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Pat Phillips A Great American Landscape

By Evan Pricco | Portrait by Adam Wallacavage
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Pat Phillips could have been a filmmaker or a documentarian, and with a brush or pen in his hand, he is, indeed, creating a moving image of America in the 21st Century. His observational eye was honed as a graffiti writer in the rural South as well as finding the hidden metaphorical messages in underground cartoons, allowing him to use pop iconography in densely populated paintings and works on paper. His standout exhibition, *Consumer Reports*, which was on view at Deitch Projects in NYC late in 2021, was a symphony of street culture at the epicenter of the pandemic, where protest, unrest, violence, pop culture, and capitalism collided into a cacophony of a new world order. The show was both raw and eloquent, elegant and surreal. In speaking with Phillips from his studio in Philadelphia, he has the candor and energy of his works. He is aware of the dichotomy he presents and his own growth as a fine artist over the last decade.



Evan Pricco: How do you begin a painting? Walk me through Pat Phillips starting with an idea or inspiration and getting it so textured on canvas. This is like interview 101 stuff, but let's start here.

Pat Phillips: I generally work thematically and don't make preliminary sketches for paintings. I typically have some sort of subject or concept I'm interested in discussing during the duration I'm working. This usually spans over the course of a few years. Sometimes during this period, I make what I call a "missing link," but regardless, paintings all start off one of two ways. Either me laying down latex house paint with a roller brush, or more traditionally, laying down a mixture of Indian Yellow and Raw Sienna with a large staining brush. This usually helps me figure out the composition of the painting.

I sort of think of paintings as animation cells. So I usually create the backgrounds first, then figure out what the subjects are going to be doing inside of them. This is why a lot of times in my painting you will see textures or ghosting of the background through subjects, rather than a traditional underpainting color, which can act as a light source. My painting process is pretty responsive, so sometimes I have to make a mark to help me navigate to the next step. Sometimes that means covering up my previous mark.

I feel like you are great at observation. I can't help but think this is where a history in graffiti comes in. Would you agree? Observing train yards and documenting train graffiti had to help shape the ways in which you look at the world at large.

Of course. My work is very much about a lived experience. Considering I dropped out of art school after two years, this was something I learned while I was still in school. That doesn't mean there aren't fantastical elements or levels of extremity to push a viewer, but I don't really work with subjects or objects I don't have a personal connection with.

Graffiti definitely plays a part. There's just a level of hyper-focusing that has to be performed when you're participating in that subculture. Whether it's the aesthetics of making a piece or trying to decipher your surroundings. There are a lot of senses that have to be used that I don't necessarily have to use while I'm in my studio, haha. I think the situations writers tend to get into can definitely provide a unique perspective. I can't say everyone thinks about it that deeply, or even cares to, but for me, trains and graffiti provided more of a form of escapism before I ever thought about why the train yards I painted were always located in poor black neighborhoods... and why someone like me traveled to paint them.



Do you think of your art as escapism, or is it a harsh reality?

It's a reality. I definitely use my work as a way to reflect on my own history, before I start casting stones. I think the application and the subjects I use in my work do lend themselves to a level of naivety, that for me maybe is a form of escapism or at least a way to engage with an inner self trying to make sense of the world.

On a side note, I tend to rewatch reruns of shows from my childhood. Almost daily. If I'm not trying to keep up with current events, then I'm probably watching some show I've seen a thousand times that I'm too embarrassed to name. It sounds silly, but with so much uncertainty around us, a lot of times I need to know how a story will end.

I don't want to belabor this, but graffiti has, how do you say, become more vital to talk about recently. I think it has to do with protest, with activism, and maybe the sort of anti-authoritarian nature of seeing so much graffiti on the streets in the pandemic. We weren't allowed to go outside and yet graffiti writers took over the outside world. So I think the conversation about freedom and rebellion is special to consider. What did you take from street works that helped you today?

The act of painting graffiti has always been political. Whether that's writing you "wuz here" in a school textbook, to pedestrians painting on Confederate monuments. So whether it was a conscious act to defy Covid mandates or writers just trying to take advantage of the situation, I definitely think graffiti has played a part in mainstream America in a way it never has before.

I won't lie, when the pandemic first started I was practically living in isolation on the Cape, so we were all taking serious precautions. Like Covid wasn't really happening where I was, so that shit was scary. My ass was really envisioning the beginning of the zombie movie when the outbreak started (laughs). I'm a southerner, so we are strapped and ready for the apocalypse, revolution, or the next Civil War. When I saw fools popping off hard with the graffiti and "essential" workers out there buffing it at the demand of the city, a part of me was a little agitated. I'm sure people would argue that these people didn't have to show up to work, especially over something so trivial during a global pandemic. But as a person from a place where the median family only makes \$45,000 a year, it's just not that realistic for most people living paycheck to paycheck. We saw this on a global scale. So part of me was empathetic to that.

You know, that's the double-edged sword of graffiti, though. It's the reason I have so much respect for the subculture and the reason I was drawn to it. It is freedom, and I'm not out here trying to be the fucking morality police, but in the same way we have seen people comparing wearing masks to slavery, we have seen writers painting family-owned business with no intention other than wanting to rep their three-letter acronym. The number of writers I saw criticizing BLM and protesters for the destruction caused just seemed a little hypocritical. I mean, I know some real criminals out here who were in these streets back in the day who quickly turned into "law-abiding citizens," "saving America," and who now build guns. Maybe that's anecdotal, but I think we all have interactions and experiences that reflect larger attitudes of society.

That said, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hyped about whole trains getting hammered in NYC. I've just always been the type of person who has these internalized conversations with myself, playing devil's advocate and trying to consider all viewpoints. Regardless, graffiti is what I come from. Even my weird bastard backwoods version of it. My experiences, and my ability to be impartial to the materials and tools I use, all derive from working on exterior surfaces, not having any money, no access to prestigious artist grants, and making work by any means necessary, regardless of how anyone else feels about it.

If you love something, you should be able to criticize it. You should want to! A lot of my work now is definitely me drawing these parallels.

Right now, as we are talking about this devil's advocate situation about being critical and loving something, is that your relationship with America right now? That seems to be exactly what you were saying in your last show at Deitch.

All I can picture right now is me being in grade school and our class singing "God Bless the USA" by Lee Greenwood, haha. My show Consumer Reports was about capitalism. America is capitalism. Americans are in love with stuff. Things bring us comfort. They act as signals, social armor... place holders. I could go on and on. Our obsession with guns is no different than our obsession with handbags.

The red, white, and blue "We Love Our Customers" mural that towered over the show took on so many meanings that transcended race, class, and a plethora of cultural differences. Even the art space itself is a place of transaction. By the time I was finished with the work, the pandemic just added an unforeseen variable. Capitalism and the accumulation of wealth kept moving along just as it was intended to. It's woven into our social fabric. So I'm not sure if I think about it as a love/hate relationship with America as much as I am American. So this is very much an internalized criticism. None of us can exactly just unplug from this Matrix. You can't burn down capitalism and still want to get the reward points on your Capital One credit card.

I want to tackle this move you did as a kid. You were born in Lakenheath, England then moved to a small town in Louisiana. Was a family member in the US military and station ed there, because that is the extent of my knowledge of Lakenheath would be?

So yeah, I was born in Lakenheath, but we moved to California around 1989. I remember when I started school, they banned us from wearing sports attire (specifically Oakland Raiders gear), because of its potential affiliation with gangs! I remember my mom talking about going to a neighborhood meeting, where they gave a talk about "gang graffiti." But yeah, my dad was a firefighter in the military. He was stationed in England. So my family lived there for three years. It's definitely 21 Savage-style, though. We moved to the South when I was still young, so that's home as far as I see it. Funny though, because fools from the South used to always call me out because of my accent. "You ain't from here, are you?"

Growing up in the rural south, or the uniqueness that is rural Louisiana, where did art come into your life? Your imagery touches on comics, cartoons, and graffiti, just on an aesthetic level, so where did you begin?

I always drew as a kid. My brother could draw. My dad could draw. We used to always bring my dad our toys and he'd quickly crank out a poster board-sized sketch for us. I was always that kid who waited until the night before to start my school projects. So my dad always saved the day with his drawing skills. My ass would be asleep and he'd be in the living room with the Deco paint pens working on my project and have my shit looking dope for class the next morning (laughs). My mom had a big collection of figurines, specifically Lladro sculptures. I'd spend time with her



dusting and wiping them all down. Early on I developed an interest in collecting things and appreciating the value of objects solely based on their beauty.

This was the 1990s, though. *Ren & Stimpy* was just added to the Nickelodeon lineup. Todd McFarlane just dropped *Spawn*. *The Oddities* on MTV debuted *The Maxx* mini-series by Sam Keith. So coming off the Ninja Turtles and the G.I Joe era, I quickly gravitated toward this sort of dark side of American illustration and animation that didn't have "good guy" and "bad guy," golden era values. There was nuance. Not just in the character arcs, but in the application. After we moved to Louisiana, a cousin of mine who was into breakdancing and graffiti showed me the first *Boondocks* strip that appeared in *The Source Magazine*, 1998 issue. A few years later, a homie showed us some *POEM One* pieces he had been copying from the same magazine and that's when things expanded from computer paper drawings during school to painting graffiti. At this point though, I'm not sure if I was thinking about "art."

I didn't start making "art" until a few years after I got arrested. My mom loved Norman Rockwell and Thomas Kinkade, and she was always super encouraging of my being creative. One day she just randomly came home with a canvas she bought from Big Lots and suggested I make a painting.



Maybe this is jumping around too much, but you are in Philly now. And when I was asking about growing up in a rural town and now living in such a major urban environment, I was wondering how your vision of America changed in this type of move from South to North. Did anything change? And does that come into the work at all, this movement and imagery found in both places?

I moved to Philly during the height of the pandemic. I've spent the majority of my life in Louisiana. So for better or worse, it has definitely shaped my perspective. As someone who's reasonably pro-Second Amendment, I felt pretty vulnerable during the political environment when I first arrived. I hadn't

been in Philly for more than a month when an armed mob of white men went patrolling the streets trying to intimidate a small group of protest supporters. Philly has some of the strictest weapons laws in the country. Yet sixty or seventy dudes walked the streets after a city-mandated curfew, beating up and intimidating their own neighbors with bats, hatchets, and a slew of other tools that by Philly law, would be considered weapons. This was literally a block or two from our police station. Of course, no arrests were made, but from personal experience, I can't say I'm confident I would have been afforded the same treatment had I needed to defend myself or loved ones from possible harm.

Obviously, some people wouldn't agree, but as a black man, I don't see much of a difference between the north and south. The economics are better, so prejudices tend to be more subtle, but there's clearly a dichotomy between the way in which black and white bodies are perceived in this country. That could take form in the 2020 protest for racial injustice, or the rioting after the 2018 Philadelphia Eagles Super Bowl win. It's funny how some people don't mind the destruction of property when they're celebrating a sports win. This definitely finds its way into the work though. The relationship of the subjects with one another, to certain iconography. Just thinking about the snake imagery in my paintings and how directly that is connected to the states of New England. Again, this is subject matter that is very personal to me as a southerner but is rooted in a larger American narrative. It's literally on the 76ers' basketball court and plastered all over the city.

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There's so much here when you are talking about Philly, living in New England versus living in the South. The dynamics of this country became a lot more clear, and yet so much more nuanced, in 2020 especially. And your work is nuanced yet so graphic. You aren't literal, but there are elements that are literal or familiar

that we can draw our own conclusions from. Did anything over the course of the last few years make you want to be more literal?

Having an accessible entry point in my work has always been a priority. Obviously, through figuration and familiar objects, this allows me to make immediate connections with the viewer. Because of our own personal relationships with objects and iconography, there will inevitably be some nuance to the conversation. That doesn't mean I don't try to steer the narrative, but it's like someone knocking on your door and asking if they could talk to you about Jesus. The topics I discuss have always been taken from literal events or current social ideas, which can be uncomfortable to speak about sometimes.... so a level of familiarity is how I draw the viewer into the conversation.

With my current work, obviously, the cartoons are literal in the sense that they are taken from pop culture, but the characters' roles take on a more subversive purpose. Maybe that's me being stuck indoors for two years and indulging in my childhood through streaming services and bidding on old comic books haha.

I think in my early attempts to be "an artist" or whatever we consider being "high art," having made the leap from graffiti to painting canvas, a part of me tried to suppress certain aspects of my practice or my inspirations, trying to make things more "sophisticated." A few days before the initial Covid-19 lockdown, I had given this lecture in Philly (this was before I moved there) and while I was working on my slides, I decided to show a few Ren & Stimpy animation cells side by side with a few of my paintings for comparison. It's no different from the way in which other painters might nod to a historical painting of some relevance to their own work. I think the sourcing of cartoons or even graffiti is just another form of history painting.

So at this moment, I'm just embracing my inner nerd. I'm trying to have some fun amidst all the chaos. It's ironic because the creator of Ren & Stimpy intended to make a cartoon that had no moral lesson to be learned at the end of the episodes. Yet, there was clearly a commentary about America and its value system.



You work on paper often, and effectively. What is interesting is that you are working around these American dreams and disappointments on such a fragile surface, and I can't help but notice or think about an intent there.

One time, the painter Angela Dufresne came to my studio. I might have been around 27 or 28, ready to show off my paintings and shortly after looking at them, she says, "Where's your sketchbook? Let me see your sketchbook." Whether it's working in my private sketchbooks or on large-scale paper works, there's something very vulnerable about working on paper. No different than a writer's black book. It's guttural, it's unapologetic. I don't know if I ever considered the fragility of the issues I tackle with the surface, more so than equating working on paper to a diary entry. I never intended for people to see the earlier works I made on paper. So there's a sense of honesty that I've been able to carry forward as I continued to work on that surface.

What does working on paper do for you that a canvas doesn't, or vice versa? How do you decide what goes where?

Working on paper is just something that's so accessible. Like I said earlier about moving from computer paper to painting walls, it's cheap, and it's in every household. So it really started out as an exercise to loosen me up while I worked on canvas. Despite the fact that paper can be way more expensive than canvas, there's an obvious difference in its perceived value. I don't consciously think of which subject matter will go on what, rather working on paper allows me to explore materials and different applications. I don't consider working on paper painting even though I use paint. I draw on paper. I construct paintings on canvas.



I feel like you have an endless perspective at the moment, as if you are seeing the world really clearly and well. So where do you go now?

My relationship to painting has always felt like one of necessity, so I typically don't get hung up on materials or application. That keeps things interesting. I try to make it a point to grab something random at the art store, haha. This is why you've maybe seen a heavier use of graphite in some of my newer paintings. To be honest, I've only been making the work I make now for ten years, give or take, and I am not sure if I think that's a long time. I always tell people, "You ain't really done the thing if you ain't done it for a decade." And even then there's still so much to learn. I find that younger artists want immediate gratification. One minute they're a painter tackling issues of identity and five months after Sallie Mae starts calling and they haven't gotten an email to do an interview with their favorite publication... they're on to the next art trend.

I think of painting like making Gumbo. You could throw all the ingredients in a pot and probably eat it after an hour or so, but if you left it simmer all day, the flavors would be bolder, more complex. While I have a rule to not rework paintings I deem "finished," I definitely explore different versions of the same ideas. Maybe it's not 250 Water Lilies, but it's going to take me more than a few art shows in my thirties to feel like I've exhausted a topic. There's just so much to unpack and so much intersection that no matter where I go (physically or conceptually), there's only a thin line of separation. That's the value of the creative journey, rather than its specific destination.