
WUENSON
RICHARD PHILLIPS
NEW

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RICHARD PHILLIPS
WŪSŪW MĒN

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**THEY LIKE TO LOOK
AT PICTURES**

BETTINA FUNCCKE

DOUBLE BIND

Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish.

—Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

When I tell people I am writing on Richard Phillips, a perturbed silence sometimes follows, or a questioning look, and I wonder, Why am I uncomfortable? I didn't fully grasp his paintings for some years, and it may be the first time I have written about an artist whose work I initially found dubious, an artist who places a strange double bind of attraction and repulsion at the core of his work.

Phillips' art is meant to produce this uneasy feeling. While discomfort might be a product of the apparent directness of the work, which can leave us seeking meaningful words—and facing immediate desires—, it is where he lodges an ambiguity, even a belligerent *dissuasion*, a force that seems to interest him at least as much as persuasion. This is an ambitious attitude, and a risky one.

His intentional use of dissuasion, and one's own awareness of this as an attitude, doesn't make the paintings easy to look at or to write about. I have to acknowledge the artist's apparent need to make provocative, if not appalling, images. From time to time, the provocation is so loud and direct, and pulls a viewer in so close, that one must step back in order to consider the reasons for Phillips' continued use of mass- or "low-" cultural imagery, preferably outdated pornographic or otherwise provocative motifs, whether the references are political or artistic. It is an aesthetic that can be both beautiful and meaningful only if we are able to embrace the perversion embedded in the source material Phillips selects as a starting point, and if we acknowledge his ambition to redefine a place for painting between realism and abstraction.

Standing before these enormous paintings, dwarfed by these flirtations with realism and with propaganda, with fashion and with

art-world chatter, with history and with politics, a viewer might think he or she catches sight of what the fabric of visual culture is made of, or might get a sense of what composes the power of images—deception, seduction, subjugation, fear, and desire—only to realize that the paintings themselves are sinking back into silence. Meaning keeps slipping away in these unstable images as they convert and revert back from and to their source, be it media or art. They keep their own counsel. This slippery movement is what mystifies and therefore empowers these paintings, as well as, if one takes the artist's ambitions seriously, painting as such.

To get to where Phillips' work is strongest, let's follow the dialectical movement, the balancing act, in his embrace of the grand, positively male canon of painting on the one hand, and, on the other, the sea of empty or too-full imagery that washes continuously against us. To reach this highly unstable place, we need to understand how Phillips makes the ambiguity work for him and how the misunderstanding operates. We might then recognize the reasons for his need to provoke via clichéd and used-up figures, to produce what Liam Gillick once called "paintings and drawings of images that have been completely consumed and reprocessed."^[1]

Rather than getting stuck on the surface of Phillips' paintings, one has to delve into the particular histories embedded in the images, into the source material's layers of dependencies and power structures, including the ubiquitous appearance of submission and seduction. We need to look at Phillips' choice to group certain motifs in one exhibition and at his manipulation of those motifs—for example, his characteristic tight crop to bring subjects close—to understand just what it is that makes today's images so different, so unappealing.

The Dead Do Not Revolt [After Aslan] (2008) is a slippery obscenity. The main manipulation in the transfer from photographic source to painting consists of tight cropping. The large vertical painting depicts Fidel Castro's face tattooed on a woman's abdomen, situated so that his beard is her pubic hair and his lock merges with her belly button. The crop includes a section of her

body stretching from under her breasts to just below her vulva. One side of the canvas cuts through the middle of her right thigh and along her waist, and the other along her left upper leg and ribs. The woman holds a Romeo and Julietta cigar just to the side of the tattoo of this slightly outdated but still controversial revolutionary, as if he were smoking. This is the most stylized of the group of nine paintings in the artist's current exhibition: the beard-hair looks abstract and the skin tone is a bit too bright, a reddish-orange that emphasizes the piece's vulgarity and suggests a different moment in photographic reproduction, the early 1970s. It's a kind of trompe l'oeil of nightmare that leaves the viewer with a quiet and difficult-to-place *horror vacui*.

Throughout an exhibition, Phillips brutally manipulates, distorts, and overlays political, sexual, social, art, and fashion representations. Art must be received within the broader context of media generally in order to present a challenge to someone's predisposition to understanding it's necessary to acknowledge art's own double bind within the larger context of visual culture, and the ways in which any image is transformed by its inevitable passage through media representations.

Der Bodensee (2008) depicts the suggestive face of a woman dropping into the painting, upside down, from above. Crowded off to the left is a quiet winter landscape. Her face seems to take over this large canvas (6½ x 4½ feet). The portrait is based on what pornography calls "the beauty shot," a supposedly more abstract focus on the beauty of a model in a sexual situation. Similarly, *Coco* (2008) is based on the so-called "accessory shot," a fashion term describing a frontal photograph of a model's face taken during a runway event. Both terms describe crops used to sell that which is unseen: perfume or clothes in the case of *Coco* or, in *Der Bodensee*, another coveted object that is only suggested, not pictured (why would she be upside down? presumably because she is bent over, looking back as she offers her body to the viewer). These operations resonate with Phillips' perversely unyielding take-me-I'm-yours assault on the suppressed elements of art's complex dependencies. What is he

trying to claim? In displacing the object of desire, Phillips might be offering an analogy for the inescapable intersection of conceptual art with commerce, a relation illuminated by the fantasy of an art that thinks it might evade consumption by deliberately negating its image as commodity. In other words, he doesn't believe in the more elegant, removed reflections of art, choosing instead a head-on confrontation with the problem of making and selling images today, or, to put it more generally, the problem of how art functions within a larger visual culture that does not separate ideological and commercial interests. Phillips seems to believe that he needs to directly attack an image's claim to specific meaning (or, for that matter, viewers' assumptions of knowing what they see, and how they feel about what they see), and he takes on the pressures that art faces, starting with the vulgar commodity status it can't seem to shake, its fate to be what he calls "paintertainment": painting that cannot quite move beyond its décor function. This is what Phillips wants to claim for himself and his art: the energy that is now leeching from art into the larger media sphere may do all its entertaining there, but he will corral it, bringing it back onto his canvas, and so into museums and galleries.

In the painting *NEW MUSEUM* (2009), two middle-aged men, apparently "bums," are hunched on the sidewalk in front of a brick wall with a bottle of schnapps, lighting cigarettes. The particular unease in the painting might stem from the possibly fashionable appearance of these men: we cannot be sure if this represents a photograph of men down on their luck or of highly styled actors posing for a shoot. This confusion, this advanced sense of an aestheticization of all parts of life, fed in New York by the city's staggering economic growth over the last fifteen years and the legacy of mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg, is symbolized by the gentrification of the Bowery, a process itself highlighted by the relocation there of the New Museum. Phillips' painting is in fact based on an image from a 1973 *Hustler Magazine* article called "Hustler's Biased Guide to Very Cheap Wines." The location of the men in the painting, directly next to the Bowery Mission, is the new site of the New Museum.

AVANT-GARDE AND KITSCH AND THE HALLUCINATORY POTENTIAL OF ART

Phillips' work has been received in distinctly opposed ways in Europe and the United States. Europeans see in Phillips a dialectician and in his paintings a critical framework in the Frankfurt School tradition. Americans seem to receive the work more literally, more flatly, placing it within the lineages of Pop and photo- or hyperrealist painting, a move that tends to elide some of the work's contradictions. These split approaches in fact mark the prickly, ambiguous potential that his work holds, the contradictions that make it function.

But one might also bend the debate through the lens of a prominent American dialectician, Clement Greenberg. Greenberg famously began to develop his critical arsenal when he switched from post-Marxist literary criticism to art criticism in his landmark 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." It opened a debate that would shape several generations' worth of art and criticism, including our present moment and the context in which Phillips operates. The essay presented an early formulation of that dichotomy of high and low culture that is so constitutive and symptomatic of the culture of modernity. The piece is well-known, but one often overlooked aspect is particularly relevant here: the underlying analogy between U.S. commercial kitsch—i.e., American commercial mass culture—and Stalin's socialist realism, the Soviet state's mass culture. These are the two culprits in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," and

both flaunt the realist aesthetic that is the *modus operandi* of imagery funneled to a general public. It is their realism that links them to Phillips, who learns from both of Greenberg's bad objects and quietly continues the suppressed analogy between socialist realism and "capitalist realism." Consciously or not, he is leaning on their operations, which shape his choice of motifs as well as the particular aesthetic that is the foundation of his style. Certainly, the propaganda aesthetic seems to be fundamental to understanding Phillips' paintings, though it has not been much mentioned in writing on his work, save in passing by fellow artist Gillick, who once described one of Phillips' paintings as "a propaganda poster for an imposed ideology."^[2]

In the painting *Message Force Multiplier* (2009), propaganda takes the form of a repurposed Marine Corps recruitment ad in which a northern landscape recontextualizes the psychology at work in the stoking of young men's fantasies of valor. Pasted on the same sort of naïvely painted winter scenery that appears in *Der Bodensee* is a marine's face, emerging from the right edge of the canvas, looking us straight in the eye. Shot slightly from below, his stalwart features could be African American, Latino, or Caucasian, *inviting all men to join the force*. The references stem equally from the realm of socialist realism and from commercial design, from both state and market. "Psychic realism" is a term we might employ, a term Phillips himself once used to describe the work of James Rosenquist.^[3]

It was the radical German art critic Carl Einstein who pioneered the notion of a realism that creates zones of dissonance. While working on the paintings in this show, Phillips was reading a biography of Einstein, whose writings resonate well with the artist's stubborn disruptions of conventional reception. Writing around the same time as Greenberg, but personally witnessing the rise of totalitarianism under the Nazis, Einstein observed: "It is precisely the concrete signification of every work of art, its arbitrary and hallucinatory side, which saves us from the mechanism of conventional reality and swindle of a monotonous continuity."^[4]

PUSH WHAT'S FALLING

"I like his work."

"It's weird, his painting."

"It's mysterious. I don't understand it, and that's why I like it ... and I can see why people put all kinds of theory on it."

"Do you think he needs to be a good painter to paint these images, I mean, in the sense of craft? It takes a long time, he says."

"It's all about if he achieves something ... "

"Do you think he's good?"

"Yes."

"As a painter, I think he's better than Jeff Koons. Not as an artist ... But if you only compare Koons's paintings and his, he's better."

"He's very good."

"He's so weird. I like him."

"There is no soft there ... I mean, in the work."

"But he's soft as a person, especially for a successful man."

"But probably not with everybody ... "

"The titles are important."

"He's pretty reliant on the word."

"He's really into power."

"He often shows images of subjugation. Or these other images of power, from the other direction."

"These are the questions."

When Phillips titles his exhibition *New Museum*, he demonstrates that being an artist is also, and maybe primarily, about control over the signs and symbols from which society, including the art world, is constructed. It is the genuine freedom—and thus the challenge—

of artists to transvaluate, displacing signs from one context to another. One of the artist's stated goals is to render sensible the sociopolitical contexts within which art history takes place, and how the creation of art history legitimizes and obfuscates the agenda of dominant political power structures.^[5]

Consider *SUMKA* (2008), in which the approaches of the fashion world conflate with those of political propaganda, and the risky slippages in Phillips' work come full circle. "Realness," beauty, desire, and perfection conjoin with falsehood, debasement, perversion, and deviancy in the artist's strategic redeployment of a modeling headshot, a Brazilian woman with Aryan looks who, for her appearance in Phillips' painting, sports the emblem of the Iranian neo-Nazi party SUMKA. Part swastika, part abstracted state eagle, the symbol is highly suggestive, though little known.

The cropping is again a crucial compositional element in this painting, placing the subject tightly inside the frame. The artist has cut the image just below the model's shoulder, slicing through the lower edge of the symbol, moving slightly into her hair along the top and left edges of the canvas, and leaving a large red void in the upper right. The sultry look that the model flashes is both quiet and loaded. Phillips' research into SUMKA was touched off by the symmetrical U.S. and Iranian propaganda volleyed during recent public exchanges between their respective presidents. He discovered a historical connection between the countries via SUMKA. Established in 1952, SUMKA helped, with the assistance of indirect funding from the CIA, to overthrow Iran's democratically elected government the following year, making way for the imposition of the Shah and a puppet state for American and British oil interests. Phillips' addition of the emblem to the headshot stamps his composition with the direct chain of history between this foreign-policy disaster and the crisis structure we live in today. As an image, *SUMKA* uncannily merges socialist realism's aesthetic with the look of an American advertisement or fashion spread, and the beauty of the piece lies in this particular tension between East and West, between our present moment and what we now call modern art.

But still, why all the naked women? The distress caused by the directness of Phillips' work sometimes makes his paintings appear tight, lacking in breathing room, and this is particularly true with his paintings of women. For Phillips, however, pornography is an important tool. Speaking about the way it operates in his paintings and in his exhibitions, he has mentioned the idea of the "message force multiplier."^[6] Message force multipliers were brought to the public's attention in an April 2008 article in the *New York Times* that reported on a 2002 U.S. Department of Defense information operation launched "to spread the administration's talking points on Iraq by briefing...retired commanders for network and cable television appearances," where they were presented as independent analysts. The *New York Times* article suggested that these "analysts" had not disclosed obvious financial conflicts of interest.^[7]

What does it mean to suggest that pornographic images act as message force multipliers in Phillips' work? If we say that his paintings operate as a kind of visual insurgency, that which may flatly articulate beauty, sexuality, or social folly begins, upon closer inspection and in combination, to feed back and reveal agendas that work against the initial, surface meaning.

However, in asking these naked women to carry out such work, a certain failure is possible. One could argue that the works must be seen together as an installation, relating to one another and to the historical, social, cultural, and political context in which they were painted or first presented. But whichever group of images Phillips picks for an exhibition, the carefully assembled motifs are shown in this particular constellation only once, and the individual pieces inevitably end up alone, shipped to various collections; this is where a part of Phillips' ambitious project may not succeed (and where documentation of his shows in catalogues therefore takes on a pivotal role). In reproduction, his paintings tend to move back to where they came from, not simply because they shrink tremendously, but because they somehow regain the cruder "read" of mass media. Crucially, with press reproductions the mechanism of media goes to work immediately, and what usually ends up on the page are the female nudes, the "message

force multipliers." So if you've missed the actual exhibition—and there are few, due to a laborious process that allows for only one or two new shows a year—you might be left with the impression that for years Phillips has been painting only women in lascivious poses. The deeper discussion, about what makes up the power of images and American visual culture, may be lost.

But apart from the slippage of meaning in the images, apart from what is embedded in them for ideological or commercial reasons, a quiet disturbance sits in Phillips' paintings, one that cannot be grasped by either Frankfurt School criticism or literal readings in the tradition of Pop art or hyperrealism. Keeping in mind Greenberg's twinning of the realist aesthetic in American commercial mass culture and Stalinist socialist realism, one might see that Phillips' oeuvre is a kind of American history painting. His icons and their shattered mirrors betray no sentimentality, but also no irony and no didacticism. It is with a certain brutal indifference that they depict products and ads and ideology from the media sphere, that they tap into the taboos of child pornography, perversion, and racism, present images of art-world politics (*Fundraiser, Frieze*) and the visual seduction of "politics" (*The President of the United States, SUMKA, Liberation Monument*), all together giving a portrait of the United States of America under the presidency of George W. Bush, his administration's duplicitous morality and sense of superiority, its conviction that lies must be told: above all, they depict the late stage of a decadent culture finding its limit.

1. Liam Gillick, "Richard Phillips: Atlanta Tbilisi Atlanta (What-the-Fuck)," in *Richard Phillips*, ed. Frank Gautherot (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel in association with JRP Ringier, Zurich, 2007), p. 7.
2. Ibid.
3. Richard Phillips et al., "Sign Language: James Rosenquist in Retrospect," *Artforum* 42, no. 2 (October 2003), p. 132.
4. David Quigley, *Carl Einstein: A Defense of the Real* (Vienna: Pakesch and Schlegel Verlag, 2006), p. 215.
5. See Richard Phillips, "Beatrix Ruf in Conversation with Richard Phillips," in *Ringier, Annual Report, 2006* (Zurich: Ringier, 2007), p. III.
6. Conversation with the author, December 2008.
7. Wikipedia entry at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Message_force_multiplier, accessed on January 25, 2009. Art criticism itself shares some structural similarities with the phenomenon of the message force multiplier. Hired by artists, their galleries, or curators for their expert opinions, critics give meaning to the works, multiplying the force of the message, as writing gives art value.

PAINTINGS

DER BODENSEE

2008
Oil on canvas
78 x 52 ½ inches
(198.1 x 132.7 cm)



NEW MUSEUM

2009

Oil on canvas

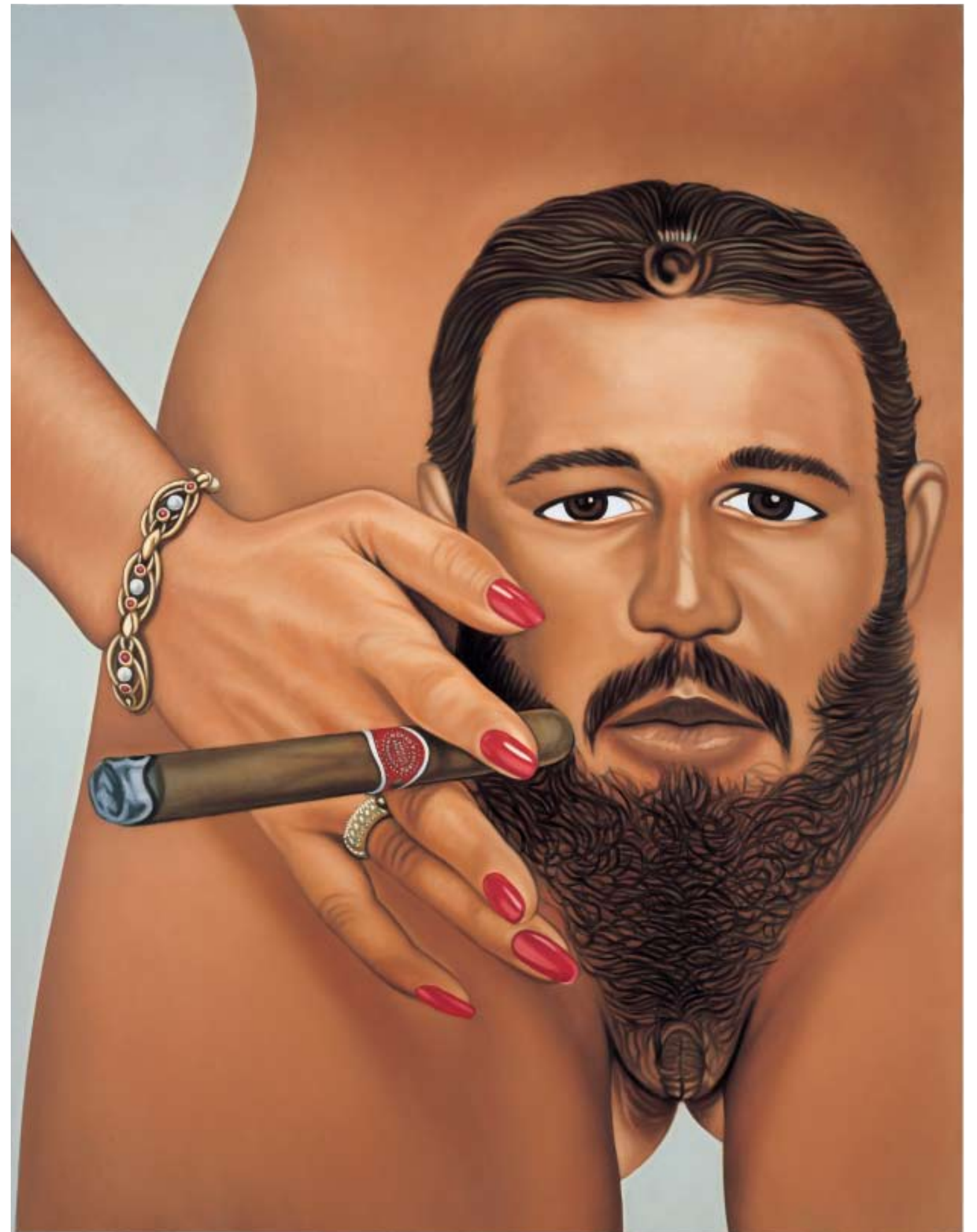
85 x 63 inches

(215.9 x 160 cm)



**THE DEAD DO NOT REVOLT
[AFTER ASLAN]**

2008
Oil on canvas
72 x 55 ¾ inches
(182.9 x 141.6 cm)



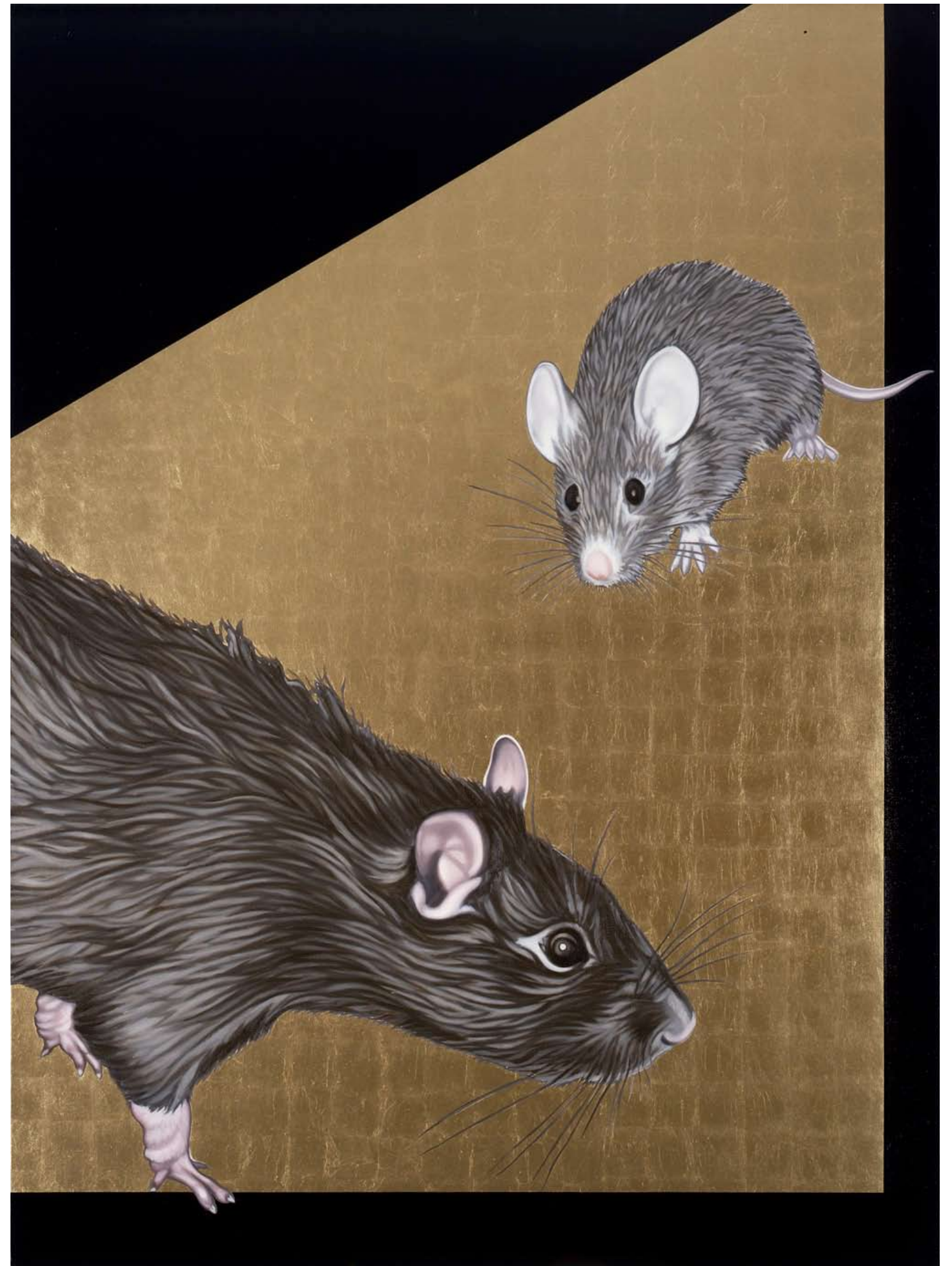
COCO

2007
Oil on canvas
79 x 54 inches
(200.7 x 137.2 cm)



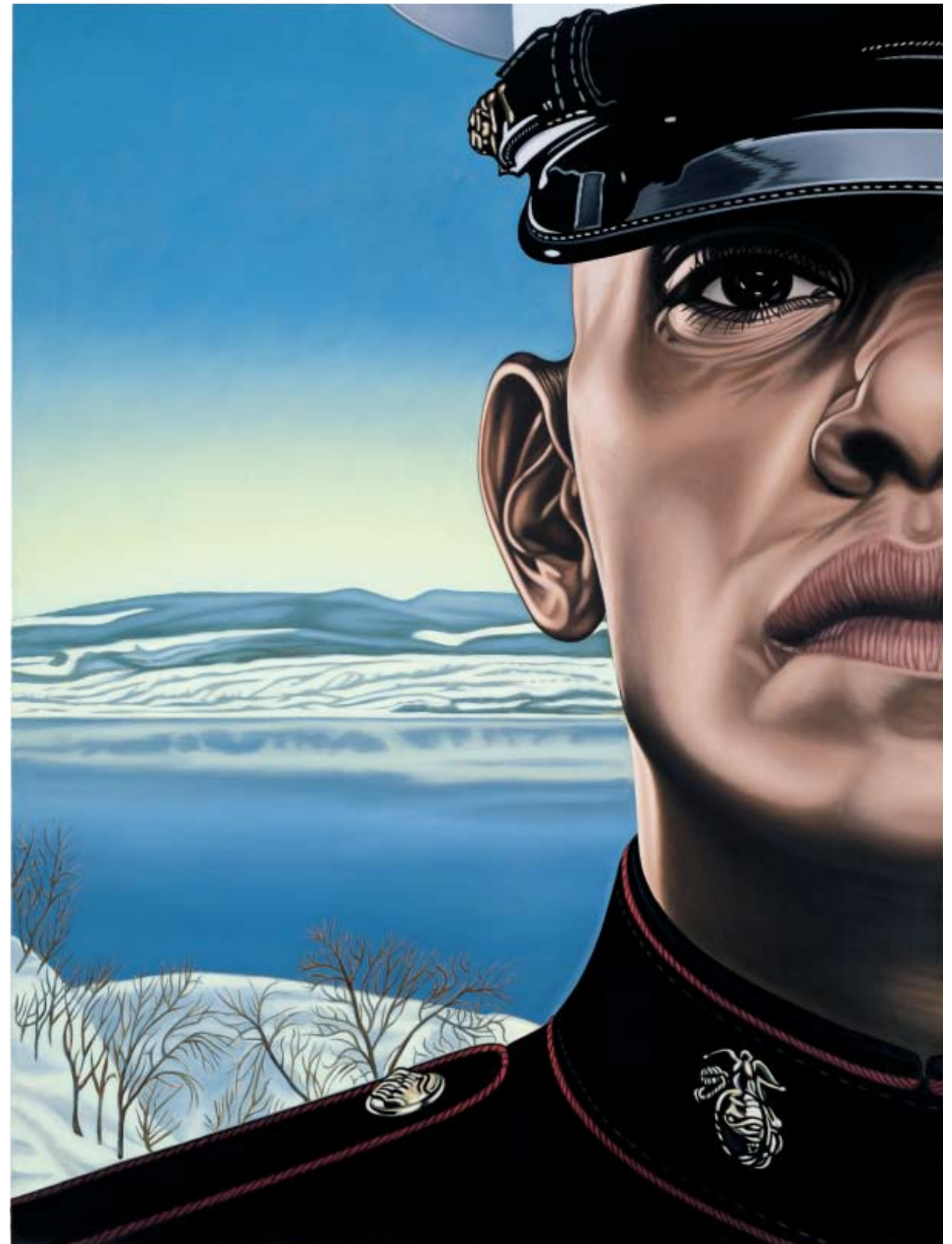
**WERE YOU OF SILVER,
WERE YOU OF GOLD?**

2009
Oil and gold leaf on canvas
82 x 60 inches
(208.3 x 152.4 cm)



**MESSAGE FORCE
MULTIPLIER**

2009
Oil on canvas
78 x 58 ¼ inches
(198.1 x 148 cm)



FUNDRAISER

2009
Oil on canvas
72 x 108 inches
(182.9 x 274.3 cm)



SUMKA

2008
Oil on canvas
79 x 52 ½ inches
(200.7 x 133.4 cm)



Frieze in process at Richard Phillips's studio, New York, 2009

