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HYPERALLERGIC

Painting Paradoxes of Family, Race, and Prison

Through his father's profession as a corrections officer, Pat Phillips has found a pictorial strategy for probing the racial chasms of the justice system, and by inference, everyday life.

Thomas Micchelli March 9, 2019



Pat Phillips is a 32-year-old painter who has shot straight to the 2019 Whitney Biennial seemingly out of nowhere, an enviable feat in anybody's book.

Yet his work possesses none of the mannerisms you'd associate with breakneck institutional recognition. It's not overtly political; its technological profile is nonexistent, and while it is rooted in graffiti, street art is present only as a background

echo, at least in the work found in *SubSuperior* at Catinca Tabacaru — his first solo exhibition in a New York gallery, and only his second appearance in the city since last year's SPRING/BREAK Art Show.

There is a sprayed drawing of a van marked "Rapides Parish Police [St]ate Inmate Labor" on the west wall of Catinca Tabacaru's front room, and a cramped installation in the back, but the majority the exhibition is paint on canvas, pictures of disembodied hands, legs, and feet engaged in various forms of menial work.

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The show's press release takes the form of an artist's statement, in which Phillips writes:

I grew up in a middle-class suburb among four other black families. Relatively blue collar, many of our parents worked in the few local industries in and around town. Out of the folks who looked like myself, we had a bus driver, janitor, factory worker, a Baptist preacher/lawyer, and my dad...a Corrections Officer at the local prison.



It is through his father's profession — the starkest form of adaption to the white power structure — that Phillips finds a pictorial strategy for probing the racial chasms of the justice system, and by inference, everyday life. That his father worked in Louisiana, the home of the infamous Angola maximum security prison (officially known as the Louisiana State Penitentiary), only exacerbates the psychological disconnect expressed in these works.

In a [review](#) of the memoir *Solitary: Unbroken by Four Decades in Solitary Confinement. My Story of Transformation and Hope* by former Angola inmate Albert Woodfox, published this week in *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner notes:

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The “legacy of slavery” was everywhere at Angola, Woodfox writes. When he arrived it was segregated. White prisoners mostly worked indoors while the black prisoners worked the fields, often cutting sugar cane under the supervision of guards with shotguns.



If not for the image of the Rapides Parish prison van that Phillips spray-painted across the wall, however, there is little indication that what is being depicted here is the forced labor of black men by the state. In the front room, where four canvases glow with sunny swathes of yellow, boots are polished, cheeks are lathered and shaved, roadside litter is cleared, a grave is dug. At first glance, the paintings seem like musings on the more mundane aspects of black life in the South.

But then you look again, and the sunny yellows turn rank, like grease in the searing heat. The perspective becomes vertiginous. The stylistic shifts within a single painting — from spray-painted shadows to penciled-in cigarette butts to roughly brushed blue jeans with sgraffito seams (“In the Desert They Don’t Remember Your Name,” 2018) — feel just this side of chaotic.

As the artist’s dirt-under-the-fingernails aesthetic sinks in, the specific ways that the imagery relates to the prison industrial complex — which were outlined during my visit by the gallery’s Associate Director, Raphael Guilbert — become a powerful subtext for the conflicts undergirding the work, even as the actual connections remain latent.

While there are clues to the imagery’s origins — in “Induction Cut” (2018), tattooed hands reach through prison bars to shave their client, an African American wearing a blue uniform that, in conjunction with the red-and-white striped barber cape, evokes the American flag — much of the

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The absence of an encumbering context frees the iconographic details (heightened by the shifting styles, which serve to isolate and individuate them) to generate open-ended implications and push into wider arenas. You don’t need to know that the gleaming, jet-black boots in “SUPERIOR” (2018) belong to a prison guard to discern the discomfiting power dynamics at play in the work. Nor do you

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need to know that the title of the painting derives from Murray's Superior Hair Dressing Pomade, a product tailored to the African American market since the 1920s, to apprehend the racial complexities that Phillips has built into the image.

The tin of pomade — gripped by a hand thrusting forward from the canvas's left edge, just above the boots — here doubles as a tin of shoe polish, with only the word "Superior" visible. Phillips parodies the image on the pomade lid by painting a trio of African Americans (man, woman, and child) with featureless white faces save for their smiling, lipstick-red lips.

The combination of signifiers calls to mind a range of associations, from the subservient jobs deemed suitable for African Americans during Hollywood's "golden age," to the pressures to conform to white expectations as a prerequisite for navigating the nation's political, social, and economic hierarchies. The word "Superior" inescapably evokes white supremacy, a notion underscored by *SubSuperior*, the title of the exhibition.



These hierarchies are made palpable in the gallery's back room, where an actual (non-functioning) industrial outhouse is jammed into a corner, signifying the division between homeowners and the workers who aren't allowed to use the bathrooms of the houses they're fixing. (The same



outhouses appear in the background of “DIGGERS / The Procession,” towed by a white prison van identified only by the gold sheriff’s star on its side.)

The paintings at times display a hint of rebellion — in “Induction Cut,” a tiny drop of blood falls from the tip of the straight razor hovering above the throat of the uniformed black man, whose lathered beard and scalp turn his head almost completely white — while the deep horizons in “Untitled (a horse with no name)” (2019) and “In the Desert They Don’t Remember Your Name” (both apparent references to the 1972 folk-rock song, “A Horse with No Name,” by a band called, tellingly, America) beckon toward freedom.

With *SubSuperior*, Phillips has transmuted his first-person account of racial paradoxes and inequities into an array of metaphors articulating a deeply felt protest, devoid of preachments and slogans. It is an insinuating vision, at once fierce and restrained, whose system of indirection catches us from behind, tripping up our assumptions and cutting into our complacency like broken glass.