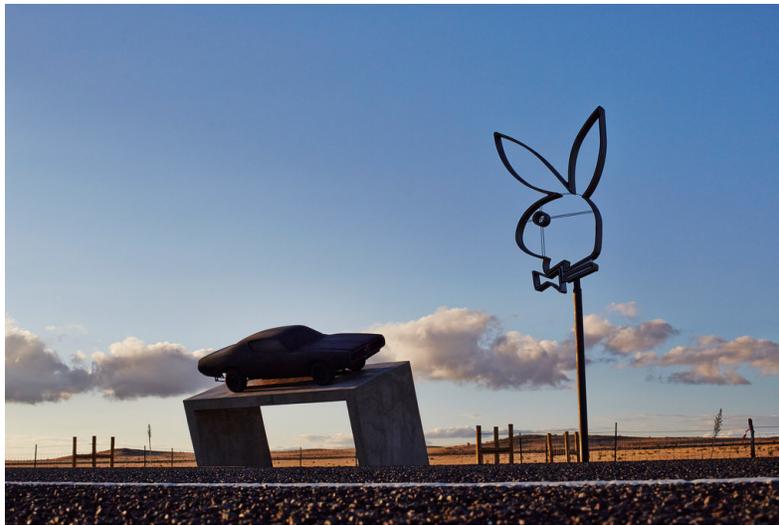


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



On View | An All-American Roadside Attraction in West Texas

Alex French



Playboy Marfa, a commissioned artwork by Richard Phillips, stands beside Highway 90 in Marfa, Texas. Adrian Gaut for Playboy

Over the next few months, motorists speeding through the West Texas desert on Highway 90, just outside the arts town of Marfa, will encounter an unexpected roadside attraction: a white neon Playboy logo hovering above a matte-black 1972 Dodge Charger perched at an 18-degree angle atop a concrete plinth. Playboy Marfa, as it's being called, is the first in a series of art projects commissioned by Playboy's new creative team of Neville Wakefield and Landis Smithers meant to reintroduce the brand for a younger generation. It's the work of Richard Phillips — the artist best known for his hyper-realistic portraits of women, often in the mode of the old-school magazine pictorial — who was a natural fit for the brand, Smithers said. "I loved his idea of this glowing symbol in the middle of nowhere as we — Playboy — are emerging from this period of darkness."

Phillips intended each of the installation's constituent parts — the car, the concrete form, the neon light, the setting — to recall early '70s American culture. "Donald Judd in 1971 visited and realized that this type of vast, wide open space was the new frontier for art," Phillips said. "He famously said that in West Texas there's a lot of land, but nowhere to go. So anything you put there gets a great deal of focus." The plinth is aesthetically aligned to Judd's geometric concrete sculptures at the Chinati Foundation nearby in Marfa. The pitched angle at the top came to Phillips after walking the banked turns at the Daytona racetrack, where, at the same time that Judd

was setting up his practice in Marfa, Richard Petty was winning the Daytona 500 in a Dodge Charger. “That car, the muscle car, became an emblem of personal luxury in the same way that Playboy was,” Phillips added. But the neon light is the central element. “That Playboy emblem is a beacon,” Phillips said, “a touchstone where all these different aspects of our lives — art, politics, sex — come together without contradiction.”

The project has a second act: while one Dodge Charger sits in Marfa, Phillips will be back in New York working with a custom fabricator to “reimagine” an identical Dodge Charger in a way that evokes Playboy’s heritage. Phillips was reluctant to say more than that, but Wakefield spoke for him: “I think he’s taken issue with the idea of an art car. What interests Richard, and what will distinguish this car, is that he’s involved in every component of it. He’s taking it down to nuts and bolts. He’ll be mining from other parts of the Playboy iconography, from the jet and the clubs, and seeing what elements can be incorporated in the process of building the car.” The final product will be revealed publicly before the end of the year.

The project’s looking-back-to-look-forward ethos is central to Playboy’s entire relaunch. But these new creatives are doing their best not to get mired in nostalgia. “We’re not going to be a retro brand,” Smithers said. “We’re challenging artists to capture the spirit of what Hef put in his first magazines. He talked a lot about sitting around with friends talking about politics, enjoying the company of women, jazz on his phonograph and drinking great whiskey. We want to take that and translate it to the modern era.”