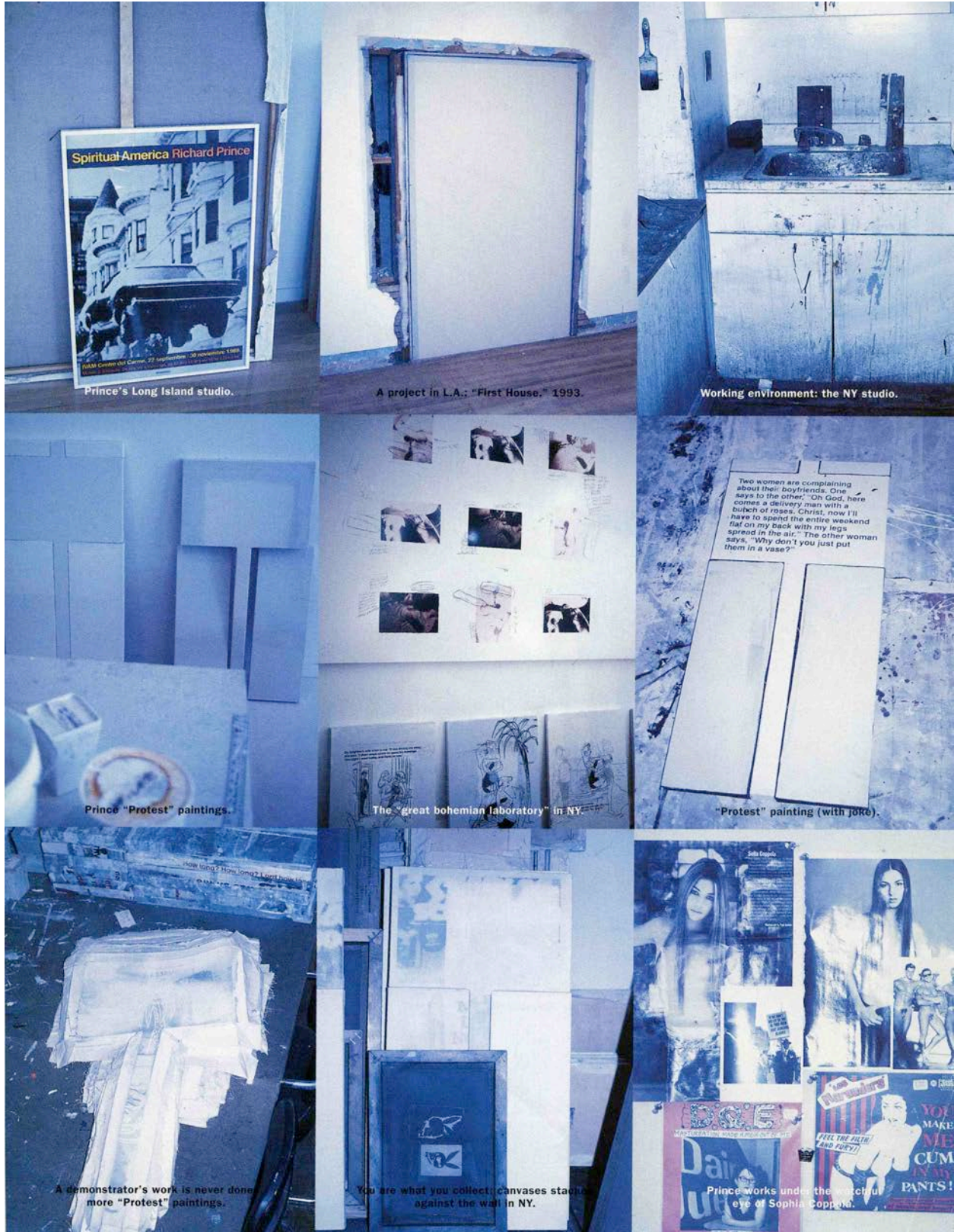


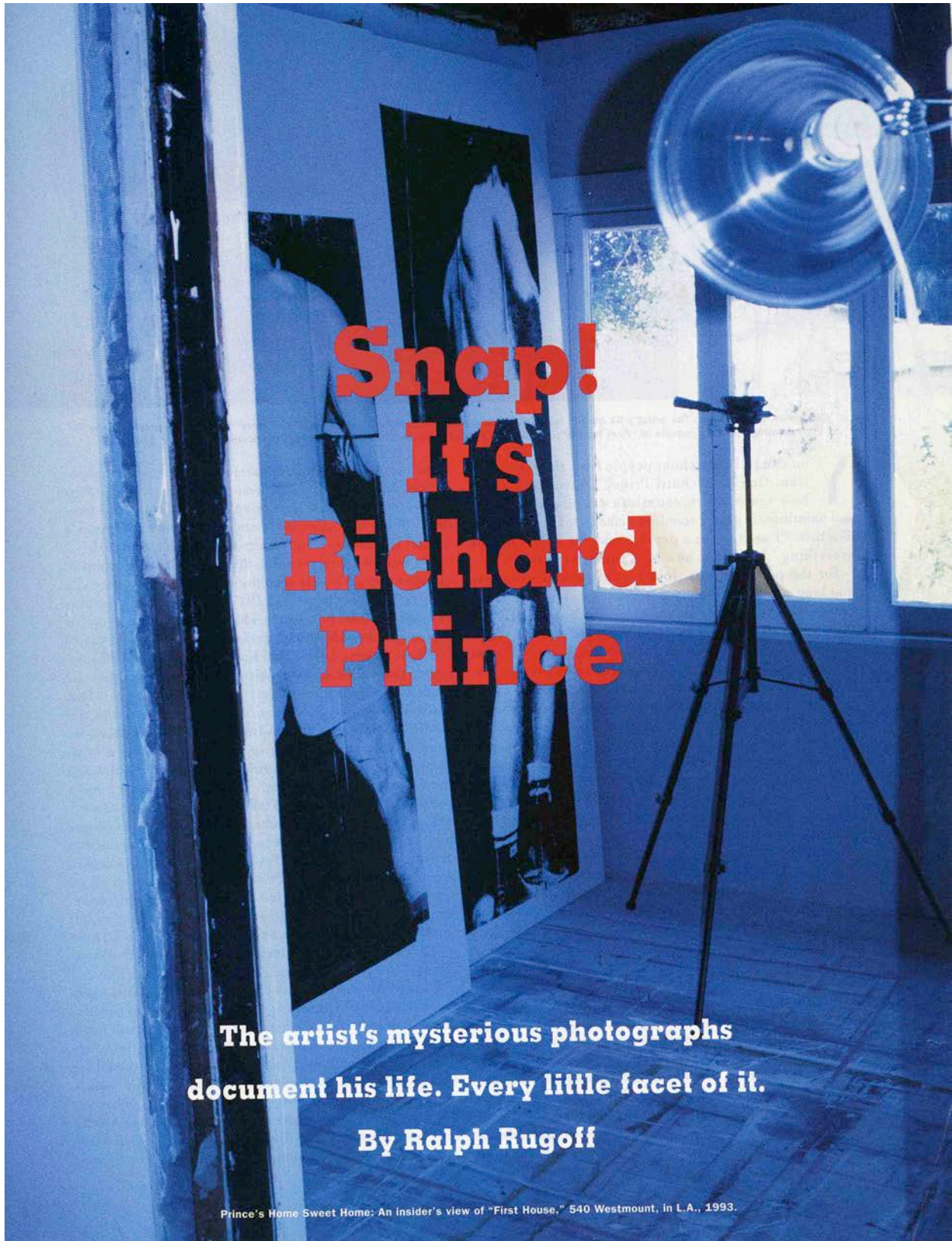
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ralph Rugoff, "Snap! It's Richard Prince," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1993, 406-411, 444-445



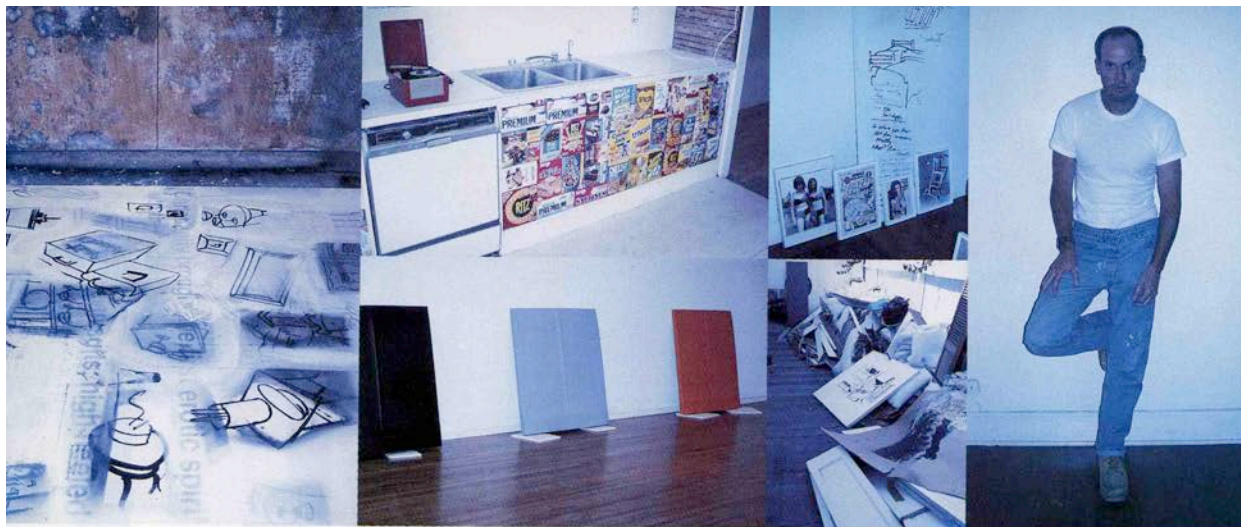
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Clockwise, from top left: The artist's NY studio; installation view of the kitchen in "First House"; "inventory" in NY; self-portrait; Prince paintings piled up outside of "First House"; installation view of "Untitled (Hoods)" at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, NY, 1989.

You can tell a lot about people from the jokes they like. One of Richard Prince's favorites, which he's reworked in countless drawings, collages, and paintings, is an old stand-up comedy routine that goes like this: "I went to see a psychiatrist. He said, 'Tell me everything.' I did, and now he's doing my act."

For the past 16 years, in a sort of never-ending gag that long ago metamorphosed into a prominent art career, Prince has been stealing other people's acts. Most of what he steals comes from magazines. He's lifted everything from watch advertisements and *New Yorker* cartoons to the amateur snapshots sent in to hot-rod and surfer publications, giving them a second life in deadpan works of art.

But for Prince a magazine is more than an archaeological site to be plundered for telling relics. "There's something very sexy about a brand-new magazine," he remarks. "It's like it's a world, and you're the first one to look at it."

"Of course, I've also said the media is the Antichrist, and sometimes I feel that's true," he adds. "But other days I feel that what's out there isn't really trying to fool you into thinking it's something else. It's more like these images have their own egos, and in my work it's not about what I imagine, it's what they imagine. I'm just in a position to fulfill that."

Having taken images from magazines all these years, Prince is finally returning the favor. He shot the pictures you see on these pages. Part of an ongoing project, these photographs document the artist's various collections—which is to say, they record not only prized possessions but also the way Prince thinks. Most of these photos were taken in the three-floor TriBeCa loft where the artist works and lives. With their casual snapshot aesthetic, they suggest a random survey of his working environment, capturing an assortment of his canvases, clipped magazine pages, book jackets, and work he collects by fellow artists, like Meyer Vaisman and Robert Gober.

On one level, these photos seem like a paean to the fertile chaos of the studio, the great bohemian laboratory where accident rules, in contrast to the sterile order of museum and gallery. Yet many of the juxtapositions in

these pictures are, in fact, carefully orchestrated compositions, and a few actually document an installation, *First House*, that he created last spring in a West Hollywood tear-down. What they offer, then, are oblique views of Prince's mental kingdom—a stolen territory familiar to us all.

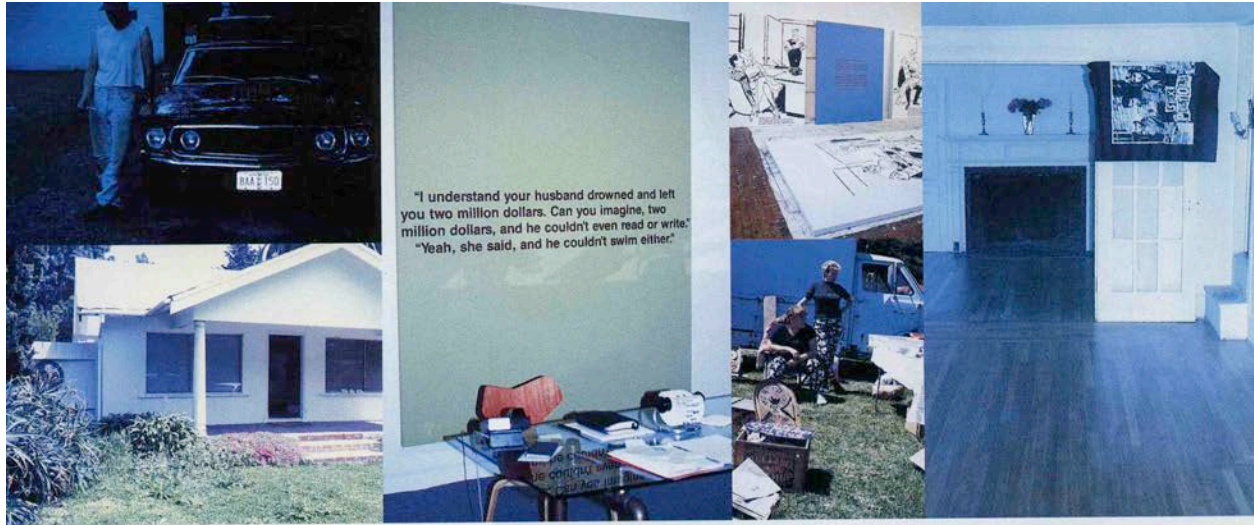
Photography lends itself to thievery—a truth evident in our idea that a photo is something we *take*. But Prince is a thief to the second power: In 1977 he began taking pictures of magazine ads, pioneering what later came to be called rephotography. Along with such contemporaries as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, and James Welling, he probed the way we relate to photographic images and the consequences of living in a society in which, like so many Don Quixotes, our private selves become entangled with the public fantasies we absorb from the media. "I think we often find ourselves acting in situations as if we'd been there before because we've already experienced it through some movie or TV program," Prince says. "To me, that's one of the things that define late-20th-century experience."

Unlike his postmodern colleagues who aimed to critique media manipulation, Prince has sought to "catch seduction in the act," as critic Hal Foster has noted. In his rephotographed magazine ads, Prince carefully removed all ad copy; framed and presented as "straight" photographs, they're oddly disorienting because there's no way to tell whether you're looking at an original image or a detail from an ad. "What these images really are probably isn't that interesting," the artist observes, "but what they *look* like is."

It's precisely this intimation of possibility, which occurs whenever our conceptual categories melt down, that Prince pursues: things that look normal, then veer off track in a sublimely subtle way; a Marlboro landscape rephotographed so that it suggests a climate-controlled cyberspace, a zone of artificial life where weightless cowboys remain forever out of desire's reach, no more able to inhabit our world than a ghost is. It's worth noting that when Prince began shooting Marlboro cigarette ads in 1980, they were already being digitally produced—typed up on computers and copied from an archive of existing images.

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Clockwise, from top left: Car collector Prince with 1969 Ford Mustang; "Untitled," 1989 (acrylic and silkscreen on canvas); "deadpan works of art" in NY studio; Sex Pistols fan Prince's "R-Ville" studio, Upstate NY; the Swap Meet, one of Prince's hangouts in Upstate NY; "First House."

After rephotographing pictures from special-interest magazines in the early '80s, Prince switched focus from photography to drawing and painting, serving up canvas renderings of borscht-belt jokes and Eisenhower-era cartoons with inappropriate captions. Near the end of the decade, he began a series of black-on-white canvases that reassembled elements of his previous work into disjointed collages, mixing murky photographic images with joke fragments and floating lamps and chairs taken from cartoon interiors.

Prince's oeuvre as a whole is likewise best appreciated as an ongoing collection or inventory, something to peruse in the same way you'd flip through the pages of a magazine. Its power is cumulative. Instead of contemplating singular and profound works of art, you're invited to compare a series of images and to try to discern how they're equivalent and how they're different. To a large extent, that may be why he likes to rephotograph his work in context. "I tend to think about the whole thing, rather than a specific proportion," he notes. A book of his photographs, titled *Adult Comedy Action Drama*, will be published this fall.

Prince's public persona, a piece of work in itself, also has the quality of something pasted together from disparate parts. Besides weaving fictitious episodes into his résumé, he's exhibited artworks under a pseudonym and published a phony interview in which he's queried by English novelist J. G. Ballard. Adding to the confusion, a number of recent works have been dated 1967, the year of his high school graduation. "That was the last time I ever really felt good," he explains. "I sort of resented the fact that I had to leave high school, and I associate that time, especially the feeling of having no responsibilities toward anything or anybody, with being an artist. Besides, I don't think I've really changed much since I left high school."

Extended adolescence—a way of life for many Americans—is, in part, about not having a stable identity, not "settling down." In this respect, Prince is arguably an adolescent artist, because after 16 years his identity remains uncertain. He takes photographs, but he's not considered a "pho-

tographer." He paints, but somehow he's not a "painter." No matter what he does there seem to be quotation marks hovering nearby, suggesting that his activity isn't quite on the level.

In person, Prince can also be hard to get a handle on. Though he can appear utterly candid, even to the point of being self-incriminating, much of the time he exudes the air of a poker player trying to keep a straight face when he's got a handful of wild cards.

Perhaps, as his work suggests, he sees identity as a curatorial act—you are what you collect or what magazine you subscribe to. But beyond the idea that we define ourselves through the images and ideas we accrue, Prince touches on a more radical notion, that the "self" may be a collection of partial selves, many of them stolen from pop culture.

Most of Prince's art also conveys a casually sinister picture of American life: Whether he's recycling jokes about adultery, snapshots from hot-rod magazines, or deracinated Marlboro cowboys, you feel he's tracing the edges of a dark emptiness at the heart of consumer culture's simulated realities. Yet no one has ever accused him of being a political artist, perhaps because his alienated viewpoint is largely that of a white, middle-class, 44-year-old teenager. (Speaking of his fairly recent appropriation of images from African-American magazines, Prince said: "I was specifically looking to include an image of a black person in my work because I see that as not being any different from a surfer or a biker. It's *that* foreign to me.")

While Prince has received a healthy quantity of kudos over the years, including a Whitney Museum-organized retrospective (opening October 3 on its last stop, at Rotterdam's Museum Boymans-van Beuningen), he's also been dogged by notoriety. Over the years, a number of critics have attacked Prince's work as misogynistic, especially his recycling of images said to devalue women, such as his "Girlfriends" series, in which he rephotographed blurry snapshots of half-dressed biker girls. Probably the fiercest criticism was provoked by a 1983 piece in which, after opening a fake gallery and hiring someone to play the part of a dealer, Prince exhibited a single rephotographed > 444

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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RICHARD PRINCE (continued from page 411)

image: Titled *Spiritual America*, it showed a nude, 10-year-old Brooke Shields, her boyish, oiled body posed to suggest the coy sexuality associated with soft-core porn.

At the time, the photo was the subject of a much-publicized lawsuit launched by Shields and her mother to prevent the original photographer from selling the poster rights. Prince

reckoned it was the world's most expensive photograph.

"It was like something out of Dante's *Inferno*," he says. "But what it was about had nothing to do with the author or the subject—neither knew Brooke was going to grow up to be this representation of Bob Hope's America. To me, what was happening around this picture, the way it got out of hand, was part of what photography could be about, and I think there's a certain beauty in that photo in terms of how the medium works."

If his reception has been problematic at times, it's partly because Prince dares people to write him off. Not many serious artists would risk showing their work in the incidental, even throwaway fashion of the photos in this magazine. Nor would they pose for portraits with their shirts off, like some would-be rock star, as Prince sometimes does. At times, he goes out of his way to provide his detractors with ammunition: In the catalog for his 1992 Whitney-organized retrospective, a recurring joke reads, "I *do* think your problems are serious, Richard. They're just not very interesting."

Even for some of his fans, Prince's work is an acquired taste. Much of it isn't easy to access; it can seem cold and underwhelmingly banal. This sometimes plays to its advantage, however—the work can creep up on you when you're not looking and quietly detonate with a delayed fuse. The risk Prince takes is that of constantly testing the line between art and nonart.

Last April he pushed the line a little further in transforming the two-bedroom tear-down in Los Angeles into *First House* (commissioned by Regen Projects), a hybrid space lying somewhere between gallery, studio, and home. After boarding up the front windows and stripping down the interior, Prince "decorated" the place with his recent joke paintings, most of which simply leaned in stacks against the walls. A single shelf of books, a magazine rack, a wall of snack food, and a closet stuffed with bunched-up clothing served as props evoking the missing residents. In the backyard, piles of junk and rejected canvases were left to bake in the sun.

Like the photographs in this magazine, *First House* presented the artist's work in a domestic context—though in this case that context resonated with the art in disturbing ways. The references to adultery and familial discord in Prince's redrawn cartoons and joke paintings conjured an oblique portrait of a dysfunctional family locked inside its two-bedroom private hell.

"To tell you the truth, I don't have much of a relationship with a lot of the work that I do," Prince comments. "Few of these images actually have anything to do with you or me. They're very much on their own, and in that sense, I see everything I do as abstract. If people have difficulty with the work, maybe it's because they sense it doesn't need [them]."

In the end, this is the *Spiritual America* that Prince charts out, a realm of third- and fourth-hand realities that have little to do with our actual lives but that we're convinced we can't live without. ■