

Jay Phillips

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
November 14, 1985–February 16, 1986



Jay Phillips

by Stephanie Barron, Curator of Twentieth-Century Art

In the past six years Jay Phillips has created an extensive body of paintings and sculptures of brightly painted enamel on metal that is cut, folded, and manipulated. These small-scale, freestanding sculptures and larger paintings literally come off the wall.

Phillips, who was born in Albuquerque in 1954 and studied art at the University of New Mexico, was influenced in his early enamel paintings by the open expanses of the Southwestern landscape. He moved to Los Angeles in the late 1970s to study painting at Claremont Graduate School, where he continued working with enamel paint, attracted to its "surface quality and the richness and saturation of the colors."¹ The awareness that the high acidity of enamel would rot the surface of traditional supports, such as canvas or paper, led Phillips to use metal as his underlying material. His early metal paintings were painted on air-conditioning duct. He poured, brushed, and sprayed the enamel onto the impenetrable metal surface, where it shrank and curled but retained its still-wet look without mixing with other paints.

The compositional device of folding Phillips discovered quite by accident. Returning to his studio one night in 1979, he stepped on one of his flat metal paintings, bending it. Placing it on a table, he was attracted to the way the piece supported itself and decided to pursue a more systematic approach to the folding of his metal surfaces. Essentially then, Phillips' first mature pieces were small-scale, freestanding sculptures, which he called "dressers." According to the artist, they "were a direct result of wanting to make a heavily painted object that could be set anywhere in one's home...on the mantle, coffee table, or dresser."² This concentration on intimate scale is not surprising since Phillips' studio-home from 1979 to 1981 was a small Hollywood bungalow, which did not allow the luxury of large-scale work. It was not until 1981 that he took a studio in downtown Los Angeles and the scale of his paintings increased. The paintings that followed were Phillips' attempt to resolve how to attach these objects to the wall. They have evolved from paintings like *Nightlight-Starry Night* (1979) with a single flap to the much more intricate compositions of the past two years.

Phillips begins with a totally painted metal surface, which he then cuts with power tools and folds, subsequently painting the verso fold. Increasingly he has been repainting the entire surface, thus manipulating the new form entirely. At first he did not control the folds; now he is much more rigorous, frequently planning his compositions by using paper maquettes. The folds that he makes—in effect the vandalizing of the initial painting—create an entirely new relationship of color and form. Phillips has worked so consistently with the cut and folded metal paintings that recently in a change of direction he produced a body of "flat paintings," which he left unmanipulated in an attempt to determine how critical the cutting and folding are for the success of his compositions.³

Color has retained a strong attraction for Phillips "because of what you can do with it." The potential audacity of color appeals to

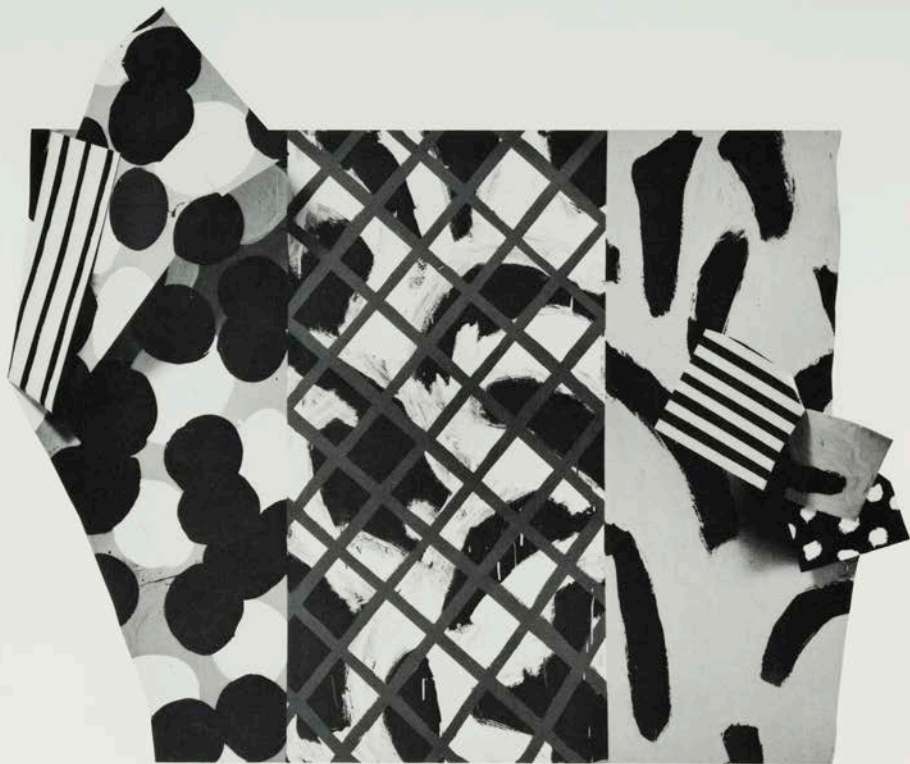
him, the juxtaposition of colors that are repulsive at one point and luscious at another. Through his palette Phillips seeks "to manipulate the viewers by manipulating the color—pitching them, seducing them, or caressing them with wonderful known color combinations that tug on all sorts of associations." The connotations of red and white stripes or of warm-hued Mediterranean colors, as in *Park Dresser (French)* (1982), are used by the artist to evoke an emotional response in the viewer.

Phillips is also very much affected by his surroundings. Despite their initial nonfigurative appearance, his paintings certainly make allusion to landscape imagery. Phillips uses a vocabulary of images, including palm trees, street lights, and evocations of city life, in his paintings and sculptures. While he was living in Hollywood, rich foliage and saturated "California" colors permeated his paintings. Palm trees emerged as a consistent part of his painted landscapes. Upon moving to New York in 1983, his colors toughened through the addition of black and a greater reliance on primary colors. There emerged a stridency and a muddiness, seen in *View* (1983–84), which can only be attributed to the "griminess of New York." The urban landscape provided Phillips with a slew of new references, which replaced his vocabulary of Hollywood and its tropical vegetation.

For Phillips one of the fascinations of New York is the city's rich architectural ornamentation. He talks about the layers of patterns one finds in older buildings: the decorative ironwork, tilework, marble floors, and rich varieties of colors laid down in mechanical ways. He has been impressed also by the tile patterning found in many of the city's older subway stations. A work like *Red Lattice* (1985), which is very heavily painted, reflects his Manhattan experience. The left side evolved from the observation of a tree in Central Park; next to it he places the harsh, mechanical colors found in subway tile.

Phillips has been called by critics a pattern painter who revels in the joyous colors of Matisse. Certainly there is in many of his works an unabashed love for the juxtaposition of saturated, intense colors. Yet Phillips' covering of the surface with a riotous patterning of colors, stripes, dots, and slashes of paint relates to his early exposure to commercial fabric patterning. In 1977 he worked at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, cataloging its vast collection of sketchbooks and fabric notations. The patterns found in architectural ornamentation reinforced that experience.

Throughout the past six years, Phillips has maintained an interest in sculpture, from his earliest accidental experiments to his current unpainted metal "dressers." Phillips is interested in the "edge-to-edge" quality of the patterning of his surfaces and in achieving an even weight across these surfaces. Although known for his highly charged colors, in 1979 Phillips executed a series of small, unpainted sculptures that owe much to his exposure to the work of David Smith. In doing these, he sought to obtain the gesture and patterning from the sheet metal itself. Recently he has turned again to a "nonpalette" in several sculptures, two of which are in this exhibition (*Vase #1* and *Vase #2*, both 1984). They rely for their color on the way light strikes their scored and abraded surfaces. Per-



Beverly, 1980. Enamel on aluminum. Lent by Jill and Mark Kreher.

haps in these pieces Phillips is searching for an understanding of the role color plays in his work, just as he did flat paintings to examine the importance of cutting and folding his metal surfaces.

After six years of fairly consistent work and early recognition and success, Phillips seems on the verge of a change. He is thinking about moving from New York and settling in a more isolated, rural

environment. Perhaps this will lead to new explorations or to a deepening commitment to his characteristic imagery. Phillips's work has grown increasingly tough, with less reliance on sweet, seductive color. There is in his work a greater insistence on structure and manipulation of the composition. Yet, ever the romantic, Phillips continues to search for ways to interpret his surroundings.

Checklist

Dots, Blue Field, 1979

Enamel on metal

19 x 22 x 4 in.

Lent by the artist, courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery

Green & Yellow, 1950's, 1979

Enamel on metal

23 x 24 x 4 in.

Lent by the artist, courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery

Hollywood Night, 1979

Enamel on aluminum

9 x 14 in.

Lent by Gerry and Suzanne Rosentswieg

Nightlight-Starry Night, 1979

Enamel on aluminum

56 x 66 x 8 in.

Lent by Gerald Ayres, courtesy of Newspace, Los Angeles

Pink Dots on Turquoise Field, 1979

Enamel on aluminum

20 x 22 in.

Private collection, Los Angeles

Betty Parsons' Dresser, 1980

Enamel on aluminum

12 x 10 in.

Lent by Roy and Ann Boyd

Beverly, 1980

Enamel on aluminum

71¼ x 87 x 14 in.

Lent by Jill and Mark Kreher

Patty's Dresser, 1980

Enamel on brass

9½ x 9¼ in.

Lent by Richard and Jan Baum

Quemado Dresser #1 (Red Dots, Light Blue Field), 1981

Enamel on steel with base

39½ x 29 x 5 in.

Lent by the artist, courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery

Quemado Dresser #1 (Black and White), 1981

Enamel on steel with base

39½ x 29 x 5 in.

Lent by Henry S. Landan

Park Dresser (French), 1982

Enamel on steel with base

30 x 23 x 10 in.

From the collection of Douglas S. Cramer

Park Dresser (Red & White), 1982

Enamel on steel with base

30 x 23 x 10 in.

Lent by Norman Sunshine

Untitled Dresser (Vase), 1982

Enamel on steel

20 x 15 x 11 in.

Lent by Roy and Ann Boyd

Abstract Dresser with Ball, 1983

Enamel on steel

24 x 21 x 4 in.

Lent by the artist, courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery

Dot Dresser, 1983

Enamel on steel

19 x 17 x 9 in.

Lent by the artist

Red Trunks, 1983

Enamel on aluminum

60 x 144 in.

Lent by the artist

View, 1983–84

Enamel on aluminum (2 panels)

60 x 117 x 13½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Modern and Contemporary

Art Council, Young Talent Purchase Award

M.85.23

Torso Dresser, 1984

Enamel on steel

22 x 22 x 9 in.

Lent by Donald and Rosalyn Kahn

Vase #1, 1984

Brushed, welded, and incised ½-in. aluminum with base

38½ x 34 x 23 in.

Lent by Eugene C. White

Vase #2, 1984

Brushed, welded, and incised ½-in. aluminum with base

38½ x 34 x 23 in.

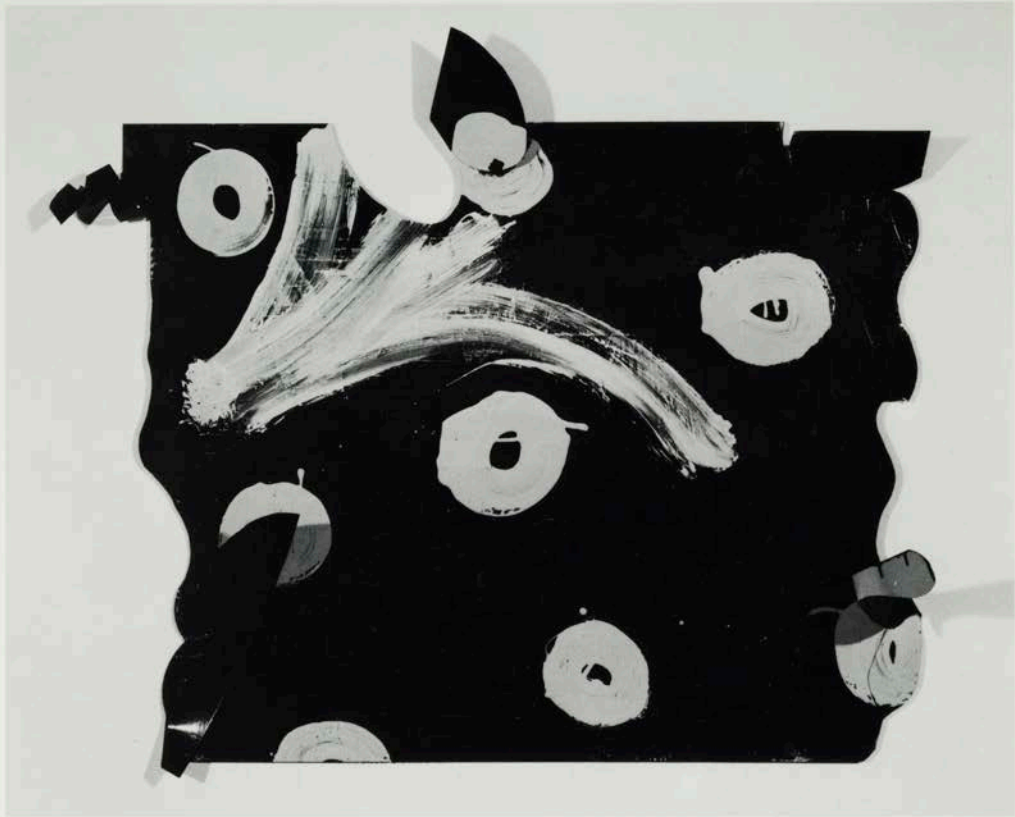
Lent by the artist, courtesy of Roy Boyd Gallery

Red Lattice, 1985

Enamel on aluminum

51 x 48 x 6 in.

Lent by the artist



Nightlight-Starry Night, 1979. Enamel on metal. Lent by Gerald Ayres, courtesy of Newspace, Los Angeles.

Biography

- 1954 Born, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- 1976 B.F.A., University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
- 1979 M.F.A., Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California
- 1981 Recipient, Young Talent Award, Modern and Contemporary Art Council, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1984 Marlborough Gallery, New York.
Jay Phillips Paintings: 1981–1984, Roy Boyd Gallery, Los Angeles.
Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago.
- 1983 B. Z. Wagman Gallery, St. Louis.
- 1982 Roy Boyd Gallery, Los Angeles.
Smith Anderson Gallery, Palo Alto.
- 1981 Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago.
Newspace Gallery, Los Angeles.
- 1979 Newspace Gallery, Los Angeles.
Libra Gallery, Claremont.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1985 *Abstract Paintings: An Invitational Exhibition*, Irit Krygier Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.
- 1984 *California Painting and Sculpture*, Gloria Luria Gallery, Bay Harbor Island, Florida.
- 1983 *16 Sculptors*, Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago and Los Angeles.
Young Talent Awards 1963–1983, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (catalogue).
The American Artist as Printmaker, The Brooklyn Museum (catalogue).
On and Off the Wall: Shaped and Colored, Oakland Museum of Art (catalogue).
Rick Dillingham/Jay Phillips, Eason Gallery, Santa Fe.
- 1982 *L.A. between the Freeways*, Palm Springs Desert Museum.
Painted Sculpture, Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles.

- 1981 *Sculpture–1982: A Contemporary Survey*, University Art Gallery, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California.
Alternative Surfaces, University Art Gallery, Sonoma State University.
- 1980 *It's All Called Painting*, Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles.
Painting Sculpture, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.
- 1979 *Newspace in San Diego*, San Diego State University.
- 1978 *Southwest Fine Arts Biennial*, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.

Selected References

- 1984 Menzies, Neal. "From Lyricism to Intensity." *Artweek*, 6 October.
- 1983–84 "On and Off the Wall: Shaped and Colored." *American Craft*, December–January.
- 1983 Christopher Knight. "L.A.'s Art Direction." *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, August.
Singerman, Howard. "Jay Phillips, Roy Boyd Gallery." *Artforum*, April.
- 1982 Lyon, Christopher. "Jay Phillips at Roy Boyd Chicago." *Images and Issues*, Spring.
- 1981 Pincus, Robert. "From Pattern to Imagery in Paint." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August.
Rickey, Carrie. "L.A. Today: Art Attack!" *Art in America*, May.
Knight, Christopher. "Successful Search for the Arcadian Landscape." *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 January.
- 1980 Singerman, Howard. "Jay Phillips: Luxury Painting." *Artweek*, 8 December.
Schipper, Merle. "Jay Phillips." *LAICA Journal*, June–July.
Knight, Christopher. "Los Angeles." *Artforum*, February.

Notes

1. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from conversations with the author in August and September 1985.
2. Correspondence with the author, 6 August 1985.
3. Phillips showed these in New York at the Marlborough Gallery in 1984.