surprised.”² Blume ascribed the creative process to a kind of magic when he stated:

There always seems to me to be a curious process or alchemy by which a number of diverse ideas out of the accumulation of images and experiences are suddenly brought together into a unified picture.³

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It is more likely, however, that most of the American images were created in a spirit similar to that of Guglielmi, who acknowledged his belief in the reality of the inner, subjective world without ever stating that this inner world was responsible for the creation of his images.⁴

As for the images themselves, the Social Surrealists based them on life in the real, physical world. During the depression daily existence became a nightmare pervaded by threats of the unknown. Thus, American artists created images as hallucinatory and frightening as European artists' more personal visions while retaining their focus on social problems.⁵ American paintings, however, lacked the eroticism and sexual overtones typical of European surrealist art.⁶ In general, the radical aesthetics of Surrealism enabled American artists to intensify the power of their social-political statements and thus to present familiar aspects of American life in a new perspective.

Social Surrealism, consequently, was not a theoretically pure form of Surrealism but rather an American borrowing of European surrealist techniques applied to social commentary and criticism. Of the three major Social Surrealists, Quirt began as a Social Realist and Guglielmi never totally abandoned Social Realism. The content of their surreal art seemed to demand that they choose a variation of the radical aesthetic closest to Social Realism. Therefore, during most of the 1930s, they were heavily influenced by Magic Realism and veristic Surrealism. Only near the end of the decade did abstract Surrealism begin to influence the Social Surrealists; actually, they left the exploration of this aspect of Surrealism largely to the Abstract Expressionists.

How did an art that is usually considered personal and irrational become the medium through which American artists expressed political and social protests? The answer lies in the nature of Surrealism itself and the timing of its introduction into the United States. The Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, then one of the most advanced museums in the country, officially introduced Surrealism into the United States in the winter of 1931 with the exhibition “Newer Super Realism.” It consisted of forty-nine paintings by Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Pierre Roy, and Leopold Survage.⁷ In a much altered form the show was transferred to the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in January of the following year.⁸ Guy visited the exhibition in his home town, Hartford, before he settled in New York, while Quirt and Guglielmi probably saw it at the Julien Levy Gallery.⁹

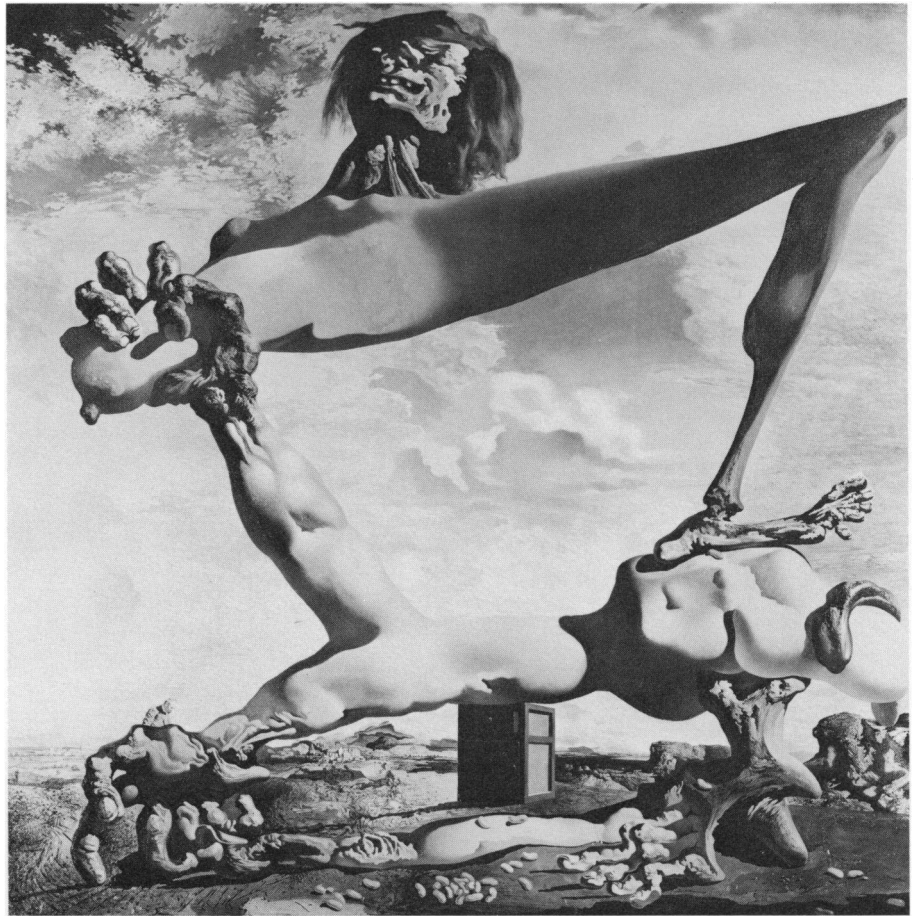


Fig. 1. Salvador Dalí, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 39 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.

During the next few years, numerous one-man exhibitions held in New York offered artists further opportunities to learn about Surrealism. The Pierre Matisse Gallery was active, presenting the first Masson exhibition in 1934, but Julien Levy was the primary proponent of European Surrealism with his shows of Ernst in 1932 and Dalí in 1934.¹⁰ In 1936, the Museum of Modern Art held the international display “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” which further promoted Surrealism, especially among the younger artists.

By the year of the MoMA exhibition a certain type of Surrealism was already familiar to Americans. It was best identified with the metaphysical paintings of de Chirico and the veristic but abnormal imagery of Dalí. De Chirico had been presented to America as early as 1927 in his first one-man exhibition, at the Valentine Gallery in New York.¹¹ His quiet, haunting, urban scenes appealed to artists who were less partial to the more bizarre fantasies of Surrealism. Dalí visited America in 1934, the first European Surrealist to do so, when his first exhibition was held at the Julien Levy Gallery. He returned to the United States several times before the influx of Europeans in the early 1940s.¹² It was Dalí’s extravagant theatrics, constantly recorded in the newspapers, that popularized Surrealism and, until the late 1930s, the movement was identified in America mainly with Dalí’s brand of verism.

A valuable source of information was Julien Levy’s book *Surrealism*, published in 1936 and for many years the stand-

ard American reference work on the subject. Along with discussions of the main figures of the movement and illustrations of each artist’s works were sections devoted to reprinted excerpts on thematic topics. Although the section on politics was not large, it included several crucial statements by André Breton that underscored the nature of Surrealism’s relationship to politics.

As the most avant-garde aesthetic of the day, Surrealism offered not only a radical language of forms but also an art in revolt against the bourgeois status quo.¹³ The Surrealists were concerned with the liberation of the mind, which they believed could be achieved through psychic automatism. They thought, however, that such intellectual freedom could only be attained after people were liberated from existing social and moral constraints. As early as 1925, Masson wrote in *La révolution surréaliste*, “the only social overturn valid in our time is the dictatorship of the proletariat as Karl Marx and Lenin have conceived it.”¹⁴ The French Surrealists’ realization that their art by itself could never alter the world led them to join the Communist party in 1927. The Communists, however, insisted that the Surrealists follow the party line on the proper means of transforming society. Since the Surrealists refused to do so, they were expelled from the party in 1933.

This setback did not deter the Surrealists from continuing to be concerned with politics and revolution. In 1935, Breton issued his *Position politique Surréalisme*, in which he asserted



Fig. 2. Walter Quirt. *Conflict*, 1935. Oil on gesso panel, 18½ by 24 in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Michael H. Baker, Minneapolis.

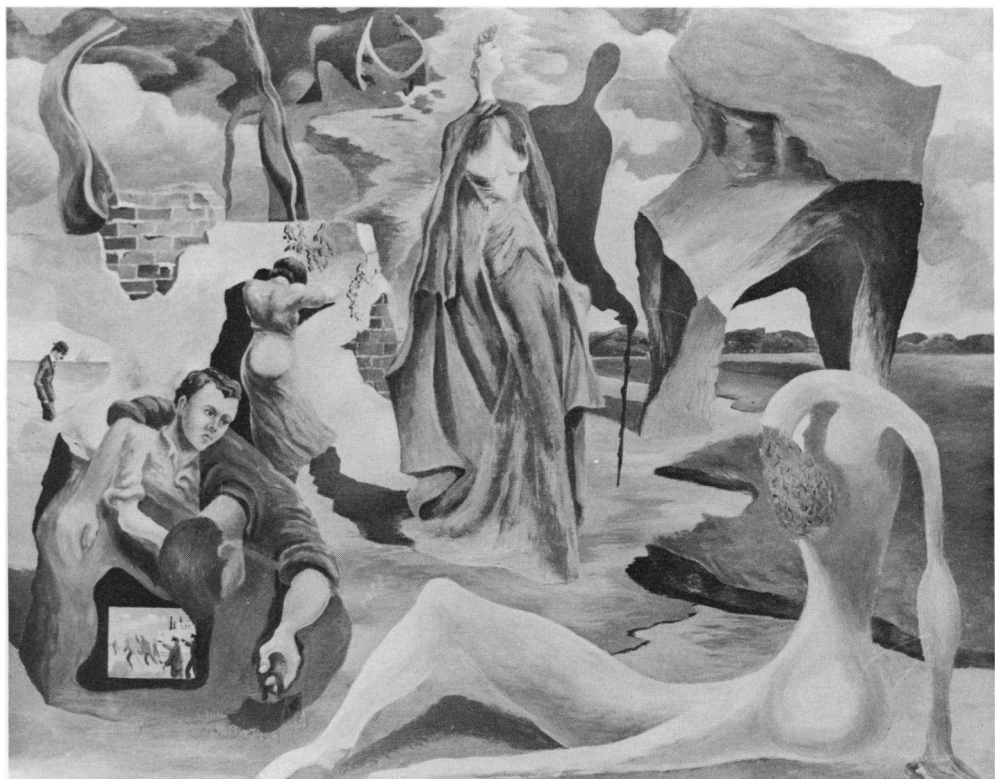


Fig. 3. James Guy, *The Evening of the Ball*, ca. 1939. Oil, dimensions unknown. Present location unknown. Photograph: WPA Photograph Collection, Archives of American Art.

the importance of the artist in contributing to the creation of a better world no matter how little he was understood by society.¹⁵ Still later, in 1938, Breton joined with Leon Trotsky in issuing a manifesto, published in *Partisan Review*, that reaffirmed the revolutionary role of art in modern society.¹⁶

Such radical politics were crucial to the work of two Social Surrealists, Quirt and Guy. Both artists were politically active before their arrival on the New York art scene. Quirt had organized a strike in Milwaukee in 1929 and Guy had staged a labor play, *Strike*, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1930.¹⁷ In New York, Quirt became a member of the Communist party, participated in May Day demonstrations, and illustrated articles for leftist magazines, while Guy joined the Unemployed Artists Group and painted a mural full of communist propaganda in the Thirteenth Street Communist Worker's School.¹⁸ Both artists were early members of the John Reed Club. Their similar political stances surely encouraged their close friendship and accounted for parallels in their art. Guglielmi, on the other hand, did not actively participate in politics, using lack of time as his excuse.¹⁹ With Quirt and Guy, however, he believed the artist was justified in creating propagandistic art wherever the society was open to many points of view.²⁰

The European Surrealists, for all their rhetoric, were usually apolitical in their paintings. Isolated examples of political commentary do exist, but usually nonpolitical elements are emphasized or the political motifs are difficult to read. Americans were quick to recognize this dichotomy, and the ensuing problems formed the basis of much of the critical debate over Surrealism in the art and political publications of the day. Generally, the Surrealists were viewed as escapists incapable of facing the dismal social reality of their times.²¹ In a 1932 *Modern Quarterly* essay, Diego Rivera acknowledged that Surrealism was the most significant recent revolutionary movement, but he noted that its potential was not fully realized because of its bourgeois techniques. Moreover, he concluded, "In ideology, they [the Surrealists] are not fully Communists. And no painting can be truly revolutionary unless it be truly Communist."²²

Dali's art was repeatedly criticized for just this lack of political relevancy. Even after he had been inspired by the Spanish Civil War to create strong (for him) antifascist statements, as in *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonitions of Civil War*, 1936 (fig. 1), Clarence Weinstock questioned:

When will Dali and his friends stop acting as though Lenin would have been dying to meet him? . . . Who is pleasing the bourgeoisie anyway, Aragon with "Red Front," or Dali with his slimy watches.²³

More specifically, the main issue became the appropriateness of Surrealism as a revolutionary art. The leftists viewed art as a tool for propaganda, and as such it had to convey its social messages in readable terms. Margaret Duroc's criticism published in *Art Front* was indicative of such sentiment. Reviewing the 1936 John Reed Club exhibition, she stated, "Surrealism is a false medium for the revolutionary artist. It uses an occult language which needlessly separates the artist from his audience."²⁴

It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the radical artists who joined the John Reed Club after its founding in 1929 retained a conservative style that was in accord with Marxist dogma. Quirt and Guy were two exceptions, insisting that a socialist art should be more than obvious portraits of political leaders.²⁵ Quirt adopted Surrealism as early as 1933 and Guy followed him soon after.

The juxtaposition of incongruous images was Quirt's and Guy's favorite surrealist device. Both men created complex compositions of overlapping and intertwining figurative groupings, which were psychologically associated but formally disconnected. Sometimes they created spatial divisions with walls and rocklike structures within which figures were set, as in Quirt's *Conflict*, 1935, (fig. 2) and Guy's *The Evening of the Ball* (fig. 3). This device enabled them to combine different times and places in a single composition—a combination that both artists felt was useful for their subject matter.²⁶ The technique of juxtaposing incongruities was also used frequently during the depression by muralists, especially by the Mexicans. Quirt and Guy both painted murals. Moreover, in the early 1930s, they visited Dartmouth College to watch José Orozco's progress on his fresco cycle; this experience no doubt affected their art.²⁷

From their earliest surrealist paintings, Quirt and Guy were repeatedly compared to Dali.²⁸ This was especially true of Quirt, whose minute scale and luminous, velvety smooth picture surfaces paralleled Dali's. But the critics were also quick to note that Quirt "functioned as a rational human being, not as a reflex mechanism for his irrational thoughts" and that he did not share Dali's "love for putrefaction."²⁹

Guglielmi, on the other hand, created visually simpler compositions, usually focusing on a single scene, sometimes in an exaggerated perspective or scale. His art was the least complex of the American Social Surrealists' and therefore the easiest to read. Since his surreal world bordered on the real, critics of his day spent much time debating whether he was a Realist, Magic Realist, or Surrealist.³⁰ *The Hungry*, 1938 (fig. 4), one of Guglielmi's many urban street scenes, is an image not very different from reality; however, a woman in the distance catches with an overturned umbrella money that miraculously rains from a cloud, while a couple and a destitute man crouched on the pavement remain oblivious to her new wealth. The foreground figures are preoccupied with thoughts of their own troubles, which Guglielmi visualized; a strange opening in the brick wall exposes the overbearing relief administrator, who controls the destiny of the poor.

Despite their different expressive devices, all the Social Surrealists suffered from criticism about the clarity of their messages. Quirt and Guy encountered immediate disagreement from their fellow members of the John Reed Club, most of whom found their art too ambiguous.³¹ Critics also questioned the propaganda value of their art. This was the general sentiment of reviews of Quirt's first one-man exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1936.³² Even E. M. Benson, who felt that the meanings of Quirt's paintings were obvious, doubted that such an art would ever be appreciated by the working class.³³ Guy met with similar comments that his cluttered compositions needed to be simplified to convey their message clearly.³⁴ Surprisingly, Guglielmi was also



Fig. 4. O. Louis Guglielmi, *The Hungry*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 30 by 24 in. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Chaim Gross, New York.

criticized for the obscurity of his images. A reviewer wrote in 1938:

It will be interesting to see whether Guglielmi in the future will take the metaphysical kink out of his work and make it more directly intelligible to the people for whom it is obviously intended. This is the basic problem.³⁵

Obviously he did not, for in 1943 his paintings were still considered to need “program notes.”³⁶

In their earliest surrealist paintings, Guglielmi, Quirt, and Guy attacked national problems, the general issues of unemployment, poverty, and workers’ rights as well as those of more specific social inequities. The plight of the city dweller was Guglielmi’s principal domain. He had been raised in an impoverished Italian tenement area of New York. This upbringing, along with financially difficult years as a young adult, forged his emotional ties with the poor.³⁷ In this respect his art is autobiographical, like that of the European Surrealists. Unlike them, however, he did not dredge up his innermost secrets as confessions but rather created objective statements about the problems of the poor. As a result, his scenes are always expressive of compassion and sympathy, with the added dimension of a poetic, haunting, and lonely quality similar to the mood of de Chirico. Guglielmi wrote:

I like to evoke the feel of a street, the unseen life hidden by blank walls, its bustle, and noise, the mystery of a deserted alley. My people may be occasional figures in a landscape or at times they are symbols of beings struggling in a flight of freedom from a world they helplessly had a part in creating.³⁸

In 1937, Franklin D. Roosevelt made the memorable statement, “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” “One-third of a nation” immediately became a popular theme, a rallying point for social critics.³⁹ The year after Roosevelt’s speech both Guglielmi and Quirt created paintings inspired by the president’s comment. Guglielmi’s *One Third of a Nation (Tenements)* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), presents an unreal encounter with an ordinary, spare, tenement building bedecked with a huge memorial wreath. Intensifying this bizarre juxtaposition are stone coffins lining the street, themselves transmutations of the rectangular windows and doors of the tenement.⁴⁰ Guglielmi’s building symbolizes a living death. In Quirt’s mural, also titled *One Third of a Nation* (now lost) the figures are indeed not well housed, clothed, or fed, but their arrangement in a complicated network of overlapping groups increases the difficulty of reading more than the painting’s most general theme.⁴¹

Quirt and Guy focused mainly on the plight of workers and farmers. Their paintings were attacks on the exploitation of the lower class and the greed and corruption of the middle class. This was especially true of the paintings of

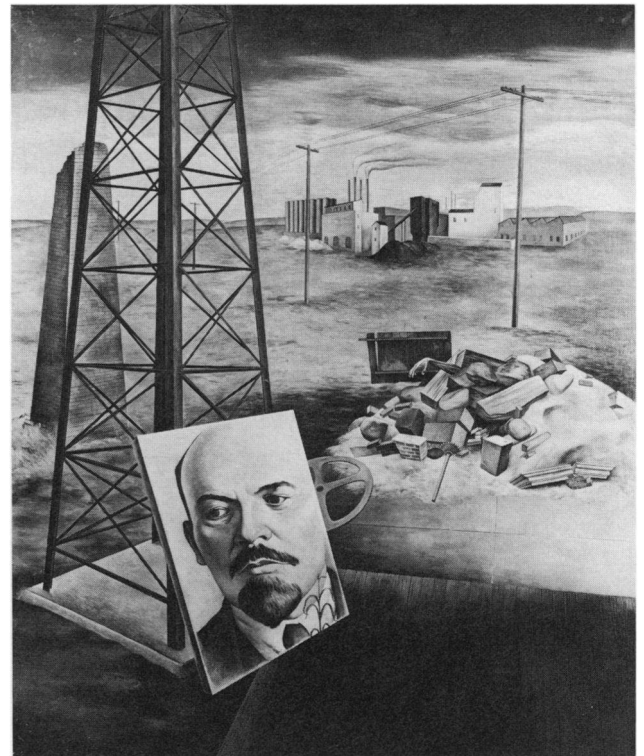


Fig. 5. O. Louis Guglielmi, *Phoenix (The Portrait in the Desert)*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 30 by 25 in. Collection of the Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection; courtesy, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



Fig. 6. Walter Quirt, *Burial*, 1934. Oil on gesso on composition board, 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously.



Fig. 7. Walter Quirt, *The Clinic*, 1935. Tempera on masonite, 12 by 15 in. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

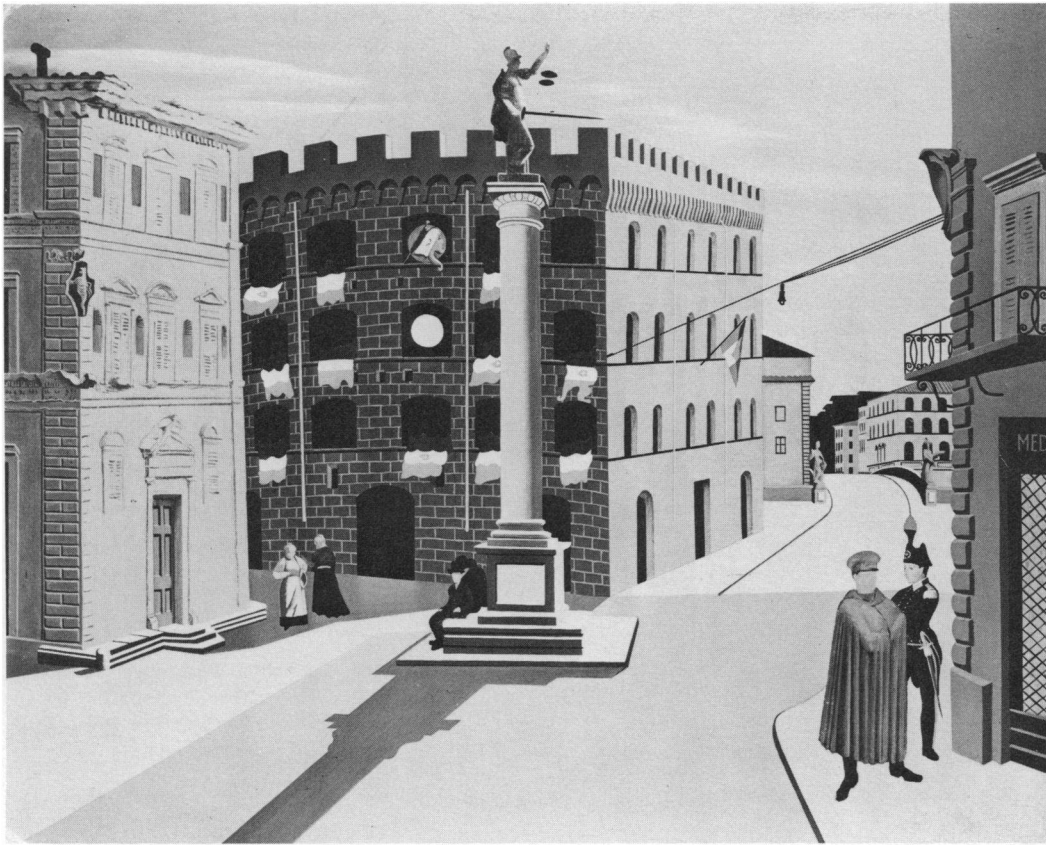


Fig. 8. Francis Criss, *Fascism*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 30 by 38 in. Collection of Ruth Criss Berke, Brooklyn, New York.

Quirt, who measured the quality of people's lives in terms of Marxist ideology. In their titles alone, the political stance of these artists becomes apparent, as for example, Quirt's *Nightmare of Capitalism*⁴² and Guy's *Capital Minus Labor*⁴³ (present locations unknown). In Quirt's *The Future Belongs to the Workers*,⁴⁴ exhibited 1933 (present location unknown), the artist delineated the various aspects of the workers' struggles for freedom from oppression. Guy's *Capital Labor*,⁴⁵ exhibited 1938 (present location unknown), is, no doubt, also a condemnation of the middle-class exploitation of the workers; however, the exact meaning of the individual figures has not been deciphered.

To a lesser degree, Guglielmi also produced pointed political attacks on capitalism. In *Phoenix*, originally titled *The Portrait in the Desert*, 1935 (fig. 5), he symbolized the birth of a communist society out of the debris of capitalism. Factories in the distance form a backdrop for the rubble of a workers' revolution—represented by the heaped wreckage of buildings from which a flayed arm emerges—which gives rise to the leadership of V. I. Lenin. He is portrayed by a photograph leaning against a steel tower that probably represents Joseph Stalin, whose pseudonym translates as “man of steel.” In addition, Guglielmi pictorialized one of the most heated political *causes célèbres*, the Sacco and Vanzetti affair, in *Memory of the Charles River*, 1936 (Julien Levy Collection).

Guy explored the relationship of the police to the common man. While *Police (Public Servants)* 1936 (private collection, New York), is a comment on the lack of police concern for the workers—strikers are beaten, the activities of the Ku

Klux Klan are ignored, and an officer asks for a pay-off—*Crempa Case and Bunker Hill*, 1936 (private collection, New York), refers to a specific injustice.⁴⁶ *Crempa*, a New Jersey farmer, tried to prevent a utility company from taking over his land, but in the process his wife was killed by sheriffs. These public officers were later exonerated by a judge, who awarded *Crempa's* land to the utility company. Each of these episodes is delineated in the painting. In Guy's opinion, there was no justice for the farmer, so he represented the judge as blindfolded but peeking out and holding bribe money in his hand; the battle of Bunker Hill, here a symbol of personal rights, is shown in the distance.

Racial equality was a popular cause among the leftist groups. Early on, Quirt began delineating the plight of the Negro. In 1933, he did a sketch for a proposed John Reed Club mural, *Negro Revolts Before and After the Civil War*⁴⁷ (now lost) and the following year the more surreal *Burial* (fig. 6). In the latter, an ordinary scene of a funeral has bizarre overtones as a result of the inclusion of a group of heads, representing various social types, over the coffin. Since one of the heads can be identified as that of Adolf Hitler, they may all portray important personages, historic and contemporary, who were instrumental in the promotion or prevention of human freedom. The fantastic, soaring perspective of the landscape intensifies the idea of the coalescence of divergent times. In *The Clinic*, 1935 (fig. 7), Quirt commented on how the Negro was used for experimental purposes in government-sponsored clinics.⁴⁸ Perhaps he was also equating this harrowing experience with the equally legal Ku Klux Klan-controlled courts (symbolized by the mysterious hooded

figure holding a book), which inevitably decreed the deaths of accused Negroes (represented by the strangled figure in the background).

As blacks were just one subgroup of workers, Quirt sometimes combined the races in statements about the universality of their suffering. *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread*,⁴⁹ 1935 (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), demonstrates both black and white farmers enduring a similar fate, poverty. The bleakness of the landscape echoes the hunger of the emaciated figures. Although several people clutch crosses, Quirt denies the usefulness of religion: the sky is filled not with beckoning angels or a redeeming Christ but with a cripple, a skeleton, and other starving figures.

The threat of Fascism began to appear as a theme in American painting in the second half of the 1930s, as a result of the international political situation. The cause of the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939, was popular among Americans, and the enthusiasm with which Picasso's *Guernica* was received upon its arrival in New York in 1939 was one indication of the antifascist sentiment of the art world. Even the usually apolitical Dali and Miró

were aroused by their country's struggle to produce antiwar statements expressive of their anguish.⁵⁰

In America, however, it was not the major Social Realists who created the first surreal, antifascist paintings but two artists who had experienced Fascism first hand while studying overseas under Guggenheim fellowships. In 1934, while in Europe, Francis Criss painted *Fascism* (fig. 8), a scene of a Florentine square populated by a handful of figures. The emptiness of the town square, the handless clock, and the lack of communication among the few figures are strongly reminiscent of de Chirico's nostalgic Italian scenes. Criss used the de Chirico iconography, however, as an anti-fascist statement; for instance, the statue of justice holds a sword in addition to a scale, implying that Fascism's justice was based on military power.

The most famous American antifascist statement was Peter Blume's *The Eternal City*, 1934–1937 (fig. 9). While he was in Rome (from 1932 to 1934) the Italians celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Fascists' march on Rome; Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, mobilizing millions of soldiers; and Italy became closely allied with Hitler. Blume derived



Fig. 9. Peter Blume, *The Eternal City*, 1937 (1934–1937, dated on painting 1937). Oil on composition board, 34 by 47 7/8 in. Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

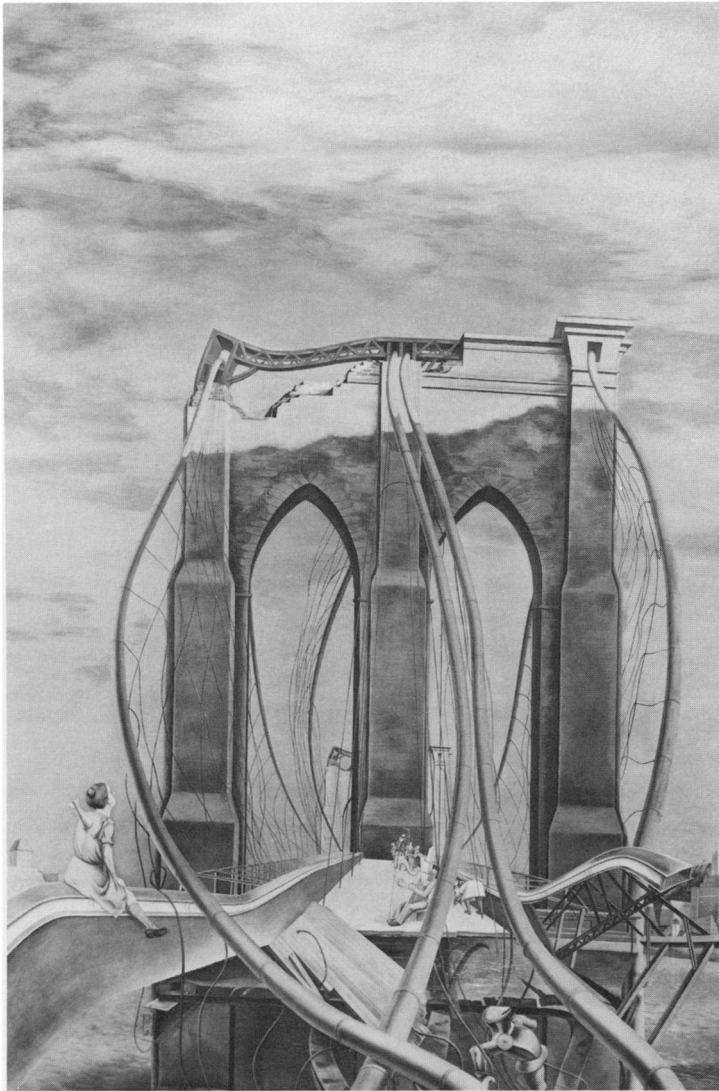


Fig. 10. O. Louis Guglielmi, *Mental Geography*, 1938. Oil on masonite, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 24 in. Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth.

the major image of the painting, the green jack-in-the-box head of Mussolini, from a papier-mâché puppet of the dictator that decorated one of the special anniversary halls in Rome. Each of the other meticulously delineated items further emphasizes the condition of Italy under Fascist rule: the broken sculpture of two lovers symbolizes the fragmentation of Italy, and the gaudy religious shrine is an attack on the venality of religion as Blume perceived the Italian practice of Catholicism, and perhaps a comment, as well, on the lack of religious compassion under the Fascists.⁵¹

When Blume's painting was exhibited at Julian Levy's gallery, in 1937, it aroused a heated controversy over its viability as a work of art, given the strong political overtones.⁵² The virulent, green head of Mussolini was the formal element most heavily criticized, but Blume countered by explaining that this visual discordance was intended to strengthen his political statement. Although the painting is about Italy, Blume hinted at its applicability to America: the distant

mountains are not the Apennines but the Rockies.⁵³ Blume suggested that Fascism, though far away, could reach America.

Guglielmi conveyed a similar message of distant threat in *Mental Geography*, 1938 (fig. 10). Reacting to the devastation wrought by the Spanish Civil War, the artist imagined the destruction of the Brooklyn Bridge after an air raid. In 1938, he explained:

Loudspeakers of Fascist destruction scream out the bombing of another city . . . yesterday, Toledo, the Prado. Tomorrow, Chartres—New York—Brooklyn Bridge is by the process of mental geography a huge mass of stone, twisted girders and limp cables.⁵⁴

Later he wrote: "I meant to say that an era had ended and that the rivers of Spain flowed to the Atlantic and mixed with our waters as well."⁵⁵

It is significant that Guglielmi employed the Brooklyn Bridge as the dominant motif for this painting. The bridge was one of the most popular images in American art of the second and third decades of the twentieth century, a virtual icon of American technology and progress. But Guglielmi showed its girders and cables entangled and its road leading nowhere, blocked by a vertical beam. Enmeshed in the cables in the foreground are fragments of a coat of armor, while at the far end of the bridge an armored body is raised on a galloping horse. The painting becomes more than just an antifascist statement; it is a comment on the condition of twentieth-century civilization.

Since the end of World War I, there had been a dichotomy in people's attitudes toward technology and its ability to lead mankind to a future utopia. Although many continued to believe in technical progress, the European Surrealists, like the Dadaists before them, held a negative point of view. Reacting to increased militarization in Europe during the 1930s, Guglielmi was not the only American Surrealist to depict the war machine as an enemy of nature. In 1939 to express his despair over the Ethiopian and Spanish wars, David Smith produced a series of bronze medals inspired by German war medals and meant as ironic awards to losers of the Nobel Peace Prize.⁵⁶ In *Bombing Civilian Populations* (fig. 11), he repeatedly substituted in surreal fashion a bomb for a baby. The central female figure has her mid-section torn apart to reveal a bomb-baby; storks drop bombs over the houses; and on the left a bomb sits in a highchair as the "well-nourished darling of civilization."⁵⁷ As Stanley Meltzoff demonstrated in his comparison of Smith's pregnant woman to Dali's later painting of giraffe-elephants dropping golden egg-bombs, *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll* (Private Collection, New York), both artists used the idea of Caesarean birth as a metaphor for the violence of twentieth-century life.

Of the three major Social Surrealists, Guglielmi was the only one to make explicit antifascist statements, but during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Quirt and Guy also shifted the emphasis of their art from national social issues to international political problems and eventually to more universal themes of a moral character. Since their art was based on the principle of responding to the human condition, they had to change their focus to reflect the increasingly realistic threat

of a world war. Quirt wrote in 1942, "Now, at last, American art can aspire to the universal, because the seeds of it exist in the spirit of the times."⁵⁸ Other factors lessened their enthusiasm for social issues. Politicized artists such as Quirt and Guy became disenchanted with the Communist party as a result of the 1936–1937 Stalinist purges and the 1939 Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. In addition, once World War II began, it would have appeared unpatriotic to attack weaknesses of the American system.⁵⁹

Quirt was the first to exhibit a thematic shift. From 1935 to 1938 he underwent psychoanalysis; he also began to read journals of psychology and psychiatry, meeting with Guy and other artists to discuss them.⁶⁰ At about the same time, possibly as a result of his analysis, he loosened his political ties.⁶¹ Subsequently, his philosophy began to exhibit a broader and at the same time more personal emphasis. Still not satisfied with contemporary life, Quirt no longer tried to rectify the situation through politics but searched for a better society in other ways, as demonstrated by titles such as *I'm Going Away, Far Far into the Distance, Never to Return, Good-bye*, ca. 1942 (present location unknown).⁶²

Also, as a result of his psychoanalysis, Quirt's images became infused with Freudian dream imagery and primitive Jungian symbols.⁶³ In such paintings as *The Very Great Lion Hunters*, 1939 (Collection of the Quirt Family, Minneapolis), the influence of American Indian art is evident.⁶⁴ Perhaps Quirt, searching for an improved society and encouraged by psychoanalysis to consider the primitive, thought the American Indian an exemplar of the better life he sought.

Surprisingly, it was at this time that Quirt began his attack on Surrealism. In January 1937 he participated along with Dali in the symposium "Surrealism and Its Political Significance" at the Museum of Modern Art.⁶⁵ Whereas Dali discussed Surrealism as an aesthetic philosophy, Quirt attacked Surrealism, and Dali personally, on political grounds. Quirt associated Dali with Fascism, an idea that had its basis in the Spaniard's brief flirtation with Nazism. Dali had created a number of Hitler images, which upset the other European Surrealists and led them to censure him.⁶⁶

Quirt's fullest attack was his *Wake Over Surrealism: With Due Respect to the Corpse*, a leaflet published by The Pinacotheca gallery in 1941.⁶⁷ While acknowledging Surrealism's potentiality for new pictorial expression, he again decried the neurotic and negative images of Dali. This publication caused much controversy, as a series of articles and letters to the editor published in *Art Digest* attests; even Guglielmi entered the battle to defend Surrealism and Dali's philosophy.⁶⁸

Quirt's antisurrealist sentiment can be explained. In the late 1930s, he gave up his Dali-inspired style. Since he equated Dali with Surrealism, when he changed his art, he felt he was abandoning Surrealism. Actually, Quirt was merely switching from veristic Surrealism to the more abstract type, which began to infiltrate American painting at this time. Encouraged by the examples of Miró and Masson, he began to use a dynamic all-over composition and to simplify his figures into angular forms. He even used psychic automatism to create more distorted human forms and more intensely energized compositions.⁶⁹ Quirt was thereby able to convey the tenor of the period through his themes, his

titles, such as *The Experience of Tragedy Yet to Come*, and his style. In *Mutation*, 1940 (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), the twisted and tormented figures melting into the environment express the anguish of a society transformed under the impact of war. The forceful coloration strengthens the power of his statement. Pictorially, Quirt's distortions are similar to those of Masson of about the same period. In fact, Doris Brian, in reviewing Quirt's 1942 exhibition at The Pinacotheca gallery, compared his Surrealism to that of Masson, who was also exhibiting in New York at that time. She concluded that the simultaneous appearance of the artists demonstrated that their art was "the idiom most tellingly reflecting this convulsed epoch," although she parenthetically added that Quirt was more of a reformer.⁷⁰

Quirt's search for emotional truths eventually took on a purely formal character, for he felt that, through color, shape, and line, art should be used to order the aggressive energies inherent in society.⁷¹ In *The Eternal Pageant*, 1942 (Collection of the Quirt Family, Minneapolis), a comment on the perpetuity of war, Quirt constructed his composition in terms of flat, broken, geometric forms, which were described by one critic as "the world on the point of dissolution."⁷²

Guy's development during these years was similar to Quirt's, and the parallels were in some measure the result of their continued friendship. Like Quirt, he became interested in psychology and responded to changing world conditions. Guy now expressed his pessimism over the world situation through a greater variety of surrealist techniques—anatomical fragments, exaggerated limbs, and double images in the manner of Dali. He was thus able to delineate a state of chaos, as in *Camouflage Man in a Landscape*,⁷³ 1938 (Private Collection, New York), where rubbery men push against a wall,



Fig. 11. David Smith, *Medal for Dishonor: Bombing Civilian Populations*, 1939. Bronze, diam. 10 in. Copyright © 1982, Collection Rebecca and Candida Smith.

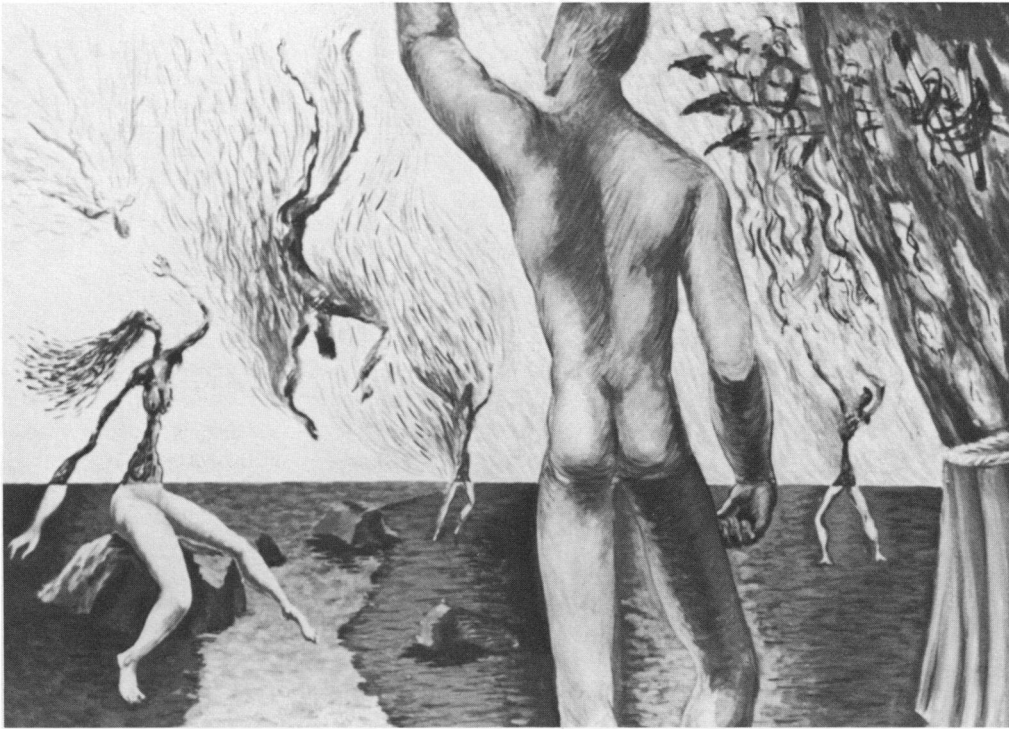


Fig. 12. James Guy, *Who Will Stand the Light of Tomorrow*, exhibited 1942. Oil, dimensions unknown. Present location unknown. Photograph: Colten Photos. Ferargil Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art.

which stands near a strange loudspeaker with a human head. In *Death Rides the Horse of Uccello*, exhibited 1939 (present location unknown), elegantly dressed figures dance in the left foreground, unaware of the starving faces on the right and the distorted shadows in the far window. Death dominates the composition just as it pervaded the real world.⁷⁴

In the 1940s Guy became even more philosophical, questioning the future of the world. In *Who Will Stand the Light of Tomorrow*, exhibited in 1942 (fig. 12), his question has a prophetic tone, for the figures are consumed in what one critic described as a “blazing vision of abnormalities.”⁷⁵ More hopeful was *Song of Tomorrow*, exhibited in 1941 (present location unknown), based on Walt Whitman’s philosophy of personal freedom and faith in the future. A child, mother, father, and grandfather symbolize family life, while the child itself with the sea below suggests the idea of regeneration.⁷⁶

Stylistically, these paintings are still within the context of Surrealism. Guy retained Daliesque elements longer than did Quirt. By 1938, however, Guy’s naturalistic forms were undergoing simplification and a metamorphosis. Like Quirt, he was attracted to Abstract Surrealism, particularly to the elongated and distorted figures of Masson which accorded well with his pessimistic view of the world.

From 1942 to the end of the war, Guy worked in an aircraft factory, an experience that resulted in his abandoning both Surrealism and social content.⁷⁷ *Industrial Symphony*, ca. 1944 (Collection of the Artist), is typical of his new interest in the streamlined style of industrial forms. He explained the change as a doing away with irrelevant, past art forms, stating, “National art expressed by superficial subject matter will be buried with Fascism in the ash can of history.”⁷⁸

In comparison to Quirt and Guy, Guglielmi altered his art

far less during the prewar years. The lack of great change is perhaps due to the fact that his art was, to a large extent, less surrealistic and more concerned with the condition of humanity than with specific social injustices. He did make statements about the effects of war, as he had in *Mental Geography*, but in his geometrically constructed and delicately colored style of the 1930s. *Terror in Brooklyn*, 1941 (fig. 13), is perhaps his most enigmatic painting. Guglielmi himself provided the only useful interpretation:

The painter finds the poet. The fleeting shaft of the sun in the dusk of a world. The terror of the three pelvic beatitudes in the test tube of a bell. The street a reflected image of itself. A premonition of war and tragedy.⁷⁹

The three women under the glass represent religion and its ineffectiveness in contemporary life. Moreover, Christ’s crucifixion suggested by the scene—a pelvic bone hangs high on a building, fixed like a funeral wreath on a cross formed by remnants of a light pole and white ribbons—might have a contemporary application. Could Guglielmi be equating Christ’s death with that of the soldiers who were destined to die in World War II to save their people?

Guglielmi hoped for a better world just as did Quirt and Guy, and he expressed his hope in *My Odyssey for Moderns*, 1943 (present location unknown). The ruined boat and the two figures struggling to free themselves symbolize the lost people of the early 1940s “crawling dream-like through the rotted timbers of a beached hulk, to win the beachhead for tomorrow.”⁸⁰

Guglielmi did not paint from 1943 to 1945, while he was in the army. When he returned to New York after the war, the city was a different place. Partly owing to the influence of the New York School and, perhaps, of his new friend, Stuart

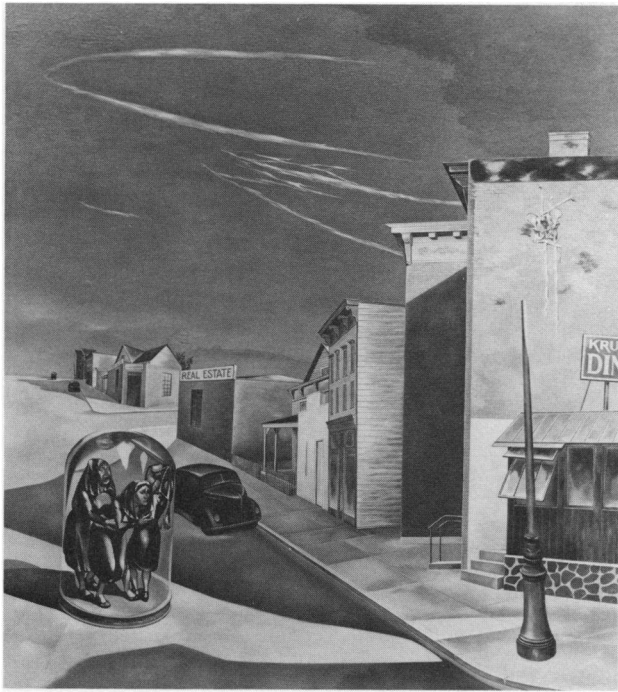


Fig. 13. O. Louis Guglielmi, *Terror in Brooklyn*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 34 by 30 in. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Davis, Guglielmi abandoned social issues for formal problems as had Quirt and Guy before him.⁸¹ His explanation of the transformation echoes that of the other Social Surrealists:

... to hold a neurotic mirror to a disordered world is to reject maturity and to infect the audience with malaise. . . . For the artist it can easily be the evasion of the contemporary problem of the painter's craft. A painting can contain ideas; plastic ideas and by necessity, a command of the medium to communicate the poetry of the outward world.⁸²

Although he occasionally created total abstractions, Guglielmi devoted most of his postwar compositions to abstracted images of New York, rendered in lyrical colors and geometric forms inspired by Synthetic Cubism.

Social Surrealism was a child of the depression, born in response to the aesthetic and social needs of its creators. It was an art form viable enough to undergo modification and to mature as the needs of the American society and its artists changed. It no longer had relevance, however, when the entire philosophy of a work of art as a social instrument was rejected by the Abstract Expressionists. So, as Guy had predicted, it passed into "the ash can of history."

NOTES

1. *Walter Quirt: A Retrospective*. Essay by Mary Towley Swanson. Reminiscences by Raphael Soyer, James Guy, Romare Bearden, and others. Exhibition catalog (Minneapolis: University Gallery, University of Minnesota, 1980), p. 39.
2. Quoted in Harry Salpeter, "Ghoul of the Ghostly West," *Esquire* 16 (August 1941): 153.

3. Quoted in James T. Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City,'" *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 10 (April 1943): 6.
4. Alfred Barr, Jr. and Dorothy Miller, eds., *American Realists and Magic Realists*. Intro. by Lincoln Kirstein. Statements by the artists. Exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), pp. 38-39.
5. Guglielmi said he was attracted to Surrealism because it expressed the decay of society. ("After the Locusts," in Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* [Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973], p. 113).
6. One of the few references to sexual overtones is to Quirt's *Nightmare of Capitalism*. When it was exhibited at the 1936 John Reed Club show, Margaret Duroc wrote, "Here the application of Surrealism seems a possibly happy one, for Surrealism is certainly the technique of nightmares. But Quirt is actually painting as a Surrealist. How else explain the distortion of the skulls of mangled soldiers into sexual symbols?" ("Critique from the Left," *Art Front* 2 [January 1936]: 7.)
7. *Newer Super Realism*. Exhibition catalog (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1931), n.p.
8. Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), pp. 136-137, 296. Levy had originally conceived of the landmark exhibition, but upon the advice of A. Everett Austin, his friend and the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, he decided that such an important exhibition should be held first in a public museum.
9. Interview by the author with James Guy, September 25, 1980.
10. Julien Levy, *Surrealism* (New York: The Black Sun Press, 1936; reprint ed., New York: Arno/Worldwide, 1968), p. 31.
11. Alfred Barr, Jr., ed., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. Essays by Georges Hugnet. Exhibition catalog (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 61.
12. Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 261.
13. One of the fullest discussions of Surrealism and politics is in Herbert S. Gershman, *The Surrealist Revolution in France* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969), pp. 80-110.
14. André Masson, "Letter to André Breton," *La Revolution surréaliste* 5 (October 1925): 30, quoted in André Breton, *André Breton: What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad Press, 1978), p. 57.
15. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 215.
16. André Breton and Diego Rivera, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall 1938): 49-53. For tactical reasons, Rivera signed the manifesto instead of Leon Trotsky, the actual author.
17. *Walter Quirt*, p. 15; and Guy interview.
18. *Walter Quirt*, pp. 11, 15, 17; Gerald M. Monroe, "Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14 (1) (1974): 7; and Fairfield Porter, "Murals for Workers," *Arise* 1 (4) (1935): reprinted in *Fairfield Porter: Art in Its Own Terms—Selected Criticism, 1935-1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes (New York: Taplinger, 1979), pp. 241-243. There is no documentary evidence that Quirt was a Communist party member, but Swanson, in *Walter Quirt* (p. 26) refers to statements by Anton Refregier and Eleanor Quirt that suggest that he was.
19. *News Week* (Dayton, Ohio) clipping, November 28, 1938. Scrapbook, Downtown Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll ND-63, frame 727.
20. Draft of a letter from Guglielmi to S. Carl Fracassini, April 6, 1951. Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 361.
21. A. W., "Correspondence: Jamais!" *Art Front* 2 (January 1937): 18.
22. Diego Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art," *Modern Quarterly* 6 (3) (Autumn 1932): 51-57, reprinted in David Shapiro, ed., *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 64.
23. Clarence Weinstock, "The Man in the Balloon," *Art Front* 3 (March 1937): 8.
24. Duroc, "Critique from the Left," p. 7.
25. Gerald Monroe, "The Artists Union of New York" (Ed. D. diss., New York University, 1971), p. 35; and *Walter Quirt*, p. 12.
26. Guy interview.
27. Guy interview.

28. Typical of the magazine reviews: "New York Criticism: Quirt, American Surrealist," *Art Digest* 10 (March 1, 1936): 16; and Doris Brian, "New Exhibitions of the Week: Rational Variations on a Surrealist Pattern by James Guy," *Art News* 37 (June 3, 1939): 13.
29. E. M. Benson, "Exhibition Reviews: Walter Quirt—Socialized Surrealist," *American Magazine of Art* 29 (April 1936): 260; and Ann H. Sayre, "Propaganda from a New Surrealist Painter," *Art News* 34 (February 29, 1936): 9.
30. The clippings in Guglielmi's scrapbook, Archives of American Art, furnish an excellent indicator of the terminology applied to his art throughout the 1930s. Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery, Guglielmi's dealer, supposedly did not want the artist "damned" as a Surrealist. (*New York Post* clipping dated "1937." Scrapbook, Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 227.)
31. *Walter Quirt*, p. 12.
32. For example, Sayre, "Propaganda from a New Surrealist Painter," p. 9.
33. Benson, "Exhibition Reviews: Walter Quirt," p. 260.
34. Brian, "New Exhibitions of the Week: Rational Variations on a Surrealist Pattern by James Guy," p. 13; and J. W. L., "Guy's Gay Surrealism," *Art News* 39 (February 1, 1941): 14.
35. *New York Post* clipping dated "1938." Scrapbook, Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 234.
36. Unidentified 1943 clipping. Scrapbook, Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 268.
37. "Guglielmi's First," *Art Digest* 13 (November 15, 1938): 20; and Barr and Miller, *American Realists and Magic Realists*, p. 38. For the fullest biography and stylistic analysis, see *O. Louis Guglielmi: A Retrospective Exhibition*. Essay by John Baker. Exhibition catalog (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1980).
38. Louis Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," *Magazine of Art* 37 (May 1944): 175.
39. Using this phrase as its title, the Federal Theater did a dramatization about poor housing conditions.
40. *Surrealism and American Art, 1931-1947*. Essays by Jeffrey Wechsler and Jack J. Spector. Exhibition catalog (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), p. 41.
41. *Walter Quirt*, p. 21, fig. 4.
42. Quirt's *Nightmare of Capitalism*, exhibited in a John Reed Club show of late 1935, was mentioned by Margaret Duroc in *Art Front* 2 (January 1936): 7.
43. Guy's *Coper Minus Labor* was listed in *Guy*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Boyer Galleries, 1939), no. 10.
44. *Creative Arts* 12 (March 1933): illus. p. 216.
45. *American Artists Congress Second Annual Membership Exhibition*. Exhibition catalog (New York: John Wanamaker, 1938), no. 55, illus. Miscellaneous Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N 69-98, frame 108.
46. *Surrealism and American Art*, p. 81, figs. 48, 49.
47. The Quirt sketch for the John Reed Club mural is reproduced in *Walter Quirt*, p. 18, fig. 2.
48. *Surrealism and American Art*, p. 42.
49. *Walter Quirt*, p. 36.
50. Dali's paintings have been mentioned above. Several of Miró's 1937 paintings reflect his anguish: *Still Life with Old Shoe* and *Reaper*, a mural decoration that originally hung, along with *Guernica*, in the Spanish Government Pavilion at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris.
51. Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City,'" pp. 3-5.
52. Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City,'" p. 3; and George L. K. Morris, "To Peter Blume, Julien Levy Gallery," *Partisan Review* 4 (4) (March 1938): 40-41. Levy's personal opinion was that Surrealism was separate from political commentary and that Blume's painting was more of a political tract.
53. Soby, "Peter Blume's 'Eternal City,'" p. 5.
54. "Guglielmi's First," p. 20.
55. Guglielmi, "I Hope to Sing Again," p. 175.
56. In 1944 and 1945 Smith did other bronze sculptures with social surreal implications. These were based either on broad themes of war and politics or on personal relations and the psychology of individuals.
57. Stanley Meltzoff, "David Smith and Social Surrealism," *Magazine of Art* 39 (March 1946): 99.
58. Walter Quirt, *'Americana,' Painting or an Art* (New York: The Pinacotheca, [1942]), n.p. Quirt Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 571, frame 16.
59. As noted in "The Art Galleries: The Whitney and the War," *New Yorker* clipping, dated "1942." Scrapbook, Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 258.
60. *Walter Quirt*, pp. 12, 15, 20.
61. *Walter Quirt*, p. 26.
62. At least one critic interpreted the tiny figure running from a horde of pursuers in this painting as the artist escaping from the contemporary world. See "Quirt Seeks Another Way of Life," *Art Digest* 16 (March 1, 1942): 17.
63. *Walter Quirt*, pp. 12, 26.
64. As the Abstract Expressionists' interest in American Indian art is usually dated from the early 1940s, Quirt may have been one of the first American artists to demonstrate the influence of American aboriginal art in his painting. This was first noted by Robert M. Coates in *Walter Quirt*, exhibition catalog (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1960), p. 7.
65. Anita Brenner, "Surrealism and Its Political Significance," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1937, p. 8C; and *Surrealism and American Art*, p. 43.
66. Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 219-220. In a painting such as *The Enigma of Hitler* (collection of S. Dali), Dali used the telephone to symbolize the helplessness of mankind in the months preceding the outbreak of World War II. This painting was exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in the spring of 1939 at which time its iconography was explained to the public in a *Life* article. The landscape is an impression of the Monte Carlo beach where Dali heard about the Munich Conference. An umbrella signifies the weather that day, and the telephone, the source of the communication. A bat and a photograph of Hitler, both associated by Dali with a medieval mentality, are also depicted.
67. *Walter Quirt, Wake Over Surrealism: With Due Respect to the Corpse* (New York: The Pinacotheca, [1941]), n.p. Quirt Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 571, frames 20-21. Swanson, in *Walter Quirt* (p. 31), inaccurately dates this paper to 1942, which is impossible since articles attacking it appeared in the *Art Digest* as early as December 1, 1941. Quirt expressed similar ideas in the unpublished "An Analysis of Salvador Dali," typescript in Quirt Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 571, frames 392-398.
68. "Dali a Fascist?," *Art Digest* 16 (December 1, 1941): 6, 14; O. Louis Guglielmi, "Name Calling," *Art Digest* 16 (December 15, 1941): 3; and *Walter Quirt, "Answering Guglielmi," Art Digest* 16 (January 1, 1942): 4. Quirt wrote to Guglielmi that Peyton Boswell, the editor of *Art Digest*, had misinterpreted his ideas on Dali and Fascism. (Undated letter, Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 502).
69. *Walter Quirt*, pp. 23, 39.
70. Doris Brian, "Three Fantasists: Masson, Quirt, Margo," *Art News* 41 (March 1, 1942): 29.
71. *Walter Quirt*, pp. 15, 23.
72. C. G., Review of a 1942 Pinacotheca gallery exhibition, *The Nation*, undated clipping. Quirt Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 571, frame 10.
73. *Surrealism and American Art*, p. 81, fig. 50.
74. Description based on a slide in The Metropolitan Museum of Art Slide Library, New York.
75. J. W. L., "The Passing Show," *Art News* 41 (April 1, 1942): 26.
76. "Surrealist Surprises of Puritan James Guy," *Art Digest* 15 (February 1, 1941): 13.
77. Maude Riley, "James Guy, Industrial Worker," *Art Digest* 18 (January 1, 1944): 10.
78. Quoted in *James Guy*. Exhibition catalog (New York: Ferargil Galleries, 1944), n.p.
79. Guglielmi to Sidney Janis, April 27, 1942. Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 347.
80. Described by Guglielmi in Grace Pagano, ed., *The Encyclopaedia Britannica Collection of Contemporary American Painting* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1946), opp. pl. 50.
81. John Baker, "O. Louis Guglielmi: A Reconsideration," *Archives of American Art Journal* 15 (2) (1975): 18.
82. Note typed by Guglielmi, undated. Guglielmi Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll N69-119, frame 346.