

tant pis, Monsieur Doo-champ!

Doin' the Do with John Phillips

(or vice versa)

by Kathryn Hixson

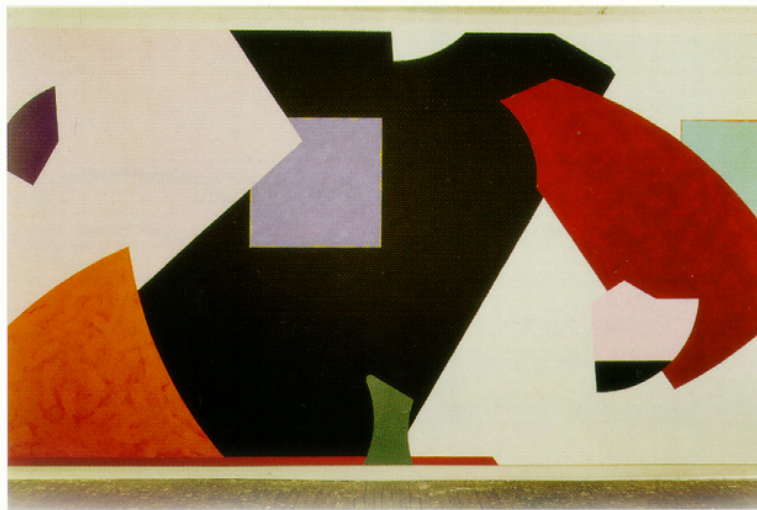
If I were a
shopping center
I'd sure be
embarrassed,
I know I'd never
get a date—
with some cute
little building,
like from Paris.

—Jonathan
Richman

John Phillips has remarked that if Barnett Newman had owned a lava lamp, it might have looked like one of his own paintings. Indeed, Phillips' inimicable mix of serious-minded abstraction and eye-hugging visual entertainment does seem to borrow equally from these vastly different arenas. Throughout his extensive body of work, there is a certain inevitability in his brilliant fields of color populated by skillfully composed, astutely drawn figures. They seem as "natural" as the shopping mall mentioned above, but like in Richmond's personification, they aspire to better company than usually expected: they can pass for a more upscale company, more like those pictures from Paris.

Like many in his generation who came of age in the mid-1970s, Phillips was jolted out of aesthetic lassitude by slides of Picasso's *Desmoiselle D'Avignon* and blood-curdling tales of bourgeois shock at Marcel Duchamp's *Urinal*. From the vicissitudes of hippie psychedelia and transcendental Ansel Adams landscape, in college in Colorado Phillips jumped onto the almighty Grid of Abstraction, absorbing the rules of Mondrian,

FIG. 1
Humbert's Dilemma, 1979
acrylic on canvas
110" x 194"



Albers, Hans Hoffman. Frank Stella had said of his moment after AbEx, "Painters could do anything, you just had to do it." Phillips had to struggle to find a way past this master, jumping around that holy space of figure and ground already populated by Elizabeth Murray, Larry Poons, and Al Held. With Greenbergian fever still hanging heavy in the air, painters were hungry to find that perfect picture plane, even as conceptualism and feminism were punching up the problems of the good fight. Phillips had the opportunity to attend the Whitney Independent Program in 1978 which, if nothing else, managed to saturate his young mind with a glut of art-world dilemmas.

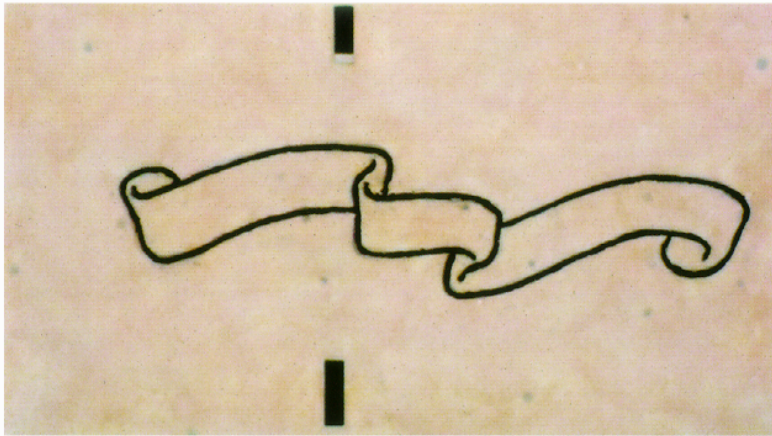
Even in those early days, Phillips would grab onto the rules of the game, while seriously undermining their claims for any transcendental truth. An early canvas titled *Humbert's Dilemma* (FIG. 1) from 1979, is a case in point. By this time Phillips was composing abstract paintings derived from conceptual rules, using geometry and set theory, to predetermine the aesthetic outcome. This very large painting is populated by overlapping sections of squares and circles marching to the

rigor of the grid. However, on closer inspection, the specificity of each shape—its hue, technique, shape, and placement—causes a raucous dance rather than a staid pictorial analysis.

By referring to Vladimir Nabakov's notorious lecher in the title, Phillips sets up a dichotomy which continues to drive his work today: Which is better? To save the myth of purity (the young voluptuous Lolita/young painting) and the stolidness of moral rules (salvaging her chastity and the honor of the Grid), or to succumb to the rapt pleasure of physical connection (of sex and/or painting), indulging in "the ol' in and out" of the picture plane? The answer, of course, lies on that picture plane.

As much as Phillips subscribed wholeheartedly to non referential abstraction, the artist was also drawn to the perverse fun of Marcel Duchamp, with his weird sexual innuendoes buried in highly personal symbology. But Phillips didn't seem to get down with the punster's rejection of the "retinal." Ditto the hard-core conceptual work of Mel Bochner and Bruce Nauman: Phillips appreciated the gesture, but kept hold of his painterly bag of tricks. So, throughout the early to mid 80s, he

FIG. 2
Shift, 1988
oil and wax on board
15" x 26"



continued to make abstractions that broke all the rules. But even as he made shaped canvasses, multiple panel pieces, used nostalgic 1950s designs, or chose particularly brutal color schemes, each strategy seemed to reinforce abstraction's rules by insouciantly ignoring them.

Get down tonight

As Phillips navigated through painting's treacherous waters, he simultaneously sunk into the beer-soaked, noxious depths of rock and roll. If abstraction freed the mind, then punk rock freed the body. Typically, Phillips dove head first, was fully committed to the music scene, then was done with it by 1981, becoming a deejay provocateur and prodigious record collector concentrating primarily on black music of the post-war era. It is dangerous to align any artist's various pursuits, the bad-boy sensuality of early R&B all the way through to late '70s sleaze-punk can be traced as easily in Phillips's 5000-odd 45 rpm records as in his painting and drawing from the last 30 years. And beginning in the early 1980s, he began titling his paintings after pop song titles. Once again, Phillips finds the rules succinctly, in order to better break them.

Po-Mo

This somewhat tangential reference to music surely helped Phillips as a member of the 80s generation to get ready for the final Leap off the Grid. While some painters mucked around in 2nd hand expressionism or rejected the brush for clinical graphic design or sunk into lyrical realism, Phillips joined the likes of Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker, and Philip Taaffe to reimagine geometric/linear abstraction. Like Brice Marden, Phillips went "looking for his line." He found it in a decorative art book in the form of a "scroll" (FIG. 2) Here was a readymade, instantly recognizable, graphic motif that has been around since the Renaissance. It is not really a sign, nor a symbol, but a sort of designation. It confers authority to its contents while placing it in a fictitious representational field. It is true and fake, simultaneously. The scroll is both 2-dimensional and 3-d, similar to but not the public language of geometry, not gendered one way or another. It is gestural in its form, yet calculated in its implementation. It could offer the Word of God, or this week's grocery-store special. It was, if you will, perfectly postmodern.

FIG. 3
What's My Line?, 1994
oil on linen
90" x 39"

Phillips began experimentation with the scroll figure in 1987-88 in many drawings, and in some paintings developed encaustic techniques to play up its historicism. In others, he adopted even louder colors than usual to hone its ability to be purely Pop. Now Jenny Holzer and Warhol's Dance Diagrams became the art historical nod, but Stella still kept that glint in the ol' lecherous eye. Phillips set up a bunch more rules—the scroll came with its own set—postmodern this time, and proceeded to break them.

In the red painting *What's My Line?* (FIG. 3), (yes, its from the TV show), three blue scroll shapes ascend a vertical canvas, each growing slightly larger. Here Phillips uses the conventions of receding perspective, though each figure remains resolutely flat. The visual language never lapses into illustration, maintaining a strong rhetorical case for pure line and color. Phillips began feeding the scroll shapes into his computer, where they morphed and grew, almost to the point of being an unrecognizable line. But they kept their readymade quality, and with the addition of ellipses and other odd shapes, Phillips continued his figure/ground investigations within his chosen postmodern idiom.

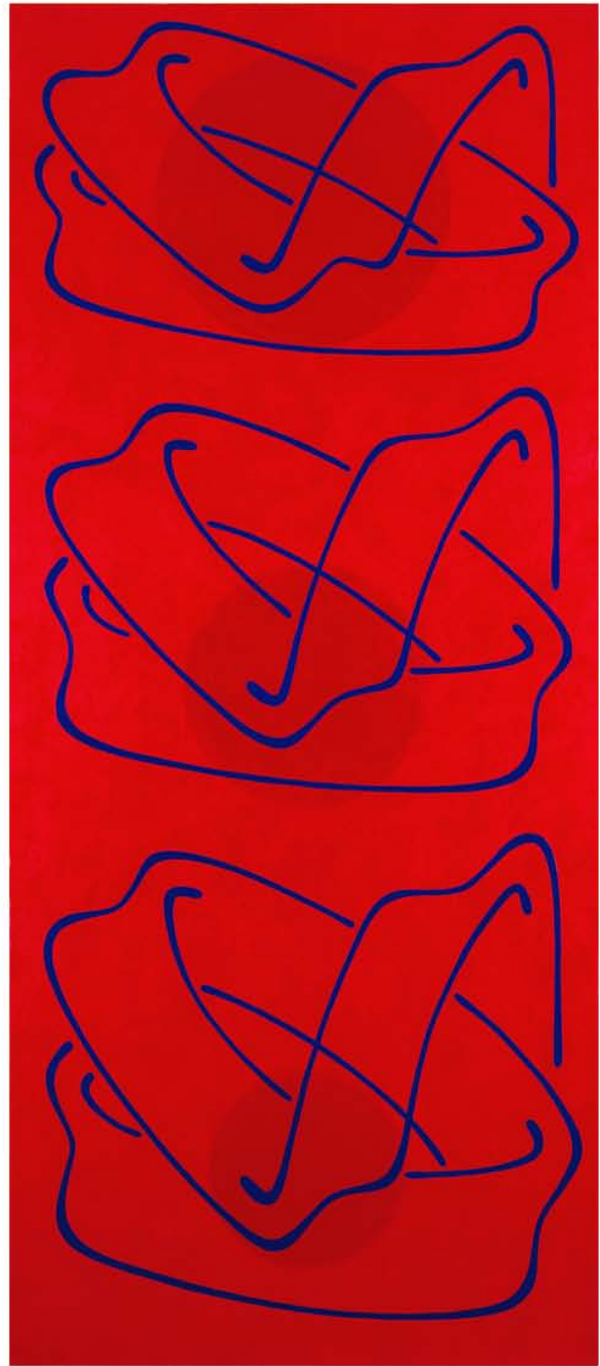


FIG. 4

Do the Do, 1996
oil on linen
84" x 94"
(2 panels)



FIG. 5

Untitled, 1997
oil on linen
74" x 250"
(5 panels)

Somewhere in the mid 1990s the scroll liberated itself for the last vestiges of its restrictive history (as all good PoMo tropes were bound to do). Good evidence of this evolution is *Do the Do* (FIG. 4) from 1995. Sliced in two by a "horizon" line, the upper section is black hovering over a pale green "ground." Each are populated by ellipses and scroll lines, painted in the color of its neighbor: green on black and vice versa. An optical situation is set up—Albers would have been proud—as the juxtaposed figures jump back and forth over their steadfastly noncommittal grounds. This is the core experience of Phillips's work: he serves up (or spins out) a host of intense shapes and colors that never coalesce into a single figure/ground relationship, but create a narrative event that plays out in our own eyes. We get to "do the do" with the Man, and, sorry Marcel, its not just in the brain.

Phillips continued to both expand and contract this retinal revue. In a major commission for the city of Chicago's 9-11 Center (FIG. 5), painted in 1997, he staged an abstract narrative over three



FIG. 6
Bob, 2001
 oil on board
 39" x 41"

paintings, one of which was over twenty feet long, metaphorically offering visual solace to the psychologically panicked. In numerous small wax vignettes, Phillips completely succumbs to his medium's ability to carry pure fictitious color.

In some recent paintings, Phillips seems to be steering back toward the cerebral, perhaps to renegotiate the Duchampian dilemma. The rich visual puns Phillips is now using reminds me of one of Duchamp's lesser known readymades: in 1914 he took a cheesy greeting card of a wooded scene purchased from a drug store, and, in one of this great trickster's more minimal moves, he painted two small dots, one green and one red, on the surface of the readymade: "a distortion of the visual idea to execute an intellectual idea." (Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, p.135) as well as a direct reference to the use of these colors to designate the time honored progression of the druggist since the middle ages. Phillips has regulated his compositional figures to ellipses and circles, some flat color, others are atmospheric fades. In these "Bob" paintings (FIG. 6)—"bob" being a diminutive nickname for his significant other—his classical abstract combo becomes, all of a sudden, a ☺. (That jolt of representation also

calls to mind Bruce Naumann's *Clown Torture* in its incessant head banging.) So, Phillips may insist on the primacy of the retinal in his erotics, but his simple punning would endear even the most stalwart conceptualist.

The Moral Dilemma returns in a brand new painting, that easily refers back to the blobs in Barnett Newman's fictitious lava lamp. The grid is back, as is some hokey nostalgia and an almost musical array along with the ubiquitous optical event. The loud pop palette is punctuated with more respectable shapes and hues. The so-called martini paintings reassert the historically earned power of painting, while pulling out those referential tricks all the while—love those olives!—generously offering us a cool strong drink, inviting us to join Phillips's ongoing party.

Look over there! Who's that cute little building, it looks like she's from Paris! I think that shopping center finally got that date.

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