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# THE ART ISSUE

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and the art world's next generation of stars

Adam McEwen, *Untitled (Richard)*, 2006

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## Richard Prince

Artist whose plundered mythology turned the tragi-comic landscape of America into high art

RICHARD PRINCE, who has died aged 57, was the most influential artist of his generation and a restless connoisseur of the underbelly of the American Dream.

He was best known for his grainy photographs of Stetsoned cowboys lifted directly from the famous Marlboro advertising campaign - tragic figures in the mold of John Wayne who ride resolutely into their own sunsets - and for paintings consisting of broad fields of flat color stenciled with paper-thin jokes taken from the pages of outdated humor compendiums.

His practice of re-photographing the pages of magazines introduced the term 'appropriation' into the art lexicon. The artist himself gave a more frank account of his technique, preferring to call it theft or, sometimes, 'sharing.'

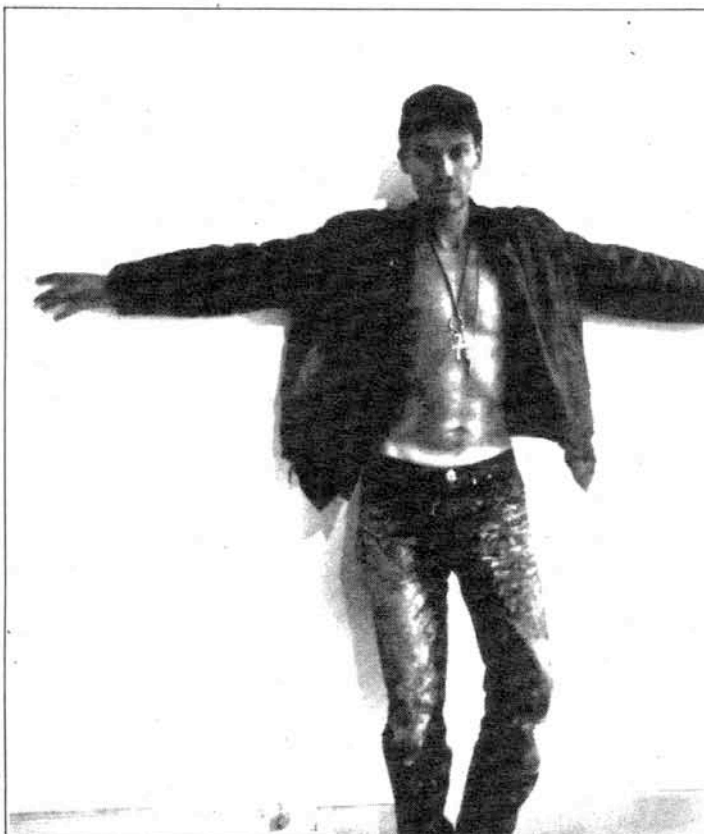
Prince possessed an unerring eye for the iconic and yet terminal image. He strip-mined popular culture, from its glossy, sheened core, dreamed up in the heads of generations of advertising executives, to its abandoned and dilapidated hinterlands. His deadpan offerings came without commentary. Instead, populated by stern-faced, inscrutable fashion models, topless biker chicks, metal heads, surfers and a parade of alcoholics, adulterers and traveling salesmen trailing bad punch lines, they insisted only on their right to join the canon of high art.

Notoriously, in 1983 he opened his own "gallery" in a small rented storefront on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The only artwork displayed was a single photograph in an ornate gilt frame, its title, 'Spiritual America', borrowed from a 1923 photograph by Alfred Stieglitz showing a gelded stallion's crotch. The picture was of a naked, prepubescent Brooke Shields, her body oiled and dripping with sleaze and pedophile association.

The original, taken by a commercial photographer, Gary Gross, with the permission of Shields's mother, was, as Prince recalled, "a very Dantesque, very spooky image. For me it became an image of what photography can do and how it can get out of hand, how it can develop a life of its own, a kind of photographic ego."

For the duration of the exhibition, Prince went underground, fueling rumors that he had fled to the West Coast, been subpoenaed, or held accountable for his appropriation in less legal, more sinister ways. By pimping the image of the child star, he put those who sought it out in the embarrassing position of having to admit their own complicity in its illicit eroticism.

Prince's aim in re-photographing previously published images was, he said, to "get as close as possible to the real thing." The unsettling implication of his work was that the experience of



Prince (1991): unsettling work posed questions of authenticity and possession

living in 20th century America was not merely dominated by the invented aspirations of advertising, but was fundamentally defined by them.

Later, having removed himself to the Catskills area of upstate New York, he made a large body of 'landscape' photographs. Shot outdoors with indoor film, these images of impoverished yards, tire planters and abandoned basketball hoops have the sun-ruined, bluish cast of a cheap mail-order catalogue.

Prince was a consummate fan, and his stolen images of 'mainstream cults' were all the more powerful for being devoid of any vampiric quality. Accused of sexism for the depictions of women which he chose to reproduce, he replied, "Well, as far as the biker chicks are concerned, I just wouldn't mind being one... I like what I think they look like, or perhaps what they are."

His main concern was with the slippery nature of myths in popular culture, and with their tenuous but deeply embedded partnership with reality. 'I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name,' ran one of his laconic texts, indicating the

easy interchangeability of truth and identity.

His own artistic persona was accordingly elusive. For many years he encouraged his reputation as a loner, and the interviews he gave tended to be conducted with himself (on one occasion, in the fictitious guise of the writer J.G. Ballard). His self-styled portraits included that of the paint-spattered artist, with more than a nod to Hans Namuth's famous image of Jackson Pollock as "Jack the dripper." His collaborations with the gallerist Colin de Land were made under the pseudonym 'John Dogg'.

Prince's work was suffused with pathos and loss. A tragedian, he understood the point where the tragic and the comic meld. As he observed of a group of his canvases, "The jokes are funny, but the paintings are not."

Richard Prince was born on August 6 1949 in the Panama Canal Zone. By his own account, his parents were spies who worked for an organization called the Office of Strategic Services. His father "did something in defoliants in Vietnam". In 1954 the family moved

to Braintree, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. After graduating high school in 1967 he spent several months in Spain and Italy touring art museums. On his return to America he attended an alternative college in Maine, managing to avoid being drafted when he was called up in 1971.

In 1973, after applying to the San Francisco Art Institute without success, he moved to New York and took a job in the tear-sheets department at the Time-Life building, where he built a makeshift photographic studio in the basement. Ripping up such magazines as *People*, *Fortune*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* and delivering the editorial pages to the appropriate departments, he was left with the advertising pages. "These images of happy couples were supposed to represent something," he said later, "but they didn't really mean anything to me. So I began to use a camera to make fake photographs of the ads."

A typical example of his early work was titled 'Three Women Looking in the Same Direction', a self-descriptive work in which he photographed three original color advertisements and

reprinted them as black-and-white images.

His first solo exhibition was at Metro Pictures gallery in 1980. Along with such artists as Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine, he began to be grouped with what became known as the Pictures Generation, named after the title of a show organized by the writer Douglas Crimp (in which Prince himself had declined to be included). While many of his artist contemporaries began to benefit from the frenzied art boom of the 1980s, Prince and his work remained largely ignored, the special interest of a small, informed group of aficionados.

In the mid-1980s he began producing hand-written jokes on paper, soon transferred to canvas via a silkscreen process. Literally jokes on painting, their lateral bands of text made complex allusions to Barnett Newman's sublime "zips" and to the history of heroic American abstract expressionism, perversely allowing him to make 'real' paintings in the process.

In 1988 he began to send off for muscle-car hoods, which he painted in primer gray and stock-car candy-colors to reveal an enigmatic and threatening intent in their angled lines.

'Celebrities', an ongoing series, consisted of 8x10 inch promotional photographs autographed by their subjects, usually in Prince's own hand. In 2003 he exhibited a series of 'Nurse Paintings', based on the covers of pulp paperback novels. As the value of his work began to skyrocket in the early 2000s, he responded by making paintings plastered with personal checks.

Throughout his career, Prince was a prolific and inspired maker of artist's books. Usually consisting of uninterrupted sequences of photographs, they offered him unlimited freedom to curate his world. Their hybrid combination of the photographic and the literal provide the most accurate chronicle of his shifting thought processes.

In 1993 Prince created 'First House', an ominous installation in a condemned tract house in Venice, Los Angeles, which was littered with particularly dark and mean joke paintings, selections of obscure magazines and sculptures. The project was a kind of idealized museum of the artist's aesthetic in which, in the words of one observer, "the circuitry of human relations was completely shorted out and charred." A decade later he made 'Second House' in upstate New York, which was subsequently purchased *in toto* by the Guggenheim Museum.

Prince's work was exhibited and collected widely in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. He was given a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1992.

Richard Prince married, first, Lisa Spellman (marriage dissolved). He married secondly, Noel Grunwaldt; they had a daughter.