

Juxtapoz n°66, julio 2006

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# JUXTAPOZ

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## PHIL FROST SILENT FLUIDITY

Pushead tugs at the corners of the mysterious Phil Frost's mind, looking for answers, and all he finds are more questions.

*Photographs by Patrick Mulligan*

**THE WORDS CAME TO ME**—"Phil Frost said *Rest in Pieces* was one of his favorites"—and with that a process began, which seemed long but evolved into a rather quick execution. How a cover illustration from 1990 would start all this, and the fact that, as baffling as it seemed, here was an artist who had roots in the NYHC scene, caught me by surprise. Too many times, it appeared that this crop of New York-based street artists would have roots and work in a culture fashioned around hip-hop. And here was such a talented individual, hailing from New York, whose style looked nothing like something that came from hardcore, much less the NYHC scene.

There is a video floating around on the Internet for some gallery- or museum-type exhibition that shows a brief glimpse of Phil at work. However short it might be, you can visualize a right hand clenching a correction-fluid pen, carefully, and with fluid control, moving this pen, quickly penning outlines of fist-sized hearts. In case you missed the obvious, yes, it was correction fluid, AKA Wite Out. This, of course, is over an already-painted piece of wood that is quite large. Landscapes of white drowning out color. At first glance, while watching this play out, the thought crosses your mind, "Does he fill in all this space with this Wite Out pen by hand?" and then, the artist in me makes that mental claim, "That's crazy." And in a quiet tone of pure respect...

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**P:** The white symbolic touches you add to your work give it a defining style. What influenced you in this direction? **PF:** They are not intended as touches, but as an overall effort to communicate accurately a perception that resonates under my tongue.

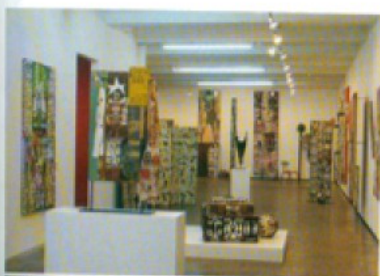
This has become one of Phil's many trademarks: the overlapping, white, solid images hiding layers of color and expressionistic shapes. But when confronted with the interview question about the use of this so-called white correction fluid ... damn, shot down. No words, no answers, nothing to embellish beyond what we already see—a mystery, and that mystery is Phil Frost. Maybe there is a face behind the face. Phil has done many a face, whether it is the blocky, sullen look or the symbolic, voodoo mask-type sectionals, almost hiding a hidden fear, screaming out in artistic glory... **P:** What made you start hitting walls with faces? When was the first time you realized this was your "signature move"? **PF:** I am not myself aware of ever having made a signature move. When I am left to myself, I am intrigued by and spend time painting, often portraiture in the form of busts or heads in spatial relation to material I find and make use of in my environment. When I began to make things for a time on walls and utilitarian objects outdoors, it was because at the time, it seemed natural to explore painting in this way. **P:** People might assume your faces to represent something wicked in their own minds. How do you see them? What brought you to this stylized signature? **PF:** Likewise, I never deemed my art stylized. There is a fountain full of repetition that



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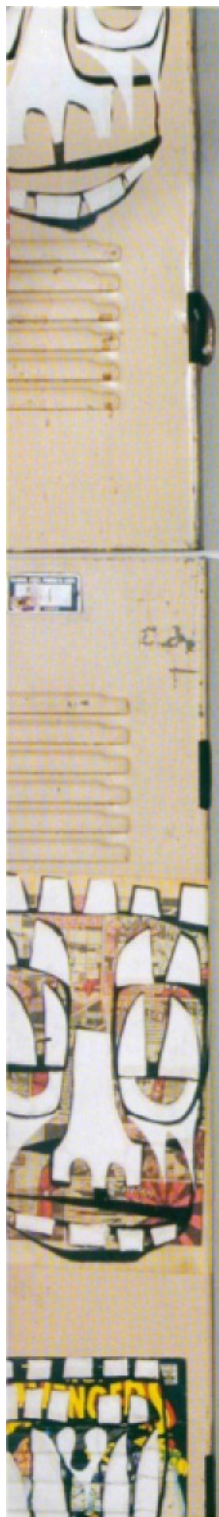


is incorporated into how I am able to represent myself accurately on the surface of an image, but it is never for repetition's sake. I don't see my portraiture as having anything to do with anyone's inner wickedness; just an accumulation of perceptions and inner process mixed with material gathered from reality that has resonated within me.

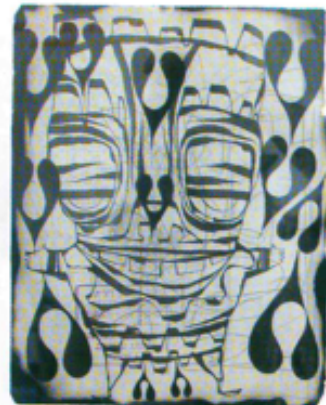
Another noticeable Frost trademark is his unique handwriting style, which weaves with an effortless flow of a brush stroke, thick to thin and back again. Sometimes unreadable to the untrained eye, the lettering contorts the alphabet while keeping the line simple and solid in shape. It's an influence for those who study typography or get mesmerized by it. **PF:** I have always been very fascinated by handwriting. In seventh grade, I was detentioned for changing my handwriting styles for nearly every test or written assignment in every class for a period of time. At that point, it was born of a fascination with mimicking the signature styles of baseball players and the graphic iconography of BMX logos, mixed with a conscious effort to conceal my identity.

When these elements are all combined, it is a visual treat, vividly stunning—a sort of primitive psychedelia, abstract in texture yet controlled in form, a contrast between colors and the mask of black and white he filters in at the final stage. Wallpaper for a psychiatrist's office, as hundreds of facial masks stare down and smile with insane glee. Patients are taken beyond the normal Rorschach test and into a world that cannot be answered, a '60s Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test with no blotters, nothing to taste beyond the mind candy. Plus, it wouldn't just be the walls haunting your senses, as this artist has taken this work to three-dimensional

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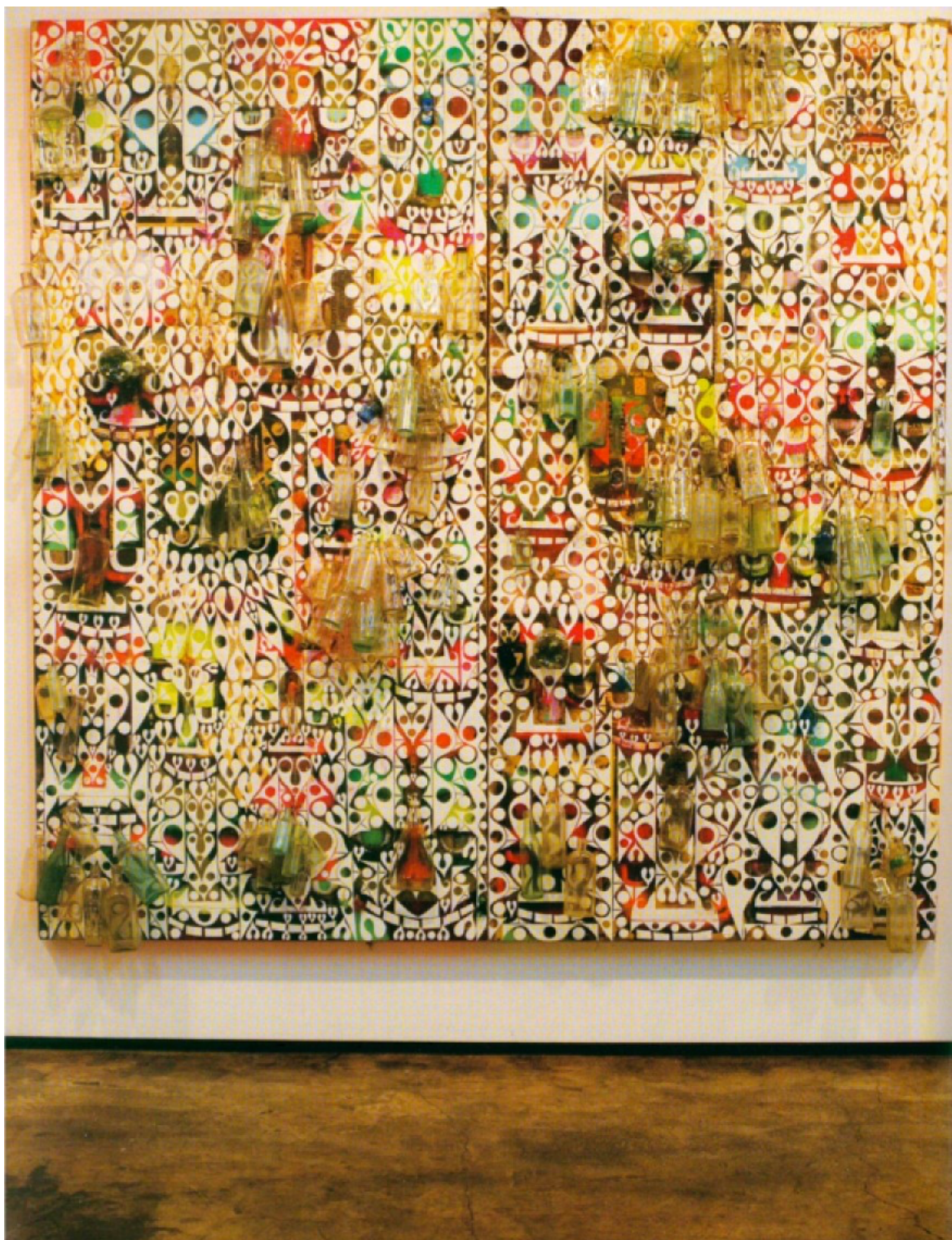
objects, baseball bats, medicine balls, luggage, even wooden outdoor steps in his most recent gallery showing. Clean padded cells have lost their fashion with this type of madness for competition... **P:** How do you determine what the size of each piece will be, and whether it will be flat or a shaped object? **PF:** There are so many things that determine the size, scale, or dimension of a work. I compose a lot of my work of material that I cultivate in my environment. Happenstance, serendipity, personal interest, and scrutiny all somehow factor in.

Outside in the commercial world, the work has seen many different forms from the street to the galleries, all brilliant and well executed—from the DC shoes and art bag, to the Arkitip blow-up ball, to the Gravis shoe cushion, to magazine covers and a very rare edition of the infamous Cube book with half of its pages dedicated to the work (and it's quite a huge book). Record covers for Sick of It All and DJ Shadow, even an Absolut advertisement for raspberry vodka. The list keeps growing; most recently, there was a pair of skateboard decks for SHUT...

**P:** There has been a presence of your creative abilities in the skateboard world for quite some time. Do you have roots in skateboarding? What was the first thing that you created around skateboarding?

**PF:** The first thing that I created to be seen in the world of skateboarding was a portrait of Jason Lee that I was asked to create by Lance Dawes, whom I met by living with Ron Allen and Cory Shaw for several months in Oakland in 1993 or 1994. I grew up skating every day and was sponsored from ages 13 to 19 by a skate shop in Hadley and Wilbraham, Massachusetts, with Jim Gagne, Cory Shaw, and Dag Ingverson, and later on Matt Pailles, Robbie Gangemi, and I think Brian Gaberman and some others. When I lived in Albany, New York, I skated downtown every day with Blake

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Hannon, Johnny Schillereff, Hack, Jeff Toma, Carl Schultz, Joe Van Dueser, Merk Cheng, Scott Herskovitz, and Kenny Reed, among others. **P: Were you influenced by any other artists based in the skateboard world?** **PF:** As a teenager, in the same way that I can say I have been inspired by Trix or Count Chocula cereal boxes, yes—by Wes Humpston, Hugh-skin Gran, Neil Blender, Wiley, Aly Asha, Matthew Solomon, SNS Steven Cales, Puppethead, Alex Ducky Talavera, Chris Miller, Jim Grey, Johnny Schillereff, Chris Hall, Eli Gesner...

If a fantasy portrayal of the wide-open psych ward renovated with Phil's work tickles your fancy, all one must do is just step inside the Real Mad Hectic shop in Harajuku, Tokyo, Japan. From the walk down the steps and through the doorway, Phil has touched something throughout. Whether it's in the extensive paintings, objects, or metal and glass etchings, you get a sense of a long work in progress that was from the heart... **PF:** An amazing experience, most formidable in my mind, was that I spent five months living and working hard at painting every day in Tokyo, and being respectfully and pleasurably hosted to do so.

Patience. A silent fluidity. As much as we would like to get into this mind, there are locks and traps preventing any type of serious access. The time is better spent creating and moving liquid, continually layering, hiding pieces of the soul, while not searching for the keys. Another rubdown of white...

**P: What artists have influenced you in your lifetime?** **PF:** I have been influenced by the work of Tom Wilson, Jack Kirby, Francis Bacon, Jim Davis, Henry Moore, Richie Birkenhead, Marty Hill, Jackson Pollock, Smith Sane, CCS Cromag, Vivaldi, Arvo Part, Joe Clough, Richard Long, Alberto Giacometti, Georges Rouault, John Buscema, Breakdown, REVS, COST, Pina Bousch, Jasper Johns, John Romita, Sr, Futura 2000, Underdog, Keith Haring, Rammelzee, Craig Setari, Jeff Perlin, Brian Blake, Barrington Levy, James Rosenquist, Ellsworth Kelly, STOUT77, Leeway, Pushead, Walt Disney, Lee Quinones, Andrew Goldsworthy, Leon Kossoff, Matthias Grunewald, and Mr Magoo. After high school, I moved to Astoria, Queens, and I spent a lot of time in the Metropolitan Museum and the NYC public libraries. ☺—Pushead

Contact Jack Shainman Gallery, 212 645 1701 or [www.jackshainman.com](http://www.jackshainman.com), to obtain the art of Phil Frost.



Phil Frost photographed by STASH.