

Currents

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KARI BODNARCHUK

Destinations

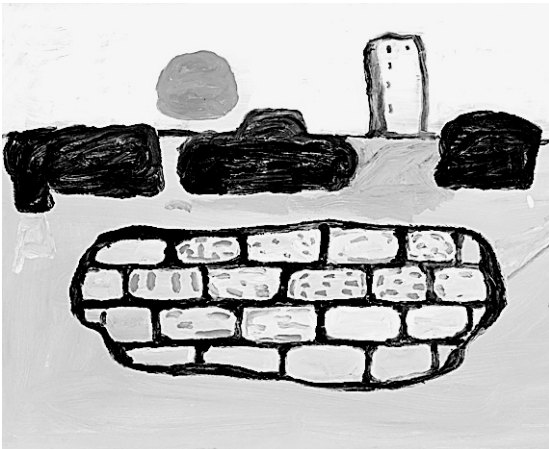
ARTS

Guston to graphics to geometry

THROUGH MAY 13
WASHINGTON
“**Philip Guston, Roma**”: It's fair to say that no painter had more impact in the 1970s than Guston. A leading Abstract Expressionist, his embrace of representational painting, starting in the late '60s, signaled a seismic shift in the art world. That his return to representation should produce canvases that could so be shaggy, loose-limbed, and cartoonish made his work all the more controversial — and influential. This Phillips Collection show looks at how much inspiration Guston drew from Italian art — everything from Roman ruins to Renaissance frescoes to Federico Fellini's films. More specifically, it examines the pivotal months during 1970-71 Guston spent as an artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome. 1600 21st St. NW, 202-387-2151, www.phillipscollection.org

THROUGH MAY 22
ZURICH
“**Type in Motion**”: As a graphic element in everything from advertising to music videos, words moving on a screen are ubiquitous. This Museum for Design exhibition looks at looking itself, as well as how the presence of dynamic lettering has affected various media and viewers' perceptions of them. Ausstellungsstrasse 60, 011-41-43-446-44-67, www.museum-gestaltung.ch

FEB. 23-APRIL 30
CAPE TOWN
“**Ernest Cole, Photographer**”: This South African photojournalist's documentation of the apartheid era was so unflinching and revelatory he was forced to leave in 1966 and live the rest of his life abroad (he died in 1990). Organized by the Hasselblad Foundation, this exhibition at the South African National



MCKEE GALLERY

Philip Guston's oil painting “Untitled,” 1971.

Gallery offers a powerful overview of Cole's career. Government Avenue, Company's Garden, 011-27-21-467-4660, www.iziko.org.za/sang.

MARCH 4-JUNE 4
LONDON
“**Flare Path**”: This Theatre Royal Haymarket revival of Terrence Rattigan's 1942 drama about a romantic triangle involving an RAF pilot, his actress wife, and her former lover stars Sienna Miller, James Purefoy, and Sheridan Smith. Directed by Trevor Nunn, it has added significance as his debut as artistic director of the Theatre Royal Haymarket Company. 18 Suffolk St., 011-44-207-930-8800, www.trh.co.uk

MARCH 24-AUG. 14
STOCKHOLM
“**Lust & Vice**”: Will any art exhibition title this year

(or even this decade) grab more attention? This Swedish National Museum show, which offers more than 200 works drawn from the museum's holdings, looks at how artistic renderings of sexuality have changed from the 16th century to the present. Södra Blasieholmshamnen, 011-46-8-5195-4410, www.nationalmuseum.se

APRIL 3-JULY 24
LOS ANGELES
“**David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy**”: With “David Smith Invents” currently at the Phillips Collection, this Los Angeles County Museum of Art show makes it a bicoastal season for the great abstract sculptor. The focus is on the role of geometry in Smith's art. Besides sculpture, the exhibition includes drawings, paintings, and photographs from the entire span of the artist's career. 5905 Wilshire Blvd., 323-857-6000, www.lacma.org.

PLAN AHEAD
MAY 21-SEPT. 6
SAN FRANCISCO
“**The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde**”: Gertrude Stein may have had more lasting impact as an art collector than writer. And her brother Leo had no less a discerning eye. This San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show includes some 200 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints by artists in their circle. 151 Third St., 415-357-4000, www.sfmoma.org.

MARK FEENEY

Events are sometimes canceled, rescheduled, or sold out; check online. Mark Feeney can be reached at mfeeney@globe.com.

Weighing white-glove service against what's on the plate

► PARIS
Continued from Page M1

And yet, a few years ago, after I interviewed French chef Alain Ducasse at the Plaza Athénée in Paris, I poked my head into the dining room. It was late morning, the room was empty, a dinner tasting menu costs a whopping \$485 — and all I could think of was how beautiful my girlfriend would look framed by the thousands of crystals hanging from the ceiling.

I have a “food-first” attitude about restaurants, but appreciate that atmosphere and service are key parts to a meal. Does a tony address still have a place beyond being a status confirmation for the wealthy? For a second opinion, I called Le Figaro food critic François Simon and asked him to choose a place for lunch, something that could speak to the beauty and decline of the top-end dining experience.

“Let's go to the Ritz,” he said without hesitating. “The reservation will be under Juves on Monday. Look sharp.”

Lined up outside the Ritz entrance a few days later are a motorcade's worth of black Mercedes-Benzes with tinted windows. I roll up my headphones, adjust my tie, walk

through the door, and the show begins.

The opulence is almost blinding: a long, lush hallway goes to the front desk and a bar and even on this dreary day, light floods in through towering windows. At the end of the hall, the restaurant, L'Espadon, is a great, gilded space with a flowering tree growing up from the center and long curtains flowing down the walls. This is either heaven's gate or the headquarters of the happy few.

“In a way, people have lived their lives to be here,” says Simon, yet even the Ritz is not beyond reproach. Ever so slightly, he laments the restaurant's food, saying, “It isn't always there” — critique-speak for it doesn't always knock his socks off. He finds the decor beautiful but a bit dated.

“The Michelin guide keeps up the idea of a France that we defended before UNESCO,” he says, referring to French gastronomy's entry last November onto the “world intangible heritage” list. “It forces places to obey — to accept their law. You must be respectful. You must be bonne garçons.”

The guide, often referred to in France as the bible, can enforce a type of stagnation: a fussy decor,



JOE RAY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The waitstaff holds a meeting at the opulent L'Espadon Restaurant at the Ritz Hotel in Paris.

a dated cuisine. It also gives short shrift to the places with excellent food but without the white-glove treatment.

That said, there is a very enjoyable side to Michelin's old-fashioned outlook. “Here, everyone plays a role. There is a way to speak. You feel like you're in a court — a society that has its own rituals,” says Simon, nodding to the dining room before us. “The

notion of politesse has evaporated in society. This place reminds you of what it could be like. We are disarmed.”

The waitstaff is a mesmerizing ballet corps in black. They are mind readers of our wishes, encyclopedic in the knowledge of the citadel they represent, pronouncing their gratitude to the client at the end of every sentence. They have a sixth sense to know if we would like to talk about where our wine comes from — or be left alone.

Our food arrives. The “sea urchin in its shell with a smoked quail egg and light puree of romanesco broccoli” is a selection of shellfish in the urchin's shell, which is used like a serving bowl. It's a busy dish, cramming several kinds of shellfish into a beautiful presentation, extravagance

If you go . . .

L'Espadon Restaurant at the Ritz

15 Place Vendôme
011-33-1-43-16-30-30

Prices range from a \$107 weekday prix fixe lunch — a fine value — to a \$485 dinner tasting menu with wine, with several options in between.

over purity and conspicuous bivalve consumption. It's prepared so well that, there we are, tasting a spoonful and dipping our landlocked Parisian toes into the sea.

In my mouth, “seared cod with wild mushrooms, chestnut cream and a smoked milk mousse” vaults past the flavors of the accompaniments. There is a quality of product and preparation that hits my mind's definition of cod's flavor. It reminds me of growing up in New England. In two dishes, the chef has both transported me and brought back memories.

There are plates we see heading out to other tables that reflect the old school or are just a tired take on what the old school thinks is new: A deconstruction of an old dish, lobster thermidor, is perhaps better left off the menu or done classically, as a nod to the past. Desserts are complex, chocolatey affairs. Beautiful to look at but not transporting like the first two courses.

Was this one of the best meals of my life? No. It was a business lunch. That said, I will still remember many aspects of it for

years to come. With a good friend or a lover (this is Paris, after all), it is worth the splurge. These places of privilege are highly conducive to wondrous experiences. Go with the right people in the right mindset and you should expect magic. Washington chef Blaine Wetzel once told me, “I can set dominoes up to fall so it's the best meal of their life.”

This idea gets me thinking about the top-level places I have been lucky enough to visit in the past few years. Catalonia's El Bulli brought out sharing and hoarding instincts in our group of friends, a weird permission to be able to horse around at the place with the world's hardest reservation. Copenhagen's noma and Sicily's Il Duomo had elements that were pure sensuality on a plate. Dishes at Carne Ruscalleda's Sant Pau north of Barcelona give the impression that you're tasting art. New York's Daniel and the Crillon and Ritz in Paris are like watching theater. A combination of food and setting at Les Cols in Olot, Spain, and Blaine Wetzel's cuisine made me feel like I had grown roots.

Splurge on a meal that is an homage to food and service? Spread your money over multiple, less expensive meals? It's up to you. Whether you are worshipping at a temple of gastronomy, savoring a dish at a small venue in Paris, or smiling over a forkful of coconut cream pie at your favorite diner, you will know it's the right place. Check discreetly under the table. Your feet might be moving up and down.

Joe Ray can be reached at www.joe-ray.com.

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