



"Untitled," 1977, is part of the exhibit Fugitive Artist: The Early Works of Richard Prince, 1974-1977, at the Neuberger Museum of Art. Alan Zale for The New York Times

Tracing a Radical's Progress, Without Any Help From Him

By ROBERTA SMITH FEB. 9, 2007

PURCHASE, N.Y. — Most well-known artists have an early phase when ambition outstrips originality and all their ideas are secondhand. If they are lucky, they know this, but it hurts. They want something they haven't yet defined to themselves, and their fledging art is raw, vulnerable and derivative. It radiates longing and insufficiency in equal parts. There may be no other way to start being an artist, but as maturity dawns, artists often come to feel ambivalent about their early attempts, which reveal both too much and too little.

"Fugitive Artist: The Early Work of Richard Prince, 1974-77," at the Neuberger Art Museum here, is full of these confused, urgent feelings, which give it a surprisingly sweet vulnerability. After all, Mr. Prince, who was born in 1949, is the most Darth Vader-esque of the instigators of early 1980s appropriation or pictures art.

A sly, cloaked multimedia wizard, he established his art-world bona fides by rephotographing existing photographs: of fashion models, Marlboro men, luxury watches, pornography and biker chicks, for example. He went on to become an equal-opportunity appropriator, making painted fiberglass sculptures and wall reliefs by casting the sleek hoods of vintage automobiles and making paintings by recycling jokes of a certain age across monochrome canvases in crisp sans-serif type. ("I went to see a psychiatrist. He said, 'Tell me everything.' I did, and now he's doing my act.") Hoaxes are part of the deal, one being the ever-elusive but

intermittently exhibited John Dogg, an artist who is widely thought to be a fiction concocted by Mr. Prince and the innovative art dealer Colin de Land.

Upon receiving notice of the Neuberger show, one could be forgiven for thinking, given Mr. Prince's proclivity for this sort of thing, that he might easily have made everything in it sometime last spring. But that is not what happened.

About three years ago Michael Lobel, a professor of 20th-century art at Purchase College, began excavating Mr. Prince's pre-fame roots and found more than 50 early works that had been idling unseen in public, private and corporate collections around the country. All had been made, exhibited, sold and occasionally even written about in the middle 1970s.

Most are in this show, including 13 monoprints with collage elements from 1976 that are in mint condition because for years they decorated an underground corridor of the Eastern home office of Prudential Financial in Fort Washington, Pa.

Mr. Lobel also unearthed some ambivalence. In the exhibition's catalog he notes that Mr. Prince implied in a 1988 interview that he had destroyed all his early work. He also points out that Mr. Prince's early New York shows at the Kathryn Markel and Ellen Sragow galleries, listed in the catalog of his 1993 Whitney Museum show, have been omitted from the chronologies of two recent books about him. So perhaps it was not entirely surprising when he declined to participate in the Neuberger show, as did his dealer, Barbara Gladstone.

Mr. Prince also refused permission to reproduce the works in the exhibition's catalog, although its clever design (by Beverly Joel of pulp, ink) has compensations. With blank rectangles, complete with captions, where the images should be, the slim gray volume is something of a participatory Conceptual Art piece. Read Mr. Lobel's meticulous descriptions, and draw in your own Richard Princes! The artist may do the same himself.

This is an uneven yet strangely dense show. It is full of motifs and strategies that can be traced forward to Mr. Prince's mature work. It reveals him as, early on, an astute scavenger of the detritus of everyday life — including his own — already equipped with subversive notions of authorship, originality and the uniqueness of the art object. Its range of formats makes his later expansion beyond photo appropriation look less opportunistic. The show also illuminates

the way 1980s appropriation art emerged from the thicket of 1970s Conceptualism.

Mainly it reveals a pre-Richard Prince Richard Prince: an artist who leaves few stones unturned as he progresses from generic to original to radical, carrying with him a fascination with language, photography and a range of printing and printmaking techniques, as well as the more banal forms of urban postwar Americana and a disconnected, decidedly male blankness. He conjures ancestor-gods like Johns, Warhol and Duchamp, and uses the monotype process meticulously and probably simply, if you could only figure out how.

He is already moving motifs and themes from one medium to another. A lush 1974 etching-aquatint depicts a matchbook à la Ed Ruscha or Wayne Thiebaud with the usual joke on its inside and outside covers, except that it is a joke denied: "There Is No Dessert/Really There Is No Dessert." Sometime later he had the phrases printed on real matchbooks, an edition of 100 that he signed and numbered.

But mainly he fiddles endlessly with that staple of 1970s Conceptual Art, especially the all but forgotten subset called Story or Narrative Art: the versatile image-text combination. Most appropriation artists did. Barbara Kruger slammed image and text together. The images of Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo made narrative implicit. Mr. Prince kept these elements in perpetual motion from the start.

Language is on its own in a series of especially telling short texts that all begin with the phrase "Like most everybody else, I like ..." and then diverge into short, oddly fractured monologues about clothes or sports. The tone is eerily close to the flat, anesthetized voice of Mr. Prince's later joke drawings and paintings, with the same sense of stifling conformity, only more innocent.

The photo-album-like monoprints from 1975 are unlikely hybrids of New Image painting and Story Art. In one, a childish silhouette of a stubby black table with an elephant's trunk appears in a big rectangle. Below it a printed text on a file-card-like rectangle tells of the first elephant killed in America, in 1816 in Maine, next to another rectangle containing the shape of the state, in red. The words are widely spaced, and each is fussily reiterated in spidery handwriting, a device that continues through much of the show. An adjacent work recounts the

same narrative using straightforward photographs of the markers at the site of the elephant's death.

In a more coherent piece from 1976 Mr. Prince tells of driving through Maine in a stylish car with his girlfriend, stopping in front of a house that looks exactly like the one in Andrew Wyeth's emblematic "Christina's World" and asking his companion to lie down and play dead in front of it while he takes a photograph. This little performance brings forth a proprietor, who angrily asks them to leave. We learn all this from a typed text that mentions the mustache Duchamp added to images of the Mona Lisa and is displayed with a postcard of the Wyeth painting and Mr. Prince's own photograph of the house, girlfriend and all. It is Story Art as classic as that practiced by Bill Beckley, James Collins, Jean Le Gac and Mac Adams — who all exhibited at the John Gibson Gallery in SoHo in the 1970s.

Finally a 1977 work involving rephotographed photographs signals the end of the beginning. It is a triptych of nearly identically posed fashion models, albeit with some lingering fussiness: the black-and-white prints are collaged with circles of the same images, in color. But the preternatural cool is fully in view.

It is hard to understand Mr. Prince's disengagement from a respectful show of works he obviously took quite seriously. Some are a bit embarrassing, but in the main they increase his stature. Cynics might say he did it to get attention, but in principle he may be right. The unillustrated catalog aside, it could be argued that living artists should always stand back and let curators and art historians do their work. It might be healthily liberating all around.

At the Neuberger a pleasant vacuum forms around the art and the diligent detective work of Mr. Lobel's essay. It sometimes reads like a legal brief, and it doesn't go nearly far enough in discussing the works' emotional content, but the ensemble effect is refreshingly unencumbered, even pure, and perhaps that is as it should be.

"Fugitive Artist: The Early Work of Richard Prince, 1974-77" continues through June 24 at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, N.Y.; (914) 251-6100, neuberger.org.