

JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

T.S. Eliot wrote that the Metaphysical poet John Webster “saw the skull beneath the skin”. So does artist John Ransom Phillips.

Phillips uses the photographer Matthew Brady as a touchstone to re-imagine the American Civil War. In his jaunty painting “Photographing You” Phillips gives us Brady’s flat hat and nearly blind left eye but the ‘you’ Brady is shooting turns out to be himself. Phillips underscores Brady’s self-regard and the inherent narcissism of all great photographers whose works tell us as much about themselves as what they see. Part of the intrigue and perhaps greatness of Phillips’ paintings is that they are dominated by the pathos of anonymous soldiers, their boots, their hats and rifles, or mere body parts which for some soldiers was all that remained. Brady’s photographs attempt to create tragedy but often give us mere sentimentality. Phillips’ paintings are the real thing.

Phillips’ large oils are especially ravishing, filled with beautiful colors and lyrical lines that underscore the timeless horror of the Civil War. The quiet metonymic power of “Worm’s Eye View of Life and Burial at Bull Run (July 21, 1861)”, for example, presents us with a Union blue hat pierced by a perfectly round blood-ringed hole under a black sky that gives us a chance to pause and contemplate the moment when we cease to be.

Phillips has the uncanny ability to align representation with choreographed abstraction in his paintings. “Myopic Close-Up of Death at Chickamauga (September 20, 1863)” is a mixture of motion and stillness in a heat-filled canvas that is dominated by one small soldier’s eye disturbingly contemplating the viewer. “Abandoned Heart at Pea Ridge (March 7, 1862)” and “Fallen at Shiloh (April 6, 1862)” contrast once vivid human parts with fecund, lyrical and oblivious nature.

In the silent Albany gallery where we look at “Parts and Smoke at Chickamauga (September 19, 1863)” Phillips, through the magic of synaesthesia, presents us with the infernal roar of the battlefield that accompanied the smoke. Each of Phillips’ large paintings as well as his smaller watercolors reward extended viewing.

“Re-Imagining the Civil War/ Recent Paintings by John Ransom Phillips” is on display at the Albany Institute of History and Art through October 3rd, 2010.