

Review/Art; Richard Prince, Questioning the Definition of Originality

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The large mid-career survey of Richard Prince's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art starts out thinly and gains in substance. Elegantly installed, well paced and, by the end, unexpectedly affecting, it traces the gradual maturation of one of the 1980's most influential yet enigmatic art-world sensibilities.

A maker of photographs, drawings, paintings and sculptures, as well as a writer, the 43-year-old Mr. Prince has had a varied and, in some sense, an uneven 15-year career. In fact, the smooth coherence of this exhibition, and the way his ideas build and expand, gallery by gallery, and from one medium to another, is something of a surprise.

Mr. Prince's habit of rephotographing existing photographs, initiated in the late 1970's, helped spawn the appropriation craze of the 80's. The artist himself is best known for his deadpan recycling of magazine and newspaper images that range through the highs and lows of popular culture. References to sex, drugs, rock-and-roll, alcoholism and the movies frequently give his efforts a dark and familiar undercurrent. But his relentless replication of found images also has its esoteric side and continually questions definitions of art, originality and artistic technique.

As the Whitney exhibition demonstrates, Mr. Prince has rephotographed slick fashion spreads and upscale advertisements for gold watches and pens. His grainy renditions of Marlboro cigarette advertisements, which feature lone cowboys on horseback, exaggerate the stagy masculinity of the images. But he has also created large multiple-image works he calls "gangs" by cribbing from magazines that cater to specialized subcultures like those of bikers, surfers, customized-car owners or heavy metalists.

Like many 80's artists who used the camera, Mr. Prince's original mission seemed to be to expose the fictive aspect of photographs and, in the process, the alienated nature of American life. In the opening galleries of the exhibition at the Whitney, this ambition is only intermittently successful, as when the artist manipulates a series of innocent travel-poster images. Blowing up, cropping and adding fiery yellow-orange backgrounds to photographs of frolicking vacationers, he imbues these scenes with intimations of a beachside nuclear apocalypse or at least the jokey violence of Japanese horror films.

For the most part a chilling opacity pervades these early photographs. They don't seem to criticize contemporary culture as much as mutely mimic it, or even passively celebrate it. This is especially true when the artist makes a gang photograph from images of half-nude bikers' girlfriends straddling big, powerful motorcycles. As with all his work, multiple readings are possible. He may well be picturing a disenfranchised group, or categorizing a little-known genre of photography, but the images also demean women. To quote Mr. Prince himself, whose smart, Raymond Chandleresque prose often seems to apply to photography: "What it looks like is what it is."

In addition, whether glamorous or tawdry, the preponderance of photographs in the exhibition's first three galleries can make one wonder if the show wouldn't actually have made a better catalogue. (This speculation is borne out by the show's own terrific-looking catalogue, where these images are arrayed in a snappy scattershot style, undoubtedly overseen by Mr. Prince, and fleshed out by four informative essays and snippets of the artist's writings.)

Fortunately, and unlike many of his contemporaries, Mr. Prince has gone on to apply the principle of appropriation to a broad number of media, including language itself. In so doing, he has brought into clearer focus the strangely poignant, self-deprecating malaise that pervades all his work. In addition, he has made his obsession with artistic issues, and especially issues involving painting, more and more apparent.

His sculptures, his weakest work from the late 80's, consist of mail-order car hoods, repainted by the artist and displayed on the wall like unusually streetwise Minimalist reliefs. His drawings are stand-up comedy jokes, written by hand on typewriter paper. One of the artist's favorites, which repeats like a mantra across numerous drawings, collages, paintings and some of the gang photographs, reads: "I went to see a psychiatrist. He said, 'Tell me everything.' I did, and now he's doing my act." Another, equally ubiquitous, goes: "I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name."

The introduction of the written or printed word seems to have loosened Mr. Prince's ties to the camera, enabling him to become more directly involved with the making of his art and also to layer different words and images together. In 1987 he started silk-screening his jokes onto monochrome canvases whose carefully calibrated hues speak of a genuine color sense even as they take jabs at formalist abstraction. A bit later he began to combine these jokes, which evince a flatfooted, middle-American bluntness, with suave New Yorker-style cartoons on luminous white canvases.

Often startlingly lush and emotionally engaging, these silk-screened and painted works are disjointed in every way: layered, topsy-turvy fragments of jokes and cartoons drift across their surfaces, sometimes with murky photographic images. Deftly drawn French windows and martini glasses, many of them pirated from the cartoons of Whitney Darrow, fade in and out, occasionally presented in fuzzy little circles, as if the viewer were peeking through a keyhole. The paintings are often finished off with pale handwritten listings of rock-and-roll bands, more jokes, sentences that sound like newspaper captions or odd observations like "the cars leap and smash in 'Bullitt.'"

Layering together many of the subjects and strategies of Mr. Prince's prior efforts, these paintings sometimes have the lightness of a 1950's movie comedy gone sour. (The Playboy Bunny symbol, turned into a skull, is a recurring motif.) They also allude to the high art of that decade, which saw the demise of Abstract Expressionism and the beginnings of Pop Art. Mr. Prince touches on both styles. 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.

"Richard Prince" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, through July 12. It will travel to the Kunstverein in Dusseldorf, Germany (Dec. 4 through Jan. 20); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (April 29 through July 25, 1993), and the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (Oct. 3 through Nov. 27, 1993).