

Denis Ray Phillips

December 13, 1938 ~ February 21, 2024

Denis Ray Phillips, 85, passed away February 21, 2024. Born December 13, 1938, to Marvin and Madeline Phillips, Denis was the oldest of four children and the consummate big brother. Denis attributed his mother with getting him started in art; she mail-ordered drawing instructions and entered him into competitions found on matchbook covers, uncovering his gift of art and ultimately his lifelong passion. He graduated from Olympus High School and in 1957 joined the US Coast Guard the same year, which took him to Alameda Island in the Bay Area of California for 6 months of boot-camp training followed by once yearly 2-week reserve duty for the following 8 years. Denis graduated from the University of Utah with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1962

Soon after graduation from art school, Denis opened the Art and Sign Company. Working as a sign-painter, he created attractive window advertisements for Associated Grocers and Albertson’s, which remained one of his trademark skills. In addition, he and lifelong friend, Ron Williams, started The Good Sole Sandal Shop in the 9 th and 9 th neighborhood, creating hand-crafted custom leather sandals. For two years, Denis also taught painting at the University of Utah Fine Arts Department. Although he did consider teaching as a possible career path, he knew that creating art was his true passion and he went on to become one of Utah’s most revered and prolific painters.

In 1963 he met his future life partner, Bonnie Gile, where they were each leasing adjacent studio spaces in the same building. Shortly thereafter, in 1965, together they founded Phillips Gallery, Utah’s first art gallery bringing contemporary art to the intermountain west. Denis and Bonnie eloped to Nevada and were married in the Elko County courthouse on September 11, 1966. They had two sons Benjamin Dooly (1969) and Adam Burke (1971).

In the early days of Phillips Gallery, located on the northwest corner of 9 th and 9 th , Denis and Bonnie worked alongside their many artist friends, selling their respective works. While holding space for local activism, Phillips Gallery hosted many events promoting anti-war and other important social causes. These gatherings showcased alternative films which collectively engaged the local community. Denis and Bonnie were active in the Peace and Freedom Party in Utah. In 1968, Phillips Gallery relocated to its current home at 444 East and 200 South.

Each summer the Gallery would close its doors so the Phillips family could travel around the west, camping and painting. Denis would plein-air paint throughout those late summer travels in Idaho, Utah and Wyoming. Bonnie also painted and produced watercolor landscapes. The children, Ben and Adam, when not shooting BB guns, bicycling or fishing, were also exposed to outdoor landscape painting with watercolors as they would paint alongside their parents. Those summer trips resulted in some of Denis's most iconic works of oil-on-canvas landscapes that became among Denis' best-known art styles from the late 70's through the mid 80's. During one of those summer adventures, Denis and Bonnie bought a house in Paris, Idaho, which provided a summer home enjoyed by both family and friends for years to come.

Denis's art styles ranged from large-scale symmetrical abstract works, plein-air realistic landscapes, colorful abstract landscapes and most recently his splatter series that were both rich in color and experimental in painting surfaces. He dabbled in any medium that caught his fancy, including small playful sculptural pieces often involving dried paint brushes affixed to various surfaces. Denis remained a prolific painter and creator throughout his life. He somehow managed to delight his audience with almost everything he produced. His wife Bonnie and their son Ben continue to own and operate the Gallery.

Denis was also a musician. He played the piano, guitar, ukulele and found time to compose and record new age music. Golf too, was a passion. On beautiful days, he could be found skipping work to go "hit some balls."

Denis was a man of few words, yet once engaged, his discerning opinions were valuable insights that cut to the chase. His advice to artists was always "keep going, make more and don't worry about it too much." Denis did things his own way. He was independent and loving, stubborn and generous, a good friend with a truly beautiful soul.

He is survived by his wife Bonnie; son, Ben; sister, Patricia (Dolly) Larsen grandchildren, Aaron, Rosie, Jonah, Lily, daughter-in-law, Lisa Phillips and Lisa's daughter, Taylor;. He is preceded in death by his son Adam, and his brothers, Terry and Roger. In lieu of flowers, please consider donating to a local charitable and/or educational arts organization. We would like to send our gratitude to our family, friends, gallery employees and artists who have expressed their sympathies and support. A memorial and celebration of life will be announced at a later date at: www.denisrayphillips.com

Photo by Simon Blundell