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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Richard Phillips' Shiny Happy People

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Richard Phillips

Photo By Robert Mitra

It's a bone-chillingly cold mid-January morning in Chelsea, but inside Richard Phillips' studio, the whitewashed walls are ablaze with a blur of impeccably bronzed faces sporting large shiny white teeth, gently tousled hair, piercing blue eyes and polished,

perfected pouts. Miley Cyrus and Kristen Stewart are here. So are Robert Pattinson, Chace Crawford and Taylor Swift. Leonardo DiCaprio and Taylor Momsen are present and accounted for.

And they've never looked better: Oversized and beaming from behind snug neon borders, which Phillips refers to as "secular halos." Flat, splashily-branded backdrops fill the canvas surrounding the A-list craniums, proclaiming über-labels such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Versace and Chanel in the manner of a promotional red-carpet backdrop. The series, a charmingly scruffy and casually attired Phillips explains, is titled "Most Wanted," a reference to Andy Warhol's 1962 installation at the World's Fair Pavilion.

"Warhol's show depicted anonymous criminals," the artist says. "Here we have far-from-anonymous young entertainers, each globally renowned in their own field."

Phillips' intentions for his show, set to debut at the White Cube gallery in London next week, are to represent the "pinnacle of our pop culture awareness right now" as well as the global influence of those depicted, he says.

"It's about putting very direct focus on the power that is at the top of the food chain," he says. Of course, Phillips is no stranger to the pop-appeal of the art world, having recently placed two canvases on the set of the CW series "Gossip Girl." Some might see Phillips' attempt to immortalize celebutantes and pop-tarts on candy-colored fashion-branded canvases as an elaborate send-up of the system, or a comment on the superficiality of the entertainment industry, but he argues that his intention "is not to be ironic or make disparaging commentary."

As Phillips walks past a portrait of Dakota Fanning, he pokes at it with his index finger.

"You can touch her," he says with a grin. "She's here!"

Phillips culled the images exclusively from "step-and-repeat" red-carpet shots of the celebrities, creating a digital composite of "the best of the best of their red carpet faces"

which he then silk-screened onto canvas before painting. The toothsome notables in the series have wildly disparate careers, but as he notes: "There is a correspondence between all the different entertainers and their various disciplines... they're all white, for example, and they all have blue eyes, whether they really do or not, and there's just this similarity between them which speaks to the production of this type of global, cultural export."

His choice to depict the stars in a promotional photograph situation was not accidental.

"It's a self-serving system, where they're showing you their formal attire, which is advertising for these fashion houses, and it's like a petting zoo," he muses. "In some cases, if you're lucky, you can actually go up and pet them and then step away."

So the menagerie is off to London, where one could argue that pop culture has even more caché. Is he excited for the trip?

"These will be my only friends there!" Phillips laughs, drawing his arm through the air to encircle his army of faces, nearly backhanding Zac Efron in the process.