

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bankowsky, Jack. "Contemporanea." *Exhibitions Richard Prince*. March 1990.

EXHIBITIONS

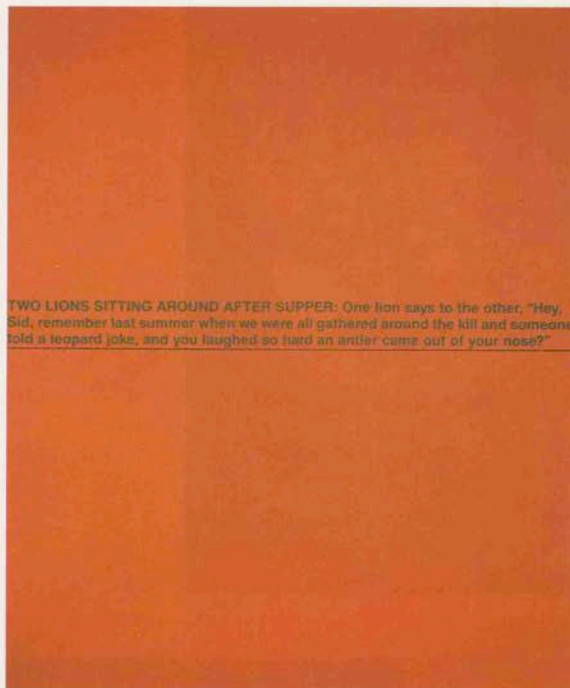
RICHARD PRINCE

BY JACK BANKOWSKY

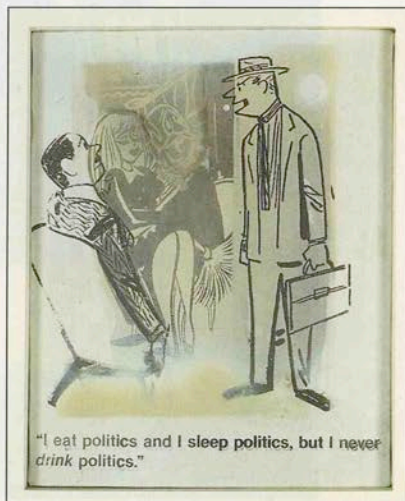
In the mid-1970s, Richard Prince turned his camera on the flood of advertising that constitutes the stock footage of our throw-away culture, and, by a skewed stroke of inspiration, supplied us with an image equal to our late-millennial disaffection that brought the hide-bound institution of gallery art lumbering into the 1980s.

If Prince's successive efforts have failed to equal the trail-blazing prescience of his early re-photographs, he has remained consistently sensitized to the way habitual patterns of speech and received images can be coaxed to deliver up contingencies obscured behind the seamless surface of everyday life. Several seasons ago, Prince turned to the joke as that linguistic vehicle which takes special advantage of the slippery nature of language. By reframing standard comic fare in the context of the gallery, he effectively foregrounded the joke's rhetorical mechanisms.

At Jay Gorney this winter, Prince introduced several new devices that nudge joke mechanisms into even more pointed relief. One series of small framed canvases combines joke texts with illustrations that don't quite jibe. In *I Never Drink Politics*, for example, an image in which the husband barges in on an illicit sexcapade has nothing to do with the text, which runs: "I eat politics and sleep politics, but I never drink politics." Throughout the series, depictions of various sexual hijinks are complicated as scenarios from apparently different jokes are combined in underpainted and silkscreened layers. Here, getting caught with one's "pants down" becomes a generalized remark about the comic effect. Though the joke's effect is a direct by-product of its linguistic economy, Prince points out that the operations which account for their instantaneous return can be disarmingly complex.



TWO LIONS SITTING AROUND AFTER SUPPER: One lion says to the other, "Hey, Sid, remember last summer when we were all gathered around the kill and someone told a leopard joke, and you laughed so hard an antler came out of your nose?"



- 1) *The Leopard Joke*, 1989. Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 116 x 96 inches. Courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art. Photo by K. Schles.
- 2) *I Never Drink Politics*, 1989. Acrylic, enamel and silkscreen on canvas, 14 x 11 inches. Courtesy Jay Gorney Modern Art. Photo by K. Schles.

The Leopard Joke, 1989, depends on a series of confusions between animal and human. Like people, the lions talk, laugh, and tell ethnic-type jokes at the expense of leopards. The "antler" has the function of bringing us abruptly back into the realm of the animal via a comic and distinctly human social mishap. As humans, we may eat venison, but we don't eat antlers. The joke effect depends precisely on the rapid-fire mixing of these distinctions.

A diptych entitled *How to Tell*, 1989, in which a joke text appears on one panel and a kind of phonetic guide to pronouncing the joke in a Bronx-type accent appears on the other, takes the joke's normal economy as its explicit subject matter. Not only is the key predictably longer than the joke text itself, the accent doesn't feel especially appropriate to the joke's content. The imperfect fit provides a distancing device that draws the joke mechanism into sharp relief.

If the works at Jay Gorney constitute an appreciable if unspectacular advance on Prince's previous joke pieces, the simulated car hoods across the street at Barbara Gladstone have even Prince's staunchest fans grumbling. The "this year's model" paradigm of stylistic changes, suggested by the combination of matte-finished minimal elegance and recognizable auto-hood detailing, seems little more than an inurgent gloss on the commonplace notion that the rhythms of capital have penetrated the "autonomous" realm of the aesthetic. Given Prince's track record, it is tempting to wonder if he is simply ahead of us again. The evidence here, however, suggests that those who have become accustomed to looking to Prince's work for vital news of our condition will have to settle for a sleepy rehash of some decidedly overworked ideas.

Jack Bankowsky is an art critic and writer based in New York.