

John McEwen, *Freedom of Choices*

Thomas Gibson Fine Art, London, 1998

'It's surfing,' says Peter Phillips of his new paintings at Thomas Gibson Fine Art. Certainly these are the busiest, the most loaded with information and cross reference, he has ever done. To surf along with them is probably to come closest to the spirit in which they were made.

Thirty years ago the buzz-idea was 'lateral thinking'. Surfing the net is a visual equivalent. To think laterally, to surf is the natural mind-set of an artist. Now we are all at it. But among artists Phillips, more even than Rauschenberg, has made it a subject. It is 36 years since Peter Phillips first showed his work in an exhibition at the Grabowski Gallery called 'Image in Art'. At that time TV was black and white. Tape-recorders were cumbersome and pre-cassette. Computers were immense and only for the likes of IBM. The Fifties did not end until 1962. Phillips was in the vanguard of change. Looking back at his so-called pop paintings of those days - the visual leaps, the irreverent use of 'low art' in a fine art context, the raid on design - is to recognise how prescient they were.

Pop art, as catch phrases go, is not a bad one. It related art to pop music, which was reasonable enough. Pop was the music painters were painting to; just as 20 years before they had been painting to jazz. The only mistake was to emphasise the 'pop' and overlook the 'art'. Art comes from art. Pop art, certainly the art of Peter Phillips, was deeply rooted in the history of art. Walking through the V & A he once brought my attention to a vast Renaissance altar-piece made up of many separate pictures telling the life story of a saint. It had been a favourite painting of his when he was a student at the nearby Royal College of Art. As a student he already knew Renaissance painting intimately, having studied in Paris and Italy on a travelling scholarship from Birmingham College of Art.

This use of multi-pictorialism is already apparent in such early Phillips's paintings, classics of their time, as the Albright-Knox's *War/Game* 1961, the Gulbenkian Foundation's *For Men Only - Starring MM and BB* 1961, the Tate's *Entertainment Machine* 1961; and it is multi-pictures, one picture made up of many separate pictures, to which he has returned in the 1990s. The sophistication and complexity of the new work is of a different order, as one would expect, but look again at *War/Game*, in particular, for the foundations - the rectangles within rectangles, the frame within the frame, the mixture of pure colour and form with depicted images, the self-contained picture within the picture.

The other group of works which specifically relate to the present is the *Art-O-Matic* series of 1973. It is particularly relevant that they initiated Phillips's return to brushes after a period using the then innovative paint-sprays. He had missed the sensuality conferred by brushes. The new paintings at Thomas Gibson Fine Art are, in that respect, the most sensual, the most concerned with surface, of his career. They are a reminder, as always, of what an impeccable craftsman he is.

This makes him exceptional in a world where artists no longer feel honour-bound to make objects which will last. Anyone can see the faded, discoloured or disintegrating state of so much modern art due to unstable materials, a feckless use of mixed media and the abdication of responsibility by artists for the investment value of the object. The more sensational the object, the more short-term the promise of its physical life seems to be. Such frivolity is at odds with the patient workmanship of Phillips, who can take months to complete a single picture.

He reckons the disdain for craftsmanship came in with the Impressionists, but it only really went out of the window with the consumer boom post-1960. Many trades, not just that of the artist, were infected by the de-mob happy attitude. Away with the rules! Jean Muir, for example, always lamented the loss of the art of cutting in the clothes industry, as the old cutters were sacked or retired and their services dispensed with, their centuries-old secrets lost in the rush to ready-wear. Perhaps history will see the period as one of those outbreaks of iconoclasm which consume the West from time to time.

Phillips represents the last generation of artists to have benefited from a solid craft training. From the age of 14 to 16 he attended a Secondary School of Art, a form of education now long extinct; followed by four years at Birmingham College of Art.

This represented a six-year training to specialist standard in everything from sign-writing, lettering and book-binding, to drawing from the cast, the model and finally to the proper use of paint itself. All this before he benefited from his travelling scholarship and completed three post-graduate years at the Royal College of Art. The present British Government is keen for the public to have 'access' to art, and yet simultaneously has cut the art curriculum for primary school children to 30 minutes a week! Long gone are the days of apprenticeship and pride in work, the educational bedrock for a once aspiring Brummie boy like Peter Phillips or Bradford lad like David Hockney.

Phillips's strict craft training has always made him adopt the latest technology, use only the best paint and canvas. A stroll with him will invariably take you down some neglected street to the den of the best printer in town or some never-before-noticed shop for the finest quality oil paint. A Phillips painting is always impeccably made, guaranteed to stand the physical test of time. These latest paintings are invisibly varnished and sealed with the very best and latest to preserve that freshness of colour, that richness and depth, the loss of which he laments in painting that has been ignorantly made.

A TV set dominates the photograph of him by J.S. Lewinsky taken in his London studio in 1963. Today it is complemented by a computer. Even his expatriate taste for life in America, in Switzerland, and currently in a beautifully converted farmhouse in Mallorca, suits his global view, enables his global grasp. He is supremely well-informed on the state of the art, specifically and generally.

He has always adopted and adapted technology to his needs. It enables him to work quicker, to pre-visualise his pictures to the nth degree and to make strange composite images - for example, the negative wedding-cake figures in the positive light-bulb in *Probe*. We live in a world of signification and to create a new image becomes increasingly difficult. Phillips achieves several here, composite or juxtaposed, which are unforgettable. The cat's head combined with a flower in *On the Patch (Scream)* is perhaps the most intense and bizarre - a hybrid of Munch's *Scream* electrified and a visual-engineering equivalent to the biogenetic creation of Dolly the sheep.

'I really dislike a painting when it is logical. It loses its spontaneity, and this is the only way I can retain any spontaneity, when I have a very logical way of working,' Phillips told Marco Livingstone in 1982. That will always hold true. Freshness of thought, freshness of paint and a sense of the mysterious - of life, of art - these are what he wishes to evoke. He does not psychoanalyse his pictures; in fact he prefers not to talk much about them at all. He invites the spectator to take his own journey; and leaves the art critic to make the connections between his work and others - from early Renaissance painting and Mughal miniatures to Leger, Kandinsky, Magritte (whose pipes are quoted in *Fragment 5 Old Friends*) and Johns.

Let me therefore dare pick a way through one of these paintings, the last to be completed, *On the Patch (Scream)*. Reading left to right at the top - diagonals, lines, circles. The cat's face is a sound burst, the dot of its nose the bull's-eye of the adjacent target.

The target's circles are the sound-waves of the caterwaul. Dividing the cat and its scream a column, one of its divisions the stretched faces of an enquiring couple. They look out as we look in and hint at Holbein's stretched skull in *The Ambassadors*, also the stretched reflections of fairground mirrors. Art is also a game, a game to amuse the artist.

After the violence, blank rectangles introduce the still-point of the painting, a still life. The red rectangle is matt and smooth; the corresponding blank rectangle as contrastingly rough as sandpaper. The surface of the black rectangle glitters. It has its matching but smaller counterpart diagonally below. They clamp the still life, emphasising its objectified placidity.

The circular theme, set in motion by the target, is continued down the right-hand side, of the painting by two hoops of subtle colour gradation to the full-stop of white amid the fork tines - the counterpoint to the black bull's-eye of the target. The upper hoop flirts with edges, playing optical tricks left and above; the lower acts as an indicator, isolating crimson flowers shaded against the *Japonisme* of lit lacquer.

A medley ensues. The eye is simultaneously held by the glitter of natural light, thrown from the surface of the black rectangle, and the simulated gleam of the lacquer still life. Tines and petals intertwine. Left, white (in marching unison) - at the foot of a blue shaft a pin-up in a blue bikini lying athwart a negative four-leaf clover. The luck of the Irish! Or maybe not. Parallel blue lines create an optical buzz in the corner, red on red fulfils the same purpose opposite. Blue, pink and red slats, carry on where the circles leave off, marginally locking the image. One feels that if one shook the depicted images out of the picture, it would still work as a harmonious balance of colour and geometry, solid as a rock.

To write this preface I had to view the paintings in London and talk to Peter Phillips by telephone:

'Do they look fresh?' he asked

'As daisies,' I said

'Is the mystery there?'

'The mystery's there,' I said.