

FOR THE BIRDS

Amy Thami on Noah Travis Phillips' (*Shitbird*) Drone & Paintings



Noah Travis Phillips & (*Shitbird*) Drone, Promotional image, 2009

THE DRONE is hovering about three feet away from Noah Travis Phillips and less than a foot from me when I catch a subtle movement out of the corner of my eye a nanosecond before hearing "plop!" Directly to my left is a pile of what looks like bird-shit, to be more, and less, precise, it looks like a symbol for bird-shit. Phillips laughs, loudly, and smiles, one of a handful of such explosions in an otherwise focused and orchestrated meeting.

The artist, by turns, refers to these excretions as: "scat, droppings, marks, shit." There is something indexical in the way he addresses this and almost everything. Even the pictures in lines and groups on the wall and the piles of pictures on the tables around the studio reflect this indexicality. A collection of more than 100 pictures of bird scat are in a cluster on the far wall. Phillips describes their authorship as "made & found" a phrase frequently used by the artist to confound any certainty of attribution the viewer might reach for.

The pictures are research for Phillips' (*Shitbird*) Drone project and its attendant paintings. The project began in 2007, and originally the drone

operated (Phillips says "lived, existed") in the gallery, and the creation of the paintings was the exhibition. The drone perching in a corner, making regular flights at variable intervals to "make marks," the imagery accumulating over the course of the month-long exhibition. These are the most dense canvases in the series.

Recently Phillips has been showing the canvases without the drone, insisting there be at least two paintings in the space; both on the wall, one on the floor or on a table, as long as there is more than one. This pairing or grouping of works is a recurring theme in Phillips' practice. Often his exhibitions will incorporate any number of components, such as: a series of drawings, books, a web-site, videos, a series of prints, etc.



Noah Travis Phillips and Richard Prince, "Stealths", 2009, Installation view, Gagosian Gallery

Phillips is vehemently opposed to the idea when I mention that the military role of the drone is domesticated in this piece. Instead he tries to unpack how the drone is "...more like an animal, The drone is more wild or feral, programmed within a certain range, then chance takes over ... the drone chooses a location and shits, makes a mark." I compare the outcome to a Jackson Pollock painting, he agrees somewhat cuttingly saying, "Clearly." The paintings aren't exactly abstract though. Each (*Shitbird*) Drone Painting is an accumulation of approximately 3,000 marks. With 26 paintings in the series this means 78,000 discharges, and this is only accounting for the official paintings, none of the tests or failures. According to Phillips' account there were at least as many failures. "They live on the roof of the studio now, being further developed by real birds." In theory, each discharge is the same; the same

proportion and mixture of paints, the dispersal mechanism on the drone, released from the same height. Yet each mark is unique, and the overall composition of splotches, blotches, and marks differs greatly between canvases. Some of the canvases are more densely marked, and some are more open and calligraphic. The compositions are never the same, but resemble each other, it's the texture, the pattern, like a Pollock, obviously, but also like a stretch of sidewalk beneath a highway overpass, or in a parking garage, or on the corner.

The questions of "What is being expressed?" and "Who is expressing?" are unavoidable. While (*Shitbird*) Drone is finding a more complex and bewildering space for the drone, Phillips is adamant to communicate that he programmed the drone, but is not the painter, not a painter at all in fact. During another one of Phillips' outbursts, he refers to his wife, Jennifer Lord: "Now she's a painter! Everyone is always trying to put painting down...but that's where the masters are... the masters and the millions. Painting is like a dialogue without time. Painting is *always* "capital A" art."

And what about the drone? What about the new media Phillips continues to explore? "The drone is an idea that got a lot of momentum, it gets a lot of attention and excitement. I would rather it points outward, to attentiveness to other things," is Phillips' response. When I ask him what kinds of things he avoids a direct answer. He's quick to talk about his other upcoming projects; one is a set of 27 different material supports coated with "Vantablack" (supposedly the darkest black in the world, a color from which no light can escape) with the support material ranging from canvas to carbon-fiber-reinforced polymer. The series, titled #000000 is slated for a multi-gallery exhibition in late 2010. He also mentions a collaboration with Richard Prince, but he'll only say the project is "top secret...and has to do with stealths." □

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Noah Travis Phillips, #000000 #10, 2009, Vantablack Nanotube paint on copper, 72 x 55", Installation view, Karma Gallery, Photo: Karma Gallery