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Kennedy, Randy: This Ain't No Retrospective, It's a Rodeo

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Richard Prince: This Ain't No Retrospective, It's a Rodeo

A new book looks at the figure of the American cowboy through the outlaw lens of Mr. Prince, an artist known for his sly borrowings.



By **Randy Kennedy**

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Photography and the mythos of the American cowboy have been lassoed together almost from birth. Even when they weren't working hand in hand, they were often in close company. The most famous showdown in the Old West, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, took place not at the corral but six doors down in front of the photography studio of Camillus Fly. He was too busy ducking to take a picture but ran out with a Henry rifle as the shots died away and disarmed Billy Clanton, one of the outlaws in a gang called — yes — the Cowboys.

“Richard Prince: Cowboy,” a lavish, offbeat new book, just published by Prestel, uses photography to take a long look at the pervasive, at times pernicious, influence of the cowboy on movies, television, books, advertising and politics. The book is nominally devoted to the work of Mr. Prince, who rose to fame in the 1980s through his coy appropriation of the majestic cowboy pictures from Marlboro magazine ads. But as compiled and edited by the collector and curator Robert Rubin, the assemblage of art, ephemera and found imagery ends up feeling more like a ripsnorting syllabus for an American studies class that might have been team-taught by Sam Peckinpah and Margaret Mead.



“Richard Prince: Cowboy,” a new photo book, examines the cowboy as an American symbol. It includes writings by Western luminaries like Larry McMurtry, Louise Erdrich and Kinky Friedman.

via Fulton Ryder; Ceara Nicholson

Mr. Rubin — who organized a 2011 exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris centered on Mr. Prince's holdings of rare-book Americana — has been fixated on the West since growing up in a working-class family in suburban New Jersey. At Yale he wrote a research paper about Wyatt Earp's influence on Hollywood. (Years after Earp's famous turn at the O.K. Corral, in Tombstone, Ariz., he rambled around Los Angeles as an unpaid consultant for silent cowboy movies.)

The book includes writings by Western luminaries like Larry McMurtry, Louise Erdrich, Kinky Friedman, Charles Portis and Dorothy M. Johnson, author of the short story that became John Ford's “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” (1962). It also heavily mines connections between the idea of the Wild West and Mr.

Prince's well-publicized outlaw aesthetic, a shoot-first-ask-questions-later approach to borrowing popular imagery that has sometimes landed him in copyright litigation. (He once wrote me an email with the Dylan-esque subject line "Deposition Row," apologizing for an unavoidable delay in responding to a message.)

Mr. Prince, 70, and Mr. Rubin, 66, sat down in late February in Mr. Prince's studio on the Upper East Side to talk about the book, rare book collecting and their lifelong love of the cowboy ethos. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

How did the two of you meet?

ROBERT RUBIN We met playing a sport but Richard doesn't like to talk about which sport. We met in a sportive context, how's that? Let's say we met at a racetrack. [Mr. Rubin, a former commodities trader, owns a golf course.]

RICHARD PRINCE A racetrack, that's good.

You could say you met at a rodeo. Did you ever come across each other in book-buying circles, competing for the same kind of rare material?

RUBIN No, not really. Though Richard did once buy Milton Berle's entire joke files and at the same auction I bought a copy of a Torah signed to Berle by his mother, for his bar mitzvah. To be honest, until we met, I was only vaguely aware of Richard's art. But then I got into it.

You collect art?

RUBIN "Collecting art" is an ambitious term. I'm interested in art. I have some art. I don't have a warehouse full of stuff and an art adviser and a spreadsheet. I have walls and I have some pictures on them.

PRINCE Bob pursues multiple influences in the culture. We both like architecture and design. And books and literature.

RUBIN And we both absorbed massive doses of popular culture uncritically in our childhoods before we grew up and brought a critical lens to all of that. In less intellectual terms, you could say that we were cowboys before we were hippies.

We're of a certain age, and when we were 8 or 10 years old, everything on television was cowboy shows. And then when we grew up, we started smoking Marlboros. It's in our DNA. There were no revisionist westerns when we were kids.



Photograph of a 1976 book about Marlboro cowboys, in Richard Prince's studio. via Fulton Ryder



Photograph from Mr. Prince's studio of a vintage seatbelt and buckle from a Ford Mustang, sitting atop a 1969 Byrds album sleeve. via Fulton Ryder

There's a 2011 letter reprinted in the book from Larry McMurtry to you, Richard. Besides being a novelist, McMurtry has been an incredibly important book dealer and rare-book scout. What surprised me about the letter was how intensely he was interested in pulp paperbacks, which have been a longstanding interest of yours and fed into your paintings.

PRINCE McMurtry has always been big for me. I first read him very early, when I arrived in New York in the '70s, his novel "Moving On" and then everything else he'd written. I wasn't really able to read until I was approximately 20 or 21. I had really bad dyslexia, couldn't spell, couldn't read.

But in my 20s something just clicked and the R's didn't look like fives anymore. McMurtry was some of the first fiction I came to and he led to Jim Harrison and by hook and crook to Joan Didion and to Ken Kesey, who visited McMurtry with the Merry Pranksters, as Tom Wolfe wrote about in "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test."

RUBIN Richard and I share the collector's gene, whether it's coins or Cracker Jack prizes or vintage cars, whatever. And one of the reasons I've been interested in Richard's work from a book perspective is that his book collection is very different from most big-time collections I've seen. Most of those are best-of compilations. They're almost statistical in the way they're organized. But Richard's is very conceptual.

And by putting different things together, the collection creates meaning, enhances meaning that's already out there. He may have an association copy of "Ulysses" that knocks your socks off, but he's just as proud of a paperback copy of [Aldous Huxley's] "The Doors of Perception" autographed by Jim Morrison that you could come across on eBay.

PRINCE There are two or three schools of thoughts about why people gravitate to collecting books, or at least why I did. One, they're insulation. They keep out the noise.

You mean in a physical sense?

PRINCE Yes, the physical sense. If you have enough covering a wall, they keep you from hearing the neighbors. Two, I grew up in a house that had no books; I never saw a book in my house in my entire youth. And three, I think the definition of a bibliophile is a person who doesn't particularly like people. They like books better. Now, I wouldn't necessarily say I fit the third definition, but I don't mind spending time alone. And when I am alone, I'm always reading a book.

Do you remember being interested in the cowboy as a subject for art before you came to the Marlboro pictures?

PRINCE No. That came from working for Time-Life Publications in the tear-sheet department, where I was for several years as a day job in the '70s and early '80s. The job was to tear up the magazine, to give all the editorial material, which was called hard copies, to the people who wrote the editorial material. And at the end of the day what I was left with was several magazines worth of advertisements.

I made files, recognizing certain patterns, certain colors, certain products that I had no feeling for, mostly. It really became, by default, a substitute studio. The art supplies were the magazines. I was collecting Winston ads, Salem and Newport ads, Marlboro. I would look for commonalities in the ads. The more I saw commonalities, the more I could believe in it.

You've talked a lot about believability with your work. What does that mean to you?

PRINCE Growing up the issue for me, and I think for Bob, was the truth. What's true and what's not true? I always thought everybody was making everything up. Nothing I was told was true, or at least that's what I was led to believe. The only things that made sense to me were art, and music and books.

With the cowboy ads, I could do something that felt almost like a still from a film. And I really loved the idea of suspension of disbelief when you went to the movies, when you sat through something. For the last 10 minutes, you're no longer there. You're in another place. You're maybe another person.

RUBIN Part of the thought in making this book was that it was almost a visual biography of Richard by other means. And of the history of the cowboy in the 20th century.

PRINCE The things about those ads was that it wasn't a cowboy you were seeing. It was a model. But the model might be a real cowboy, acting like a cowboy. It was making itself up.

RUBIN Those ads came along when traditional westerns were running out of steam. Then the adman Leo Burnett takes the cowboy smoking on the cover of Life magazine in 1949 — who looked like he was right out of John Ford — and extracts the essence of that cowboy. And instead of using it to entertain and stimulate through popular culture, he's selling nicotine, right? And then Richard comes along, and he has the same love of the cowboy and the myth. So he starts deconstructing it and at the same time giving it new life, probing all the contradictions and the dark underbelly of the thing.

If each of you were to name a favorite in your collections that relates to the cowboy what would it be?

PRINCE It's always hard to say. Maybe a first edition of "Horseman, Pass By," McMurtry's first book, with a long inscription to the guy who published early drafts of the story in a literary magazine. In other words, it's inscribed to the guy who published McMurtry before he was really published. Which gets you back to the beginning.

RUBIN For me, it would have to be two different versions of the script for "The Searchers," John Ford's movie, written by Frank S. Nugent. I have John Wayne's working copy, which is interesting because Wayne had the habit of folding the pages over in two when he finished a shoot. So the screenplay is half the width of a normal screenplay.

And then there's the master script draft, with all the production notes. At the very end there's a typed-in question: "Ride away?" In other words, Ford hadn't yet settled on what John Wayne was going to do at the end, which is now probably the most famous ending in the history of the western, the doorway scene — Wayne walking slowly into the distance as the door closes and the screen goes to black.