

Larry Bob Phillips: *Done and Undone*

Larry Bob Phillips is of the Llano-Estacado, a high-plains plateau conjoining New Mexico and the Texas panhandle, where it's easy to find yourself conspicuously upright inside the circle of a distant horizon. Movement, adventure, exploration, are what may be found in a world so sparse. For Phillips, native of Canyon, TX, it's a habit of being that he carried west to New Mexico and Utah, where he first ventured two decades ago with legendary New Mexico painter John Wenger.

They went to be still and to listen as standing water would listen, selves slowly evaporating into an atmospheric understanding of location in the midst of Barrier Canyon Style pictographs and soul-stirring geology. This experience placed them in a present that was radical in its presence, generously sharing with both artists an offering of awe and splendor found in landscapes deeply marked by time. In such places, wind and rain, erosion and reformation, join with a silence that is heard softly. Of figure and horizon, it may be said that a point can't be parallel to a line, or to put it another way, a point is always parallel to a line. Done and Undone.

Phillips's ink on paper works sometimes center an image that is emblematic of intense encounters with singular objects in nature, as if the one-on-one relationship were blazing. Call it a heightened awareness of thermal radiation; a burning bush of understanding about a person's relative place in the universe.

Hanging in space on a planet where there is light and shadow, it may possibly be inferred that metaphor is self-evident in life, but if that raises a question, it goes unanswered by the radiance that informs these paintings and drawings. The truth interred here is that relationship is the core dynamic of our reality.

Waterfall (2024)

Lovers appear in primordial waters, practicing naked-in-the-woods-telepathy, and are dwarfed by the deepening perspective that surrounds them. Looming mounds border the pond and seem swirled by inky, energetic shapes, suggestive of something just beyond the boundaries of suggestion itself, like shadows verging on identification. A pair of fish share the pond with the lovers and reappear in the exhibition, as if related like wave and particle, a monad of two.

Deeper into the space of the painting, a waterfall emerges from the center and seems to pour into the picture, becoming light by the time it hits the water below. Above, a pointillist mountain forest is contrasted to entoptic lines representing rain beneath a thunderhead. The painting moves from bottom to top by way of semi-realism through graphic play to thick bands of black, each wider than the one below, indicating a deepening sky. Essentially stripes, they are met by the most overtly representational image in the work: a bird perched on a pine branch in the upper right corner, giving voice to an unheard song.

The Bather (2024)

Phillips's reoccurring character, *The Bather*, emerges from a birth pool as gleaming embodied, with one palm open, indicative of generosity. Basking in radiance, sensing it and exuding it, this naked apparition is wearing the garment of the world. What is it that is beneath the drape that blends its contour with everything else?

The volcanic geology of the landscape is cartoonish and tattooed with spots, and implies uncertainty as an undulating surface blends body, sky, and earth, implying that the luminosity on offer is illusive. A dice rolled in this space leaves its mark on the land, as if losing its pips as it tumbles.

The head and hand are essentially tendrils of sensitivity as figure and ground merge into a thickening quaver that ripples in a continuum in which the bather holds and is held. Tubular phalanges are defined by concentric contours, not unlike the topographic maps that the artist has consulted for trips into back country.

Rainbow (2024)

A rainbow frames a river winding its way into the center of the composition where its banks eventually contain only the base white of the formerly blank surface. Images emerge from the landscape in ambiguous arrays vaguely resembling faces and limbs, speaking to the tentative nature of life on earth. We see ourselves in everything, even though we are only recently arrived.

The Mancos Shale is the distant focal point. A rock formation that points to it conjoins the arc to the flat panel. The rainbow itself is dematerialized as if it were an invitation written in invisible ink. A tiny man stands beneath a towering pine, tenderly touching its trunk, attempting to give his pulse to the tree. The entire composition seems made of stars, neutrinos, and dragon clouds.

Funny Bones (2023)

Phillips's love of comix comes forward in *Funny Bones*, in which an eyeball is a point of awareness caught within an anarchic tangle of animated putrescence. It is reminiscent of Phillips's 2016 contribution to the House of Eternal Return at Meow Wolf, though it might work just as well as wall paper in a black-light bathroom in the House of Usher. Some of the smaller works in *Done and Undone* feature beer tumblers in which the delusions of an alcohol fugue eddy, conjuring the horrific denizens in *Tales from The Crypt*.

Partners (2024)

A pair of speckled trout closely hover as if floating in water, which reads as transparent like the picture plane through which they are seen. This may lead a viewer to consider the perceptual partnership involved in any moment of sensation, but the mental map that must be used to

know that these fish are there is illusive. It moves suddenly and quickly and may only leave an impression of mystery as fleeting as the fish, who are long gone, at least when no one is observing them.

In common use, the word “psychedelic” has often come to mean “intense color,” but that, even though lovely, is merely an artifact of something else that is at the center of that kind of experience. There are visual souvenirs that are not forgotten, but there is also humility and gratitude in the face of an astonishing physical reality. For Larry Bob Phillips, it’s best alluded to in black and white, with cinematic flicker, but it is not only a retinal experience. There is that window behind the eye.

Commissioned by 516 Arts, Albuquerque, NM, June 2024