

## ***RICHARD PRINCE***

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*Objects are objects, but man is only man.*

**Alain Robbe-Grillet**

Richard Prince's photographs, appropriated from a variety of popular imagery, present a diachronic miscellany of coded cultural viewpoints: the snapshot, the advertisement, the news-photo, etc. The work playfully explores the contemporary visual vernacular of wanting as evinced in particular codes of behavior such as those systematically administered by fashion, entertainment, the arts, social manners, laws and most importantly by the method of relaying this hysterical Babel of information to the body of society. In Prince's work it is the body, in a materialistic sense that perceives the images; it is the body in a Nietzschean sense that thinks the world.

Each of the new works is a series of nine Ektacolor photographs evenly spaced in rows of three on a white vertical ground that is 86" X 47". The photographs are arranged in a conventional grid in the center of the work leaving a large white space of approximately two feet at the top and bottom. This white ground inevitably becomes a deep space on which the

photographs float and the imagery at first glance seems to divide itself easily into a nature/culture opposition – therefore it is tempting to read the work as a symbolist allegory of paradise that has been reconstituted into vulgar fragments which are several generations removed from a vaguely imaginary “original” a-historical condition. Yet the nature/culture opposition is too simple a dichotomy. The work presupposes that the concept of the natural has been subsumed by culture, yet this is where the work begins, eventually making its own assumptions problematic by virtue of its extensive itinerary of associations that go beyond any one concept or idea. In that sense the work does not illustrate anything.

The imagery repeats itself, with variations in the same photograph in focus, or cropping or variations in diverse photographs of the same thing. In *Untitled (Waves, Waterfalls, Bikini)* the black and white torso of a woman appears three times – in a medium shot in close-up and in an out of focus close-up – alongside three separate color images of waterfalls and waves. The overtly symbolist imagery recalls Redon’s rich field of meanings connoting sensuality and death. Cropping and focus shift to signify certain ready-made meanings and associations. An out of focus black and white torso, *Untitled (Waves and Torso)* implies the intimacy of a snapshot just as

a sharp focus color photograph of a woman's head of hair implies fashion advertising. Prince plays with the same type of associations in the grainy repetition of *Untitled (HEMI Cuda, Challenger RT, Boss Stang)* in which landscapes that are contingent on the ambivalent pleasure of dissolution in movement itself progress cinematically from connections of snapshots to beautiful magazine reports of violent destruction. From the multiplicity of associations we become conscious of our own connoisseurship in this visual vernacular that is simultaneously both personal and social.

The natural and the historical interpenetrate alongside fragmented associations or narratives that transgress these categories but do not stand outside of them. In fact such transgressions intensify conventional narrative; narrative being a device for linking things together that signify something, an intensification of such links with an uncertain digressive meaning produces a paranoia that, like Mallarme's blank page, can contain the world. In this sense the work is not an anti-narrative, as a great deal of the pleasure in it is to be found in its deliberate assertion and play of narrative strategies. Rather the work proposes the idea that narrative is altogether impossible outside of the already established models we find actively working in culture. The photographic narrative proposes a concept of interiority that is

problematic by virtue of the explicit social origin of its repertoire of images and narratives. Yet what does this interiority look like?

Immediately abstracted from man and nature alike the answer can be found in the strained world of leisure that one finds in travel advertising wherein the exotic always means the same thing: a disquieting homogenization and sterilization of differences – of wants. In this exotic interiority time is suspended among the polyphony of visual rhetoric where every image is perceived through various generations of distance, fragments of fragments, inchoate as through regarding the world through thick opaque glasses, such as the ones time travelers wore in Chris Marker's *La Jette*.

In Prince's work the debased imagery of the exotic and its relationship to wanting – to sexual desire – brings up the debased carnival imagery of Rabelais, which as described by Mikhail Bakhtin is “precisely to present a contradictory and double faced fullness of life. The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious for the final result is always abundant increase.” Food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body are central to Prince's work by being

obliquely referred to in its narrative associations and simultaneously by being absent in its literal content. Advertising works in a similar way – through suggestion - but it is always directed towards one final narrative goal– all narrative roads lead to the same place: selling the product. In Prince’s work there is no product and the various narrative strands are free floating fragments – episodes in an open-ended work. Bakhtin describes the disintegration of carnival imagery over the centuries which is “replaced by moral sententiousness and abstract concepts. What remains is nothing but a corpse...alienated and torn away from the whole in which it had been linked to that other younger link in the development. The result is a broken and grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed. Hence all of these sterile images representing character, all these professional lawyers, merchants, matchmakers, old men and women, all these masks offered by degenerate petty realism...”

It is in Prince’s work that we find the familiar modern rationalized remains of carnival imagery, debased and inadequate, fragmented into significant individual parts, with uncertain distances between various incomplete constituent parts that make up not history but histories. His photographs are reminiscent of Godard’s soldiers in *Les Carabiniers* who painstakingly roam

a landscape as desolate and fractured as Prince's, looting the bounty of the world by collecting photographic post-cards of famous places – such as the Eiffel Tower or the pyramids– signs of a past civilization embodied in historical monuments and ruins – believing they have despoiled the earth of its treasure and are its new masters.

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