

Lives of Artists

Andy Warhol
Jean-Michel Basquiat
Jackson Pollock
Federico Fellini
Vincent van Gogh
Diane Arbus
Frida Kahlo
Salvador Dalí
William Blake
AND MORE

JOHN RANKIN SPELTHILL

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS IS MORE THAN AN ARTIST—he's a prophet. His work is as colorful as any sermon; as powerful as any biblical verse. His latest series, *Lives of Artists*, is an exercise in spirituality—one in which he travels into the minds of some of *BlackBook*'s favorite artists, and comes out with not just a better understanding of their oeuvre, but his own work.

Here at *BlackBook*, we're not interested in nostalgia. We don't spend time reflecting on the past. We look towards the future, take what happened before us and create something new. We choose to collaborate with artists that subscribe to that same principle. That's why we teamed up with John Ransom Phillips. With *Lives of Artists*, he hits at the center of the *BlackBook* mantra: we don't just report on culture; we create it. And that's exactly what he does.

LIVES OF ARTISTS WILL BE ON VIEW AT BLACKBOOK PRESENTS GALLERY IN DUMBO, BROOKLYN IN NOVEMBER 2019.

**“If you want to know
somebody, invade their
dreams.”**

—JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

FOREWORD

TO THE STARS

ALEXANDER NEMEROV

TWO OF JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS' INSPIRATIONS, William Blake and Giorgio Vasari, both painted pictures of the biblical story of Jacob's ladder. Vasari, whose text *The Lives of the Artists* is the prototype for Phillips' similarly titled series, shows Jacob setting his head down on the humble stone pillow in a darkened alcove while up above, angels descend to peek at the god-like man who has dreamed them into being. Blake, the Romantic visionary, shows Jacob sprawled on a ledge beneath the stars, the angels stepping lightly on a serpentine stairway emerging from the sun.

In Phillips' *Lives of Artists*, he too is a Jacob. His angels are the artists he makes appear in the dreamy images and sayings in this book. "I breathe color and it gives me the sun"—Van Gogh's words that Phillips writes beneath one of his homages—speaks to Phillips' own visionary sensibility. The artists of the past (and some of the present) appear readily before him, set forth in lustrous insignia and delicate aphorism. Their only requirement is that they must be hallucinated into being.

Color is the artists' sign. None materializes except in chromatic auras. Without the watercolors' delicate glow, without the oil paintings' intensity, there would be no vision, nothing at all, except the artist alone with himself. The oil paintings make a heraldry, a hall of worthies—Warhol with his pineapple head on a field of Phillips' most beautiful blue; Blake in a mirror flanked by faces on a burgundy ground; Arbus upon a faceted wall adorned with pictures. Like the proud designs of medieval knights, Phillips' paintings portray a nobility of ghosts.

Something in him wants to defeat time. A student of art history, the owner of a beautiful library of hardbound books, Phillips dreams of establishing a temporal equality among all artists, a way that they can speak to one another across the ages. The sayings of the artists he writes in his own hand on his watercolors are simultaneously theirs and his.

But Phillips only makes explicit what any artist already knows: namely, that when they feel a connection to another artist, dead or living, there is no gap, no separation, no time.

The connection is a two-way street. The artists come back to Phillips, but he must also go to them, undertaking a Stygian journey. If there is any peril to his pictures, this is it—their feeling of afterlife. We sense not only the afterlife of the artists, summoned as phantoms to the sumptuary banquet of their own posthumous wisdom, but also that the artist must go, if you like, *beyond his own death* to find them. The simple beauty of the world is not visible except to a person no longer in it; perhaps because that beauty is otherworldly and requires a kindred

spirit to be seen. The artists Phillips praises are capable of envisioning a world as it exists without them, and Phillips, admiring them, sees as they do.

The oil paintings do the same. With their gorgeous colors, their inclusion of hands holding out patterns for us to see, they feel like testimony, like proofs of a beyond—fantasies made valid by the lucidity of the recollection. Like accounts of wandering countryfolk abducted by aliens, they imply a person whisked beyond the stars and dumped back to earth, where he recalls with hyperacuity the swirling shapes and cosmic rituals of a space he visited for a time and knows no more.

No darkness attends Phillips' fantasies. Eclipses and blackouts and screaming ghouls are not a part of his trips beyond life and death. But a kind of staggered debility haunts his transits. Frida Kahlo's blue steel spine, Toulouse-Lautrec's affliction, the rich array of suicides—Arbus, Rothko, Pollock (in effect), Basquiat (in effect)—make his color mortal, a human gesture, as if no otherworldly light were ever palpable except as painted by an imperfect hand.

Swung around, back through the ages, Phillips retains a feeling of motion from his time travels. Like a sea captain on dry land who still feels the shipboard heaving of tropical swells, he cannot separate his terrestrial safety from the ardor of the voyage. A feeling of rocking back and forth haunts his art. Kinesthetic phantoms populate his brush, echoes of the worlds he has seen. If his journey should seem too occult, he takes comfort in the fact that Blake was also accounted a madman. The truth is maybe somewhere between the static and the shaking: where colors twitch and revolve, and art is convincing as the memory of a place we have never been.

—**ALEXANDER NEMEROV**, Carl and Marilyn Thoma Provostial Professor in the Arts and Humanities at Stanford University

“I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,

INTRODUCTION

LIVES OF ARTISTS

JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

ARTISTS DON'T DIE—unless we ignore them. And that's because their creative lives speak beyond their works; they are more than just memories.

I like to go back in time and make the past present. The past is simple, the future even more so. It's the present that is complicated.

So, I invade artists' dreams and invite them to talk with me. It's more than an approximation—I truly become them. I live in their mythologies, study their feelings, in order to visualize their unseen truths. These images permeate my mind, filling me with inspiration. Then I wake up.

In my *Lives of Artists* series, I seek insight from artists who continuously reshaped their perception. I want to see how they saw, how they spoke, wrote, how they moved and sometimes even became mixed up, but nonetheless created art that was always unique and wholly their own.

—JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

and I become the other dreamers.”

—WALT WHITMAN, 'THE SLEEPERS'



Reaching for inspiration in the wrong places, 2018.
Oil on linen,
40x40 in.

“When you look at the world through someone else’s eyes, you really start to understand them.” —JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

The artist who remakes his own body, 2017.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

An artist threatened by life, 2017.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

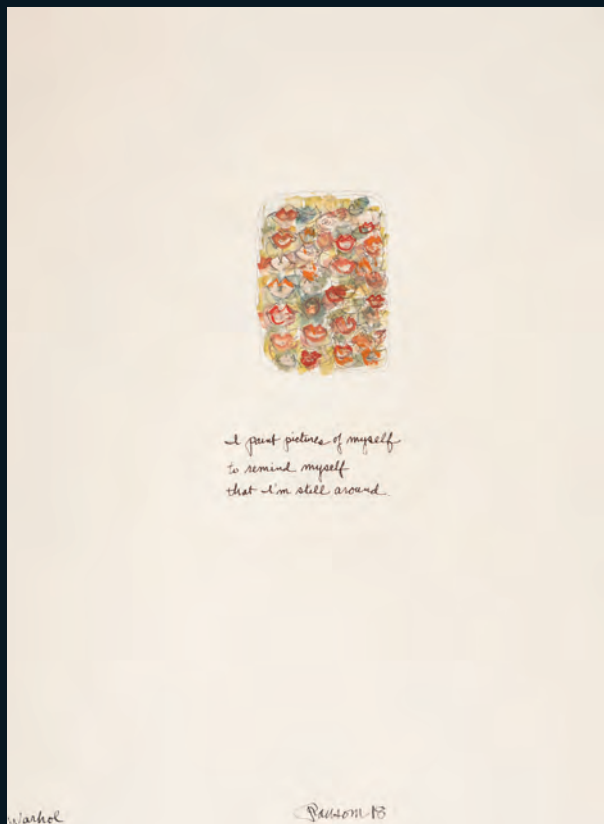
The artist as God, 2017.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

Artists paint their senility, 2017.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.





**Andy Warhol and his
tape recorder**, 2018.
Oil on linen, 40x34 in.



**If you want to know
all about me**, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

**I paint pictures of
myself to remind
myself that I'm
still around**, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

His myths were comic books, advertisements and movies. Since he could never remember the day before—not that he wanted to—his eyes were opened and closed to take in the full panorama of contemporary life. “Who has the most beautiful lips in the world?” he would wonder. So, he multiplied Marilyn Monroe’s lips 50 times. In his hands, repetition ceased to mean affirmation. What was sensuous became predictable. Even scary objects, like bombs, traffic accidents and electric chairs, when repeated, become devoid of meaning and feeling. He was just reflecting the world.

ANDY WARHOL (1928–1987) was an American artist, director and producer, known as the “Father of Pop Art,” whose work—like his famous Campbell’s Soup Cans—captured the American obsession with celebrity and consumer culture.

Andy Warhol

Frida Kahlo



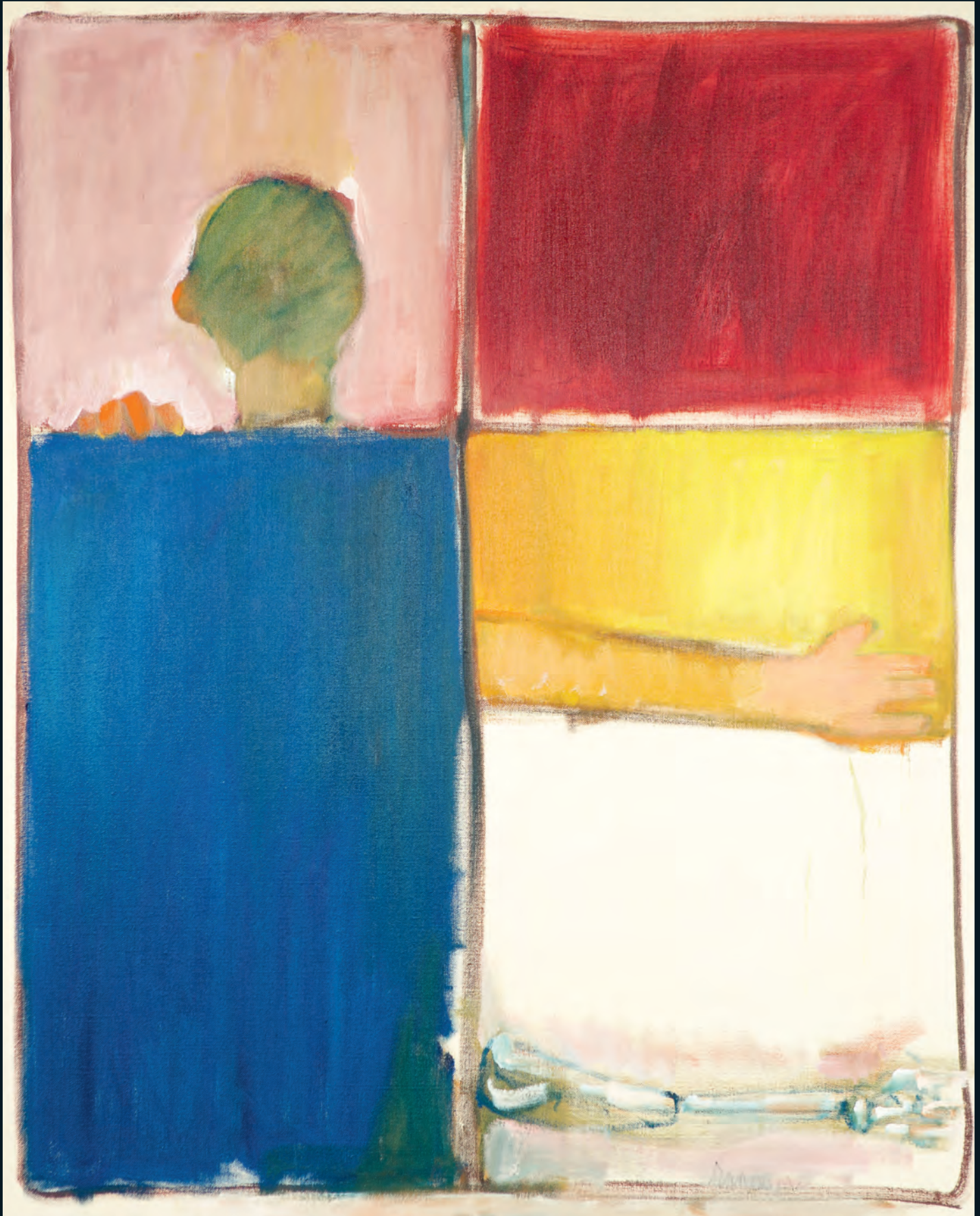


In bed asleep, 2018.
Oil on linen, 50x60 in.

**My stubborn
insistence**, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

She was a pretty Mexican teenager before it happened. But after she was impaled by a steel track in a streetcar accident, she was never the same. It destroyed her balance and her ability to experience anything but her own agony. Her damaged spine was replaced with a blue steel shaft. Now she tasted metal, was supported by metal, and when she moved, the metal reminded her of whom she had become. And since she could not avoid the pain, she chose to document it. In time, she even celebrated it. Metal became her friend because it pushed her upward and allowed her to live, to paint and love. The rest was easy.

FRIDA KAHLO (1907–1954) was a Mexican painter known for her colorful self-portraits that explored gender, class and sexuality. Her unapologetic and surrealist pieces touched on themes of post-colonialism, feminism and native culture.

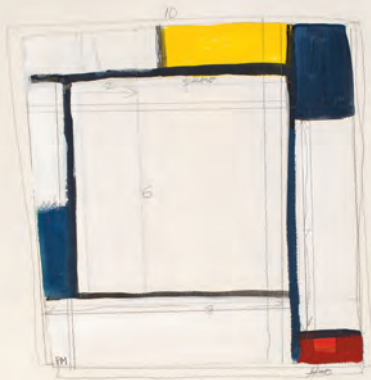


Piet Mondrian

Universal Artist,
2018. Oil on linen,
50x40 in.

He hungered for universality. Compositions of flat primary colors, locked in a happy iron grid that tolerated no discord. No romantic sentimentality about nature. Free of diagonal and curved lines. Free of nonsense with no sense of human touch. He banished green, the color of nature, from his paintings. Consequently, he was forced to use his left hand to block the temptations of Central Park. He was happy to be free, but alone.

PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944) was a Dutch painter and early pioneer of abstract art. As a founder of the De Stijl movement, he developed a non-representational geometric style that became not only his signature, but the foundation for minimalism and Abstract Expressionist art.



*Struggling to balance
patience and self-denial*

Mondrian-18

**Struggling to
balance patience
and self-denial,** 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.

**Balancing the
geometry of primary
colors,** 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.



*Balancing the geometry of primary
colors in order to embrace unity*

Mondrian-18

William Blake



Everyday he was visited by biblical characters: Job in the morning, Moses during afternoon tea, and Lucifer at night. There is nothing unusual about heaven invading the earth and the earth falling into hell. It's only when the earth, heaven and hell come together that you can achieve harmony. Then we will all become fully human.

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827) was an English poet, painter and printmaker, whose work has largely become the symbol of the Romantic Age.

Visionary Artist:
A New Kind of Man
(Blake), 2018. Oil on
linen, 30x30 in.

Blossoms and breasts
blooming, 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.

Heaven, earth and
hell, 2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

“I only hope to respond
honestly and fully to those
whisperings, as William Blake
did so completely. Spirits
were a natural part of his
world—I envy that strength of
connection.”

—JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS



*Blossoms and breasts
blooming*

Phillips 18



*Heaven, earth & hell henceforth
shall live in harmony*

Phillips 18

Studio/Hothouse,
2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

Studio/Zoo,
2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

**Shooting on the far
side of purgatory,**
2018. Oil on linen,
50x34 in.



She was never known to embrace angels. Purgatory attracted her and she aimed her camera at those on the edge of life. Did she identify with the mentally ill, the disabled, those who seemed to have never shared in the beauty of life? Was she reshaping nature in its most neglected forms?

DIANE ARBUS (1923–1971) was an American photographer whose haunting black-and-white portraits of marginalized groups expanded the idea of what was considered acceptable subject matter. Her portraits, which captured dwarves, prostitutes, members of the LGBTQ community and the elderly, celebrated identity—in all its forms.



Diane Arbus

Salvador Dalí



Sources of childhood, voluntary hallucinations and meaningful falsifications of memory, 2019. Oil on linen, 50x50 in.

Masturbation as delusion, 2019. Watercolor, 22x30 in.

Sources of childhood, 2019. Watercolor, 30x22 in.

All those things that we take for granted—dreams, memories and everyday experiences—are open to deconstruction and replacement. There exists a certain place in the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future cease to be perceived as contradictions. He called it critical paranoia. You deceive your eye into accepting the reality of illusion by hallucination, anxiety, dislocation and violence.

SALVADOR DALÍ (1904–1989) was a Spanish artist and leading figure in the Surrealist movement. His paintings, like the famous 'The Persistence of Memory,' employed extensive symbolism, and brought his fantasy world to life.



*madness
or delirium
or disarrangement*

Dali

Daum 19



*voluntary hallucinations
meaningful glorification
of memory*

Dali

Daum 19

Jean-Michel Basquiat



We take the streets for granted. We use them to get to other places. In certain neighborhoods, we are warned to watch our backs. For Basquiat, the street was where we could reinvent ourselves. A place where he crowned poets and punks. His scribbles became the larger voice that shaped the fullness of the streets themselves.

Inventing Myself,
2019. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT (1960–1988) was a New York City artist credited with bringing graffiti into the world of high art. His neo-expressionist style combined street art, rap, punk and hip-hop into cutting social commentary that highlighted his ideas on black masculinity, colonialism and class struggle.

Jean-Édouard Vuillard



Wallpaper and mother, 2019. Oil on linen, 60x50 in.

He loved his mother and lived his life in her overheated, wallpapered apartment. There, he felt safe. In time, he could no longer tell the difference between the wallpaper, his mother and himself.

JEAN-ÉDOUARD VUILLARD (1868–1940) was a French painter, printmaker and member of Parisian collective Les Nabis, whose skill and use of lavish detail made him the go-to portraitist for French nobility and an early adopter of the decorative arts.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec



*they were flowers
and i made them
a bouquet*

T-Lautrec

PAUL & CO. 19

He was small from a childhood accident—actually, deformed, as he aged. But he discovered himself in places of fun and excitement. He identified with the women who lived in these landscapes as he painted them, much like flowers about to wilt.

They were flowers,
2019. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

HENRI DE TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864–1901) was a French artist known for his colorful depictions of Parisian nightlife, including the posters he created for the city's most famous cabaret, the Moulin Rouge.



*I was never smaller
than life*

T-Sauter

Ransom 19

**I was never smaller
than life**, 2019.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

**This is not memory
but transformation**,
2019. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

Untitled, 2019.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.



*this is not memory but transformation
I am becoming what I see*

Toulouze-Sauter

Ransom 19



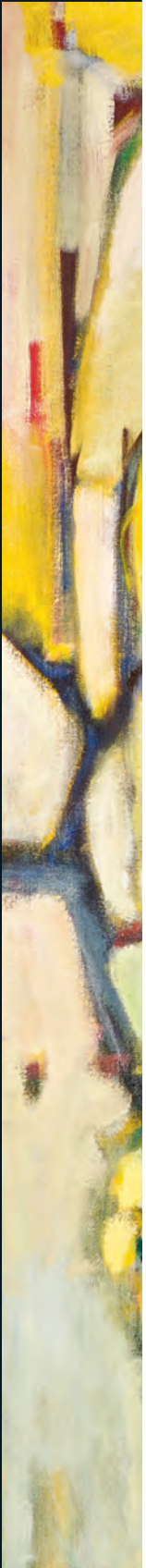
T-Sauter

Ransom 19

I live color, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

**I was incomplete
until I painted myself**,
2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

Artist as lover, 2018.
Oil on linen, 60x50 in.



He was incomplete until he painted. It was then that he became the colors. Only in fully breathing yellow and orange could he embrace the larger sun that is nature itself.

VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853–1890) was a Dutch Post-Impressionist painter known for his prolific oeuvre of oil paintings that included landscapes, still lifes, portraits and self-portraits full of color and expressive brushstrokes. Throughout his short career, he produced over 2,000 art works, including 'Sunflowers' and 'Starry Night.'



Vincent van Gogh

Henri Rousseau



the sun expands
& multiplies
because the
innocent artist
witnesses
circumference

Rousseau 18

**The sun expands
and multiplies**, 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.

If your vision is clear, clean, open and innocent, you can select from nature a single leaf and create a complete jungle. You can even change the wind.

HENRI ROUSSEAU (1844–1910) was a French Post-Impressionist painter who championed Primitivism, and whose illustrious nature paintings were highly influential in the development of Modernist art.



Dreams of the innocent artist

PAUSOM 18

Dreams of the innocent artist, 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.

The innocent artist can change the wind,
2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

The innocent artist can make nature red,
2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.



*The innocent artist
can make nature red.*

PAUSOM 18



*The innocent artist
can change the wind
to the color of the jungle.*

PAUSOM 18

I need to believe that movies can attempt other things, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

Your faces should coincide with the ones in my memory, 2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

I live high up in a basket, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.



*I need to believe that movie
can attempt other things than
filming a bicycle.*

Fellini

Panorama 18



*Your faces should coincide
with the ones in my memory*

Fellini

Panorama 18



*I live high up in a basket
where at night I can see
our common humanity*

Fellini

Panorama 18

Federico Fellini



*I have so many memories
that frequently I am out of focus*

Fellini

Ransom 18

I have so many memories, 2018.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.

Everyday life can never match early memories, especially those indelible moments when we first laughed, or kissed, or got into a fight. And these memories now reside in the objects of childhood: toys, playmates, the favorite sweater, or the captivity of a playground.

FEDERICO FELLINI (1920–1993) was a screenwriter and director whose innovative take on Italian Neorealism established him as a leading figure in global cinema. His radical aesthetic, as seen in Academy Award-winning films such as *'8½'* and *'La Dolce Vita,'* has inspired countless directors, and is now referred to as the "Fellini style."

Jackson Pollock

It begins on the floor and rises up, 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.

Pollock in paint, 2018.
Watercolor, 30x22 in.

He began his painting on the floor, where it rose up and consumed him. Those long gestures of paint imprisoned him, only to release him in death.

JACKSON POLLOCK (1912–1956) was an American painter who helped popularize Abstract Expressionism through his large-scale 'drip paintings.' The gestural, chaotic pieces he created throughout the late 1940s led *Life Magazine* to call him "the greatest living artist" before his death in 1956.

Cezanne



Paul Cézanne



He loved apples. He ate them as he devoured most of nature: mountains, quarries, human heads and nudes. But he valued apples above all, because they did not move. Now he could become them and paint nature in its fullest existence.

PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906) was a French Post-Impressionist painter whose highly recognizable, almost architectural style has often been called the bridge between 19th century Impressionism and 20th century modern art. Because of this, Pablo Picasso called him “the father of us all.”

I prefer apples because they don't move, 2019.
Watercolor, 22x30 in.

My ambition is to paint all of nature, 2019. Watercolor, 30x22 in.

Franz Kafka



I write not as I speak
I speak not as I think
I think not as I ought
to think
+ so it goes on
into the deepest darkness

Kafka

Danoom 19

I write not as I speak,
2019. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

The world was never welcoming for Kafka. But he made up for it by discovering its secrets and burying them in his head.

FRANZ KAFKA (1883–1924) is one of the most important names in 20th century literature. His works, which explored themes of guilt, anxiety and existential angst, inspired everyone from Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre to Jorge Luis Borges; the term “Kafkaesque” refers to situations like the ones he presented in his writing—surreal with a sense of impending doom.



the enormous world
I have inside
my head

Rafka

Ransom 19



I am a memory
come alive

Rafka

Ransom 19

**The enormous world I
have inside my head,**
2019. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

**I am memory
come alive,** 2019.
Watercolor,
30x22 in.



a blue steel spine
invaded to keep me
upright

**“At night, the artists would
come to me and ask that their
stories be told.”**

—JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

KAHLO

A blue steel spine,
2018. Watercolor,
30x22 in.



Basquiat

Ransom 19

BIOGRAPHY

JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

NEW YORK-BASED PAINTER JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS has been working in the art world for decades. After receiving his BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute and PhD at the University of Chicago, the San Francisco-born Phillips began his tenure as both a professional artist and professor, at universities like Reed College and The New School, over the years developing his direct yet spiritual approach to painting. But it almost didn't happen that way.

"The idea of a career as an artist never came to mind," he says. "I was warned that they are messy and dirty, and that most of them are broke. [Being an artist] chose me."

That journey started back in California, while Phillips was studying under figurative painter and Bay Area legend, Richard Diebenkorn. Though Diebenkorn was "a terrible teacher," Phillips suggests, he was a great artist—one that taught Phillips how to find his vision and explore it.

But Phillips, whose connection to past lives, spirituality and energy is as realized as his paintings, couldn't find his voice in his hometown. Instead, he needed to travel to Antwerp, Egypt, Italy and Judea, where he experienced regression therapy and learned to revisit the places that had been relegated to his subconscious—drawing on memory and lived emotions as part of his new practice, one that has followed him throughout his career, all the way to his latest series, *Lives of Artists*.

Inspired by Giorgio Vasari's landmark 1550 text, *The Lives of the Artists*, and the Walt Whitman poem, *The Sleepers*, John Ransom Phillips invades the dreams and minds of 15 influential artists to learn "what they see, how they feel, how they view their subjects," he says, "and tell their stories."

The result is a riveting series of paintings, scribbles and poems that takes the viewer on a similarly ethereal journey. The abstract paintings are vivid portrayals of the emotional subconscious; of Basquiat's wild, but tormented energy; of Kahlo's inner turmoil; of William Blake's own time spent communing with spirits.

Through sometimes bold, sometimes muted colors, Phillips communes with some of the history's most celebrated creative thinkers—ones that share only a distinct vision—and presents their conversations in a way that's true to his own.

"The struggle in my art was never more than recognizing that certain ideas, certain feelings, demand expression in words and images," he says of his practice.

With *Lives of Artists*, Phillips gives the ideas and feelings of other artists their own powerful words and images—ones that traveled to the ether and back, to make the viewer see differently.

"I'm interested in the idea that you can isolate perception," Phillips adds, "and in past lives, and in the world of metaphor. I just tried to access all of it."

BASQUIAT

STREET HEROISM,
2019. Watercolor,
30x22 in.

GLOSSARY WORKS

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Reaching for inspiration in the wrong places, 2018. Oil on linen, 40x40 in. Price available upon request.

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Pollock in paint, 2018. Watercolor, 30x22 in. Price available upon request.

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P I write not as I speak, 2019. Watercolor, 30x22 in. Price available upon request.

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The enormous world I have inside my head, 2019. Watercolor, 30x22 in. Price available upon request.

I am memory come alive, 2019. Watercolor, 30x22 in. Price available upon request.

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A blue steel spine, 2018. Watercolor, 30x22 in. Price available upon request.

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STREET HEROISM, 2019. Watercolor, 30x22 in. Price available upon request.

**“One of my purposes in this
life is to connect with and
understand the energy of my
past lives, and maybe achieve
some kind of resolution.”**

—JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS

Lives of Artists

Andy Warhol
Jean-Michel Basquiat
Jackson Pollock
Federico Fellini
Vincent van Gogh
Diane Arbus
Frida Kahlo
Salvador Dalí
William Blake
AND MORE

JOHN RANKIN SPELTS

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