

Art

The Genuine Simulations Of Richard Prince

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It is no secret to anyone living in America that the visuals from advertising, TV and film influence our collective conduct and appearance. The transitory imagery of advertising is especially effective. Advertising functions on fantasy, the creation of desire and a willing suspension of disbelief. Often, these emotions are coaxed forth by the persuasive medium of commercial photography. For example, there is an ad for Johnny Walker scotch that depicts a crimson sunset, against which, darkly silhouetted, there stands a skyline of world-famous landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State Building. The obvious implication is that this scotch is globally popular. More significantly, the message is conveyed because the photograph is convincing. It is only at second glance

that we recognize the romantic skyline as an impossibility. Simulation attains the status of reality.

Richard Prince's recent works appropriate commercial photographs to create simulations of advertised reality. He is one of a group of young artists who recognize the fictive imagery of the commercial culture as more "real" than the reality of nature.

In Prince's earlier work, he isolated commercial photographs from their original text and composition to create a new context and meaning. This method exposed subtle, common, cliché postures of advertising, a ubiquitous "look." Prince's new series continues to reveal the manipulations of advertising imagery but the photographs are now complex simulations in a clear alliance with the ad for Johnny Walker. Prince re-photographs figures in black and white and arranges them against a sunset background of flame and gold. The characters, men,



"Not a day at the beach, it's the end of the world..." Richard Prince at the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery.

women and children, outfitted in bathing suits, are selected from travel- and leisure advertisements. Their poses and gestures are familiar, and signify pleasurable activity. These new compositions are legible as messages of comfort and relaxation, due to our extensive experience reading advertising.

For instance, two different photographs depict an attractive man lifting a young woman up and out of the waves. It is an image familiar to us from magazine ads for trips to such exotic resorts as the Virgin Islands. In the ad, the skin of the models glistens in the sun, they are infinitely content and the slogan affirms, "An American Paradise." Initially, the simulation reads like the ad. A closer look, however, induces a curious revulsion. The women have been decapitated, their heads cropped out of the picture. Each man actually holds the stump of a torso. In Prince's photographs, the process reveals the sources: the borrowed photographs are enlarged dramatically so the image comprises half-tone dots and high-contrast shadows. Under Prince's direction, the skin of models doesn't glisten, but looks as though it's been strafed with napalm, and is blistering and peeling from the heat. The background of scarlet and yellow no longer appeals as warmth and passion, but takes on the look of a nuclear blast. This is not a day at the beach, it's the end of the world! Yet, we are so conditioned to the commercial information that we can draw positive associations with Pavlovian predictability. Only by gathering strength in skepticism do we see the beast beneath the beauty. Prince's photographs are more real than

the reality of advertising, which has become sadly more real than real life.

Of necessity, advertising imagery expresses the future, and plays upon dissatisfaction with the present. The sated creatures appropriated for Prince's photographs are vacationing in a mythic future. Prince, however, is only too aware of the uncertainty that lies in that direction. He illustrates a social complacency in the shadow of a great threat. Prince's simulations reveal a future, but it is bleak.

Prince is also a talented writer, and though his writings stand separate from his photographs, there is a common perspective. In the catalogue for his recent show at the Nouveau Musee in France, Prince wrote of one of his characters, an artist, what he might have said of himself:

"He accepted all the conditions and built out of the givens. He transported these givens to a reality more real than the condition he first accepted. He was never too clever, too assertive, too intellectual... essentially too decorative. He had a spirit that made it easier to receive than to build."

The "givens" are the media-manipulated fantasy that our society embraces as reality. Prince is not moralizing but revealing the process by stripping it bare, uncovering the machinery that dictates our dreams, our delusions, our future.

"Black and White in Color," a series of his large format photographs, will be on view at the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery through May 14. (The gallery is only open on Saturdays and Sundays or by appointment at 385-8649.)

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