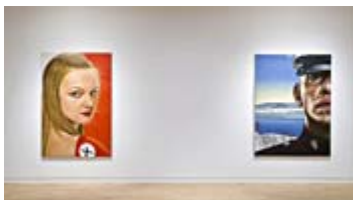


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Installation view of "New Museum" at Gagosian Gallery; left to right: *Frieze* and *Sumka*



Installation view of "New Museum" at Gagosian Gallery; left to right: *Sumka* and *Message Force Multiplier*



POLITICS OF PAINTING

An Interview with Richard Phillips by Alisa Baremboym and Katerina Llanes

To all appearances, Richard Phillips loves Pop culture, and Pop culture loves him back. He paints billboard-sized portraits of pretty girls, pictures sourced in the popular press, from vintage fashion magazines and newspapers to pornography. Over the years -- Phillips was born in Massachusetts in 1963 and has been showing his work since the early 1990s -- his repertoire expanded to include images of male celebrity (Tom Cruise), haute bourgeois style (Valentino), state power (George W. Bush), spiritualism (Deepak Chopra) and unalloyed cuteness (a white Persian kitten).

At the same time, his appropriated images have re-entered the society of the spectacle on its own terms. Phillips' "spectrum" painting of a classic fashion model from 1998 debuted on the "Gossip Girl" teen soap opera, while his 2004 painting of a model with piece of currency projected on her nude body became the cover image for Adam Lindemann's Collecting Contemporary guidebook.

In 2007, Los Angeles art critic Hunter Drohojowska-Philps claimed that Phillips made "conceptual paintings, paintings that are commentaries on paintings." These artworks, she wrote "send a message about agendas, manipulation and seduction" -- though something about them made her "want to punish the messenger." [see

Richard Phillips

SUMKA

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Richard Phillips

New Museum

2009

Gagosian Gallery



Richard Phillips

Message Force Multiplier

2009

Gagosian Gallery

"Phillips Head," May 30, 2007].

On the occasion of Richard Phillips' new exhibition at Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue, titled "New Museum," Mar. 14-May 2, 2009, the artist's two studio assistants -- friends, artists and feminists both -- teamed up to turn the table on their boss, seeking from their inside vantage point to shed some special light on his work, its value, and why we all might need to look again.

Alisa Baremboym: All of the work spanning your painting career dealt with images of beauty and power and a kind of defiant female presence. More recently you have put together more overtly politicized imagery. Are you reacting to the reception of the earlier works?

Richard Phillips: I have deployed political imagery in my work for almost a decade, from paintings like *The President of the United States of America* and *Liberation Monument* (2001), to *Spokesperson [Joschka Fischer]* (2002) and *\$* (2004), and *LRA* and *Göhring Deutsche Jägerschaft Letterhead* (2007). I consider the representation of female presence, beauty and power no less political within the context of my exhibitions. (And these paintings, as well the works in my current exhibition, were *not* conceived as reactions to how my art has been received.) In the current show, the paintings *SUMKA*, *Message Force Multiplier*, and *New Museum* may appear more overtly political because in each case they employ the visually coded power of fashion models to propagandistically represent the ideologies of fascism, capitalism and the social real for unstable and contradictory reasons.

Katerina Llanes: While your work most often circulates as a single image -- hung above Chuck's bed on the set of *Gossip Girl*, on the front cover of *Art Now*, or as the



Richard Phillips
Der Bodensee
2008
Gagosian Gallery

album jacket for *Dirty Vegas* records, it is only in relation to each particular body of work that the paintings begin to make sense. In that way, it could be argued that your work needs to be viewed as an exhibition -- as an installation. What value is there, then, in displacing individual paintings and turning them into iconic imagery?

RP: Set loose from the original context of my exhibitions, some of my paintings have re-circulated back into the media from which they were appropriated. The sense these paintings may have made in their original exhibitions ends up being as transitory as their primary purpose when they were sent out as advertising or pornography. In a way the images' function as "art" was only temporary and the object status of the painting form became alienated to the degree that only verified a second order, appropriated state. The third stage of appropriation is the negation of the art of the object and the reflection of its referent by the reinstitution of meaning and iconography that is no longer dissimilar to itself, beyond itself.



Richard Phillips
Were You of Silver, Were You of Gold?
2009
Gagosian Gallery

KL: Could these new contexts perhaps allow you to play with pop culture as another stage for your work, to create a conversation between the image and its icon?

RP: Yes. Rather than existing as or commenting on late stage Pop Art, this "Prop Art" becomes a literal representation of art in its pure state as a first order projection of popular culture. Art in this sense becomes a character or an actor in the theater of consumer decision-making process. The conversation develops less between image and icon and more between art and its fictitious state as anything more than a beautiful illegitimate vessel of obscene consumption.



Richard Phillips

Fundraiser

2009

Gagosian Gallery



Richard Phillips' *Liberation Monument*
(2001) at Friedrich Petzel Gallery



Richard Phillips

\$

2004

AB: Why is it important today to make massive realistic paintings of your chosen subject matter? Does it have to do with the market of painting as a commodity fetish?

RP: *Frieze* (2009) measures 84 x 110 in. and is a realistic representation of a woman on her back with an issue of *Frieze* magazine inserted into her vagina. Recently the art critic Jerry Saltz called art ads "our" pornography while wondering whether an art magazine was becoming irrelevant due to increasingly academic posture while losing its contributors to academia. Within this context *Frieze* has everything to do with art and its markets and commodity fetish. Unlike film, photography and digital media, painting, in a deliberately conventional way, slows down the speed of images to a dead stop. When confronted with *Frieze* in person the way in which oil painting can amplify the sexual perversion of the art media is tied directly to the most commonly represented clichés of my own production. This painting is meant to physically and visually tear down people's perceptions of critical agency, art media and assumptions of control. Thereby relieving them of any sense of security.

AB: In considering your recent painting of a mouse and rat in *Were You of Silver, Were You of Gold?* (2009), and past paintings of squirrels in *Similar to Squirrels* (2003) and felines in *Mouser* (1997) and *Persia* (1996), why did you choose these specific animals as subjects? Does it relate to the notion of camp or kitsch?

RP: The inspiration for the painting of the rat and mouse was the cover of a glue trap box. Within the painting the image of the glue is represented by 23-carat gold. The title alludes to the circumstances we find ourselves in 2009 as a result of our wars in the Middle East and the economic war waged against the American people by its own government. Typically animals (individuals or



Richard Phillips

L.R.A.

2006

Gagosian Gallery

financial concerns) caught in glue (gold) traps suffer for days (a decade) before dying of starvation, dehydration and shock.

KL: You have been derided time and again for your sexist depictions of naked women, and yet in this most recent exhibition, "New Museum," it is clear that you use pornography to draw attention to the erotics of capitalism -- that of the art world in particular. And while you unabashedly bring nonprofits -- the Kitchen and the New Museum -- and the art magazine -- *Frieze* -- into the fray, you shy away from any critique of the private gallery system in which you are a complicit agent. Can you talk about your relationship to the Gagosian gallery within your critical perspective?



Richard Phillips

Görling Deutsche Jägerschaft

Letterhead

2007

Gagosian Gallery

RP: The perpetuation of the notion of a separation of public and private interests in art has come to an end, and my "New Museum" exhibition addresses this directly. Institutional, academic systems and their media outlets sell this separation embedded in their "meaning product" to be distributed as the propaganda of their self-preservation. The title of the exhibition, "New Museum," refers to a branded claim to cultural authority within the context of social and financial relationships that are articulated in deliberately obfuscated ways. My relationship with Gagosian Gallery has given me the opportunity to raise a discussion that would not have been possible in other contexts due to the need to keep such relationships hidden.

AB: Do you feel that the sexuality in some of the paintings overpowers the politics of your imagery, thus not allowing the power to move beyond shock value? Does it overpower the politics within the other paintings?

RP: The strong sexual content of some of my paintings



Richard Phillips

Similar to Squirrels after A. Dietrich

2003

Friedrich Petzel Gallery



Richard Phillips

Portrait of God (After Richard

Bernstein)

1998

are integrally engaged with the politics of others. What is non-sexual to one person in a political context becomes another's fetish. The valor and heroism portrayed by a male model dressed in a uniform (*Message Force Multiplier*, 2008) sends a strong sexual message to people for not-so-subtle reasons. The fantasy of becoming the violent guardian of the state appeals to both those who would emulate this actor and those who would entrust their safety to them. The "power" is pornographic and the disarming of a rational thought process through the use of sexually charged images in order to displace the understanding of mortal consequences far outweighs their shock value.

AB: Why have you not painted males ever in the same sexualized way?

RP: Again, the perception of whether my male subjects are sexualized depends on one's predisposition. Paintings like *Portrait of God* (1998), *The General* (1999), *Liberation Monument* (2001), *Commune* (2005) and *Threesome* (2005), as well as *LRA* (2007) and *Tom Cruise* (2007) all address male sexuality. My work reflects the proportional over-representation of the female body in art historical and advertising patterns. Even the way in which my paintings have been absorbed into the art media, has privileged the images of women over men, which parallels mainstream media's old bias' of heterosexist transmissions for the safeguarding of property legacy and real-estate control.

KL: In light of the recession and the shifting face of American politics, how do you see your work developing in the future?

RP: The same way I saw it developing during the last two recessions I've lived through in this city:



Richard Phillips

Threesome

2005

White Cube



Richard Phillips

Tom Cruise

2007

Gagosian Gallery

Independently.

AB: You grew up in a part of America that has a very strong character, has this affected the psychology of your paintings?

RP: Yes. Growing up in New England exposed me to the teachings of Cotton Mather, who had a deep effect on me. For example, in his "Authors Defense" within his text *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases* (1648-1706), Mather wrote: "I am far from Insensible, That at this Extraordinary Time of the Devils Coming down in Great Wrath upon us, there are too many Tongues and Hearts thereby Set on Fire of Hell; that the various Opinions about the Witchcrafts which of Later Time have Troubled us, are maintained by some with so much Cloudy Fury, as if they could never be sufficiently Stated, unless written in the Liquor wherewith Witches use to write their Covenants; and that he who becomes an Author at such a Time, had need be Fenced with Iron, and the Staff of a Spear."

KL: You have been working with images of women for a long time. While it may have served as way for bringing awareness to the objectified female figure, one possible critique is that you have retroactively inscribed the body of women as a singular category caught within the male gaze. How then might your work offer a way out of that binary trap? What could a re-viewing of your work look like within a wider field of feminist discourse?

RP: Human trafficking, prostitution and contemporary slavery are serious issues that are inextricably tied to a significant percentage of the production of international sex trade content. Drug trafficking, political corruption and harmful state-sponsored healthcare policy are all wound into hypocritical morality codes written by men to

disenfranchise populations and consolidate wealth. My representation of pornography as a subject is neither affirmative in the promotion of sex positivism nor seeks to damn the publicizing of deviancy. Looking beyond the initial impact of my paintings use of conventional sexual imagery, a confrontation occurs with the displacement of this often malevolently driven content as it transmutes into every medium that is not a legitimized sexual act itself.

Richard Phillips, "New Museum," Mar. 14-May 2, 2009,
980 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10075