

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

DETAILS

Artist Richard Phillips on His Dodge Charger in Marfa and Other Influential Works of Car Art

The 52-year-old American artist gravitates toward three things: nudity, celebrities, and cars.

Brett Berk



Phillips' Playboy collaboration, by day and night.

New York-based artist Richard Phillips is famous for his highbrow-meets-lowbrow mix; you can see his work at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Tate—and on the walls of the "Gossip Girl" set. We spoke to the man about his recent automotive creations for Playboy and other works of car art that drove his interest in the genre.

DETAILS: Can you tell us what inspired your car art in Marfa, Texas?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: I had been invited down to watch the 24 hours of Daytona, the Grand-Am race, in January, right around the time [creative director for Special Projects Neville Wakefield] asked me to think about the sculptural idea [for Playboy]...It would look into its history—and imagine its future—to energize the image of the brand.

DETAILS: Why Marfa?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: That seemed interesting in the sense that it's a global reference point for modern sculpture. I stayed away from the term minimalism, because that was [associated with] Donald Judd. The idea of an off-site place away from an urban environment in which the landscape itself is the ultimate critical backboard was also important...Crushed autos, and neon sculptures; those things became part of an American sculptural identity. At the same time, you have Playboy.

DETAILS: How did you choose a particular car to represent?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: The presence of the Dodge Charger came about through a process of discussion of the hallmarks of American affordable luxury and power. And that, of course, is globally understood as the muscle car. The Dodge Charger, in the 1970's, was the spearhead of that idea, of personal luxury and power. It was halcyon days for Playboy. The reason why it was black was to focus on it as a form; I didn't want to get caught up in details, design, and identification of a Dodge, per se. It more had to do with the absolute iconic presence of the muscle car that could transverse the Texas landscape at around 200 miles per hour...[Plus] the car is a sense of passion, speed, and eroticism. That fantasy. Rather than looking at it as a retro thing, we got ourselves a 1972 Dodge Charger, took it apart down to the chassis, and then thought about how to imagine anew what this car would be. It's bolted to the top of a concrete piece. We were ready to expose it there and see whatever happened.

DETAILS: What is the significance of the neon?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: The neon element is how we think of Playboy, looking at images of the clubs in the 1970's. It's the indelible image in our minds of hanging out at a Playboy club. The idea was a kind of gateway to eroticism. The way that the magazine was actually regarded at that time...you had great writers and journalists. They could take the gloves off and have at it. If you're looking at from a non-ultra-conservative perspective, Playboy was a great switching point. It was actually able to reconcile our different states of being; our erotic life without hindrance; our political life without being edited; and the fantastic life of literature. That coalescing was the core of what that sculpture is really talking about.

We [also] used the neon so that it could light itself at night, mark itself as a point of exchange. Having that emblem up in context creates a sense of motion and speed, and being able to digest a roadside attraction. It's a part of American life.

DETAILS: How did you go about making the piece?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: We contacted a builder in Long Island who was experienced, HRE builders. That involved getting a custom-built, Ernie Elliott, Nascar 850 horsepower engine and putting it into the frame of this original vehicle. We have custom-made bucket seats with embroidery on the headrests of purple bunnies. The chrome-plated pistol grip shifter is also inlaid with the bunny. The splitter bears the Playboy font. All these elements came together to imagine a new version of a Cup Car. What's cool about it is that the valve covers of the engine have Playboy valve-cover caps. It's not emblazoned with decals, per se.

Unlike a lot of art cars, this is more of a kinetic sculpture. It's a purpose-built car that's fully functional. You could register it. Or you could take it down to Daytona and recreate a race-winning pass across the finish line. In a way, that's a critical point. It's not about creating an effect that modifies a car form and makes a comment; we're beyond splashing paint on cars and calling it art. In a car like that, it takes talent. It's like looking at a Stradivarius; it's an amazing form, but you have to know how to work with it. Like walking into a Playboy club; you don't know what's going to happen. They are the conditions for maximum potential.

DETAILS: What do you think of Richard Prince's car pieces?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: My first response to Richard's car hood pieces was that it was fairly new work. It took the idea of customization, as an American tradition, and put a focal point on it

as artwork. He was saying, it's not just primary structures now. Richard took the pinks and pale blues and grays of Bondo [automotive repair filler] matched up against matte paint or ground down metal, and said, 'these are as important as a de Kooning brushstroke.' It expresses all of this feeling. Richard does this, and then makes it into a usable car that he drives himself. That was inspiring. I think that the usable car is a part of the reflecting on America's obsession with that type of vehicle. Like, when you put a blower on top of your Camaro, it's about power and speed and menace.

DETAILS :How about Gabriel Orozco's Citroen DS work of art?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: I like the idea that art with a relationship to this work is like engineering gone mad. I like that this art takes the idea of aerodynamic efficiency and creates a form and an entity that could express the unthinkable. This piece goes against everything that you think you would do to a car like that. They cut a car completely in half: that doesn't end up being art. It's more like a science fair display. The form of that piece keeps asserting itself as an unknowable thing. It has this really powerful feeling, and I love that he was speaking about efficiency in motorsport. Yet, as a sculpture, it's fantastic.

DETAILS: How does Erwin Wurm's Fat Car figure into the car art genre?

RICHARD PHILLIPS: When I saw the picture, all I could think of was all of the obesity...It's drinking too many super-sized sodas. I think the car would be banned from Bloomberg's pantheon of car design. I totally love the idea of this car being a total perversion of car design. You don't think of excess and fat with a car, you think of sleek...It really is bringing into physical form a completely antithetical idea, and making it fantastic. It looks like something out of a Pixar movie. It does subordinate it to an entertainment factor. My criticism is that it works toward a comedic relationship, but that's only from my aesthetic. I'm not sure if that's on firm art-critical terms. It does occupy a firm position for commenting on culture.