

Two Coats of Paint

SUSANNAH PHILLIPS: A GRAVE LUMINOSITY

by John Goodrich | October 19, 2025



Susannah Phillips, Untitled, 2024, oil on canvas, 36 x 46 inches

The act of painting is enough to befuddle the ordered mind. We can grasp its basic ingredients: the lines that divide a surface, directing the eye and locating forms and details; the tones that lend mysterious weight to light, fleshing out volumes and intervals; the colors that recast tones with a new dimensionality of hues and intensities. But each of these ingredients continuously rejiggers the others. Where to begin? How to finish? The challenge is hardly new. In 1765, addressing the jury of the Académie Française, the great painter Chardin pictured how “a thousand unhappy painters have broken their brushes between their teeth out of despair.” Every artist, of course, ends up finding their own way,

favoring one or another of these ingredients. For some, the actions of color are especially crucial, and do more than cast objects in a luminous light; the pressures and intervals of color leverage an overall design, illuminating *how* objects occupy the world framed by a painting. Judging by the work now on display at Bookstein Projects, Susannah Phillips is one such colorist.



Susannah Phillips, Untitled, 2023, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 inches

As if to test her own facility, she has concentrated in recent years on views of a shadowy studio storeroom, lit only by dim ambient light and the occasional splash of sunlight through a window. Phillips captures these gravely luminous scenes – all mutely populated by the spindly verticals of easels, the bric-a-brac on shelves, and the regular pulse of paintings lined up in racks – with a brushy, abstract attack. The identical titling of the two dozen paintings and works on paper – all “Untitled” – suggests a kind of detached meditation. Yet, to a surprising degree, the artist’s color locates elements with poetic precision: a particular scene, revealed in this moment, in this light.

The largest painting in the exhibition may be the most impressive. Though broadly executed and confined mostly to darkish purply-blue grays, this six-foot-wide canvas captures much of the complexity and intimacy of a studio view. Some of its dramas are conspicuous. Anchoring either side of the horizontal canvas are two bright vertical slits of sunlight, entering through partially obscured windows. Stare for a moment, and it becomes apparent that each drama contains sub-stories: shifts of hue within each slit that convey the subtle, distant overlappings of sun-splashed buildings. The most climactic moment occurs on the right in a tight sequence: a brilliant white building is glimpsed next to the wondrously elusive shadowed façade; the two are sandwiched between a darker figure painting below and the opaque blue-grays of the window's blind stretching above. The effect – a buoyant moment contained by dense events – exceeds verbal description or reproduction. The jostle of colors captures real-life spectacles as only painting can. Lines, tones and colors all play their part, but colors lead, amplifying the simplified but dynamic drawing. (Picture a Mondrian, its tones inverted but its color pressures somehow retained.)



Susannah Phillips, Untitled, 2023, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

My favorite moments in this painting, however, are subtler. Lower center-left, between the windows, lies a sequence of notes, all blue and vertical, spelling out a passage of canvases variously leaning against and stacked within a painting rack. The blues undergo a dozen

shifts: darkly simmering, limpidly grayed, regally deep blue, sturdily blackish. With only the barest drawing, the canvases feel startlingly present, sifting in and out of light as they trail towards the doorway at left. While not always matching this intensity, such conversations reappear in various guises throughout the exhibition. Easels rise to confer with items squatting on shelves. Windows dominate, or subside to perforations of seas of shadow; occasionally they don't appear at all. The artist's palette sometimes centers around dusky coral-reds, or tawny yellows and greens. One senses a striving to make all objects – even unidentifiable ones – pictorially crucial.

In very different ways, Rothko and Reinhardt also spent time rumbling through the shadowy regions of the palette. It's refreshing to see new allegiances at play in Phillips' paintings. Unlike those two modernist masters, Phillips focuses on exterior challenges as much as inner promptings, and to this end she introduces – or is it re-introduces? – the dynamics of drawing. Sometimes self-imposed discipline sets you free.

"Susannah Phillips: New Paintings," Bookstein Projects, 39 East 78th Street, New York, NY. Through October 31, 2025.

About the author: Formerly a contributing writer for the *New York Sun* and *Review* magazine, John Goodrich paints, teaches, and writes about art in the New York City area. He teaches at Haverford College.

Goodrich, John, "Susannah Phillips: A grave luminosity," *Two Coats of Paint*, October 19, 2025. <https://twocoatsofpaint.com/2025/10/susannah-phillips-a-grave-luminosity.html>