

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### COMPLEX

#### **"Art Is Our First Language." —Richard Phillips Discusses His New Exhibition at Dallas Contemporary**

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On April 4, 2014, artist Richard Phillips will host the "RE:DEFINE" auction and gala at Dallas Contemporary, preceding his first solo museum exhibition in the US there, titled "Negation of the Universe." The 20-year survey of his career, taking place during Dallas Arts Week, spans painting, film, and sculpture, including the controversial sculpture of the Playboy logo he put up (and was asked to take down) in Marfa last November.

Few know that Phillips also had his second exhibition ever in Deep Ellum, Dallas, so it makes sense that he'd celebrate the occasion of his exhibition by giving back to the city. For "RE:DEFINE," Phillips has curated a music performance program, bringing Brooklyn rock'n'roll band Starred and Jennifer Herrema of Black Bananas to the event. Proceeds from the coinciding auction on Paddle8, with works from Conor Harrington, Damien Hirst, Angel Otero, Daniel Arsham, and more, go to the MTV Staying Alive Foundation.

Phillips' works have been making headlines since he started in 1996. In 2011, he famously made a film starring Lindsay Lohan, which contains much of the imagery he used in subsequent paintings of her in 2012. In addition to more political paintings of George Bush, Mitt Romney, and soldiers, he's depicted highly sexualized women (such as 2009's Fundraiser, 2005's Threesome, and 2009's Frieze) in a way that confronts the politics of sex, advertising, capitalism, and the art world.

We caught up with Phillips to talk about what he's learned from looking back at his vast career, bringing a movement to Dallas next month, and why art is our first language.

**Growing up in Massachusetts, what was your impression of the American southwest including Texas and Dallas specifically? When did you first go to Dallas?**

I was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, a New England town, in 1962. It was pretty old school and very, very different from Texas. My awareness of Texas came early on, when you think about the history of the country and all. My first chance to actually visit came in 1997 when I did my first exhibition there at Turner & Runyon Gallery in Deep Ellum. It was my second full-scale exhibition of paintings, outside of the first one that did in New York in 1996.

Texas has been a very important part of my art career, because it was literally the second opportunity I had to exhibit my painting. I mean, Texas could not be more different than New England, where I grew up, or any other part of the country that I had been to. It really is its own unique environment, and I really liked it. I've been going back ever since. I have a stronger connection to Dallas than any other city in the country, with regard to my artwork.

**How have you structured this 20-year look at your work, "Negation of the Universe," at Dallas Contemporary? Where does the title come from?**

The structure of the show will have my new work, which includes the films that I've exhibited in Europe and more recently in New York. It will also combine my newest efforts in sculpture, which have been seen in West Texas in Marfa and in Miami. With the painting aspect, it will look at the way in which my work has developed and progressed since 1996, starting with the basis and conventions of fashion imagery and large-scale oil painting. It goes all the way up until the films, which were the source for the latest imagery in my work. For these, I wasn't appropriating media that pre-existed, but I was actually creating the media and then re-appropriating it from that media space. There's work from all parts of my career that got me through the very first exhibition up to the present. Some of it is quite provocative.

**By putting all of this work together and revisiting some of your older pieces, was there anything you realized about your career in its totality?**

The core thread that I've been finding is the vitality of painting as a form and a method for expressing myself through art. Painting is a very vital medium; it's so flexible and expansive, and it has this kind of limitless possibility. The notion of the real is something that can be debated quite interestingly within the medium.

**Speaking of the sculptures, I wanted to ask specifically about the Playboy sculpture that will be outside the exhibition. When you put up the the Playboy sculpture in Marfa last November, did you think that there'd be a chance you'd be asked to remove it?**

I think that anytime we put work out into the public, it's a great opportunity to ignite a discussion. I knew that there would be a multi-faceted discussion, especially when you bring Playboy into the mix, which in its own unique way reconciles and brings together different facets of life—eroticism, politics, and journalism. That core intersection of passions was something I wanted to work into the sculpture. When you have references to Donald Judd's Chinati sculptures and a neon emblem that demarcates Playboy's moving past, the sculpture can work in

and of itself. The Dodge Charger is an emblem of the American landscape, quite literally moving through it as powerful, affordable luxury, with the romance and sexiness of speed.

I think that when people saw the sculpture, it brought up strong feelings in both directions. Some people really liked it; I think local people really liked it. I think that the people who administer the art foundations there didn't like it, because it's a new kind of art that's separate and not in accordance with the work that's been put up there previously. Even the other work there, as well, doesn't have to obey those ideas. My piece certainly did not.

**Where do you think the misunderstanding lies?**

I think that there was misunderstanding in the community about what art is compared to advertising. When the issue was brought up with the Department of Transportation, they raised the question about art's relationship to the Highway Beautification Act, and there was a debate.

The work was never intended to be a permanent installation, so I was always comfortable with the idea that it would eventually be taken down. It was taken down within the time frame that I expected it to be. The exciting part about all of this, and something that I'm very happy about, is that the issue of whether the piece is art or advertising will be resolutely solved by its appearance at my survey show in a museum. It seems as though, culturally, we need to have that type of reassurance—of art being in the proximity of a museum—for it to legitimize itself as art. The fact is, that doesn't actually need to happen. That point could have been very strongly argued in any number of environments. Fortunately, we are able to continue thinking about art and not about legal cases. I'm happy to talk about art and its legitimate right to ask questions and comment on or create cultural landmarks of our contemporary environment.

**What made you want to make the occasion of your exhibition more than just about art, but also incorporating music and philanthropy with the Staying Alive foundation?**

To me, philanthropy and art go hand in hand. Dallas is a leading location in the world for that. I'm happy to have this opportunity to be involved in MTV's RE:DEFINE program to bring together art, philanthropy, and the excitement and energy of rock'n'roll. All of my art is rooted in my experience with rock'n'roll and music; it's just that my paintings are silent. I've had openings where bands have played, like in 2001 where one played at 140 decibels at my opening. If you didn't have earplugs, you would have left with damaged ears. I've always had bands play at my opening parties. It's very much a part of the energy and spirit that's within my work.

I'm not a musician, so I'm very fortunate to meet people who are very talented like the members of Starred. I asked them to join me in working with RE:DEFINE to create a new sense of energy and excitement around art and philanthropy. I think those things are so critical that they should function together. That spirit of rock'n'roll, of lawlessness, of surpassing all cultural limits without any boundaries, and of exploding into a new present is a spirit that can carry into all aspects of our lives. It's certainly in art but also in our commitment to supporting all of the members of our community.

**Referencing your discussion of painting's endurance, you've mentioned the medium as your way of going against photography as a "degraded or unacceptable form." Do you think photography is still seen that way in comparison to painting, or has it been elevated since you started in 1996?**

Things have changed a lot, and that has to do with social media and the electronic media space.

In our own capacity, if we have Twitter, and more specifically Instagram, where everyone is generating a photo diary and putting it out there for all types of purposes, on a constant basis, that sense of the rush of imagery is just flowing past us. It's really hard to grab onto anything that has any weight or significance when it comes to that. It's so in the present, deluded, and without any type of substance. It's like a vapor that we surround ourselves in.

The excitement about painting is that it can, in our corporal state, in our presence with the object or within the environment, create an entirely different relationship to imagery. It sets up a dialectic that does not exist otherwise. You know certain forms of painting, at least the kinds that I'm involved in, are completely generated by hand. That inflection and that sensitivity are all absorbed into that object. It's a very unique type of experience. There's a reason why people go to see Bronzino at the National Gallery in London from everywhere in the world; it's a kind of experience that you can't have in any other way. It's very specific.

It's the same if you go to a concert and see a show. I happened to see The Jesus and Mary Chain play their first US concert in Boston. It's such a specific environment and experience; you have to be there in person to know it. It's just not the same if you watch a YouTube video decades later, you have to be there. I'm very much for that sense of creating highly concentrated and specific experiences.

**How do you, yourself, engage with media? Do you read blogs and go on Twitter a lot? How have your theories and ideas about politics, sexuality, and advertising changed with using the Internet and how you engage with media now?**

I think that it's important to use the tools that are available and to be engaged with them. I'm of a generation where you can either shut off from it completely or you can be engaged with it. I tend to engage with it wholeheartedly, because I think that it's important to use this ability to find connections within our world. To me it's really opened up a lot of possibilities. I've made friends from Twitter. I've met people on Twitter, and I've ended up being able to collaborate with them as a result of that.

It's not even just the imagery, per se, but it's actually these connections or the potential for these connections to happen. With the media, there's this potential of having a dual relationship with it. You don't have to submit to it. You can engage with it, you can distort it, and you can use it. By understanding the methods and techniques that are available in an environment, you can communicate in ways that have everything to do with art and its communicative potential. I think that PR and those relationships are forms, not just businesses; they're forms of communication that have artistic potential. I've used them for art.

**How do you choose your subjects? It seems like the one phrase that's persisted throughout discussion of your work is the term you gave yourself, the idea of certain celebrities having a "wasted beauty." Is "wasted beauty" always a prerequisite or even a negative thing?**

It's interesting. I said that in 1996. I actually remember being in my 12 1/2 x 12 1/2-square-foot apartment telling that to the interviewer. At the time, heroin chic was very trendy in fashion, and some of the images that I was looking at in magazines related very much to the images of the late 1960s and early '70s. Photographers were deliberately making models look much more empty of any type of emotion—much more alienated, gaunt, and extreme.

In the mid-'90s, of course, all the photographers were closely emulating that look from the previous generation as fashion got recycled. The idea of a "wasted beauty" was, at that time,

more of a stylistic reference point. In terms of content, "wasted beauty" has to do with that sense of beauty being linked to negative potential.

Yesterday or the day before, these scientists figured out a direct connection to our probability of the Big Bang Theory, in terms of the origin of the universe. My title for "Negation of the Universe" goes back to a painting that I made in 2001 for my exhibition at the time titled *America*. It really has to do with individual and personal sovereignty beyond external manipulation. It's the idea that the universe was inverted down to the one singular entity or being, and all else was negated. That power exists within a person through the negation of everything else. That's very explicit in that particular painting, but also as a concept for the way art can inspire or take hold of our communicative reach.

**I think I might have actually seen that specific interview on YouTube.**

It was so long ago. I actually haven't seen that interview. I still embrace the term in a certain sense. It's catchy. I like it. To be wasted and to be beautiful—a lot of rock'n'roll has been written about that. I don't disagree with it. At that time, for me, the paintings were meant to be a backdrop. Liam Gillick wrote a text about my work, saying that it's best experienced while looking over the shoulder of a person who you're talking to. That kind of indirect connection reaches a different part of the mind and starts operating in a different way. It's not the light side of reality or the illuminated side of reality, it's the darkened side of reality. Both are equally present, it's just a matter of how you connect to it.

I find that my paintings do connect to it in unsuspecting ways. On one hand, they can be read flatly, for what they are, but in another way, they bring peoples' subjectivity in line with what their dispositions are. That was very much true with the Playboy sculpture in West Texas, too. Peoples' predilections and their predispositions were brought out front and center to be talked about. I think that's a very good thing to have happen with art. That will definitely happen in my new exhibition, and it will be a unique thing. I'm really excited and very grateful to the Dallas Contemporary and Peter Doroshenko for giving me this opportunity.

**A lot of people have become familiar with you, especially outside the art world, from your appearances on television, whether on *Gossip Girl* or *Work of Art*. What's prompted you to experiment with your own celebrity and your own image in the media? What kind of insight has that given you into the lives of your celebrity subjects?**

A lot of it just had to do with saying "yes" when I was asked.

When forces act upon our culture to redistribute financial instruments, or redistribute money, the first thing that goes is art. There's a lot of effort to try to save that. A lot of art has been removed from schools. In our culture presently, people's idea of what art can be is extremely limited. For me, to appear within a larger media context, in television or otherwise, as a working artist making art, for instance on *Gossip Girl*, is to verify that art is made by living people that have both of their ears! It's not just a myth, it's actually there. It can be beautiful. I wanted to be there to verify that. I think it connected with so many people. It was less to do with celebrity, although critically, it became part of it.

It had more to do with standing up and saying, regardless of whatever the reproaches or commentary would be on both sides of the coin, that art has a very important role as our first language. It is *not* our second language. Art is not subordinate to science or business. It's our

first language. I really wanted to emphasize that. Art reigns above all other forms of communication as our first language. It is very important that we keep this in mind when we communicate in our culture. Whether it be in media, or through our one-on-one conversations, or in our institutions. Art is our first language, and that should be respected. For me to appear on television that way was to affirm that role and to try to take a positive approach to it, regardless of whatever people would say about it.