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SUSANNAH PHILLIPS

By Distilling landscapes and still-life forms to their essence, this New York-based painter conjures a moody and spare personal vision. **BY JULIE L. BELCOVE**



Landscape 9, 2012

Wearing black ballet slippers, Susannah Phillips pads around the living room-cum-studio of her prewar apartment in Washington Heights, the Manhattan neighborhood north of Harlem that has lately become something of a magnet for artists. Phillips, a recent transplant from Montreal, gazes out the window at gray mist. Even on a gloomy day, the view of the George Washington Bridge is spectacular. "I've always wanted to live here," she says.

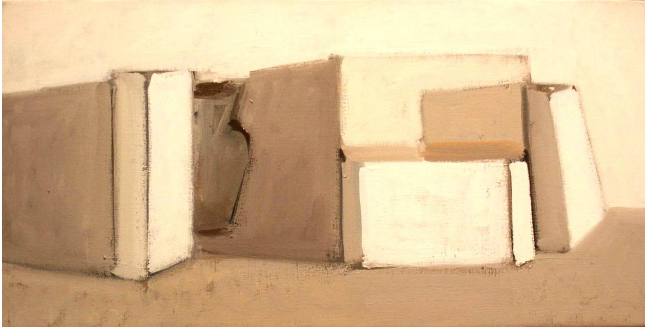
Phillips recently painted a series of moody landscapes in this room, though she pieced together the compositions from drawings made at the rustic camp built by her grandparents in the Maine wilderness. When she was a child, her family could only

reach the property by canoe. Now there is a dirt road, but the house is still two hours from the nearest supermarket and lacks both electricity and potable water. It might not be everybody's idea of summer vacation, but Phillips, her husband, and their college-age son revel in their solitude. "There's nothing to do except read or draw," she says. "The days are long, and they're all yours."

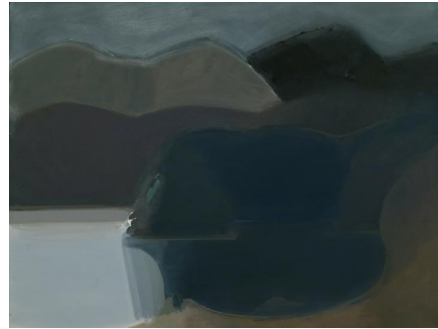
Perched on the porch or an outcropping of rocks, Phillips drew Lobster Lake over the course of a week in 2010. "It's a harsh landscape," she says. "It's not like Tuscany." Back in New York she "totally concocted" a series of oil paintings, removing the forest and emphasizing the mountain range. The canvases all depict the same scene—a patch of lake in the foreground, with mountains so reductive as to be childlike in the background—but in a captivatingly varied palette, not so much suggesting different hours or seasons as moods. In one, angst-ridden grays dominate land and water; in another, pale hills are outlined in red. "I would never paint a blue sky and green bushes," Phillips says.



Still Life, 2011



White Still Life, 2004



Landscape 10, 2012

Like her landscapes, Phillips's still lifes, interiors, and portraits rely on repetition, abstraction and deep personal connection. One group of interior fixates on the old-fashioned stove in her late father's house; objects in her still lifes include a pot that belonged to her grandmother and a package of rabbit-skin glue, which is used to prime her canvases.

The works are intimately sized. Many are small enough to hold in your hands. "You have to pay attention," says independent curator and critic Karen Wilkin, who has followed Phillips's work for several years. "They don't hit you on the head. The more time you spend with them, the more you discover."



Sleeping Figure, 2000

Phillips, an American, grew up in Florence and London. Her mother, Agnes Magruder, was an aspiring artist before marrying her first husband, Arshile Gorky, with whom she had two daughters. After Gorky committed suicide, Magruder wed Susannah's father, John Phillips, also an artist. They later divorced; altogether John married five times. Phillips has one sister, four half-sisters, and one half-brother, almost all of them involved in the art world. "It wasn't as if I did something brave," she says. But her mother was not always encouraging and tried to yank

her out of London's Slade School of Fine Art.

Phillips had her first solo show in London in 1987. "Then there was a long gap," she says. She moved to Montreal to be with her husband, and though she never stopped painting, she kept the work largely to herself. Her focus was on portraiture, and she began frequenting a local steam room, where she'll stay all day surreptitiously sketching the diverse nudes and then putting them into her compositions back in the studio. Montreal provided her breakthrough, "a shift away from looking too much at what I was painting," she says.



Grey Interior, 2002-2004

Phillips's husband is a retired philosophy professor who has long played banjo, harmonica, and other instruments with folk singers Loudon Wainwright III and Kate and Anna McGarrigle. His playing at home doesn't intrude on her concentration, though. The music room is soundproof, and besides, Phillips has always preferred a live-work space to a separate studio for a simple reason: "I want to come here in my nightie."

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