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THE JOKER

Richard Prince at the Guggenheim.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The immense art-world success of Richard Prince, the subject of a large and seductive retrospective at the Guggenheim, depresses me, not that I can gainsay it. If "quintessential artist in a generation" were a job opening, Prince, fifty-eight years old, would be an inevitable hire, having hit no end of avant-gardist sweet spots since the late nineteen-seventies in photography, painting, and sculpture. His contemporaries Cindy Sherman and, off and on, Jeff Koons are better, for stand-alone works of originality, beauty, and significance. But they don't contest Prince's chosen, Warholian ground as a magus of contemporary American culture. (Koons tried, but his attempt was too weird for comprehension, let alone assent.) Prince's works make him an artist as anthropologist, illuminating folkways by recycling advertising photographs, cartoon and one-liner jokes, soft-core pornography, motorcycle-cult ephemera, pulp-novel covers, "Dukes of Hazzard"-era car parts, celebrity memorabilia, and other demotic flotsam. His bald rip-offs of painting styles from Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, and, lately, Willem de Kooning make him an artist as irreverent art critic, razzing exalted reputations. Prince can seem to cover, in an insouciantly corrosive way, the whole topography of the aesthetic in present high and low life; and he is acute enough that a refusal to play along, for the nuanced pleasures that he provides, would be bigoted. But his is a shallow, brittle, ultimately desolating conceit—seizing on things that are a-twitch with a little vitality, and chloroforming them. Prince's nearest approach to identifiable emotion is the exiguous zeal of obsessive collecting. (He's a bibliophile, with letches for authors, including Nabokov and Kerouac.)

Prince was born in the Panama Canal Zone in 1949, and grew up in a suburb of Boston. He has said that his parents were spies for the Office of Strategic Services, and that his father served in Vietnam. Caution is in order, however, regarding Prince's autobiographical accounts. In 1985, an art magazine, *ZG*, published an interview with him, conducted in 1967 by J. G. Ballard, the English writer of dire fantasy, when Prince was eighteen years old and under detention in London for want of a valid passport. The interview, in which Prince describes his father as a diabolical manipulator of minds, was a lively hoax. Also in the eighties, Prince collaborated with the late Colin de Land, an eccentric dealer, to make the work and shepherd the career of one John Dogg, a fashionable and, it later turned out, nonexistent sculptor. Prince's devotion to the put-on is among his bona fides in a generation—that of punk, deconstruction, and David Letterman—addicted to vertiginous irony: in-jokes with nothing in them. An appropriate bonus of the catalogue is a series of interviews about Prince, by the hipster's

hipster Glenn O'Brien, with leading technicians of waggery: ad and magazine people, cartoon editors (including Robert Mankoff, of *The New Yorker*), a car designer, the Hells Angel Sonny Barger, John Waters, and Phyllis Diller.

Prince attended college in Maine and arrived in New York in 1973, where for ten years he worked various low-end jobs (notably, assembling magazine tear sheets) in the Time & Life Building. He started to show in 1975—small, gnomic paintings, prints, and photo-and-text works. His emergence on the scene is commonly, and lazily, associated with "Pictures," an epochal 1977 show at the non-profit downtown gallery Artists Space. He happened not to be in it. (Neither was Cindy Sherman, the first artist who comes to mind in the same connection.) Curated by the critical theorist Douglas Crimp, "Pictures" announced a movement of menacingly cold-eyed appropriation, as in the work of Sherrie Levine, who became known for her no-comment photographs of classic modern photographs. Prince had taken to photographing magazine ads, enjoying the strangeness of, in his words, a "reality that has the chances of looking real, but a reality that doesn't have any chances of being real." He refused an invitation to appear in "Pictures," he has said, because he was put off by what he deemed to be Crimp's dogmatism. (Crimp has denied inviting Prince.) An admirably bristly independence is apparent in his move, eleven years ago, from Manhattan to rural Rensselaerville, New York. There he filled a tacky house with some of his works and collections of this and that to such striking effect that, in 2005, the Guggenheim bought it as an in-situ work of art, titled "Second House." (In June of this year, lightning set it afire; what to do with the intact but charred remnant is undecided.) Flirting with self-forgetful realism in the nineties, Prince took elegiac photographs of woebegone back-road sights, such as a basketball hoop in an overgrown meadow. That mood passed.

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Prince has dubbed his retrospective "Spiritual America," keying it to his 1983 photograph of an infamous Garry Gross photograph, published by Playboy Books, in 1976, of a naked Brooke Shields, aged ten, her prepubescent body oiled and her face given womanly makeup. Prince applied the title—which comes from Alfred Stieglitz, who coined it for his 1923 photograph of a gelded workhorse's rear end—to the work, to a show consisting of nothing else, and to the one-off gallery, in a Lower East Side storefront, that first hosted it. His unbounded enthusiasm for the awful image offers queasy-making testimony to his character as an artist. He sees in the photograph, he has said, "a body with two different sexes, maybe more, and a head that looks like it's got a different birthday." And he enjoyed the spectacle of Shields's failed later effort, in a lawsuit, to quash Gross's picture, which her mother had authorized for four hundred and fifty dollars. It gave him a "patriotic" feeling, he has declared—"that is to say if I was to have heard that this type of activity over a photograph was happening in another country I would have considered moving there." (Note the piled-up subjunctives: Princean grammar.) The Guggenheim's chief curator, Nancy Spector—who, working closely with the artist, has installed the show with excellent rhythm and clarity—hastens, in an essay in the catalogue, to defend the work as social criticism, "a portrait of desperation" exposing the American pursuit of fame at any cost. But she thereby fails to credit (if that's the word) Prince's omnivorous connoisseurship of kink, as in paintings (which have been selling for millions at auction) from covers of semi-smutty romance novels featuring nurses. He doesn't diagnose decadence. He swims in it.

Dude Ranch Nurse

Certain of Prince's works, early on, nailed tropes of the "Pictures" sensibility for good and all. His gorgeous prints of the cowboy photographs in Marlboro ads, a stock-in-trade since 1980, stick us with the fact that those pictures are beautiful. Any opinions we may have about advertising, cigarettes, and the West founder in our visual bliss. And I remember laughing with amazed delight when I first saw some of the "Gangs," from the mid-eighties—big sheets of rephotographed, gridded photos, such as amateur shots from motorcycle magazines for which guys posed their girlfriends, lasciviously, with their choppers; or of big waves from surfer publications, which emit formulaic, subcultural rapture. If I liked one of those pictures, it occurred to me, I would be fated to like them all, insatiably; and for a moment, still, at the Guggenheim I can feel locked into their wavelengths of avidity. Prince's sensitivity to mores of what John Waters calls the "upper-lower class" yields oracular coups. Prince has been onto something, certainly, with his corralling of antique Borscht Belt gags and an oral tradition of mildly off-color jokes, as texts drawn or stencilled onto his paintings, usually with no thematic relation to the visual elements. For example, "I got good looking kids. Thank God my wife cheated on me." Do market considerations govern Prince's choice of relatively tame jokes, in genres where the best tend to be the dirtiest? (I miss certain gamy favorites of mine.)

Prince's most ambitious works cheerfully vulgarize familiar features of Abstract Expressionism, minimalism, and Pop art. Most successful, and very snappy, are his sculptural, para-minimalist adaptations of hoods and body parts from the Dodge Challenger and other preposterously overpowered coupes from pre-oil-crisis days. The forms, lovely in themselves, receive applications of paint and putty that evoke the never completed customizing projects of youthful owners. Dicier are his pastiches of styles that, unlike minimalism, are poetic in essence. The wandering, lost-sheep brushstrokes in Jasper Johns's classic early paintings excite because their gestural tension and sensitive touch create a surfeit of expressiveness. When Prince imitates them across expanses of collaged bank checks—a recent series of large canvases, with stencilled jokes—the effect is toneless and slack, though decorative. It makes me wonder if he even knows what he's dealing with. His recent, raucous takeoffs on de Kooning's "Women," incorporating ink-jet images from female and male pornography, bespeak a tin eye. By presenting distorted figures, Prince seems to have de Kooning mixed up with Francis Bacon. (De Kooning's pictures are lyrical improvisations of line and paint, in which glimpses of figuration come and go.) An adept of juvenile sarcasm, like Prince, is well advised not to invite comparisons with grownups. ♦

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