

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



REFINERY29

Playboy's Rebranding Initiative, As Told By Richard Phillips

Hayden Manders



Photo by Adrian Gauty for Playboy

One mention of Playboy and images of centerfolds and hedonism flood the brain. The foundation of the brand as the epicenter of solid authorship, art, and the “good” life has been shrouded in boobs, butts, and bunnies. It's something that, albeit successful, has pointed the corporation's trajectory in a direction that it doesn't seek.

Through a series of creative initiatives, Playboy wants to reinsert itself as the place where, according to famed artist Richard Phillips, “the nexus between art, culture, literature, and eroticism all come to reconcile with one another.” Phillips and Playboy have joined forces to create pieces of art that stimulate the zeitgeist with their paradigmatic use of symbols that symbolize both hedonism and progressivism. Beginning with this past summer's installation in Marfa, Texas, which will be deconstructed this month and reimagined for a 2014 exhibition in the Dallas Contemporary museum, Phillips' two-part Playboy collaboration will come to fruition at this year's Art Basel in Miami. But, what about these cars-turned-sculptures and a not-so-innocent bunny symbol signify a change in direction for the impish brand?

“Playboy is looking for us to see things anew,” Phillips explained to us over the phone. “That’s exactly what got me interested in the project in the first place. I’m of a generation where Playboy was a gateway for artists and authors to make a name.” He's exactly right in that sentiment, too. Playboy has a history of launching the careers of authors lauded today as greats (read: Ray Bradbury, Ian Fleming, and Roald Dahl). “It always starts with the mind of an individual with passion that grows into a (potentially) global brand,” Phillips said regarding the brand's origins. “I find that narrative to be particularly fascinating, and it was something I wanted to reflect.”

The reflection in question comes in the form of a murdered out Dodge Charger mounted on top of an angled concrete plinth beneath a glowing white neon bunny sign in Marfa, Texas. Pulling inspiration from Donald Judd, John Chamberlain, and Dan Flavin, Phillips set out with the abstract to create a portrait of Playboy. In our conversation, he referenced his past projects of making painted portraits of Lindsay Lohan and Sasha Grey from films he made as process inspiration. The associations each of those names carry — the “infrastructures” as Phillips calls them — have massive communicative power. “Playboy itself is a potential subject of portraiture, too,” he said. “It’s just the idea of portraying a corporate entity through contemporary art that hasn’t been done yet.”

Phillips could have easily done something with the female body, but instead chose to highlight the body and form of a different kind of epicurean delight: muscle cars. His experience at the Daytona 500 along with “serendipitous relationships” between the rise of the Dodge Charger and Playboy's peak sales in 1974 resulted in what Phillips calls “kinetic sculptures.” By eliminating the frills and blackening out the car in phase one, Phillips focused on the body of the car — a move that forces the audience to see it as a mass, something erotic, like a pinup. “I think that the alliteration between the body of the car and its beauty and form is something that’s appropriate to being a component of this Playboy sculpture.”

This moment, however, is ephemeral. Phase one was a prelude to the second half of Playboy's resurgence. Phillips focus on eroticizing the form of luxury (speed and culture), shifts to moving it forward in phase two. How does the brand take the idea of Playboy's “freedom of communication” and push it forward, take it to its ultimate limit? By working from the inside out, naturally.

Just as Phillips looked to the core of Playboy's past, present, and future trajectory, so, too did he for the second iteration of the Dodge Charger. “Rather than reimagine what it [the Dodge Charger] would look like, we imagined, from the chassis outward, a new one including subtle changes to the bodywork. We really took the body apart and imagined a kinetic sculpture.”

The result is a fully functioning piece of art with the horsepower of a NASCAR vehicle. So what, though? It's just another muscle car, right? Well, yes and no. It all comes down to whether you can perceive a car as art. Both phase one and phase two work to change our perceptions of Playboy's dirty mag history by returning to it's roots. The bunny was once the pinnacle of all things high-class — a refined, tongue-in-cheek oeuvre. Eroticizing something as speed and innovation through these cars pushes Playboy in a new direction. The brand knows sex sells, but sex isn't simply nude women seductively staring out from a glossy. Sex is growth. Sex is, in a way, the future (quite literally when you think of reproduction).

What Phillips has done is made a body of work that doesn't bow “into the idea of producing to the normative standard.” It's a rock-and-roll approach to an initiative ripe with speculators. His rather brilliant use of Playboy's vernacular to progress it into a new era makes for provocative discussion. “It’s when you work within conventions to start a different type of discussion that new art comes about,” he told us. “It might not try to completely change the entire idea, but it’s more subversive when you’re living and editing within known conventions and not attempting to claim otherwise.” Indeed. Whether Playboy itself will shake the chains it seeks to remove is in time's hands, or, perhaps, yours.