



PATRICK DOWNS / Los Angeles Times

Richard Prince: "With my jokes, you are not sure if you should laugh at them or agree with them."

De-Construction Worker

Richard Prince's 'First House' Launches Regen Projects

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Anywhere else, this would be a funky bungalow. In West Hollywood, it's a tear-down. But the modest house is enjoying an exotic cultural moment before it becomes a memory. "First House" is the site of Richard Prince's installation of paintings and other works through April 30. It is the inaugural event for Regen Projects, formerly the Stuart Regen Gallery, which has scaled back its operations to fund four special projects a year.

Is this a joke? Well, yes and no. The paintings are jokes. Lettered mostly in black on white, the canvases of various sizes make visitors to the house commit contemporary art heresy—they giggle and guffaw, nudge and wink.

My brother just married a two-headed lady. Is she pretty, you ask? Well, yes and no.

Prince, who lives in New York, got this idea in 1985

after spending four months making art in a rented house in Venice. In West Hollywood, he has approximated aspects of his studio by putting drop cloths on some of the floors and sanding others, stripping the walls down to plaster and wall board and standing cheap flood lamps in the corners. Conventions of an art gallery merge with those of a home. The ambience is intimate yet awkward. Paintings of jokes hang or lean on every wall in aesthetic cacophony. "In a way, it's about display and arrangement," he says.

I don't like to brag but I got good looking kids. Thank God my wife cheated on me.

Seated on a fat roll of canvas on the living-room floor, Prince is dressed, as he often is, in a black suit jacket and white T-shirt. He has a rakish, rock star quality that has earned him a certain notoriety in the worlds of rock music, advertising and film. "If read literally, the jokes are tragic," he admits. "It's a way to cope, to deal with certain realities, absurdities, what I

Please see PRINCE, F7

PRINCE: De-Construction Worker

Continued from F1

find unbelievable in this world. I don't really have a sense of humor. With my jokes, you are not sure if you should laugh at them or agree with them. Either way, it's a powerful reaction."

A young kid bragged to the judge that he'd shot another kid for a quarter. The judge said, "How can you shoot somebody for a quarter?" The kid replied, "You know how it is Judge. Two bits here, two bits there—it adds up!"

"These jokes are edgier and more topical than usual," observes Prince. Domesticity is rendered raw from jokes that deal with violence, racism, adultery and ennui. Conceived almost entirely in black and white, the art's references to racial tension are heightened in Los Angeles by anticipation of the verdicts in the Rodney G. King trial.

In the play room, canvases silk-screened with photographs of white boxers are stacked opposite a canvas printed with an image of the Black Panthers. Glass doors open onto the back yard, where the silk-screen of a black boxer is tilted against the garage next to a painting of this joke:

White man: "I don't know what to do, my house has burned to the ground, my wife died, my car was stolen and the doctor says I gotta have a serious operation."

Black man: "What you kickin' about, you white ain't you?"

Prince has not simplified his art to coincide with the cultural politics that are in vogue. Anyone familiar with Prince's art of the last decade will recognize a distillation of ideas concerning the elusive nature of meaning, the question of authorship and the difficulty in separating the private and public selves. He has perfected the aesthetics of repressed anxiety.

Prince achieved acclaim in the 1980s as one of the initial practitioners of the strategy of appropriation in photography. He re-photographed images from advertisements and recontextualized them as early as 1977. He became part of the group that came to be called the "Pictures Generation," after an influential exhibition in New York organized by critic Douglas Crimp. The artists included Sherrie Levine, Troy Brauntuch, Robert Longo, Philip Smith, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler, Allan McCollum, Laurie Simmons and James Welling.

Despite an impressive amount of support from critics and galleries for his re-photography, in the mid-'80s, Prince began appropriating cartoons from the New Yorker magazine. He wanted to return to the media of drawing and painting without inventing his own subject

matter. The jokes followed, often lettered on brilliantly colored monochrome canvases. Lately, the jokes have been conjoined with fragments of imagery silk-screened from cartoons.

These bad-taste Borscht Belt jokes are from the Cold War era, when sexism, racism and homophobia were acceptable subjects, though they seem embarrassing today. Regardless of medium, for Prince, the jokes are a means of examining issues of gender and identity.

"I think I was always a painter, regardless of what I did in the medium of photography," says Prince. "I see myself as an abstract artist. The jokes are abstract. The subject matter is outside the author's experience. I don't know anything about jokes. I couldn't write one."

The house is a logical context for speculations about relationships between the sexes: "I see a lot of things in terms of sex but it's only one ingredient in the work," Prince says. "It might be more important than, say, 'space' or 'flatness,' but they are ingredients also. I've been thinking about sex since I was a child. About what images do to me. I've been bombarded with sexual images.

"It's not my sexuality. It's more of a blankness. It's about what I feel about things. It's autobiographical," he continues.

Elliptically, he explains that his autobiography is built from the outside in. The images and information of the culture become his personality. He claims that his generation was the first to be able to "have a relationship with an image."

"There is a certain charge when I find something [i.e. a photograph or a cartoon] as if I would have done it myself," Prince says.

"As if it were made for me. That is a sexual feeling. It's like being given something and there is an excitement in taking it. Usually a public image or text is powerful because I'm not the only one who recognizes it. It's a briefer way to communicate than if it all came from me at first."

In the bedroom of the house, the realm of sexual activity, the closet is overflowing with a chaos of tangled colorful clothes, while framed works from Prince's personal collection are "in storage" on the shelf above. A white painting is silk-screened with floating architectural details from cartoons and captioned:

A man comes home and finds his best friend in bed with his wife. The man throws up his hands in disbelief and says, "Hey Rick, I have to but you too?"

In the kitchen, the room most associated with nurture, canvases

silk-screened with the black-and-white logo from the Mad magazine cartoon "Spy vs. Spy" lean against the wall. Another small painting announces: "I'd rather die than wear a condom."

Doors from the kitchen cabinets have been removed and the shelves are filled to capacity with boxes of crackers and cookies. The brand names read as a sort of snack-food rebus. Harmless? Hardly.

Prince is a master of recontextualization, so that Premium, Ritz and Posh Corn sound like allusions to class, while Pop Tarts and Munch 'Ems sound libidinous. Cookies is slang for girls, while crackers means crazy. The language of packaging becomes another tragic joke. It offers Prince another opportunity to play with words.

This fascination with language is manifest in the selection of books purchased for the house's shelves, from pulp novels such as "House of Vice" to serious fiction like Paul Auster's "City of Glass." Even the wall heater has been transformed into a magazine rack bearing Metal Maniacs, Muscle Cars, American Swimwear and Essence.

Prince calls his ongoing oeuvre "Spiritual America," a name borrowed from the famous Alfred Stieglitz photograph of a horse's groin. Like the modernist photographer, Prince has had multiple callings: painter, photographer, writer, curator, collector, musician.

"It's all Spiritual America. These things have been around since 1949, [when Prince was born]. I rarely go back further than that because I don't know anything about it. My work is as contemporary and fresh as the latest magazine."

Asked about the influence of Pop Art, Prince asserts: "There wasn't any such thing as Pop Art, just as I don't think there was any such thing as a Pictures Generation. I think you have to talk about everybody's work in terms of Pop Culture because artists are the culture.

"Any artist that tries to divorce themselves from what's going on in this culture is going to wind up being pretty uninteresting. Even Mondrian listened to jazz, and it influenced his work. Categories are fine for academics and historians. For me, there is only the category of 'good artists.'"

■ Richard Prince "House" Installation, 540 Westmount, West Hollywood, sponsored by Regen Projects, is open 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays and by appointment. For information, call (310) 276-5424. A retrospective of the artist's work will be at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from April 29 through July 25.