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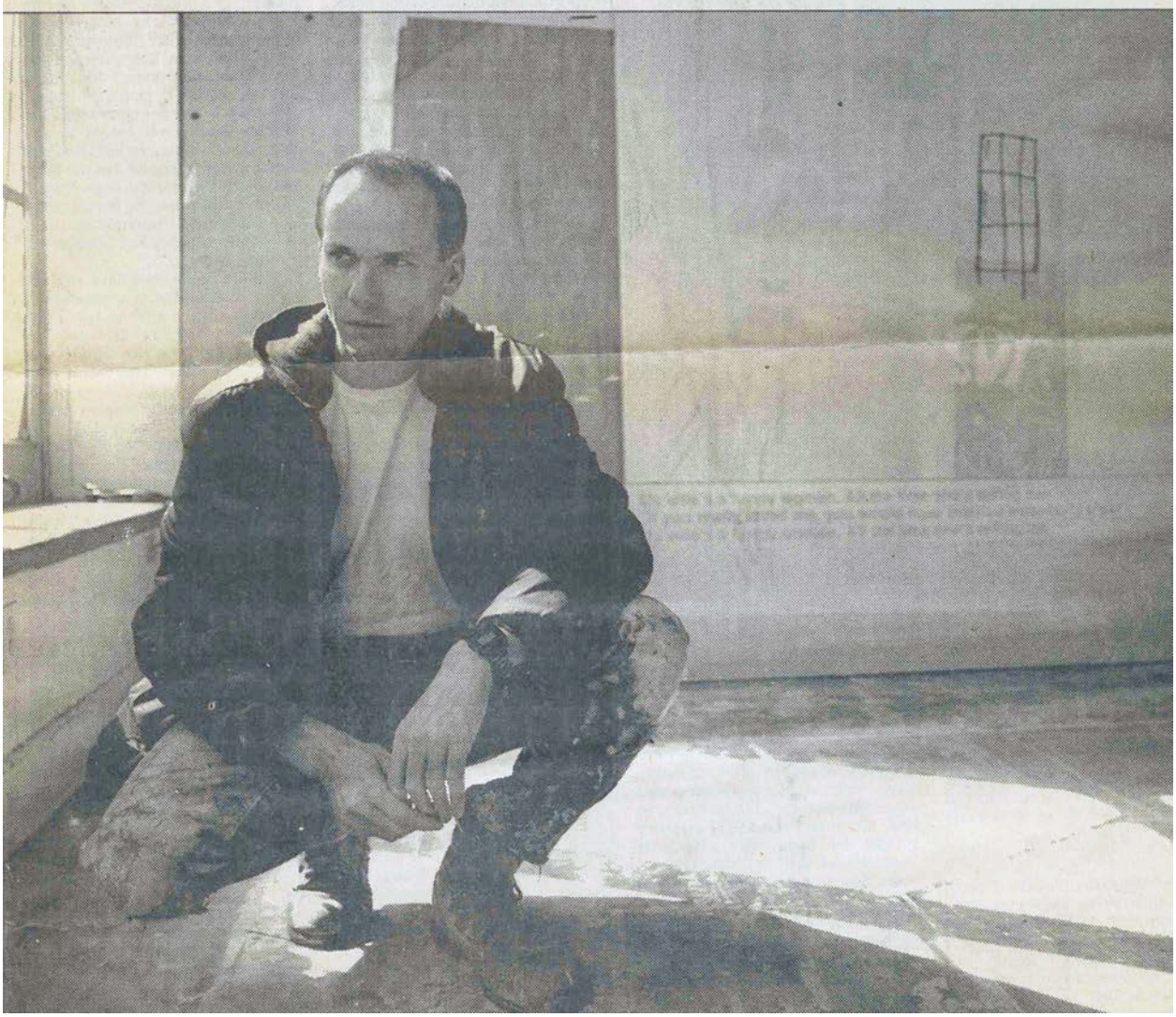
Richard Prince, Art's Bad Boy Becomes (Partly) Respectable



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By PAUL TAYLOR

FIVE YEARS AGO, RICHard Prince made three paintings in disappearing ink. He kept one and sold the others through galleries in New York and Los Angeles, although the dealers who sold them and the collectors who bought them were unaware of the gag. When the imagery on the canvas started disappearing, the California collector called his gallery and complained. Both buyer and gallery director were furious.

"The funny thing," says Mr. Prince, perched on a paint-splattered chair in his TriBeCa studio, "was that when I explained that the invisible painting was more or less unique and offered to give back the $15,000 or replace the painting, the collector wanted to keep it." The second buyer, according to the artist, has stored his painting and has not yet realized that the image is gone.

Richard Prince, like Jeff Koons and Mike Kelley, is one of the bad boys of the art world. Long a player of games, he has made works under pseudonyms, like John Dogg, and once opened a fake art gallery, which few people could find and even fewer could gain entrance to (it was rarely open). In 1977, Mr. Prince destroyed his existing works — early figurative paintings, collages and staged photographs — and turned exclusively to photographing photographs from magazines. This ultra-Minimalist way of making pictures — high concept, low labor — became wildly popular in American art during the early 1980's and now goes by the names rephotography and appropriation art.

These days the 43-year-old artist is concentrating on what he calls joke paintings — silkscreens of old cartoons, often from The New Yorker, often monochrome, often with captions he considers tragic. "A lot of the jokes I use are about death, alcoholism and madness," Mr. Prince says. Often the butts of the jokes are women. He gives an example: " 'My brother married a two-headed woman.' 'Is she pretty?' 'Well, yes and no.'

In the 80's, he saw his colleagues streak ahead.

"Jokes are a way of saying two things at once," he says. "I like the ambivalence, the black and white, the fence-sitting."

But Mr. Prince, whose devilish grin is bolstered by a sharp intelligence, is becoming at least partly respectable. He now has an exhibition in which all the works are plainly visible; all are certified as being by him; and all are in a place that is easy to find and admits everybody. The retrospective, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, includes more than 80 examples of Mr. Prince's work from the last 15 years. Even worse for his cherished outsider status, once the show closes, on July 12, it will travel to Germany, San Francisco and the Netherlands.

"I've been working on this project since 1987," said Lisa Phillips, a curator at the museum who organized the exhibition.

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On the strength of his photographs of photographs, beginning with a set of four pictures of living rooms in 1977, Mr. Prince is frequently touted as the inventor of appropriation art — despite interesting photographic predecessors in the 1950's and 60's and, of course, a centuries-old tradition of painters copying the works of others.

Nevertheless, in the late 1970's, Mr. Prince was onto what a younger generation of artists embraced as a hot new idea, one that became a major trend in the 1980's. Photographic appropriation became a blunt and effective challenge to the popular idea of art — much of it, like Mr. Prince's, favoring an impersonal, Warholian quality over the creator's own touch.

While working part time in the tearsheets department of Time Inc., Mr. Prince observed certain repetitions of images and poses in magazine photographs, whether advertising or editorial — the way women held their hands, for example. By enlarging details — a gloved hand, say — and exhibiting almost identical images side by side, he raised questions about originality and the identity of the artist. The shots of fashion models and living rooms also revealed something deadly about the representation of private spaces and private selves in the media. In those photographs (as in the joke paintings that came later), he presents a lifeless world of stereotypes.

Other artists were not far behind. After seeing his work in an exhibition in 1979, according to Mr. Prince, the intense young artist Sherrie Levine called him and asked how he had done his photographs and whether she could use the idea. Nonchalantly, he said he wouldn't mind. Years later, after Ms. Levine had stolen the appropriation spotlight and amassed greater critical acclaim, he is less cool about her call.

"People associate artists with doing things original," he says. "Here's someone who calls you up and says, 'I want to do your work.' I thought 'Jeez, I haven't heard that one before.' " Ms. Levine, for her part, says, "I know that Richard thinks I get all my ideas from him."

In the early 1980's, a little New York school of re-photographers emerged, including Sarah Charlesworth, Silvia Kolbowski and Barbara Kruger, as well as Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman, both of whom practiced set-up photography rather than appropriation in the strictest sense. Mr. Prince says he felt like the only man in this predominantly fe-

Paul Taylor is writing a book about the 1980's art scene.

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male group, whose most immediate supporters among dealers and critics also tended to be women.

Mr. Prince was associated with other 1980's figures as well, among them Jenny Holzer and Robert Longo. Yet as the art stars of the early 80's became established, he saw most of his colleagues streak ahead of him. His comparatively quiet photographs were barely selling.

Most annoying of all was that Ms. Sherman, with whom he was romantically involved, was invited to take part in countless exhibitions, including the Documenta show in Germany, the major international exhibition of 1982, while he was not. (He now says that he refused to "audition" for the exhibition.) And because both artists showed at Metro Pictures, a SoHo gallery, he was constantly reminded of her success. As a result, Ms. Sherman says, he became "jealous and destructive." He, in turn, says he "ruined everything." After a year and a half they separated, and he was out of the gallery a year or so later. By 1983 he was ready to pull one of the biggest stunts of his career.

Now, with shows at the Whitney and in Germany, life is sweet.

There had surfaced a previously unknown photograph of the prepubescent Brooke Shields, who at 17 was starting to become famous. Mr. Prince describes the picture as "an extremely complicated photo of a naked girl who looks like a boy made up to look like a woman. For me, she had the perfect body." He re-photographed the picture, named it "Spiritual America" and exhibited it by itself in his fake gallery on the Lower East Side below Houston Street — hardly a district for galleries.

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Some supporters were enraged that he would give prominence to such a plainly exploitative image. Meanwhile, according to Mr. Prince, the original photographer, Gary Gross, and his lawyer, A. Richard Golub, tried to stop the exhibition but couldn't find the gallery. (Mr. Golub's recollection is that they did find it and served papers. In any case, after a month the show was history.)

Nevertheless, trouble was brewing. Says Kate Linker, an art critic who was an early admirer of Mr. Prince's work: "Richard's absence of any political perspective about the images he so acutely selects poses a problem. He wants to almost wallow in the cultural loadedness of these images, and that makes one uncomfortable when faced with what those images actually do."

Soon after the Brooke Shields episode, Ms. Linker and the artist parted ways. "I got kicked out of the women's club," Mr. Prince says.

After 1983, Mr. Prince launched into less sensational series of re-photographs — of sunsets ("pictures that look like they were sent away for"); cowboys, lifted from Marlboro ads and shot through colored lenses to accentuate their artificiality; and women, his favorite subject, as beauty and porno queens and gang molls. He often adjusted the color and exaggerated the grain of the page, obscuring the images and making them look more seductive than advertising.

A few years later, he started applying slick coats of paint to fiberglass car hoods and exhibiting them vertically on a wall. Then there were the jokes. "When I drew the cartoons," he says, "they were already drawn. When I photographed photographs, they had already been photographed. When I painted car hoods, they had already been painted. But the joke paintings really look like art." (Of the ones now at the Whitney, the Times art critic Roberta Smith wrote: "He stirs the found images of popular culture into a semi-legible stew that mimics the stream-of-consciousness automatism of Abstract Expressionism. In the process, he is progressively making his obsession with popular culture more personal and accessible, and also more beautiful.")

Ten years of neglect ended in 1987. Perhaps the change was due to his joke paintings, perfectly timed for the newly cynical art world. Perhaps it was that paintings sell for more than photographs, and Mr. Prince was ready to make the shift. Perhaps it was the fact that he was approached by Barbara Gladstone, a smart operator with a stylish gallery in SoHo. Whatever the reason, everything improved for him.

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Ms. Gladstone says she made a "big pitch" for the artist: "No gallery had ever invested a lot in him, and I wanted to do the whole ball of wax and have my hands on everything. The first thing we did was print earlier photographs." They now sell for up to $30,000. Even in this depressed market, Ms. Gladstone can command $35,000 to $70,000 for the joke paintings.

For 15 years, Mr. Prince has worked in a wide variety of media and styles. He is comfortable with uncertainty, for even though the jury is out on his joke paintings, 12 are included this summer in Documenta. He has a luxurious new beach house in Bridgehampton, on Long Island, and an Acura NSX racing car. He is cavalier about his celebrity, and finds having money "humorous."

He's also uncommitted in his private life, and lives alone. There have been a couple of major love affairs since Cindy Sherman, but nothing since his brief marriage to Lisa Spellman, the director of the 303 Gallery, in 1990. "It sounds terrible," he says, "but I went from an artist to an art director to an art gallery owner."

Now, he jokes, "I'm dating this pair of twins."

Are they pretty?

"Well, yes and no." □