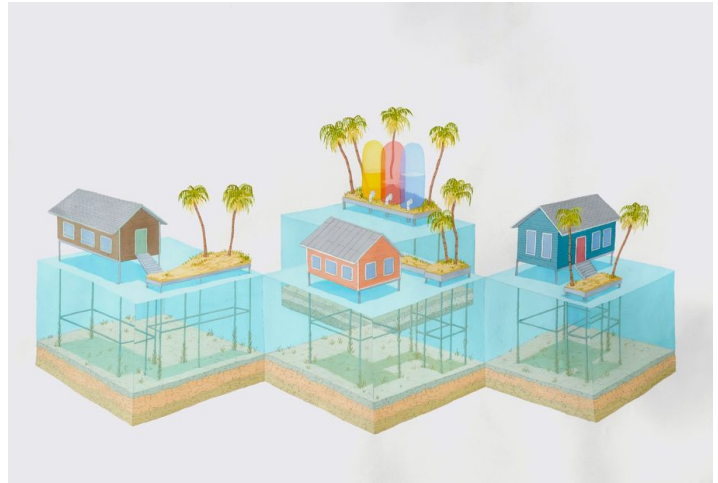


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In pretty yet ambiguous drawings, Joseph Phillips tracks our desire to possess nature

2/2/2013 By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#), American-Statesman Staff

Joseph Phillips doesn't typically like to offer explanations of his art work. "People have such wide-ranging reactions to it," says the Austin artist whose latest delicate gouache drawings of deconstructed environments are currently on view at Tiny Park, an East Austin gallery. Some think that Phillips' intentionally naive yet ridiculous landscapes are terribly funny and cynical. Others find them terribly depressing and cynical. The truth is, Phillips — whose work has been featured in museum exhibits in Austin and elsewhere in Texas — really isn't cynical, not personally and not artistically. "I like (my drawings) to be ambiguous," he says. "I'm not out make didactic statements." And they are. Phillips draws places as simultaneously utopias and dystopias.



With exquisite finesse and a refined sense of line, Phillips creates imaginary real estate parcels — fantasy locales such as beachfront homes and forest retreats or even quixotic combinations of both. In Phillips' imaginary cosmos, however, the natural landscape is so hyper-manipulated by consumer desire that lagoons, palms trees, ski slopes or a grass-covered hill become a property buyer's option no different than cabins or condos. In fact, the surreal pieces of land are shown in diagrammatic cross-section as if they fall somewhere in between construction or disassembly. Scaffolding made of rickety two-by-fours supports a sod-covered lawn. A flimsy plywood wall backs the blue sky surrounding a beach scene. Nature never looked so quantified — and so commodified.

Phillips titles his paintings as if they were items in some hypnagogic lifestyle catalog. There's "Country Cabin with Cistern and Shelter" and "Alternating Terraan With Holding Tank." Wait — you want a dock? Then better order "Alternating Terrain with Holding Tank and Dock." And yet there's an innocence to these clearly dystopic tableaux. Perhaps it's the delicate luminescence of the water-based gouache paint. Or it could be the sweet, almost storybook quality to Phillips' sense of line and composition. Whatever — these jarringly rearranged landscapes remain completely nonconfrontational.

For his exhibit at Tiny Park — his first solo show in several years — Phillips created "Variable Landscape," a mural made up of hundreds of like-sized diamond-shaped pieces. Some are painted a flat sky blue. Others are covered with fuzzy green fake grass. Some sport ruffled, earth-colored foam dotted with plastic flowers. Still others bear basic house façades. Together on the gallery wall, "Variable Landscape" looks like an isometrically arranged hillside community of identical lawns, gardens, houses and even identical patches of sky. Interested in investing? You can. Each triangle sells for \$20. Buy as many as you like and arrange them in any fashion you wish and voilà! You can create your own facsimile suburban-scape. Just as Phillips combines bits of the environment and real estate in his paintings, so can you enjoy they same process with pieces of "Variable Landscape."

If there's any irony to Phillips' work, it emerges more from the coincidences of his biography. A native Austinite whose grandparents' South Austin farm is now (literally) a paved shopping center parking lot, the 35-year-old is one of the co-founders of the East Austin Studio Tour, the event that arguably kick-started East Austin's transformation into the trendy, artsy, desirable (and expensive) neighborhood and entertainment destination that it is today. One wonders if a startup gallery like Tiny Park — or nearby trendy eateries Hillside Farmacy and Blue Dahlia Bistro — would even have opened in East Austin if it hadn't been for the wild popularity of the East Studio Tour.

But even suggesting there's some irony between Phillips' art and his biography is likely wrong. He seems as equally admiring of our impulse to manipulate nature as he is worried about the scope of that manipulation. In a way, Phillips taps into a peculiarly American sentiment — a romantic zeal that's pushed pioneers into the wilderness in search of some simpler, ideal existence with nature. And yet that zealous conquering of the natural world is exactly the thing that destroys it, leaving any authentic relationship with nature a quixotic impossibility. To possess is to destroy nature, and yet we can't help but want it so much — especially when it looks as easily purchasable as Phillips renders it.