

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bankowsky, Jack. "The Sweet Smell of Success," *Artforum*, Vol. XXX, No.9, May 1992

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The Sweet Smell of Success

Jack Bankowsky

Zeroing in on the most numbing daily given of our souped-up late phase of capital—the ubiquitous advertising still—Richard Prince planted a pin on the cultural map by parading Madison Avenue's longest-running fiction, the ridin', ropin' Marlboro man, under the sign of art. Like the now venerable tradition of artists, from Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons, who have in one way or another squared off with the twin demons of commerce and communications, Prince has been subject to a predictably mixed reception: he is simultaneously revered as an "artist's artist," with a cultish cabal of imitators, and reviled as an '80s-style charlatan who made good peddling snake oil to a public dulled by entrepreneurial overexertion.

As was the case with Warhol—that pure magnetic symptom who slashed and burned his signature across the middle of this century, laying waste to pieties across the political spectrum yet managing to tap (and figure) the rhythms of capital more decisively than any artist of his generation—the gut-level sense of Prince as a toxically cynical confidence man cuts to the core of his art. His bad-boy truth telling—his refusal to mitigate the facts of contemporary life under television with a traditional cushion of esthetic presence and plenitude—and his "artlessness" (What do you mean a photograph of a photograph?) are flip sides of the same coin.

Special Affect

You'd have had to have been seriously asleep in the late '70s not to have recognized Prince's early negotiations with the print ad as definitive in their way. With a click of the shutter, he separated his appropriated advertisements from the 100-year history of collage: he could have torn the images from magazines and pinned them directly to the wall, but instead he subjected them to a slim but decisive mediating filter. The only clue that lets us know that the seamless images in the gallery are not straight photographs (short of our recognizing the original advertising campaign) is the nearly subliminal "aura" of artifice, the "fictional" quality, that seeps from these deadpan doubles.

Prince has very little patience with art, but he needs a tiny sliver of the distance that sets work off from world to bleed the image for its loaded subtext. When he looks at an ad from behind the lens, he explains, "It's as if I can suddenly distinguish between its manifest content and its latent content. It's like the picture starts to behave simply because I'm looking at it."

If Prince is locked in a love/hate relationship with "art," he is equally ambivalent with regard to the media condition (he likens it to "the Antichrist") that his "art" unblinkingly re-presents. Prince wants it both ways: he wants to present an image unhampered by affect or art, and yet to keep a crucial distance—to give himself up wholly to the media-powered exigencies of late-style capital and yet to retain, in the simple click of the shutter, a tiny register of symbolic expenditure.

The Whole Art Thing

Prince never took his bad-boy routine as far as either the '80s superyuppies Koons and Meyer Vaisman or their wrong-side-of-the-tracks counterpart Mark Kostabi did—never played into the art machine so theatrically, or turned his own self-promotion overtly into the subject matter of his work. Yet the low-grade celebrity of the art star remains a privileged site at the interface of art and commerce fanned by Madison Avenue. Indeed, Prince's claim that he was "interested in marrying the sheriff's daughter" evinces a concern

Richard Prince, *Untitled*,
1989, acrylic and silkscreen
on canvas, 90 1/4 x 58".

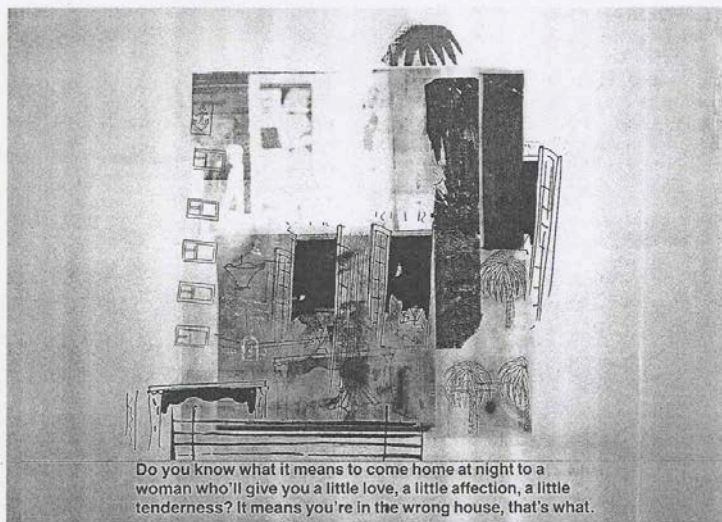


"I understand your husband drowned and left
you two million dollars. Can you imagine, two
million dollars, and he couldn't even read or write."
"Yeah, she said, and he couldn't swim either."

MAY 1992 • 97

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Richard Prince, *Just Married*, 1990, acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 85 x 116".

with the problem of constituting himself as an artist through an act of institutional infiltration that was more than prescient career prophecy.¹ The art-as-career problem cuts across this century, in Duchamp as a delicately managed anxiety, in Warhol and Koons as an exhilaration, in Prince as an almost psychotic voyeurism. In fact Prince has explicitly monitored the celebrity effect, in a manageable and marginal grade-B realm: he cites "*The Sweet Smell of Success*, a movie about the manipulation of small histories," to shed some light on the publicity photos of stars on a marginal New York nightclub circuit that he rephotographed for a series he calls "Entertainers," ca. 1982-83.²

Of the "girlfriend" images in the "Gangs" series, begun in 1984—images based on pictures bikers take of their girlfriends and send into biker magazines—Prince professed to be more interested in their need to see themselves in print than in cataloguing subcultural types. Putting the image into circulation and watching it work, he invented himself as an artist and turned his image into a product. Yet when he enters the cycle of commodification (he has no choice), when he puts his own image into circulation and steps into the ring with the reifying forces of the signature, he does so with his guard up.

Stupid as a Painter

At age 15 Prince had pictures of Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline on his bedroom wall: "Not, you understand, pictures of their paintings but pictures of *them*...[Pollock's] portrait *looked it*. Unbelievable. Posed. Self-conscious. Complete. Classic. Extreme. Just what an artist was supposed to look like."³ At a crucial juncture in his artistic self-invention Prince turned against this seductive fiction—a fiction of the painter—just as Duchamp did nearly a century ago, in the face of the improbability that the craft of painting could directly figure his industrial condition. Fueled by an anxious suspicion regarding "fiction" and "art" more generally,

Prince made the fictionalizing work of the mass media his subject.

Recently Prince seems to have slipped back into the artist role he once abandoned; he has returned to the traditional craft of painting, to a rather faint-hearted collagist pastiche reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's screened composites, which bridged the expressionist facture of the New York School and the more deadpan replications of Pop. Like Warhol in his late "Retrospectives," 1979—composites of his signature icons—or Duchamp in his *Green Box*, 1934, and the *Boite en Valise*, 1941, Prince is doing a kind of old master routine, recasting his familiar repertoire in a pastiche of self-quotation. Yet is this artist's schtick a decadent wallow or a grand if melancholic twist à la Duchamp? Is his little move simply a cynical attempt to reinvent himself as a bigger celebrity in a bigger pond, or a maverick bid (à la Warhol) to domesticate the media under the sign of art? Do his painterly banks of fugitive images drag with them the traces of a complex artistic showdown with the media-powered exigencies of late-style capital? Does the liberating everyday existentialism that animates Prince's titleless book with the roses on the cover breathe through his high-painterly drag show?

Duchamp longed to lay to rest the epithet "stupid as a painter," and, in the process of attempting it, he invented himself as an artist. In the cycle of ultraslim negations and recuperations that trailed him into this century, does Prince's willful "stupidity"—his '80s-style go-with-the-flow reinhabitation of the art of painting, his "self-conscious" acquiescence to the recuperative agency of art—count as a decisive gesture? Prince once said that he was "interested in being yourself and being out of character at the same time."⁴ Has he managed, in these paintings, to look on at the patterns of his own assimilation and to figure them as a decisive vicissitude of his early rephotographic gesture? Do his signature jokes, fading in and out of painterly washes and smears, suggestively link the psychic repetition figured in the joke effect (as an eruption in the seamless flow of everyday linguistic exchange) and the underlying logic of photomechanical repetition that drives his entire project?

Duchamp made us consider his whole life under the sign of art; Warhol managed it too. If Prince's negotiation of his own relationship with the modulating sign of art even begins to measure up to those of his precursors—if he manages decisively to activate the gap between the "artist" who painted his recent paintings and the artist who watches himself work the painting effect—the chance to evaluate his "oeuvre" this month at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art will be all but beside the point. While it will be good to see Prince's output assembled under one roof, the "Prince effect" is elsewhere. With a little luck, it may even survive his retrospective.□

Jack Bankowsky is associate editor of *Artforum*.

1. Richard Prince, quoted in "Richard Prince: An Interview with David Robbins," *Aperture* 100, 1985, p. 10.
2. Prince, "Vito Aczonzi," *Bomb* no. 36, Summer 1991, p. 53.
3. Prince, quoted in Robbins, p. 10.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. Molly Nesbit reads Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box* and *Boite en Valise* as a recycling of his old notes for the history of art—as a kind of repetition of the rhythms of industrial culture. "In the ready-mades, Duchamp seized control of the dialogue dictated by the shop window... If mastered, he would have the symbolic means of industry under his personal control. By 1925 Duchamp seems to have realized that his monologue was powerless against the commodity. He fell silent for awhile. And then, in the '30s, he began to work on the *Green Box* and the *Valise*, reproducing his old notes... as documents for the history of art... This time around he was just plain repeating himself, doing a kind of artist's monologue... behaving now not as an ordinary citizen but as an old master." Nesbit, "Ready-Made Originals: The Duchamp Model," *October* 37, Summer 1986, pp. 53-64.
7. Prince, quoted in Robbins, p. 13.