

## John Ransom Phillips

Heidi Cho

John Ransom Phillips has long been marching to his own cultural beat. Steeped in all the arts, his paintings share the lyricism and symbolism of poetry, the movements of dance, the rhythms of music, the staging of theater, and the colors and forms of the natural world. They also draw from art history, from medieval and Renaissance painting to Matisse and Picasso. As sophisticated interpretations of visual and literary history, his paintings can seem firmly out of step with current trends. Which is all to the good.

For this show, titled "Egypt: Past Lives and Appropriations," Phillips integrated a rich vein of Egyptian mythology with his own dreams and Western culture. The narrative paintings and drawings here, in vivid blue and other primary colors, represented a theater of the mind in which the artist plays his own leading character,

an Egyptian civil servant who lived in 1300 B.C. Phillips assumes the persona of Kheperkheperura, or Ay—the man behind the pharaoh Akhenaton—who served the higher-ups while remaining in the shadows, and equates him in the exhibition brochure with Dick Cheney. So it becomes evident that Phillips's art—about love and loyalty—also touches on politics.

In the painting *House as Home* (2006), a house has been split open and flattened as if in a book, with darker figures and objects on one "page," and brighter ones on the other. The figures look like implements in a cutlery tray or bodies lined up in shallow graves. Sleeping or dead, Phillips's characters in these works are part of a much larger narrative whose episodic nature is indicated by the paintings' vertical sectioning.

A separate group of small watercolors here, with poetic writing on them, were extremely delicate and affecting.

Phillips's stories place quotidian life in a larger framework and aim to assure the artist of a place in the afterlife.

—Barbara A. MacAdam



John Ransom Phillips. *House as Home*, 2006,  
oil on canvas, 48" x 48".  
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