

The
Hudson
Review

At the Galleries

Karen Wilkin | Spring 2021



Susannah Phillips, *Untitled*, c. 2000-04. Oil on canvas, 22 x 30 inches.

Uptown, at Bookstein Projects, “Susannah Phillips: Paintings of a Model, 1998–2006” explored territory not unlike Bailey’s on a smaller scale and with a very different set of assumptions. Phillips’ economical, broadly stroked images of a reclining nude, in a restrained palette of grays, whites, and earth tones that sometimes flushed into flesh, seemed to be generated by the question of how much could be left out or barely indicated without compromising the studio theme. Figures were minimally but convincingly indicated with assertive gestures and sweeps, parsimoniously sharpened, on occasion, with judiciously placed drawing. Sometimes Phillips came close to her model, filling the small canvas with the horizontal body, under a wash of light that in one arresting image all but fractured the figure into luminous, clearly defined planes against a dark rectangle of background. In others, Phillips stepped back, overlapping the nude with the looming shape of the seated artist, played against the corner of the support. The most pared-down of these two figure compositions threatened to become abstract constructions, with the painterly physicality of their dryly brushed planes becoming a potent metaphor for bodily presence. Phillips can put on paint with deceptive ease and notable accomplishment. The small paintings at Bookstein Projects could read as if they had been dashed off, as spontaneous responses to perception. But the tension between allusion to a familiar image and the fact of paint on a surface strengthened the pictures and helped to cancel out that very familiarity. Ultimately, though, these tough little paintings refused to wrench themselves free of reference, returning us to Phillips’ engaging, fresh, and very personal version of her time-honored motif and, happily, distracting us, at least momentarily from our uneasy present.

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