





EVERYONE
KNOWS
THIS IS
NOWHERE

Richard Prince

on lightning striking, time passing, springing Noriega, and being your own stand-in

Interview by DOMENICK AMMIRATI

Photographs by ROE ETHRIDGE

EXTERIOR OF SECOND HOUSE (2001-2007), AFTER BEING STRUCK BY LIGHTNING, RENSSLAERVILLE, NEW YORK, JULY 2007
PHOTO: ROE ETHRIDGE



The following conversation took place by e-mail in July 2007 over a period of two weeks. During that time, Richard Prince was at work on two projects for the fall, a retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and a commission for the Frieze Art Fair in London. Just prior to the interview's beginning, Prince's *Second House* (2001–2007), a minimuseum in upstate New York owned by the Guggenheim, was struck by lightning and burned.—DA

DOMENICK AMMIRATI: Do people think you're lying when you say you're from the Panama Canal Zone? I'm not entirely sure I believe it myself.

RICHARD PRINCE: I'm not sure people even know what the Canal Zone was or where. Maybe something that Rod Serling made up.

DA: Do you feel any special affinity for the palindrome "A man, a plan, a canal, Panama"?

RP: Recently I tried to get Noriega out of his Florida jail and fly him to the Venice Biennale where I was going to install him in a hotel room. I was thinking an audience could line up at the door and get his autograph on an 8-by-10 glossy picture.

DA: He's getting out this month! You can still do it.

RP: This is exactly the kind of art idea I try to avoid. Too complicated. Too expensive. I like to leave "think" pieces to other artists. Art should be made with cocktail umbrellas.

DA: So then you just claim, point, flash freeze, pin butterflies onto boards. I'm interested in the sense of time in your work. You seem to suspend it in a way that's hard to articulate. For me the easiest examples are the rephotographs.

RP: Putting a camera in front of another picture ...



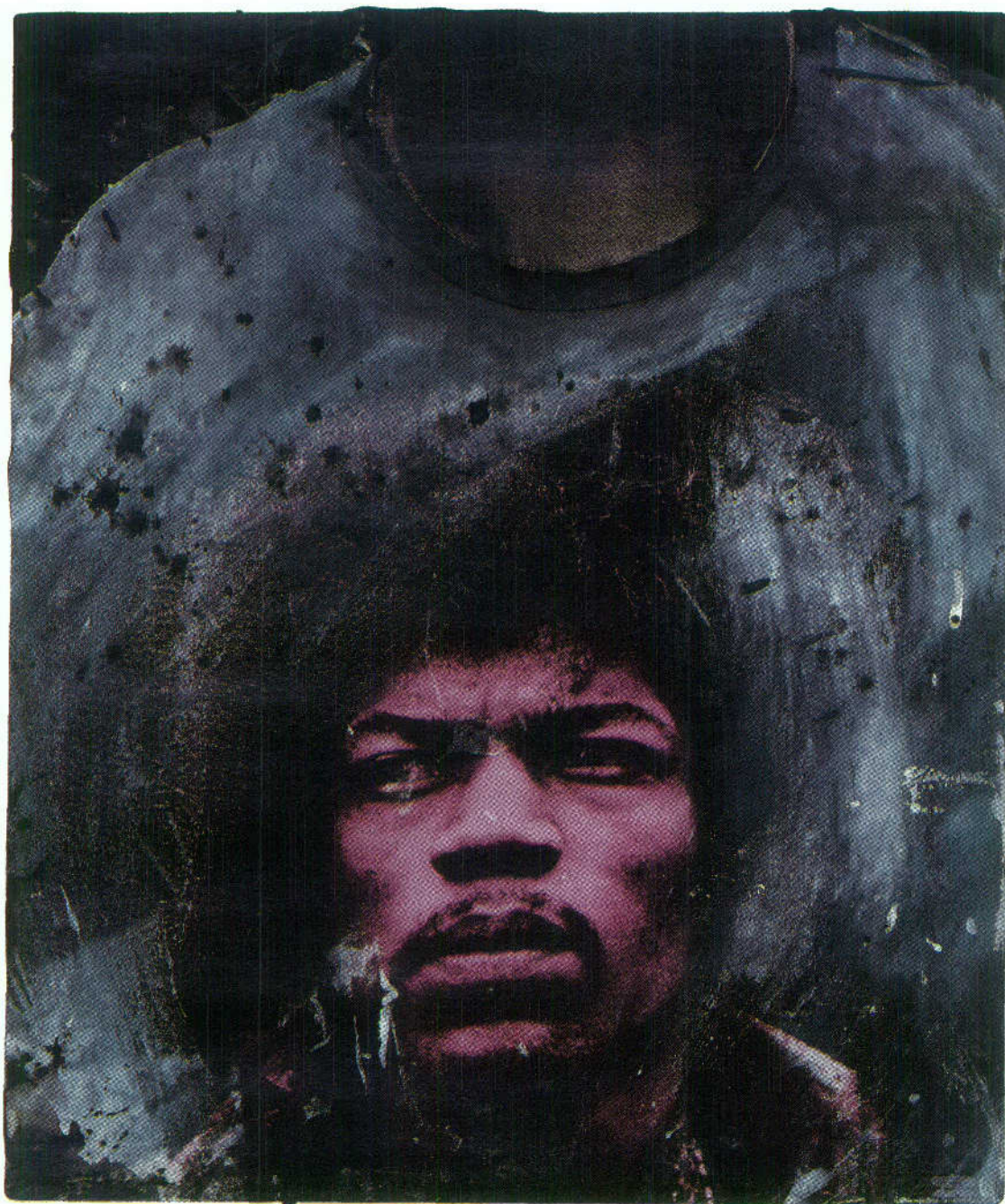
Go ahead and do it. You can light it with a couple of lightbulbs—40 watts is enough. Look through the viewfinder and all you see is the other picture. You can stare at it all day. What you're looking at won't move. It won't change. You can come back the next day and it will look exactly the same. You can be lazy about it. You can covet it. You know exactly what you're going to get before you get it.

Whatever I've done in my studio has no time. The dates on my work are meaningless. A 1977 photograph is as relevant as a 2007 painting.

DA: I was very sorry to hear about the burning

down of *Second House*. Was it the total loss described in the media? The lightning-strike aspect is bizarre, though I guess that kind of thing happens all the time.

RP: Lightning hit the *Second House* on Tuesday, June 26. Tearing down the barbed wire and rustling up the cattle came to mind, maybe someone whistling "Dixie." It's funny—someone burned a cross on the front lawn of the *First House* in West Hollywood [1993]. Of all the houses, in all the neighborhoods ... I've asked around: "Have you ever heard of a house being hit by lightning and burning to the



FACING PAGE
MANUEL NORIEGA, PANAMA
CITY, PANAMA, OCTOBER 1989
PHOTO © REUTERS/CORBIS

DETAIL OF *THIRD PLACE*, 1992
PHOTO: RICHARD PRINCE

THIS PAGE
UNTITLED (JIMI HENDRIX), 1992-93
ACRYLIC ON T-SHIRT, 24 X 20 X 1 IN
COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

RICHARD PRINCE'S LIBRARY,
RENSSELAERVILLE, NEW YORK
PHOTO: DAVID REGEN
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GLADSTONE
GALLERY, NEW YORK



I'm in my studio as much as I can be. I'm not laying about smoking a blunt and grooving on the pitter-patter outside the window. There's no mystery, no voodoo, no religion, no other world to what I do.

ground?" Came the reply, "Don't reckon I have, at least not in these parts." Anyway, it's gone. No more. Most of the contents had been removed and stored by the Guggenheim. The one artwork that was in the house was the Sid Vicious painting done in 1992, titled *Third Place*. If the *Second House* is replaced, perhaps by a prefab or kit house, I'll call it *Third Place*. It's the least I can do.

DA: You're rounding the bases or pulling in a tri-fecta. I am sorry to hear it, though.

Do you miss New York City?

RP: I miss New York, but I lived there for 25 years. I'm actually there twice a month September through May, so it's not like I'm completely removed. When I'm there I usually do nothing but go to museums

and galleries and bookstores, things that were hard to do when I lived there.

I moved upstate because I wanted the complete opposite experience. I'd never lived in a place with so many trees. I'm in the middle of nowhere in a hill town 2,000 feet above sea level, at the end of a dead-end dirt road surrounded by 90 acres of land that's (on paper) mine. Sometimes the only people I see besides my family are the FedEx and UPS guys. When I first moved here I started to take photos of neighboring yards and the things that were in them. I started working with the local body shops on my "hoods," or "bonnets" as you call them. Recently I built my own body shop, where we're working on whole cars and designing cars.

Sometimes I'm not even sure if I'm making art anymore. This is something that I don't think would have happened if I had stayed in New York. If I had I'd probably be building fire escapes or living in a parking lot.

DA: The magazine's in New York now; we don't have to call them "bonnets" anymore.

Cars. I'm supposed to ask you about the one for Frieze. Can you describe that project? I've heard that you're making a life-size, fully functional "model" of a 1970 Dodge Challenger.

RP: We started with the shell of the Challenger and filled it with high-tech parts so that it will drive like an Audi. It's being test-driven in Canada as we speak.

It's going to have a 660 hp Hemi engine, custom interior, no chrome, black wheel wells, 14-inch tires in the front and 16 inch in the back, a pale orange paint job with a flat black T/A hood, plus various decals and emblems. I've been working with XV Motorsports out of Irvington, New York, on the design. It will of course be completely drivable and in an edition of three, all for sale.

DA: Do you think art should be useful?

RP: If your car is dented, the body shop can fix it. If you want a flake job, we can paint it. If you want to replace a rocker panel, we can send away for it.

DA: I saw a photo of the body shop. From the outside it reminds me a little of the Menil Collection's Flavin installation in Houston, which is in an old car dealership.

RP: Inside there's a metal stage with a drum kit, amplifier, keyboard. My kids and a friend and I occasionally perform covers of the Flamin' Groovies and Lothar and the Hand People. There's a pole for

There aren't a lot of funny artists out there. A lot of them are afraid of the critics and academics and the people who write for *October*. Ad Reinhardt read the funny papers, but I'm not sure Clyfford Still ever laughed in his life.

topless dancers, or if you simply want to exercise alongside always-playing videos of *Vanishing Point*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, or Claude Lelouch's [*C'était un Rendezvous*]. In a nod to our most cherished gas stations (think *On the Road*), the bathroom key is attached to a bowling ball.

DA: Isn't there going to be a car at the Guggenheim as well?

RP: For the rotunda there's a new sculpture called *American Prayer*. It's a 1968 Dodge Charger that's been completely emptied of any engine parts and interiors and has been stripped of any paint and then powder coated. In place of the engine block there's a cement block.

DA: Did you see *Borat*?

RP: Yeah. He reminded me of Andy Kaufman. Kaufman did a bit where he invited people up to the stage and asked them to touch the boil on his neck. It was big and red and real nasty. I remember people recoiling when they got close to putting their fingers on it.

DA: Do you have other favorite comedians? What about favorite artists who make funny work?

RP: I loved Sam Kinison. What a genius. Started out a preacher. He had the voice. The fear of God. The crown of thorns. I like Bruce Nauman's humor, and William Wegman's.

DA: I feel like Wegman is a little underappreciated, especially those early videos. There's this great quote from him: "As soon as I got funny, I killed any majestic intentions in my work."

RP: There aren't a lot of funny artists out there. A lot of artists are afraid of the art establishment. Afraid of the critics and academics and the people who write for *October*. Most artists' role models aren't people like Big Daddy Roth and Hugh Hefner. Ad Reinhardt read the funny papers. I'm not sure Clyfford Still ever laughed in his life. Me, I like reading [T. E. Lawrence's] *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and

Lord Buckley's *System of a Down* at the same time.

DA: I'm glad you brought up books. You're a well-known book collector. What's new in the library?

RP: Recent acquisitions are Sylvia Plath's carbon of *Ariel* and a *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* inscribed to Tim Powers.

DA: The sci-fi writer who *Valis* was dedicated to.

RP: I've been wanting an inscribed copy of that book for years. What I'd really like to get is a signed Richard Powers book—I've never seen one. I recently bought a Jim Morrison, *The New Creatures*, inscribed to Norman Mailer. And I'm currently filling out a collection of Kathy Acker's work.

DA: Do you consider any writers influential on your work?

RP: Not really. I think that musicians were more influential. The thing that's influenced me the most about books is the original illustrations for paperbacks.

DA: How do you feel about the genre of the press release?

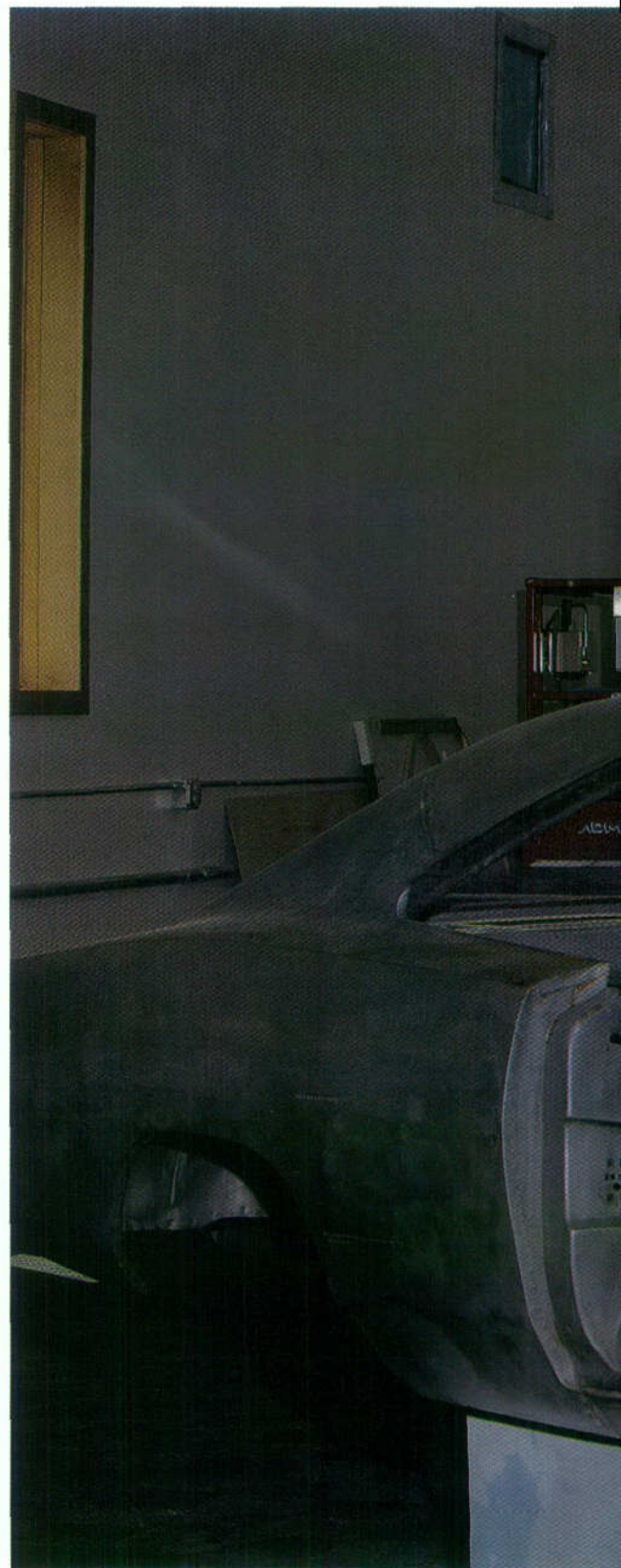
RP: I'm not sure about the press release. There always seems to be lots of love there. I do like what Adam McEwan has been doing with his fake obits. I was recently the subject of one and was shocked that I wasn't dead.

DA: Is being the subject of an obituary better than being the subject of a review?

RP: "Do you see what I see?" I thought people did, but I was wrong. Most people have no idea what they're looking at. Art is interpreted, judged, criticized, umpired to death—subject to the I-know-what-I-like point of view. Everyone has an opinion. Well that's nonsense. My freak flag says NOT IN MY BACKYARD.

DA: Freak flag: maybe one of the illustrations for this interview can be Jimi Hendrix.

Do you or did you ever read philosophy or critical theory? I know you've kept a distance from it, but I



was just wondering what things were like in the late '70s and '80s when theory first caught on. Would artists refer to Derrida, Barthes, Baudrillard, Benjamin all the time the way that some today refer to, oh, Žižek or Rancière or Alain Badiou or anti-globalization stuff?

RP: I read some Roland Barthes. I thought he was good because he wrote kind of like a novelist. About the only other guy I read was Christian Metz. He wrote a lot about the movies. Like when you were sitting in a movie theater, he said your body was experiencing "a general lowering of wakefulness." Later I said watching a movie was moving by wading more



I PICK UP HITCHHIKERS. WHEN THEY GET BELTS. I WANT TO TRY SOMETHING I ON
EK MY WIFE MADE TOMATO SURPRISE. I

than swimming. I kind of stole that from him.

DA: I guess what I'm asking for is a sketch of the times. I know you've said you felt separate from the Pictures group and the theories surrounding it.

RP: From 1977 to 1981 there was a whole lot of theory going on around "the Pictures group." But I think it was mostly leftover thinking from conceptual practices of the early '70s. It wasn't like there were a lot of "lifestyle" articles like they did with the "neo-expressionists."

I remember the writing of the time being pretty uptight and hard to understand. I was guilty of writing the same way. I wrote a piece for *Real Life*

magazine called "Primary Transfers" [1980]. When I read it today, I can barely keep my eyes open. It sounds like I had a secret and didn't want to tell anybody about it.

DA: What do you think of photographs of artists in magazines? Honestly I've never liked them that much.

RP: I don't mind portraits, as long as you use a fair amount of Photoshop and airbrush.

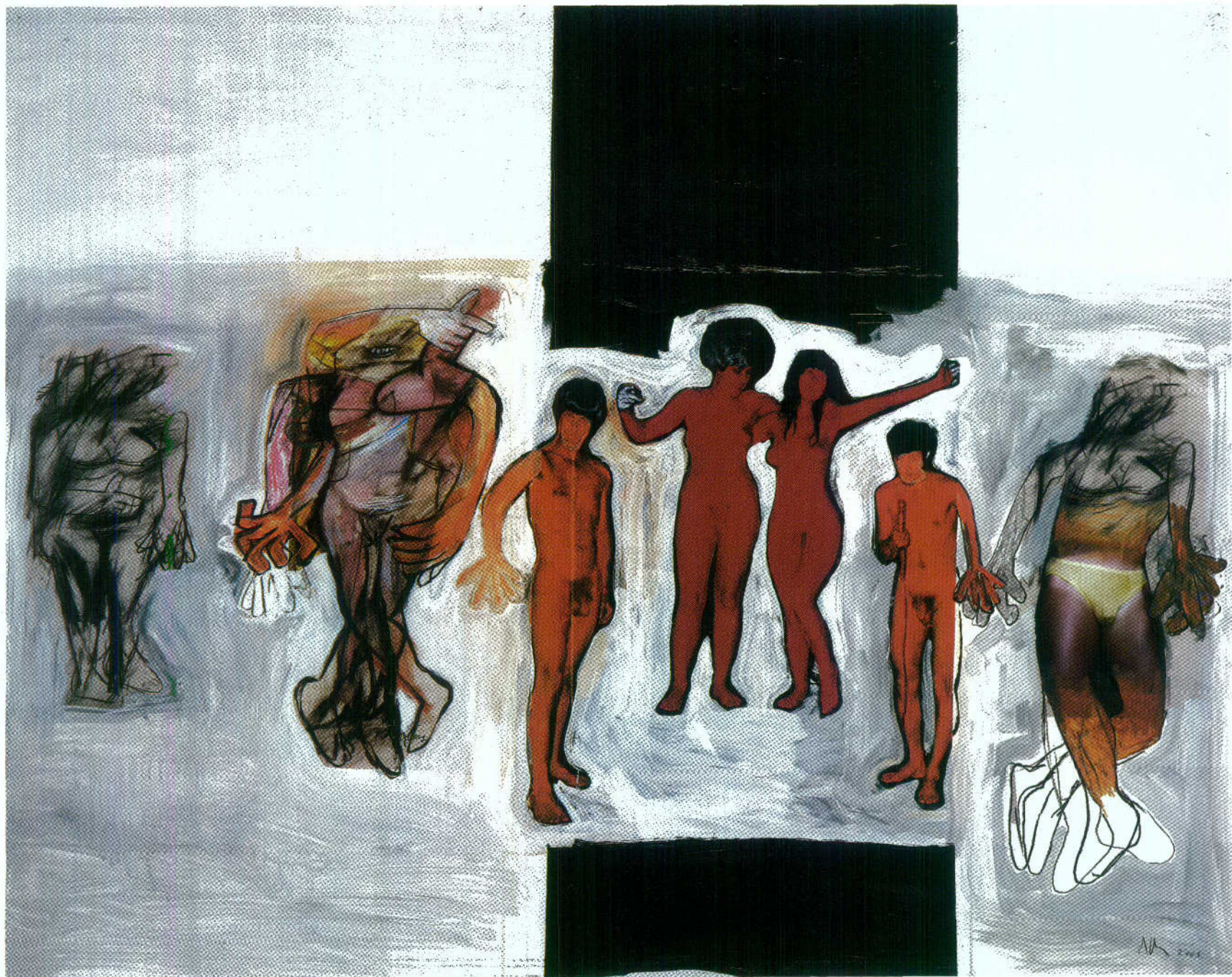
DA: But maybe that's because you're very interested in the role of the artist—"role" in the sense of performance, I mean.

RP: There is this idea of looking the part. When I

see someone like Iggy Pop, I say to myself, "Yeah, that's rock 'n' roll." But what should an artist look like? Picasso? Pollock? Did Warhol look like an artist? Does James M. Cain look like a writer of hard-boiled fiction? How great does Samuel Beckett look? Or James Joyce with that eye patch? The three greatest artists of the 20th century were bald. (OK, Warhol wore a wig.) You've got to remember that Groucho Marx's mustache was greasepaint.

DA: Is being an artist a good job? Selling paintings composed of your canceled checks seems like a pretty sweet gig.

RP: If you don't like leaving home, then being an



The artworld is small. It's not like my mother knows who you are. It's not like you're being downloaded by my teenage son. You're an artist. You're obscure. Get used to it.

artist is a great job. And sometimes, yeah, I treat it like it's a job. Like I have to finish a painting that week even though there's no deadline. I like to work quickly and I like to work on five or six things at the same time.

DA: Do you have a good work ethic, or are you just kind of manic? I think those are the only two ways people get things done.

RP: It's not obsession and it's not manic but I'm in my studio as much as I can be. I'm not laying about smoking a blunt and grooving on the pitter-patter outside the window. I don't have artist's block, or writer's block. I'm more the Joyce Carol Oates of the

artworld. There's no mystery, no voodoo, no religion, no otherworld to what I do.

DA: Oates. I would never have thought to compare you two, but it makes sense. You're both prolific and fascinated by American pulp. Have you ever felt that, in the artworld, there was kind of a bias against you for being an Americanist? Or a reverse bias. Sometimes I feel like Europeans still think of American artists as unaware, unconscious, "savage."

RP: I don't feel any negativity from Europe. Anyway, the artworld is a small world. I mean, between New York City and Los Angeles there are probably five

houses with any art of any significance in them, and I don't think that's an exaggeration. There are probably one hundred good artists and fifty good collectors in any given week. That's one hundred and fifty people worldwide. It's not like my mother knows who you are. It's not like you're being downloaded by my teenage son. You're an artist. You're obscure. Get used to it.

I know there's all this talk about globalization and China and all, but what's coming from China? Nothing. Whoever is collecting that stuff from the mainland is seriously misinformed. Maybe they think they're in a Paul Bowles novel.

DA: I heard that at the Guggenheim you're going to be showing some of these "de Kooning" paintings you've been making.

RP: That's the plan. It depends how they look on the wall.

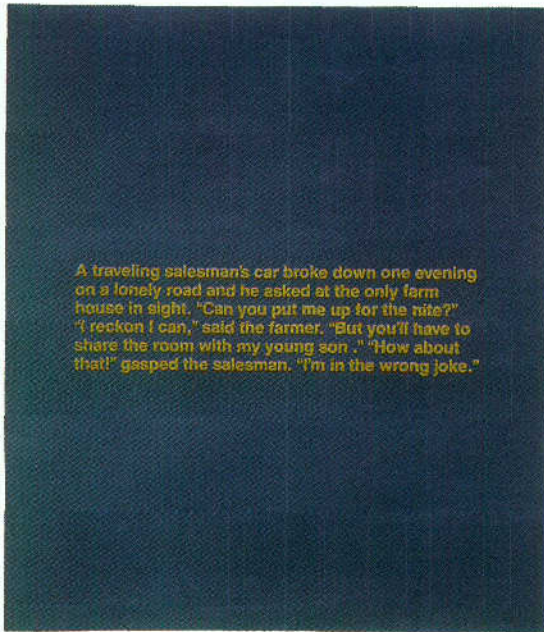
DA: What are they exactly? Why did you start making them?

RP: They started out as collages using a book of de

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UNTITLED (WITH DE KOONING),
2006
 COLLAGE, ACRYLIC, AND OIL
 CRAYON ON PHOTOGRAPH,
 46 X 58 IN
 COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY,
 NEW YORK

THIS PAGE
UNTITLED, 1994
 ACRYLIC AND SILKSCREEN ON
 CANVAS, 56 X 48 IN
 COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY,
 NEW YORK

RICHARD PRINCE IN
RENSSELAERVILLE,
NEW YORK, JULY 2007
 PHOTO: ROEETHRIDGE

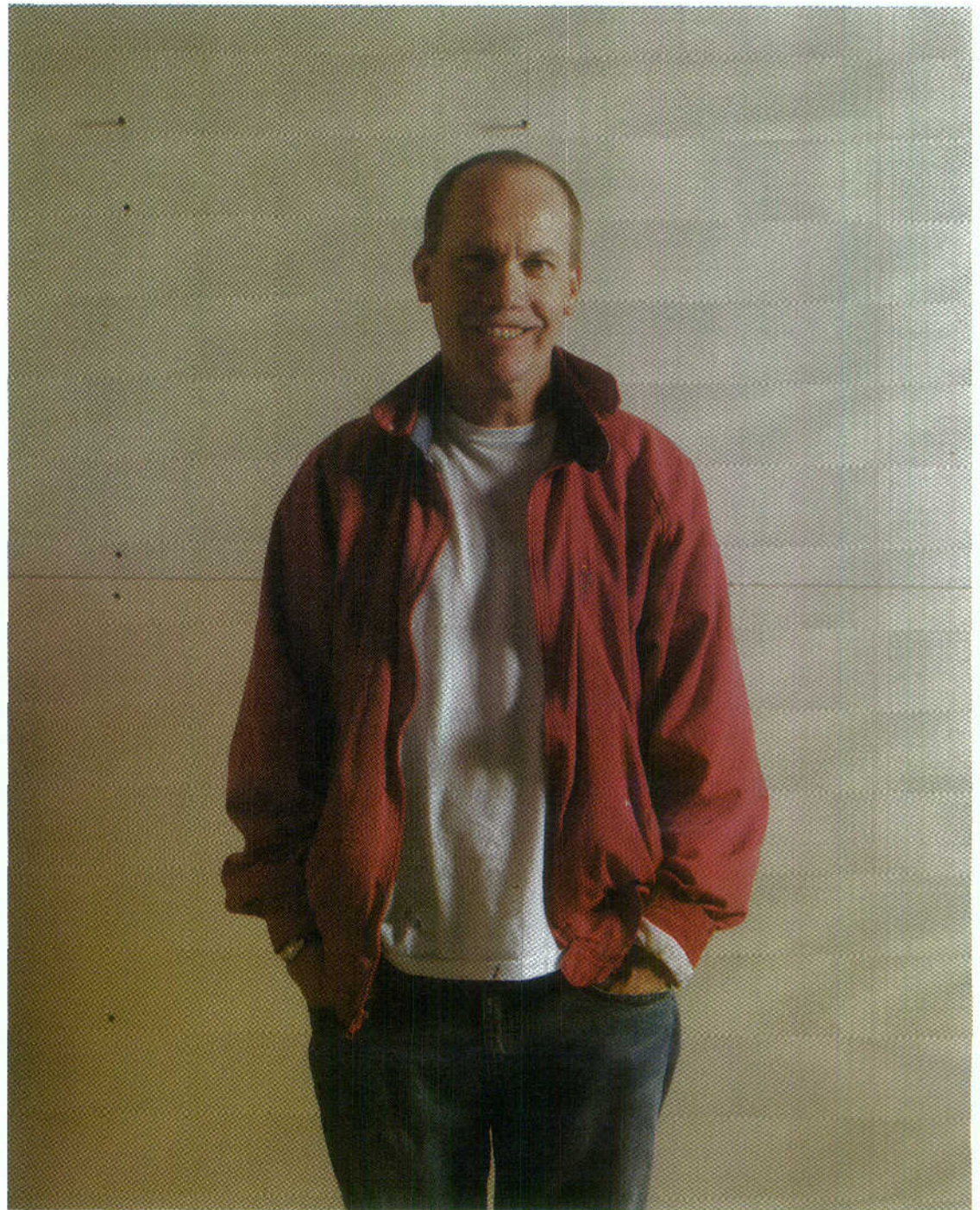


Kooning drawings of women [Willem de Kooning: *Tracing the Figure* (2002)]. About two years ago I was between studios and sat with the book in my lap, drawing in it. I've always loved de Kooning's women paintings. When he collaged the Camel cigarette "T-zone" smile onto the heads of his women, it was the beginning of Pop art. That's like 1953-54? That's just my opinion.

Anyway, what happened with the book was that all of a sudden I started to draw and collage men alongside his women. After this "continuation," I sent out the collages to get ink-jetted and blown up on canvas, and when they came back I painted and painted and painted and became Edward G. Robinson in the movie *Scarlet Street*. . . . Well, not really, but it makes a nice story.

DA: IMDb tells me that *Scarlet Street* is a 1945 noir about a double con: a middle-aged Sunday painter tries to convince a young woman that he's a rich artist, while she and her crook boyfriend try to dupe him out of his "fortune." The protagonists are named, respectively, Chris Cross, Kitty March, and Johnny Prince.

One of the things that I've always felt about your work, but have never been able to articulate until this discussion with you, is that it's quietly un-



canny. It's something about your deadpan; everything you look at seems to become your doppelgänger.

RP: The question for me has always been, "Who do you think you are?" Game shows like *Who Do You Trust?*, *To Tell the Truth*, *Truth or Consequences*, *I've Got a Secret*—they were all popular when I was growing up. The idea of substituting, stand-ins, exchanging places with another person is interesting to me. The desire to be someone else—there was another TV show when I was growing up called *Queen for a Day*—to play a part, take on a role, to be an understudy is either part of an insecurity or a huge ego.

DA: Someone told me that in interviews people want to be asked certain questions that never actually get asked. Then someone else told me that if I thought this was a new angle, I was sadly mistaken. But I'm trying it anyway. Is there a question you're hoping I'll ask you?

RP: I always go with the suicide question. Which

artist do you identify with the most? Arthur Cravan, Lew Welch, Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Cobain? Artist, poet, writer, rock star . . . There was a moment when I could have died with the actress who played Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks* back in 1994; her real name was Sheryl Lee, and we were dating, and if it had happened we could have been big in Japan forever.

I'm thinking treatment . . . and pitch . . . and talking to someone like Mike Ovitz and getting turned down.

DA: Do you consider the way you present yourself to be a kind of performance?

RP: Not really. "Really" being the operative word.

Richard Prince's retrospective "Richard Prince: Spiritual America" will be on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, from September 28 to January 9, 2008. His project at the Frieze Art Fair, London, will be on view from October 11 to 14. For more information on Prince, turn to Index, p. 110.



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