Peter Phillips: The Random Illusion
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'Random Illusion' serves as an eloquent phrase to describe the basic operating principle within the work of Peter Phillips since 1960. Devised by him as the title of a series of large paintings he made in 1968-9, it describes not just his approach to image-making but his system of belief as an artist. In the second decade of the 20th century, the Dadaists had already laid themselves open to chance in an anarchic, anti-art gesture against convention. For Phillips, by contrast, it was not a question of continuing to fight battles that had long since been won but simply of accepting the random nature of experience and the unpredictable aspects of visual stimulation as a fact of modern life.

The idea of randomness might bring to mind a relinquishing of responsibility, an amoral purposelessness or a haphazard and disordered way of encountering information. For Phillips, on the other hand, it has always connoted a kind of controlled use of unpredictable combinations of elements drawn from an already selected pool of possibilities. In his first Pop paintings of the early 1960s, he had already fixed his attention on certain categories of imagery derived from the mass media, including such things as comic strips, decals, playing cards, the colour photographs of mass-circulation magazines, the eye-popping designs featured on amusement-arcade games and diagrammatic renderings of machine parts. While the various classes or types of material were consciously chosen in advance, the choice of particular motifs for any given painting, and the way they are placed in relation to each other, could be a much more spontaneous matter. Any motif, any geometric pattern or any colour could be made to work, irrespective of what meanings might already be attached to them. This was the great challenge: how to make a painting from whatever was already available. As the American Robert Rauschenberg had written in 1959, 'Any incentive to paint is as good as any other. There is no poor subject.' Phillips was particularly quick to respond to this way of thinking and in the process has produced some of the most surprising and mysterious compositions of the late 20th century.

The Dadaists, of course, had relied on chance decades before Phillips was born not just as a violent assault on predictable methods of creating art, but also as a way of bypassing the structuring principles of the conscious mind. The conviction demonstrated in Phillips's paintings and prints that there is an underlying order at work in all things was already embodied in collages by Hans Arp 'arranged according to the laws of chance'. And Phillips himself was already quite convinced about the reliability and rightness of his methods when he became more aware in the 1980s of the parallels with scientific research: it was thus without hesitation that he embraced fractal patterns and chaos theory as legitimate sources for his later work.

Phillips also had at his disposal the modernist history of collage, especially in its Surrealist incarnation, as an alternative to the post-Renaissance tradition of the picture as a view into a homogeneous space populated by elements placed in a straightforward and coherent dialogue with each other. With collage, unlikely and unexpected juxtapositions of unrelated elements are not just possible but welcome. In the case of Phillips's paintings and prints, it is irrelevant whether or not the found elements are glued onto the surface, reproduced by photo-mechanical means or painstakingly copied by hand. The principle is always the same, and the only criteria by which to judge the effectiveness of the result are aesthetic ones. The component parts of a picture must spark off each other visually, emotionally and psychologically, and they must be wholly convincing in their material presence. The actual surface in Phillips's paintings and prints alike always strives for a physical density that is somehow deeply satisfying in itself. This helps account for the variety of procedures that he has investigated as a printmaker. Although he has favoured screenprinting for its even deposits of flat colour, he has combined it with collage and with other techniques and has also made lithographs, collotypes and more recently Iris prints created directly from digital computer files.

Together with other artists of his generation, particularly those involved in the creation of Pop Art, Phillips succeeded impressively in invigorating the practice of picture-making through his willingness to take inspiration from visual forms outside of the fine art tradition. Having a quick, intuitive intelligence, and coming from a working-class background, he was prepared to trust his responses without asking too many questions and certainly without ruling things out because they might be inappropriate in the context of painting. There was simply no place in his mind for a snobbish distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. It seemed natural to make art that reflected his way of living, the objects he used and the places he inhabited. The fun-fair, the cinema, the razzle-dazzle of a city street could provide as much inspiration as museums (which, incidentally, he also visited with his eyes wide open, finding pre-Renaissance paintings particularly rich in possibilities).

As a student, Phillips enjoyed the thrill of riding motorcycles, which even more than cars represented adventure, risk-taking, rebellious youthful independence and pure sexual attraction. It was perhaps inevitable that he would make reference to the new practice of customising both automobiles and motorcycles: that is to say, of decorating their gleaming surfaces with sleek designs so that they are turned into objects of pure fantasy conveying the outgoing and unconventional personalities of their owners. Having introduced such imagery into his paintings as early as 1962, on his move to the United States two years later he began work on a series of large canvases entitled Custom Paintings which he had planned while still living in England. In these dynamic compositions, car headlights, dashboards and motor parts jostle for attention with zig-zag designs and moiré patterns. The frequent use of reflective metallic paints, exaggerating the glamorous look of their machine aesthetic, was perfectly in sync with their flawlessly smooth surfaces: surfaces painted not with artists' tools but with air-brushes, mechanical instruments very similar to those used for spraying an even layer of colour onto car bodies.

Reacting against the overt expression of the artist's personality through the autographic mark and the manipulation of paint by hand, Phillips discovered the paradox by which his own individuality could best be expressed through found images and equally anonymous standard geometric forms rendered in a cool and apparently depersonalised fashion. Echoing Duchamp's notion of the found object as one chosen with a profound disregard for good or bad taste, he has always insisted that nothing should be read even into his selection of imagery: no social comment, no celebration or condemnation of consumer society, no opinion about Americanisation or the relative merits of American and European design. His selection is made impulsively and intuitively, on purely visual grounds and with a genuinely democratic acceptance of all possibilities no matter what their derivation. Perhaps for these very reasons the process of choosing and composing taps directly into his visual way of thinking and his subconscious preferences for particular types of imagery, for certain forms and even for various kinds of colour combinations. In spite of the aggressively flaunted anonymity of his art, every painting and every print comes out unmistakably as his own.

When Phillips devised the term 'Random Illusion' he meant to give equal weight to the second word as to the first. The illusion can be a purely spatial one constructed from independent, abstract elements, but there is no getting away in his work from the powerful and immediate imagery that calls attention to itself as vigorously as the consumer products in advertising or as the sexy bodies and faces of celebrities in magazines. A convincingly realised representation has remained an essential component of his paintings and prints, a way for the viewer to connect the art to the contemporary world of images with which he or she comes into active contact every day.

Given the extent to which Phillips has relied on printed sources, there was an inevitable move from the printed look of airbrushed perfection in his paintings to his actual use of photo-mechanical methods - above all screenprinting and more recently Digital Iris printing - for his editioned work. Long before the advent of cheaply available home computers, Phillips had been fascinated by the possibilities offered to the artist by new technologies and had exploited them as far as science and his finances would permit. Some of the patterns employed in his paintings of the 1960s look like the randomly generated designs now commonly available on home computers, and may even have influenced them. With the availability of ever more sophisticated software, it is no longer necessary to make collages by cutting and pasting the actual pieces of paper by hand: the process of storing, altering and reusing found images in an endless variety of combinations has opened the way to the production of virtual collages on screen, with the added advantage that elements can be moved or altered at will at the click of a mouse. Phillips's recent paintings (which are carefully plotted on screen) as well as his Digital Iris prints make full use of these possibilities.

Phillips was undeniably one of the inventors of Pop Art, and one of the very youngest at that, much younger than his American counterparts, such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and James Rosenquist, who were working on similar lines in New York before they had even heard of each other's existence. He produced such masterpieces of the genre as For Men Only - Starring MM and BB and War/Game as early as 1961, when he was just 22 years old, devising his own brand of Pop not out of any intellectual theorising but as a direct result of his wide visual interests and of the practical craftsmanlike skills he had learned at art school when he was still in his mid-teens. He was never one to write manifestos or to create elaborate verbal justifications for his discoveries. Nor did he ever have a programmatic approach to his choice of popular imagery from the cinema, pop music, advertisements, packaging, car design, pin-up illustrations and the like; in fact, he has always felt free to combine such elements with references to paintings and other works of art, seeing them all as equally legitimate for him to use. For nearly forty years he has been adamant that it would be futile to attempt to decode symbolic meanings from his motifs. From the very beginning, even as a young man, it simply seemed natural to him to make use of the vibrant, sexy, sometimes amusing imagery he found all around him. Warhol once defined Pop, rather flippantly but with a deadly seriousness, as 'liking things'. For Phillips, too, the directness and simplicity of such unchecked responses remain vital tools in the making of pictures that remain as fresh now as when they first appeared.