

ARTFORUM

SUSANNAH PHILLIPS

Bookstein Projects

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Susannah Phillips, *Untitled*, 2024, oil on panel, 42 x 74 inches.

It's not exactly a *hortus conclusus*, but Susannah Phillips's studio—versions of which, both real and imagined, appeared across a selection of oil paintings and works on paper for her solo exhibition at Bookstein Projects—is, despite its depressing bleakness, a sanctuary of sorts. The works on view, all untitled and created between 2023 and 2024, often read as loose geometric abstractions. In many of these compositions, we saw an easel standing out, indeed confronting us, its iconic presence an invitation to perhaps worship it or pay it blind homage. This object signals the artist's extreme narcissism and demand for attention—what Freud called infantile omnipotence. It struck me as a primitive symbol of the self, an entity with no substance—a sort of skeleton, implying that her studio is a kind of tomb, and that the paintings she makes there are triumphs of death. The artist is seventy-three, suggesting that her works, if the biblical length of life is three score and ten years, are intimations of mortality.

Phillips decided to be a painter when, at age fourteen, she saw a Morandi show in Bologna, Italy, and I venture to say that he remained a decisive influence on her development. Later, she followed Braque—one could see his imprint as well, though his studio paintings, virtually all still lifes, are emotionally richer and considerably more robust than hers. See Phillips's forty-two-by-seventy-four-inch canvas from 2024, comprising a despairing assortment of wan, rectilinear forms. In the lower-right corner of the canvas is a depiction of another painting: Faint white lines trace out a reclining woman, a Matissean figure seemingly dragged through a field of ash. This is not a model resplendently posing in the French countryside, but a body fished out of the filthy Seine, ready for the morgue.

Phillips grew up in a prominent family in London—does British aristocratic detachment have something to do with the insular Weltanschauung of her art, however confrontational it may be? Her mother's first husband was Arshile Gorky, who tragically killed himself at the age of forty-four. Phillips knew de Kooning, Matta, and a whole host of prominent European painters, all of whom encouraged her artistic pursuits. In a 2017 interview with painter Larry Groff, she states that she is “very drawn to murky gloom, twilight,” suggesting a melancholic temperament. *Melancholy* is derived from the Greek word for “black bile”—it was said that too much of this humor could give one anhedonia, a loss of appetite for life. Clearly, there is little pleasure in Phillips's work. In some of her tableaux we saw renderings of books; in one piece from 2023, a bookcase stood next to an easel, slightly set back but still in pride of place.

Even if reading may be more recreational for Phillips than painting, the volumes on display in her pictures confirm her work's introspective character. Freud distinguishes between healthy grief, in which one mourns a lost object—symbolized by the easel, for instance—and melancholy, when one is unable to accept and process the absence. Phillips's art takes on the spirit of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, 1514, except that her paintings are more poignant than the master engraver's magnum opus, for she shows us her dark and barren easel, like the corpse of an angel that has lost its wings. “Black sounds like an eternal silence, without future or hope,” Kandinsky wrote. “Black is something extinguished like a burned pyre, something immobile... It is like the silence of the body after death, the end of life.” Phillips's studio seems to me a mausoleum, haunted by ghosts.