

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

Fashion and Style

No Greater Role Than His Own

By Bob Morris

RICHARD PHILLIPS, a portrait painter who traffics in glossy erotica and celebrity images, stood at the door of his studio in the Starrett-Lehigh building in Chelsea the other day. Outside, in the wide hallway, a line of languid models waited by an agency next door. One was changing from flats to hellishly high heels. Many stared into space.



Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

“I’d love to say they’re waiting to see me,” he said, “but they’re not.”

They may be someday. An international art star represented by Larry Gagosian, Mr. Phillips, 49, has a disconcertingly easy alliance with fashion and pop culture. Last summer, he showed off collaborations with MAC Cosmetics, Izod and Jimmy Choo at a reputable East Hampton, N.Y., gallery. (Ed Westwick of “Gossip Girl” attended.) This month, his first editorial fashion shoot appears in Elle. In the provocative black-and-white spread, China Chow poses by a sporty white Porsche.

“That’s actually my car,” he said nonchalantly.

On Friday night at the Standard hotel in Miami, full-size prints reproduced from Mr. Phillips’s “Most Wanted” show last January at White Cube gallery in London will likely draw art aficionados to a party staged by Exhibition A, an online art dealer, to benefit the Whitney Museum’s after-school outreach programs. Venus X, a D.J. du jour, will be spinning.

“Miami’s my favorite art fair,” Mr. Phillips said of Art Basel Miami Beach, which opens to the public Thursday, and which he sees as a cocktail of art, fashion and fun. “I even surfed there one year.”

Yes, in addition to having talent, power, good looks (lean as a model with a dappling of gray in his artfully cut hair), Mr. Phillips surfs. He keeps seven boards and a wet suit by his studio door. “You never know when surf happens,” he said.

To make matters even hipper (or depressing, depending on your stomach for art gods), he keeps a black and white Rickenbacker guitar in his studio, too. It stands at attention next to a mixing board and turntable by a wall of windows with a perfect Hudson River view. “It’s the same model guitar that Johnny Marr of the Smiths used,” he said.

What else to envy? There’s his 1986 M.F.A. from Yale; a beautiful fiancée, Josephine Meckseper, also a hot artist; a loft in SoHo converted from an ice house; and his ease in diffusing criticism of his vulgar subject matter.

Two of his candy-hued portraits adorn the “Gossip Girl” set, a show in which he has also done a cameo. “Being on the set was one of the most fun things I’ve done in New York,” he said.

More glamour, please? There’s his cozy working relationship with Lindsay Lohan, whose face covers his studio walls in various media as he prepares for a Gagosian show next fall. Last summer, he collaborated with Ms. Lohan on a moody 90-second commercial-like art video for the Venice Biennale. He’s now working with the actress on a longer one. Of course, she’s been an absolute pleasure to work with, he said. “She’s interested in art,” Mr. Phillips said. “She paints, and I like her work a lot.”

He isn’t coy about using a famous face or a naked body for what he calls the “elevation” it takes to get ahead in today’s brutal art market. “You need celebrity endorsement and luxury sponsorship,” he said.

Not to mention a healthy hit of eroticism, as in the video he shot at a modernist Lautner house in Los Angeles with Sasha Grey, the pornographic film star turned legitimate actress.

Mr. Phillips grew up in Marblehead, Mass., and studied fine art at Boston University’s rigorous foundation program before getting his master’s at Yale, alongside John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Sean Landers. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, Tate Modern and others.

He is not the first to work the system and push pop imagery. Francesco Vezzoli has made videos and performance pieces with Milla Jovovich and Lady Gaga. Andy Warhol used celebrity. James Rosenquist painted sexy luxury. Jeff Koons mines celebrity culture while courting rock-star art fame. And with companies like Prada and Hugo Boss eating it up, why not?

“I loved the Koons ‘Luxury and Degradation’ show in the ’80s,” Mr. Phillips said.

Jean-Luc Godard is another inspiration in Mr. Phillips’s current work. A portrait-in-progress of a nude woman holding a .50-caliber pistol looks like a pornographic locker-room poster.

“Godard said that all you need for cinema is a girl and a gun,” he said.

On another wall, a painting of a sexy woman in a Lotus Evora racecar seems as appropriate for a lad’s magazine as an art gallery. But then, when car companies like Lotus are your Medicis, everything’s material. “Painting is a coalescing of experience,” he said.

If he sounds like a courtier of celebrity and corporate luxury, he doesn’t care. He has his intellectual reasons for doing what he’s doing, involving terms like iconic, vernacular and appropriation, which he often employs when on academic panels.

“And you know what?” he added. “I deserve to be bullied.”

And envied as well. His technique is as masterly as his cultural acumen.

At the end of the day, he was back in the hall outside his studio. The models were gone, alas. He recalled the days when the building and the entire far edge of Chelsea were the Wild West.

“When I first looked for a studio here in 1986, it was a lot less money,” he said of the Starrett-Lehigh, which now houses the offices of Tommy Hilfiger and other fashion and media companies. “But I had less than a lot less money then.”

Seven years later, he came back and could afford it.

The dusky sky had turned as red as a candy apple, and Mr. Phillips looked out from his hallway over Chelsea and the Hudson. His eyes stopped at a new building by Jean Nouvel along the West Side Highway.

“I hear Nicole Kidman lives there,” he said.

Another celebrity to conquer in the name of art?