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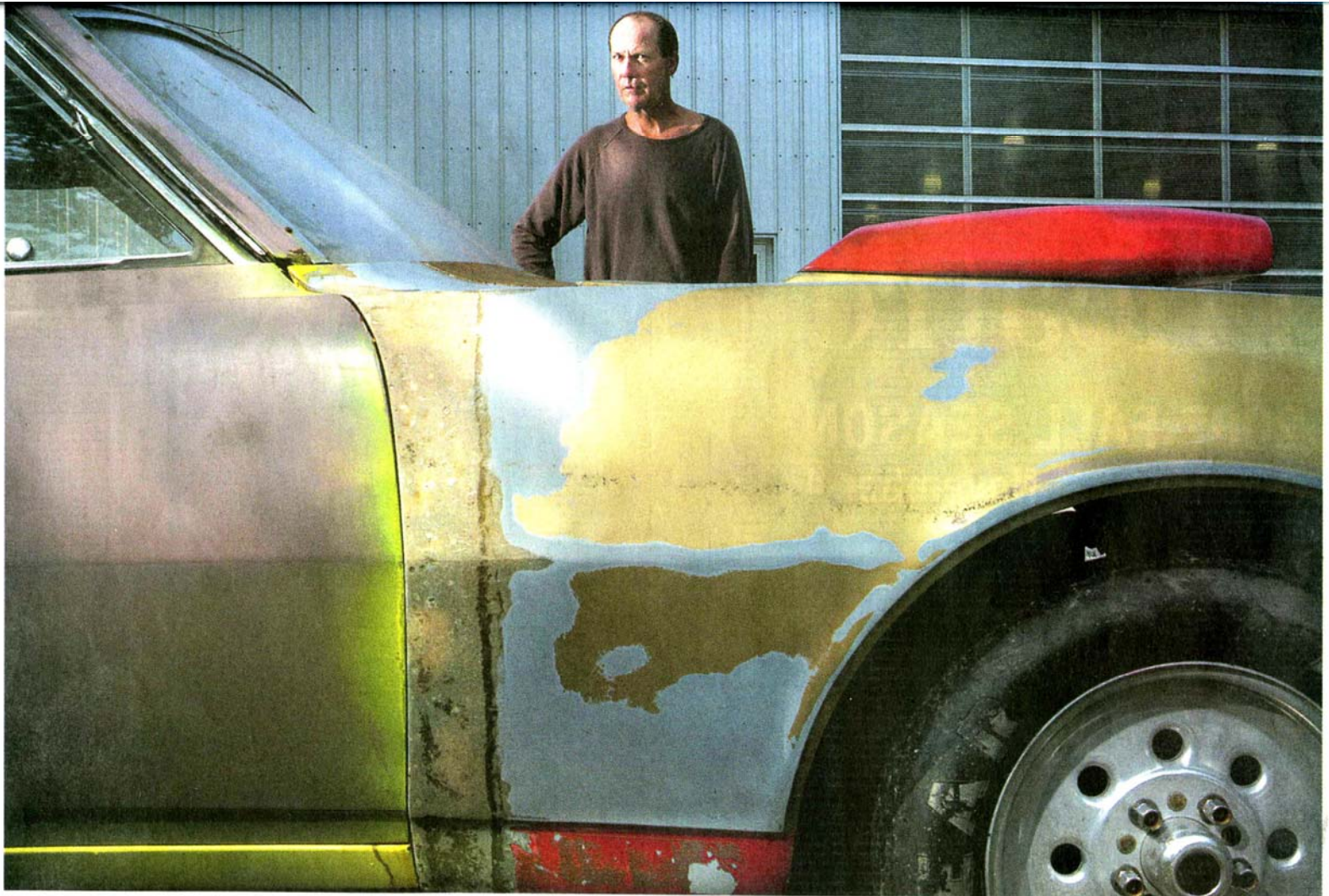
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TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

The artist Richard Prince at his studio in Rensselaerville, N.Y. The subject of a Guggenheim Museum retrospective, he has in recent years made cars the focus of his work.

The Duchamp of the Muscle Car

Richard Prince Blurs the Distinctions Between Life and Art, Truth and Fiction, and Even Automaking and Sculpture

By RANDY KENNEDY

RENSSELAERVILLE, N.Y.

ONE of the first things you see when you drive onto Richard Prince's property in this small upstate town is a car that doesn't belong in a small town: a low-slung 2005 Ford GT that tops out at over 200 m.p.h. and looks like something built for the Bonneville Salt Flats.

But on a recent overcast afternoon this is not the car that Mr. Prince wants to show a visitor. It is another one, inside a cavernous concrete-floored warehouse that he recently built near his house, an odd combination of auto-body shop and art gallery. The other car is also a GT, but of a make designed to go nowhere. It is composed, in fact, of earth-brown modeling clay shaped into classic American muscle: grille, cowl, scoops, bad-boy ducktail spoiler.

While this life-size model has much in common with the car-centric sculptures Mr. Prince has been making for the last

15 years, it is not his piece. It's an unadulterated piece of Detroit. Ford's design division gave it to Mr. Prince more than a year ago, agreeing to let him do whatever he wanted with it, perhaps even alter it to make something not exactly theirs, not exactly art. "They just said they didn't want to be embarrassed," he said.

Mr. Prince's dark, funny, enigmatic work will be the subject of a 30-year retrospective opening on Friday at the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan. And though he did not make the clay car, he seriously considered putting it front and center in the show. In the end his reasons for changing his mind had more to do with humility than originality: he thought the car was too powerful a work of art in its own right.

"It's almost as if I need to catch up to this," he explained, gazing admiringly on the model's grooved contours. "I think I still need about a year."

The conundrum is a good introduction to the slippery career of Mr. Prince, whose influential work, now highly sought by collectors, has long played cat and mouse with distinctions between life and art, reality and fantasy, truth and fiction. It operates somewhere in the territory of Duchamp and Warhol, but often with quite different intentions and a fascination with a very specific down-and-dirty vision of American popular culture that will now climb the Guggenheim spiral: biker girls, naughty nurses, hippies, pulp fiction, cartoons, borscht-belt hu-

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The Duchamp of the Muscle Car



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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mor, Marlboro men and muscle cars. Lately, though — as evidenced by the completion in January of the building he calls the Body Shop, a well-appointed 15,000-square-foot warehouse so large that his son and daughter derisively call it “the Home Depot” — the muscle-car chapter of Mr. Prince’s obsessions has begun to take up much more of his time and energy.

From the mail-order car hoods that he first started painting and hanging in the late 1980s to evoke Ad Reinhardt or Mark Rothko (“They were really minimal, and I don’t think anybody got them,” he said), Mr. Prince progressed to appropriating heftier chunks of automotive anatomy.



making sarcophaguslike sculptures crowned with air scoops, usually left with the appearance of being only partly primed and spackled with body-shop Bondo compound.

As he explained in the Body Shop, walking around a few examples on display in the building's elegantly lighted gallery section: "They're in that state before you're actually finished, just before you paint it, and I've always loved that look on teenagers' cars: nine coats of perfect paint on the hood but then the doors are left bare metal because they never got around to it."

At first he borrowed from the up-on-blocks world simply because he was obsessed with the look and wanted to recreate it for himself, he said, an aesthetic he thought of as "maybe a combination of Big Daddy Roth and Donald Judd."

"If it ends up looking like art," he said he recalled thinking of his sculpture, "that's great. But if it doesn't, then that's completely O.K. with me."

In the sly deadpan that accompanies many of his statements, Mr. Prince added, "With these I consider myself pretty lucky that they did come out looking like art."

But all this conceptual car fetishizing seems to have been just a warm-up for Mr. Prince's newest project, which he began only a few months ago, and which pushes the art-or-not-art question up to its breaking point: a real car, a tricked-out modern re-creation of one of his favorites, a 1970 Dodge Challenger, that can be either driven at dangerous speeds or parked in a gallery, where it can be admired as sculpture. Or maybe both.

Mr. Prince said he was still not quite sure what to consider the car, although he does plan an edition of three, and he thinks of the first one, recently completed for him by XV Motorsports in Irvington, N.Y., a high-end builder of modernized muscle cars, as an artist's proof. (Its first appearance will be at the Frieze Art Fair next month in London, where the car was recently shipped.)

Aside from minor customizing Mr. Prince asked for, the car is identical to an earlier Challenger XV made using vintage shells but filling them with new high-performance engines, suspension and steering. (The company's prices start at \$140,000.)

"I kind of agreed with the look of the car they had put out," Mr. Prince said, adding that he also liked the custom color XV had already mixed for the car, a yellowish orange he calls "Vitamin C."

On later versions, he said, he might customize the gas cap, headrests, upholstery



and other parts of the car with his artwork. But for now a mean ride is being declared a kind of street-legal ready-made basically because Mr. Prince is in love with the way it looks — and the way, as with many of the appropriations in his art, it reflects American desires and dreams, particularly those of his youth in the tumultuous 1960s and '70s. (Asked what he thought of Mr. Prince's calling one of his company's cars a Richard Prince, John Buscema, XV's founder, said, "From my perspective if someone of Richard's caliber is looking at our cars that way, it's great.")

Nancy Spector, the Guggenheim's chief curator and the organizer of the retrospective, "Richard Prince: Spiritual America," said in an interview that she was still trying to figure out exactly what to think about the XV car.

"I don't know if the critical function has quite caught up to this yet," she said, smiling, and adding that she wondered what a Prince collector would do with one of the cars after he was handed the keys. "I guess you'd probably want to insure it as a car, not as a Richard Prince, right?" she said.

While his car-based work began only in the late 1980s, the catalog for the Guggenheim show, which includes some of Mr. Prince's writings, shows that cars have been loomed large in his thinking for a long time.

In a written dialogue between Mr. Prince and a kind of alter ego of his, an artist named John Dogg, Mr. Prince describes how Mr. Dogg — who comes off as a minimalist Neal Cassady — was once employed to deliver special cars to buyers by driving them across the country.

One of his "drive-aways," from Denver to Los Angeles, was a 1970 Dodge Challenger. "He did it in 16 hours," Mr. Prince wrote. "The owner wasn't expecting the car for three weeks." (For those keeping close score, Ms. Spector's catalog, with Mr. Prince's permission, acknowledges publicly for the first time that John Dogg, whose work was exhibited intermittently in the late 1980s, was indeed the creation of Mr. Prince and the New York art dealer Colin de Land, who died in 2003.)

In some ways the car can be seen simply as an extension of Mr. Prince's obsessions as a prodigious collector of Americana, from first editions of Kerouac, Mario Puzo and many others to manuscripts, photos, pulp fiction, comics and magazines. It might also be viewed as an extension of

the practice that first brought Mr. Prince to prominence in the art world: his photographs of existing photographs, most of them taken from ads for luxury goods and from the epic, cowboy scenes in Marlboro ads. The pictures emerged at a time when artists like Mr. Prince, Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein and Cindy Sherman were first starting to use the camera to dig deep into the late 20th century's collective image bank, questioning what they found there and asking what it meant about how we saw ourselves.

Ms. Spector said the cars could be thought of as yet another self-reflecting image. But in much of Mr. Prince's car work, as with his paintings of the texts of corny, often cruel jokes, she sees other intentions at work.

"I don't know exactly how to describe it, but I would say there's an aspect of tragedy in there, of melancholy," she said. She suggested that the economically depressed part of upstate New York where Mr. Prince has lived and worked for more than a decade had also had an effect on him, increasing the "real identification with the downtrodden" that she has long

seen in his art.

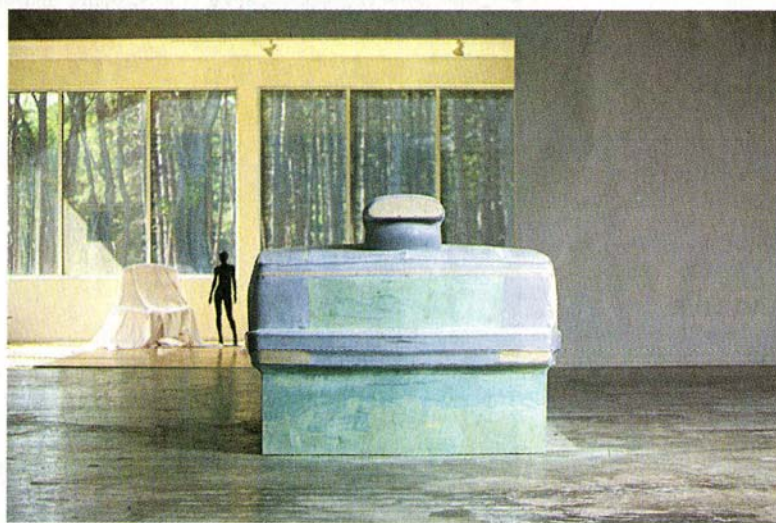
"I don't see irony in Richard's work in the end; there's a real pathos there," she said, differentiating him from Warhol and trying to soften the prevailing image of him as one of the darkest excavators of the American soul.

In person, Mr. Prince, 58, does not seem particularly dark. He manages to be affable and also a bit evasive, but in a way that makes you think he is just trying to keep things interesting. In interviews and writings he has said some things that have turned out to be untrue: that he destroyed all his early work, for example, work that has turned up in collections and in a recent exhibition. And there are other things that people have reason to think may be fictionalized, even where he says he was born, the Panama Canal Zone.

"No one really knows Richard's biography," said Ms. Spector, who spent a lot of time with him over the last year preparing the show and professes to be unsure of many basic facts even now.

"There are all these stock lines and lies; they've been there since the beginning," she said, adding only half-jokingly: "His real name might not be Richard Prince. It's entirely possible."

On a recent visit, Mr. Prince — or at least the artist known as Mr. Prince — was playing host to a local man in a van who had come to install lightning rods on his growing collection of buildings, including the Body Shop, his studio, another gallery space, a library for his huge vintage-book collection and the modest clapboard house where he lives with his family.



One artist's automotive aesthetic: 'If it ends up looking like art, that's great. But if it doesn't, then that's completely O.K. with me.'

In June lightning struck another of his buildings on a separate piece of land, one he called Second House, a run-down ranch-style home that he bought, tweaked only a little and filled with some of his works. The house, which was bought by the Guggenheim two years ago, was covered only in silver insulation and was accompanied by an all-black 1973 Plymouth Barracuda sitting in the weeds nearby, giving it the vague look of a place where something illegal was probably under way. Fire caused by the lightning gutted the house and destroyed one of Mr. Prince's paintings.

The house's ethos, however, could be felt throughout the Body Shop, where several larger, spectral car-based sculptures were taking shape. Mr. Prince talked excitedly about how a California company called Dynacorn is now feeding a new trend in which "vintage" cars are being made completely from new, recreated parts: — an idea that sounds almost like one Mr. Prince could have hatched himself.

He said his own car ideas had become so numerous that he now employs two local men just to help him with auto-body work. He also said word of his enthusiasms had spread quickly around the area.

"People just come and drop off parts in the yard," he said appreciatively.

Before he called it a day, Mr. Prince took a reporter to the charred ruins of Second House, which sits alone outside town off a narrow road. The flat-black Barracuda is still parked behind it, undamaged and appearing more menacing now that the house is windowless and scarred with soot. Mr. Prince said he still had not decided whether he wanted to rebuild the house, replace it or simply encase it somehow and leave it a ruin.

"It looks kind of nice like this," he said. But he added, turning uncharacteristically metaphysical: "When I first heard about the lightning hitting it, I got kind of worried. I thought: 'Oh God, maybe it has something to do with the Guggenheim show. Maybe it's the first review.' "



GRAHAM CRAIG

Far left, a sculpture of sewn-together tires designed by Mr. Prince. Left, his newest project, a re-creation of a 1970 Dodge Challenger that can be driven and displayed in a gallery.

