



GQ ON POP CULTURE

The Verge

Work of Art: The Richard Phillips Interview

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This week on Bravo's *Work of Art*, Richard Phillips served as a guest judge on the show and provided some of the most provocative insight into the work yet. In his own paintings, he often deals with commercial imagery, removing it from the original context and, in a sense, redirecting it and creating new meaning with a recombination of imagery that is intentionally misused.

In this *GQ* interview, Richard explains how his own path as an artist evolved and explains how the show *Work of Art* might actually be its own work of art.

Why are you interested in pop culture? How did you get to the point where you were dealing with issues of celebrity?

My work, in a certain way, got started in 1996 when I did an exhibition of thirteen paintings that were solely based on fashion imagery. And it was fashion photography that was from a time period in the late 1960s and early 1970s where fashion photography was doing a lot of avant guard artistic gestures... my using oil paint and painting, in a realistic style, these large scale paintings of fashion was, in a certain sense, to countermeine that look at the portrayal of women in photography as a certain degraded or unacceptable form...

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[Art history] has always been important to me and, in fact, the last half of my time in grad school was involved with contemporary art history, which was for the first time being given as a focus at university... And even though I was in the painting department, I applied to [the art history department] because addressing theoretical positions was as important to me as learning the craft of painting and was important to setting up a dialectic between thought process and the act of making art...

Do you think commercial imagery is empty or meaningless?

There were specific images that I found that kind of became vehicles or carriers of applied meaning. The emptiness in the actor who was being portrayed became a carrier of multiple meanings that weren't necessarily tied down. Rather than establishing a specific narrative, it could mean anything. So, in a way, that kind of open potential was something I think the photography from that particular period of time captured brilliantly and it was avant guard, which was passed off as women-specific imagery so therefore it could be transverse.

Do you feel any connection to graffiti artists?

For me, graffiti and the complexities with which it is either absorbed or expelled from what is going on, is a really good comparison to the way I see my work being similarly expelled or absorbed into different types of discourse.

How do you feel about the contestants on the show attempting to enter the art world through reality television?

By the fact of the show saying that there is an art world, they are already in the art world, whether or not it helps with the specifics of art media and the recognition that would go with that. I mean there's a lot of contingent factors for whether or not that would work. But the art world in New York is big enough, in a certain sense, that any one of the contestants of the show could be absorbed into it. It's just that it may not be on the level that they immediately expect in terms of the venues and the possible shows, the institutions and how they look at this particular television show and how they might address that with the individual contestants.

But that's obviously very contradictory to your path, because you had a more traditional art education -- graduating with an MFA from Yale and then moving to New York in the 80s.

And I think that, yeah, mine was a very conventional approach that's been done many, many, many times. And there are many of those from my class who chose not to go to New York and seek other paths. But there are some who did and we remain close today and continue to have a strong dialogue in New York. Similarly, I think the dialogue that was established on the show may create a cohesive group of individuals that could conceivably have a future in New York... There's so many different facets to it that I really think there's all potentials for absorption. Whether it's at that height that they experience from the exposure of the show right away, that will be very much about exactly what they do.

Do you think the format of the show is a good reflection of the artistic process?

Art is a thing where, the least likely thing that you think is going to be art, is precisely the thing that is going to be art. And I would even hold that true to a reality television show... maybe the entire overarching process of the show actually exists as an artistic structure. And that's left to be debated by the many viewers that have been tuning in.

That's interesting: the show itself as a work of art.

Yes

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Unlike other reality shows such as *Project Runway*, where all of the contestants are skilled in the same trade, the competing artists on *Work of Art* work in very different types of mediums, like sculpture, painting, and photography.

Art, unlike the trades in the artistic capacity of fashion and food, can literally be anything. It can be the negation of itself and conceptually not present. So, to that degree, the potential for representation of that--the idea of reality--takes on a much more interesting potential... I think that it's because of art's capacity to completely take itself out of representation, in a certain sense... the components of form are literally the individuals. They are the critic, the producers, and the imagery of the show. So there is this kind of exoskeleton and there is the actual skeleton that we put all of the corporal potential on top of.



Nuclear, 1996-97

— [Rose Meacham](#) photo: © Richard Phillips. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

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