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# Claiming Images: The Production and Preservation of Desire in Richard Prince's Re-Photography

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**CLAIMING IMAGES: THE PRODUCTION AND PRESERVATION OF DESIRE  
IN RICHARD PRINCE'S RE-PHOTOGRAPHY**

**BY  
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
BACHELOR OF ARTS DEGREE**

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## Introduction: Re-Photography with a Lacanian Lens

Why photograph an existing image? What knowledge or meaning is there to be gained from replicating that which is already in existence? These are primary questions one must ask in order to understand the art of Richard Prince and other appropriation artists of his time. How is the image, as displayed by the artist, different from the image left in its original context? For some of Richard Prince's contemporaries like Barbara Kruger, this question is easily answered. Kruger takes existing images from media and print advertisements then adds her own text to dismantle the messages being conveyed. Kruger's opinion is clearly legible in the finished work. Prince, however, leaves the images he appropriates almost completely unchanged, making the artist's point of view harder to decipher.

All images contain within them symbolically coded messages that are read and interpreted through their consumption. Often in advertising images, this message is one of luxury and happiness. The images seem to declare that if you buy a certain product or invest in a particular lifestyle, you will be richer, prettier, happier, or more accepted. Images contain within them a promise of something beyond what is seen on the page or in the frame. It is this promise that has been the primary focus of both Prince's and Kruger's art. Kruger confronts the promise directly and explicitly by proclaiming across the image, "Face it! This luxurious garment won't make you rich or beautiful."<sup>1</sup> She exposes the lie of advertising imagery in her work and makes a clear and deliberate condemnation. Prince, however, makes no commentary at all. He simply re-photographs

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<sup>1</sup> Fig. 1: Kruger, Barbara. Face It! (Green). Photograph, 2007.

existing images and then re-presents them as his own, often in pairs or sets, but without any definitive condemnation of their content.

Technically speaking, Prince does very little. He sometimes switches an image from color to black and white or vice versa, but rarely alters the original in any substantial way.<sup>2</sup> The artist's hand is all but invisible in the work, and it seems that Prince would prefer to keep it that way. He makes a conscious effort to keep his personal identity out of his art, and does this by appropriating images already within the public cultural cannon then presenting them as they are. Prince does not offer a firm opinion on those images he uses, ensuring that no one can hold him accountable for their content. He does nothing but re-present that which already exists. Why then, does he seem to elicit such an impassioned and polarizing response? What is it about his appropriated images that make them so valuable in the contemporary art market while making the general public so uncomfortable? Are they really as impartial as the artist would have you think? Many scholars have attempted to tackle these questions. However, the meaning created in Prince's art is often misinterpreted. Lisa Phillips, who assembled the publication that accompanied Prince's Whitney Museum of Art Retrospective in 1992, insists that Prince's condemnation of American consumerism is just more subtle than his contemporaries, and praises how he, "casts doubt on basic assumptions about the authority of photographic images."<sup>3</sup> Phillips is not the only writer who champions Prince for "[deciphering] advertising's messages of seduction and alienation by revealing the stereotypical character of gestures, poses, and expressions,"<sup>4</sup> Jim Lewis in his essay

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<sup>2</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

“Outside World,” outlines in detail how Prince’s re-photography exposes the lie of commercial advertising imagery and exposes it to the world. He argues that by “catching” these fictions through the camera lens, Prince reveals them.<sup>5</sup> Lewis’s reading of Prince’s work centers on a “mixture of skepticism and credulousness,”<sup>6</sup> on the part of the artist and, like Phillips, he asserts a clear condemnation in the work. Rosetta Brooks gets closest to uncovering the elusive meaning in Prince’s appropriations, with her essay “A Prince of Light or Darkness.” She recognizes the lack of critique in Prince’s work, but finds a way to rationalize it: “By appearing to affirm commodity culture and its values, his alignment with the forces that create it (including those of authorship) actually reveal something dark at their heart.”<sup>7</sup> None of these writers are willing to accept the possibility that Prince’s work promotes and perpetuates the troubling messages of consumerist society, and each reads into his work a subtle but firm critique.

However, Prince’s use of advertising images may not be as critical as Phillips, Lewis, and Brooks proclaim. In fact, there is a sense of yearning in each of Prince’s early works; a sense that the artist does not condemn the luxury products which fill the pages of magazines, but rather covets them. These writers and others in the field of Art History have failed to fully articulate Prince’s motivations as an artist and many questions are left unanswered in their collective analysis. By incorporating perspectives from the fields of critical theory and psychology, some of these questions can be answered. A Lacanian analysis of Prince’s work will bring to light the decidedly uncritical motivations behind

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, Jim. “Outside World.” In *Richard Prince*, 61–84. Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks, Rosetta. “A Prince of Light of Darkness?” In *Richard Prince*, 26–67. New York, N.Y., United States: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003. 39.

the artist's process. Despite the insistence of certain writers on the subject, Prince does not critique consumer culture through his appropriation of advertising images, but is instead motivated by his own desire for luxury and status. He wishes to craft his own image through collecting and investing in fantasies of modern capitalist society. In his re-photographed works, Prince is not exposing the images but claiming them and their promise as his own. Prince is less interested in exposing the lie of consumerism and more interested in freezing in time the promise of the picture, preventing it from ever being exposed as false.

In order to understand how Prince captures the promise of an image in a way that does not condemn it, one must understand some Lacanian Theory of the Gaze. Jacques Lacan, a prominent psychoanalyst and critical theorist routinely associated with American Post Modernism<sup>8</sup>, discusses the gaze as a way of understanding looking dynamics and visual culture. The gaze refers to a process of observation that goes beyond the mechanics of the eye and its processing of light. The gaze is what happens beyond the scientific process of seeing. It is the psychological effect of looking and of being looked at. This process transcends physical space and can apply even to Prince's gazing upon stagnant magazine pictures. In Lacan's famous seminar, "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis", he explains this function of the gaze between subject and image: "Vision is ordered according to a mode that may generally be called the function of images. This function is defined by a point-by-point correspondence of two unities in space. What- ever optical intermediaries may be used to establish their relation, whether

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<sup>8</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large." *Lacanian Ink*, no. 6 (1992): 25–42.

their image is virtual, or real, the point-by-point correspondence is essential.”<sup>9</sup> The gaze exists beyond physical proximity and relies instead on the psychological relationship between interacting entities. Thus, it can be directly applied to Prince’s appropriation of magazine images and can be used to understand how Prince positions himself in his art.

Implicit in the gaze is the desire and anxiety of the viewer. The desire stems from buying into the promise of the image; from coveting the subject and getting caught up in the illusion of its availability. “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze.”<sup>10</sup> The act of gazing creates a dynamic between the subject and object that goes beyond physical existence. There is an exchange of power, pleasure, and desire taking place wherein the object of the gaze becomes wrapped up in the viewer’s desire and perpetuates the myth of its own accessibility. Through this process, a privilege and authority is created. “We can apprehend this privilege of the gaze in the function of desire, by pouring ourselves, as it were, along the veins through which the domain of vision has been integrated into the field of desire.”<sup>11</sup> There is a pleasure in gazing upon an object or image; and in allowing oneself to invest in its promise and through Lacan’s reasoning, the psychological process of looking is closely tied to the yearning and longing to possess that which is seen.

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, Adrian “Jacques Lacan,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2014, 2014, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. 84.

The other side of this dynamic is the anxiety associated with the gaze, which stems from the viewer's recognition of his own ability to be seen.<sup>12</sup> Theories of the gaze incorporate a particular power dynamic in which that who does the looking is in a privileged position and exerts power over the subject of the gaze. But interaction goes two ways. In order to look at something and to participate in the gaze, one is confronted with his own vulnerability. With the pleasure of the gaze comes the realization that if he sees, then he can also be seen. It is this power dynamic which applies directly to Prince's work. By photographing frozen advertising images, he can elude the anxiety of being seen and of being exposed. The camera lens acts as a shield against this exposure. Through his art, Prince can participate in this process of viewing without fear of it being reciprocated. He can claim the objects depicted and assert a personal authority over their symbols and messages.

Slavoj Zizek, a scholar of Lacanian theory and how it is applied to contemporary media, is particularly interested in this anxiety, and in his work, *In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large*, relates it to the psychological response audiences have to Hitchcock horror films. Viewers to believe that their gaze is objective and that their perspective is neutral. Zizek argues that Hitchcock films push audiences to confront their own gaze and the dark desires that are wrapped up in it. The viewer's impartiality was always false and somehow film is able to disrupt this falsehood. "His gaze is de-idealized, its purity blemished by a pathological stain, and what comes forth is the desire that maintains it."<sup>13</sup> Through the suspenseful cinematography, a desire is created within the gaze and audiences begin to crave violence, if only to put an end to the suspense. The audience

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<sup>12</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

must accept that their gaze is not just a scientific process of how their eyes process a visual scene. Instead, when their gaze is thwarted and distorted by the film, audiences are confronted by the authority and privilege that is caught up in their desires. This recognition of inherent bias applies directly to Prince's work because of how advertising images are constructed. Unlike Hitchcock films, advertisements aim to preserve the assumption of impartiality. Advertisements are successful because they create desire through manipulated images and this desire propels consumers into stores. The process of manufacture and cultivation of desire is reliant on the viewers' assumption that their desire is neutral and natural. Instead of disrupting the perceived neutrality of the gaze, advertisers depend on it. Perhaps Prince's work, in its appropriation of advertising images, achieves the same confrontation as a Hitchcock film and perhaps it is for this reason that Prince's work elicits such discomfort in its viewers.

There is another facet to Žižek's interpretation of Lacan, however, which can be applied directly to Prince's work and which provides another reason for discomfort. The difference between *desire* and *drive* helps illuminate Prince's fascination with mythic images in magazine advertisements. "An essential characteristic of *desire* is its restlessness, its ongoing agitated searching and futile striving."<sup>14</sup> When applied to contemporary consumer culture, this refers to the belief that a particular product will fill a need. Upon striving for and attaining that product, it is inevitably discovered that this product is not what it promised to be. It does not fill the void. No object is ever quite "IT." One can keep buying and buying, investing in *desire*, and never filling the need. Žižek describes this constant striving as the root of the "hysteria of everyday capitalist

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<sup>14</sup> Adrian Johnston, "Jacques Lacan," 73.

life.”<sup>15</sup> It is a cycle that can never be completed. “Desire is a metonymic sliding propelled by a lack, striving to capture the elusive lure: it is always, by definition, ‘unsatisfied’, susceptible to every possible interpretation, since it ultimately coincides with its own interpretation: it is nothing but the movement of interpretation, the passage from one signifier to another, the eternal production of new signifiers which, retroactively, give sense to the preceding chain.”<sup>16</sup> Here, signifiers refer to the visual interpretations of an object or idea, namely the advertising imagery. There is nothing to be obtained or achieved because the visual interpretations are separated from the real object. The desire is for an illusion and not for the object itself. The consumer wants the promise and not the product. This is why when we purchase a product we have been craving, we will ultimately discover that this does not fill our desire. The craving is for something that can never be achieved, and results in a constant process of trying and failing to attain the object behind the illusion.

*Desire* can never be satisfied. *Drive*, however can create pleasure through this process of failing to achieve desire. “Whereas *desire* is stuck with its dissatisfied drifting from object to object and ever onward, *drive* derives a perverse enjoyment from this desire-fuelled libidinal circling around the vanishing point of the impossible-*qua*-unattainable. There where desire is frustrated, drive is gratified. Drive gains its satisfaction through vampirically feeding off of the dissatisfaction of desire.”<sup>17</sup> Although logically, American consumers have realized that material possessions will not alleviate their problems, many still take pleasure in the act of unsuccessfully pursuing this desire. There is a pleasure in the failure because it is the one thing that can be sure. In hoping for

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<sup>15</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. “In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Johnston, “Jacques Lacan,” 75.



fulfillment of *desire*, the only thing that remains constant is the inevitable failure of the effort, a cycle of perpetual pursuit and disappointment. “In opposition to this pursuit of the lost object which remains forever 'elsewhere', *drive* is in a sense always-already satisfied: contained in its closed circuit, it 'encircles' its object—as Lacan puts it — and finds satisfaction in its own pulsation, in its repeated failure to attain the object.”<sup>18</sup> The images Prince appropriates cannot fill the void of desire, but they can provide an entry point for the artist into the cycle of *drive*.

Working from a Lacanian analysis of Prince’s appropriated images, we see an interest in preserving the illusion of commercial images and American consumer culture that is quite different from the intent of his contemporaries. Instead of uncovering the lies inherent in commercial images, Prince is preserving the lie, fixing an image within the cycle of *drive*. Prince began his career working for *Time-Life* in the tear sheet department. He sat alone in a basement for eight hours at a time tearing the articles out of published magazines so they could be archived.<sup>19</sup> The byproduct of this process was print advertisements, pages and pages of images exclusively featuring glamorous and luxurious lifestyles. Flipping through these advertisements was the only way that Prince could have access to the luxury life depicted—the beautiful women and the ruggedly charming men in suits were all contained within the pages. Eventually, he began to tear those out too. He would look for images that appealed to him and take them for himself, collecting all of them and using them in his art. Prince wanted them; they appealed to him, and he let himself be seduced by them, physically taking them home with him. Originally, Prince would tear print advertisements out by hand and paste them on

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<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso, 1997). 228.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 23.

boards.<sup>20</sup> Soon Prince discovered that a camera was a much more effective alternative for collecting images and began using this method instead. This collection of existing images and re-presentation of them as art parallels the cycle of *desire* and *drive* quite directly. Just as many Americans collect products to fill a void, Prince collects images of these products and claims them as his own. Prince even refers to his process of re-photography as “stealing”<sup>21</sup> Through this type of language and artistic practice, Prince’s appropriation techniques are doing something very different than Kruger. He is not rejecting advertising images as false and corrupt, but claiming them for himself. Prince is using them to fuel the *drive* cycle so that he can formulate his identity through these desires.

By re-photographing magazine images of luxury items, Prince is using them to structure his artistic identity and writing his name on them. He is taking ownership of these products in an effort to grasp the pleasure of *desire*. Unlike other appropriation artists who pervert existing images to highlight why they are wrong, Prince simply adopts them, preserving the myth of these images as an aspiration. Rosetta Brooks describes Prince’s investment in the myth: “A constant in his early experiments in re-photography is his goal of showing others the quality of the images that he finds so tantalizing. Prince chooses to represent these images because he himself is seduced by them. There is never any criticism in this activity.”<sup>22</sup> Brooks goes on to describe how the deadpan depiction of Prince’s own lust in his art is a brilliantly subtle way of presenting to the viewer everything that is wrong with consumer attitudes in America. However, it seems that Prince’s desire is what matters here, not the hollow superficiality of that desire. He is not highlighting the way commercial images lie to the viewer; even though this is how his

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<sup>20</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Brooks, Rosetta. “A Prince of Light of Darkness?,” in *Richard Prince*. 40.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid* 28.

work is often described. Something much simpler is happening here, a simple human impulse to possess that Prince regularly gives in to. Prince is seduced by an image, so he takes it. The act of re-photography is Prince's way of "stealing" a lifestyle he does not have access to. On some level, Prince is aware of this difference between *desire* and *drive* and aware of the futility of investing in commercial products as saviors.<sup>23</sup> However, he does not want to expose the truth. Prince wants to revel in the lie. By re-photographing advertising images, he is attempting to disrupt the cycle, freezing the promise of these products. Prince does not fully understand his mistrust of these images, but is still seduced and titillated by their power. What Prince does understand about the images he takes, and what lies at the heart of his artistic motivations, is recognition of his total inability to resist them. Prince is unabashedly captivated by these images and the promises they make. So, he takes them. This gets to the core of why Prince's art is so off-putting and polarizing. He uses his art to take ownership of things that he did not create, exerting control of the gaze and imposing his desires over symbols of status and success then incorporating those symbols into his own artistic identity. Through analyzing the artist's comprehensive body of work and incorporating a Lacanian perspective, the relationship between Prince and his re-photographed images can be fully explained. Through the subjects Prince chooses to appropriate, and through his method of appropriation, Prince's primary aspirations are revealed. His *Cowboys* series attempts to quell insecurities about Prince's own masculinity by claiming the mythic character of the American cowboy as his public identity. His *Girlfriends* series provides an outlet for Prince to exert his sexual fantasies and voyeuristic power over the women he re-

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, Jim. "Outside World." In *Richard Prince*. 67.

photographs, claiming them as objects to bolster his own reputation. In the *New Portraits*, Prince claims ownership over emerging digital communities in an effort to remain relevant. A Lacanian analysis of these series reveals how Prince's work is misinterpreted by existing publications and highlights the aspects of his appropriation art that glorify rather than critique American capitalist power structures.

## Chapter One: American Masculinity in The *Cowboys* Series

By looking at the various subjects and objects that Prince uses in his appropriation, one can begin to formulate a list of Prince's own insecurities and desires. From what he chooses to claim, one can begin to guess at what the artist feels he lacks. Unlike other appropriation artists working in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Prince does not clearly articulate a message in his work. In a sense, for Prince the work is something to hide behind, a way to make art without exposing himself to the world. By dealing with images created by someone else that are already available to the public, Prince can avoid responsibility for his work. He did not create it, but merely found it and re-presented back to the world as art. Likewise, Prince is notoriously illusive during in-person interviews and events. Thus, it is very hard to get a firm reading on Prince's intention for his art. He has been known to lie in interviews, or even make up and self-publish entire fictional encounters.<sup>24</sup> It seems that Prince is determined to make art without making himself vulnerable. Re-photography is the perfect medium for fulfilling this objective, and allows Prince to remain always within the privileged position of the gaze. Re-photography allows a certain level of distance and disassociation from his subjects and provides an extra layer of protection behind which Prince can hide.

However, all art, regardless of its process, is a reflection of the artist's inner self and Prince's work is no exception. Through choosing which images to take and which to leave behind, Prince inadvertently provides a detailed list of those things that he wishes to possess. Despite his insistence otherwise, Prince's re-photography is deeply personal

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<sup>24</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 22.

and must be read as such. The choice to appropriate leaves Prince equally responsible for the content as its original creator. He has claimed these images in an effort to construct an artistic identity and in doing so provides his audience with a window into his deepest insecurities and desires. Some consistent themes running through the work are wealth, Americana, hyper masculinity, sexual proclivity, confidence, and cool. His *Cowboys* series, which has become a sort of trademark for Prince, incorporates all these traits and provides Prince with a way to quell his private insecurities by claiming them for his public persona.

The *Cowboys* series is made up of images originally found in Marlboro cigarette ads, which Prince has re-photographed and re-printed directly from the magazine's pages. He uses his camera lens to freeze these advertising images within the cycle of *desire* and *drive* so that he can preserve them. This urge to fix desire within a picture is outlined in Zizek's work as a natural impulse: "In order for us to perceive the object clearly, it must be frozen, immobilized - immobility makes a thing visible."<sup>25</sup> These cowboys are mythical figures in the American cultural memory. The cowboy is as close as we get to a national historical hero. They are deeply rooted in the fibers of American freedom and represent the integrity and resilience of the American spirit. Yet, they are also being bastardized by a corporate company in order to sell cigarettes. "The opposition of desire and drive is far from being a simply abstract conceptual couple: a fundamental historical tension is invested in it."<sup>26</sup> These cowboy figures are a perfect example of Lacanian theories of the *drive*. The images hold a promise and a symbolic ideology that appeals to consumers despite its falseness. These figures, while instantly recognizable, don't exist

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<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso, 1997). 109.

<sup>26</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin Is Writ Large," 74.

anymore. Prince's image is "a photograph of a photograph of something which does not exist in the first place; for if there are any cowboys left in this country, they are not Marlboro men. The image just hovers there, separated umpteen times from nothing, like the shadow of a ghost. It's powerful nonetheless."<sup>27</sup> The United States no longer has a place for them within our contemporary societal structure, but their cultural promise remains intact and the signifiers take on a life of their own, removed from the signified. It is this promise that Prince preserves through his claiming and re-showing of the images. Cowboys appear over and over in Prince's work and serve as a constant reminder of the American masculine ideal. It is an ideal that can never be achieved, and a goal that can never be reached. However, just as there is pleasure in the cycle of buying and being disappointed by consumer products, there is a pleasure in the constant trying and failing to live up to the mythic masculinity of the Marlboro cowboys.

As a child, Prince often struggled to locate himself within the socially dictated definition of manhood. He looked up to the symbolic authorities on masculinity and continues to do so in his work, by freezing and re-presenting masculine figures as a part of himself. Superman and Zorro were both particular masculine role models for prince when he was as young as five years old.<sup>28</sup> "I was in love with 'Zorro'. The TV show. Once a week, seven o'clock at night, on a little black and white. It actually comes into your living room. And it's what matters. It's what's important. The whole concept. Like Superman. During the day a regular guy...but the other side, something like a hero. I

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis, Jim. "Outside World." In *Richard Prince*, ed. Lisa Phillips. (Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992,) 65.

<sup>28</sup> Jeff Rian, "In The Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince," in *Richard Prince* (New York, N.Y., United States: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003), 6–24. 8.

made drawings of Zorro. I think I did that for years—make drawings of Zorro.”<sup>29</sup> Some of Prince’s first childhood experiences with art making were motivated by his aspirational relationship to media representations of masculinity. “Prince selects and therefore controls the roles he plays, developing them as a series of surrogate self-portraits: model, cowboy, surfer, race car driver, rock n’ roller, patient, salesman, son, lover, stand-up comic, drunk cheat, husband, brother, father, superhero.”<sup>30</sup> He hides behind and loses himself in the cultural symbols of masculine identity. But these are not real people Prince aspires to. “Father” and “brother,” in this case do not refer to the human beings who occupy those roles, but rather the roles themselves. Prince is more interested in the title of “cowboy” and what that title represents than he is in meeting and documenting the work and lives of actual cowboys. It is the idealized, commercialized, sterilized version that appeals to Prince. The signifier holds more power than the object behind it. Superman, rock stars, racecar drivers, Zorro; these are all embodiments of adolescent male fantasies. They are also all manufactured consumer products, used to sell movie tickets, comic books, and record players. They are hollow in their promises, yet their appeal is undeniable.

Our American cultural space is saturated with symbolic figures of masculinity, figured which have been appropriated to various commercial causes and that have become almost entirely removed from their original source. Prince documents his experience with these figures and the lie inherent in them through a method of displaying art that he calls “ganging.” To create a gang, Prince assembles several appropriated

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<sup>29</sup> Jeff Rian, “In The Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince,” 8.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 35.



photographs into a grid of nine.<sup>31</sup> He got the idea for this by working with contact sheets of photographs which display several photographs next to one another.<sup>32</sup> These contact sheets are just a photographer's tool for completing the development process, but Prince sees meaning in the way they force associations between images. "Rather than being about a section of a magazine, the gangs were about an entire magazine. It was all in one place—the white of the photographic paper became a wall—the frame itself became an object."<sup>33</sup> Prince's gangs show the universality of media images. Despite all of their varied subjects, varied audiences, and varied aesthetic values, these images have one major thing in common: they all lie. They all trade in fiction but represent it as fact. Through assembling gangs, Prince is able to link these images together and freeze them in the moment before they are exposed, to savor the illusion.

The gangs, and their forced associations between seemingly disparate content, allow the viewer to see the connections Prince makes between images. There is nostalgia that he feels for the false promise in these images and that is what ties them together for him. One of his early gangs called *Super Heavy Santa*,<sup>34</sup> assembles various symbols of American masculinity in a single page, highlighting how the images convey similar messages yet also highlighting an overarching feeling of wrongness. It shows three images of the cartoon Superman, as both the superhero and his secret identity Clark Kent. Superman looks constantly distressed and never smiles. The superman symbol peaks out from underneath his Clark Kent clothing. The contours of his muscles are drawn to extreme and are set off by the delicate curl of his iconic cowlick. There are also three

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<sup>31</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, Jim. "Outside World." In *Richard Prince*, 61–84. 73.

<sup>33</sup> Heiferman, Marvin. Richard Prince. "Richard Prince." *BOMB*, no. 24 (July 1, 1988): 34–39.

<sup>34</sup> Fig. 2 : Prince, Richard. *Super Heavy Santa*. Ektacolor Photograph, 1986.

photographs of a man dressed as Santa Claus. He is not perfectly embodying the character, as he is posed next to a row of motorcycles and has his arm around a leather-clad woman. The sunglasses and biker gloves give this particular Santa a rebellious edge, yet he is still instantly recognizable due to the long white beard and red hat. The last three images are all a hair metal rock band. The anonymous band mates have long teased out hair and are wearing significant amounts of dark eye makeup. They are clad in studs, leather, and other 80s rock ware. Arranged in groups of five and six, the men are snarling towards the camera and exude a rebellious tough guy attitude. Interestingly, these group shots have a few women snuck in to the compositions, which are hard to distinguish because they share features with the glammed out rock n' rollers, mistaken because of their shared visual coding. All of these appropriated images are coded with iconic symbols—the cowlick curl, the long white beard, and the teased out hair—which tell the viewer what they are seeing. Each of these images, however, also subverts these visual indicators by partially distorting meaning. The images are just a little bit off. They aren't perfect representations of these cultural figures. The falsehood of each image has been exposed in some way and the constructed promise of the image is precarious. Prince freezes these individuals as symbols, fixing them within the roles each plays and stabilizing the promise of the image.

Prince was first inspired to become an artist based off of one of these falsely constructed yet intensely seductive narratives. He was taken in by the promise of an image and uprooted his life because of it. The myth and promise was so seductive that it propelled him all the way to an art career in New York City.<sup>35</sup> Prince first wanted to be an artist because the idealized image of an artist appealed to him. It was Jackson Pollock,

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<sup>35</sup> Rian, Jeff. "In The Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince," 9.

or perhaps Franz Kline, as Prince tends to contradict himself in retellings of the story. But the fact remains that Prince fancied himself an artist because of their rugged and masculine symbolic appeal. He grew up during the height of fame for American Abstract Expressionists and saw them as cultural celebrities to be envied. These artists belonged in the cultural public domain. Prince writes that he was, “always impressed by the photographs of Jackson Pollock, but didn’t think much about his paintings.”<sup>36</sup> He fixated on the publicized image of Expressionist artists and was more interested in their machismo cool attitudes than he was in their work. Pollock was an outlaw of sorts. He was someone who embodied the same detached and aloof brand of masculinity as the *Cowboys*. Phillips heard the Kline version of the story, stating, “Prince maintains that his move to New York in 1973 was prompted by the image of Kline staring out the window of his 14<sup>th</sup> street studio, cigarette in hand, foot on the sill. In this picture, Prince saw a man content to be alone, perusing the outside world from the inner sanctum of his studio.”<sup>37</sup> This would have appealed to Prince on several levels, both because of his personal struggles with his own masculinity and because of his fear of being seen. Notice that in this description of the photo, Kline is placed quite firmly in what Lacan would deem the position of power within the dynamics of the gaze. Although Phillips never made the connection between Prince and Lacan, there is a direct parallel to be made between Lacan’s theories and Prince’s aspiration to an artistic outsider identity. Kline views the world from his studio but remains protected from it, removed from it. He does not wish to be seen. Prince fancied himself an outsider. “The outsider, the melancholy, longing one, the town geek, who moves to the big city after high school, studies how to

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<sup>36</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art, 48.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

want, and reemerges some years later as a hero of misunderstood cool.”<sup>38</sup> This narrative is what motivated Prince to move to New York and become an artist. This same narrative has been the plotline of many Hollywood films and popular novels. It is the story of *Gatsby*, the story of Pollock and Kline, a story of the outsider perfectly redeemed in an apathetic postmodern society. To be above it all, to be the hero of his own story—this is what Prince aspires to. But this narrative and character are fictitious. They are a lie that is used to inspire and to manipulate, and Prince’s wholehearted investment in it is an indication of just how different he is from more critical appropriation artists like Kruger. Despite the insistence of critics that his work is primarily a critical commentary, Prince does not see the falsehood in these narratives, nor does he want to. He does not expose or critique anything. Instead he believes in the lies completely. Prince is perfectly content to live in the world of commercially constructed falsehoods in the *drive* cycle.

It can be argued that Prince has in turn attempted to construct himself as one of these false constructions. He views his own identity as a collection of images that have been sold to him and defines himself through his relationship to mainstream cultural imagery. The act of appropriation requires a significant investment in pop culture. Most often this investment is one of rebellion and revolt. For Prince, however, it is one of glorification and acceptance. Prince likes the perfect magazine images. He likes them so he captures them in a re-photograph and then presents them in a gallery with his name attached. Prince claims these figures as a part of his own carefully constructed outward identity in order to become the romanticized outside observer he covets in pictures.

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<sup>38</sup> Lewis, Jim. “Outside World.” In *Richard Prince*, 61–84. 77.

The cowboy is a mythic figure that Prince wants to claim. It is a potent symbol of the American dream and Prince wants ownership over it. As someone born in the American-occupied Panama Canal Zone, it is likely that Prince feels equally at odds with his American identity as he does with that of his masculinity.<sup>39</sup> In his infamous fictional interview with J. G. Ballard in 1967, Prince talks almost exclusively about his family's time in the Panama Canal Zone and his father's alleged involvement in the Vietnam War. Prince alludes to his father's criminal espionage activities and constructs an elaborate story of his own struggle to gain official United States citizenship and admittance into the country after turning 18. He retells a complicated series of events where he is detained at the airport for over two weeks before being shuttled to the Bahamas and back and then, finally being let back in to the country.<sup>40</sup> This story, while it occurred only in Prince's imagination, indicates insecurity about his own status as an American. So in true postmodern consumerist fashion, Prince looks to advertisements in an effort to fill the emotional void and to create a sense of belonging. Despite the images inability to fill any sort of void, Prince will continue to participate in the Lacanian *drive* cycle in an effort to be comforted in the assured failure of his efforts. Perhaps Prince also participates and perpetuates this lie of the cowboy image in a hope that his audience will believe it, even if he doesn't. He does not want to focus on where this "American dream" fails or on his own failure, but rather is interested in preserving the lie. Prince is trying to freeze the process of an image failing to live up to its promise before that failure can happen. "The cowboy is a quintessentially American symbol associated with a spirit of individualism

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<sup>39</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 22.

<sup>40</sup> Brooks, Rosetta, Jeff Rian, and Luc Sante. *Richard Prince*. New York, N.Y., United States: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003. 86.

and free will...he is instantly recognizable in his requisite dress of denim, leather chaps, boots, and a Stetson hat.”<sup>41</sup> The Cowboys are compilations of signifiers and can be constructed by a number of physical objects, just like Superman or Santa. The symbolic cowboy is made up from a superficial checklist of traits, as is the image of the brooding artist. By claiming and appropriating these *Cowboys*, Prince is able to indulge in the myth of the cowboy while also bolstering his own image.

An in-depth analysis of images within the *Cowboys* series provides further evidence for how these *Cowboys* are related to Prince’s own insecurities surrounding American masculinity. It is not just in Prince’s writings that we see this attempt to placate feelings of personal inadequacy, but also visually in the individual works. One work within the series, *Untitled (cowboy)* completed in 1986, bears a striking resemblance to how Prince described the photograph of Kline.<sup>42</sup> The image is a super cropped close up of a man’s face, peeking out from behind a coffee cup and staring off into the distance. He has a furrowed brow and an intense gaze, shaded by the brim of a Stetson hat. The cropping of the photo was in a part a necessity of the medium. In order to eliminate the image from its original context and ownership, Prince has to avoid any inclusion of advertising copy or logos. There is also a very grainy texture to the image that can be attributed to the process of re-photographing. Prince took a tiny section of an 8 by 10 inch magazine page and then blew it up to 24 by 20 inches and this remnant of the appropriation process can be seen clearly in the final image. That pixilated texture however highlights the toughness of the central cowboy figure. This is not a man who values aesthetics. This is the image of a man who observes the world and who counts

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<sup>41</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Fig 3 : Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, Ektacolor Photograph, 1986.

himself an outside observer—the misunderstood hero of understated cool that Prince has been aspiring to since boyhood. It is important to highlight the various implications of re-photography as opposed to art photography of a more traditional nature. When photographing a cowboy in person, the cowboy has the ability to look back and the process of observation goes both ways. As the artist watches his subject and makes decisions as to how he will create an image, the subject is also watching the artist, returning his gaze. This is the anxiety Lacan speaks of in terms of looking dynamics. The gaze is a two-way process that breeds both power and anxiety simultaneously. However, when re-photographing an image, Prince is able to look at and admire this figure without having to endure the return gaze. Prince's particular brand of appropriation allows him to look and to possess without having to reveal any part of his private self. He is able to capture the cowboy's mythic image and exert ownership over it through this Lacanian dynamic of the gaze without sacrifice, and does so over and over again for the duration of his career.

The cowboy figures Prince chooses to appropriate all have the same attitude of power and control. A later image of the series, *Untitled (cowboy)* completed in 1998 shows a cowboy wrangling a wild horse with a lasso.<sup>43</sup> The vertical composition is similarly cramped and the cowboy fills the frame with the dynamism of his action. He wears the requisite Stetson hat and a worn denim jacket. His legs are covered with leather chaps and he wears working gloves which peek out from underneath his sleeves. He has a strong stance and a powerful presence, managing to upstage even the bucking horse. This image depicts a man completely in control. He is calm, powerful and confident. Coming a full ten years after the first *Cowboys* emerged, the recurring cowboy motif seems

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<sup>43</sup> Fig 4: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (cowboy)*. Ektacolor Photograph, 1998 1997.

mostly redundant in Prince's work. It is not a variation on the older works, nor is it an update. It is simply a continuation. Prince was making new additions to the *Cowboys* series as late as 2007<sup>44</sup> and it is doubtful as to whether Prince will ever stop appropriating these *Cowboys* into his art. There is a therapeutic quality to Prince's *Cowboys*. He is comforted by his collection and presentation of them. The images are too good to be true, beautiful and idyllic in their depictions of an extinct race. The landscapes are gorgeously colored with bright blue skies and large open spaces, and the cowboys themselves are quite perfect. All of them are white, tall, muscular, and handsome. They are *too perfect* in every sense of the word, and profoundly inauthentic. Particularly, when we place them in the context of cigarette sales, an industry that was just starting to deal with significant scrutiny regarding the health risks of smoking tobacco, the *Cowboys* take on a more tragic meaning.<sup>45</sup> As spokesmen for Marlboro, these images are tainted with the failure of their promise. In reality, the Marlboro cowboys are implicated in a fairly significant national scandal surrounding death and danger.<sup>46</sup> The *Cowboys* in Prince's series, however, exist on a plane above this unpleasant reality. In Prince's re-photographed images of them, they are saved from the reality of failing to fulfill the promised *desire*. Through Prince's preservation of them, the *Cowboys* are never exposed and continue to live within the *drive* cycle quite happily.

Prince does not critique this false image and its use in advertising but instead gives himself permission to get caught up in it. He does not dwell on the inability of the image to live up to its promise; he simply takes comfort in the promise. Where there

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<sup>44</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 97.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid* 32.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid* 32.



should be condemnation there is only glorification, and perhaps a little bit of guilt for not feeling more critical. Prince is continually being seduced by the myth of American masculinity and with his art and gives himself permission to succumb to his temptation. This postmodern angst and profound desire to fulfill his own adolescent fantasy drives a lot of Prince's artistic choices. He wants to be like Pollock and Kline, like the *Cowboys*—the ruggedly cool and aloof hero of his own story. This is an understandable aspiration and one that is shared by the vast majority of Americans. We are all seduced. We are all fooled and Prince's inability to resist the allure of media images is not in itself a condemnable offense. It does, however, provide a wealth of insight into the mind of the artist. Prince's work does not exist outside of himself simply because the source material he uses for his art belongs to the collective conscious of American consumers. Prince cannot exempt himself from association or responsibility. He cannot escape the returned gaze. By re-photographing images that already exist, Prince hopes to bypass interaction and to escape intimacy and exposure. He hopes to be always poised in the position of power, looking without being seen. It is in this sense that Prince fails. Regardless of his method of art making, Prince must expose himself and his insecurities eventually and does so despite his vehement insistence otherwise. He cannot construct an outward persona of himself that is any more convincing than the *Cowboys* he appropriates. In the end, the promise of an image must be exposed as false and Prince must be seen.

## Chapter Two: Nonconsensual Voyeurism in The *Girlfriends* Series

Richard Prince claims the images he photographs and, through his process of re-photography, aims to make found images into his own. When looking at Prince's collected works, at everything he has done over the course of his prolific career, one can begin to assemble a profile of Prince's own aspirations in addition to his anxieties. We see in these images what Prince wants, what he covets, which promises of consumer culture he is unable to resist. The common thread that knits together all of Prince's various projects is his desire for what is depicted.<sup>47</sup> Prince only claims images that captivate him. He is interested in preserving the seduction of the image without shattering it, ignoring the impossibility of physically achieving his desires. In the real world, during his early career, Prince could not hope to claim the lifestyle he was photographing. He could not afford the extravagantly decorated homes and commercial status symbols of the early re-photographed images. These were not physically attainable. However, what Prince was able to access were the images. By re-photographing the images of these luxury products and lifestyles, Prince got closer to possessing the real things. He was able to circumnavigate the consumer process associated with Lacanian *desire* and *drive*. Instead of purchasing product after product and continually discovering the inability of that object to fill the void in his life, Prince just photographed them. He found a loophole of American consumerism in these advertising images and discovered that through his particular method of appropriation, he could participate in the pleasure of the *drive* cycle.

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<sup>47</sup> Brooks, Rosetta. "A Prince of Light of Darkness?" In *Richard Prince*. 28.

The ownership he felt when photographing an advertising image was the same as could be felt through purchasing. Through this dynamic, Prince was able to tap into the process of *drive* without ever spending a dime, or leaving the tear sheets room in the basement of *Time-Life*. Photographing an image, for Prince, yields the same result as purchasing the product depicted, and through appropriating commercial images, he is able to derive all of the pleasure inherent in the act of ownership. Everything that can be purchased, all of the status symbols and luxury goods that promise happiness and glamor, can be photographed. Prince can bypass the buying process while still exerting power over the contents of the image. However, there are lots of things featured in photographs that cannot be bought or claimed and yet Prince's treatment of them remains identical.

The women in Prince's work are submitted to the same process of control and ownership through appropriation that we see in Prince's treatment of material possessions. Women are claimed in the photograph so that Prince can experience the pleasure of the *drive*. Through re-photographing these women and through capturing the moment of his gaze on film, Prince is exerting a type of gendered power that treats women as objects. He is claiming them through his appropriation in a way that does less to critique sexualization of women in images, and more to perpetuate it. The commodification and consumption of women is a prevalent theme in Prince's work but one that is rarely discussed in academic writings on the artist. When Prince's consistent choice to "steal" naked and sexually provocative women is acknowledged, it is framed as a conscious critique.<sup>48</sup> Lisa Phillips describes the dominant perspective on Prince's objectified women, "primarily as a critique of the conditions of commodification and

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<sup>48</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 31.

fetishization that inform art production.”<sup>49</sup> However, as he did with consumer objects and products, Prince is avoiding any type of explicit condemnation or critique. He is not disrupting the dominating gaze but preserving it, freezing it in a photograph and selling it as his own.

Looking at the direct visual comparisons between Prince’s product images and images of women exposes the imposition of Prince’s desire when it is applied to people instead of objects. A common format in Prince’s art is the presentation of visually similar images next to each other in a set or *gang*. We see this method of presentation in one of Prince’s earliest appropriation works, *Untitled (Living Rooms)*, which shows four living room scenes lined up next to each other.<sup>50</sup> By showing images as serial patterns, Prince highlights the unoriginality of advertising images and makes it clear that the promise of one image is quite similar to that of the next. Critique of the stereotyping visual language pervasive in contemporary advertising is a fairly universal interpretation of the living rooms, shared by Lisa Phillips, Rosetta Brooks, and Nancy Spector in their respective analyses. Although a valid reading of the work, this interpretation puts emphasis on the rooms depicted as interchangeable, completely reproducible entities. Prince wants to possess them all equally, without discrimination as a way of participating in the cycle of unachievable desire. He claims them indiscriminately because the promise they offer is the same in each image of the series. Another popular piece from this period in Prince’s career is *Untitled (Three Women Looking in the Same Direction)*<sup>51</sup>. This piece, also a series of images appropriated from magazine pages, shows three women as completely

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<sup>49</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 31.

<sup>50</sup> Fig. 5: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (Living Rooms)*. Set of 4 Ektacolor photographs, 1977.

<sup>51</sup> Fig. 6: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (Three Women Looking in the Same Direction)*. Set of 3 Ektacolor photographs, 1980.

interchangeable commercial entities that serve to stimulate Prince's desire. Their purpose is identical to that of the living room scenes. The value of these women for Prince lies not in their humanity, but in their promise of fulfilling some desire. Prince claims these women as objects. However, there is a huge difference between a woman and a reupholstered couch. Showing the two sets in a visually identical format as Prince does evidences a fundamental mistreatment of women on the part of the artist. He views the women and living rooms as having the same function. The images exist to seduce Prince, and to pleasure him through his ownership and appropriation.

The objectification of women in Prince's early works is quite clear. His later works, however, take this commodification to a deeper level. Prince increasingly positions women as erotic objects to be possessed in pursuit of male dominance and sexual pleasure. The women he chooses to appropriate in his work present a gateway into the Lacanian pleasure cycle of *drive* and *desire* and, by re-photographing these images, Prince is enacting his power of the male gaze in a process that he himself recognizes as being explicitly tied to his own voyeuristic sexual desires. Prince describes the sexual pleasure he gets from re-photographing women in this alarmingly vulgar interview with Jeff Rian, "Out and in. Like fucking. Fucking the picture. Yeah, maybe re-photographing a picture is like fucking a picture. There is something sexual about standing behind the camera and staring at another picture. It's hard to explain. It's like you've captured it. Even before you've taken it. Even before you press the shutter. You can stare at it all day."<sup>52</sup> This phenomenon has actually been explained thoroughly by Lacan. What Prince is describing here is the oppressive power of the male gaze. Clearly Prince's

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<sup>52</sup> Brooks, Rosetta. "Spiritual America: No Holds Barred." In *Richard Prince*, 85–108. Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992. 19.

appropriation is not an entirely impartial cultural critique, as critics like Phillips and Lewis claim. The bias in his work is tangled up in his sexual desires and fantasies, which are enacted in the process of claiming and possessing women.

Blatant sexualization of women seems to be present in most of Prince's work, but particularly in the *Girlfriends* series. This series is often discussed as a counterpart to the Marlboro *Cowboys* and as a commentary on stereotypes of American masculinity. There are definite similarities between the two series in terms of what Phillips describes as, "a celebration of Americana, particularly the eroticized objects of male desire."<sup>53</sup> Both the Hell's Angels and Marlboro Cowboys exemplify a type of mythic masculinity, which young boys and men aspire to. The biker gang subculture features a particularly literal representation of male power and dominance, similar to that of the cowboy and which creates a thematic connection between these two series.<sup>54</sup> However, *Girlfriends* differs from *Cowboys* in a couple of essential ways. First, the men in the *Girlfriends* series are not featured in the frame of the photo as the *Cowboys* are. They are not the visual focus. Instead, images of their bikes and their girlfriends are used as representations of their power and masculinity. Presumably, the men are behind the camera lens, occupying the same privileged position as Prince. Second, the women in these photos are not archetypal or anonymous like the *Cowboys*. There is nothing universal about these women. They are unique individuals who live real lives and these images are evidence of their real relationships. Prince found these *Girlfriend* photos in the back pages of niche biker magazines. The premise behind them is that readers and subscribers to the magazine can send in submissions to be published in the next issue. These readers stage photo shoots,

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<sup>53</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 45.

<sup>54</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 41.

often in their own houses or backyards, where they position their two prized possessions to be immortalized on film: their motorcycle and their woman. “The Girlfriend photos serve as trophies for these dreams of self-sovereignty. The sexy sweetheart—adoring, available, and yielding to the machine—is a required prop in the biker’s image of himself as independent, macho, relevant, and hip.”<sup>55</sup> Here, Specktor highlights how the photographed women were used to construct their boyfriends’ identities. The relationship between Prince and these women, however, is slightly different. Through re-photography, Prince is taking on the privileged position of the biker boyfriend but without the requisite relationship or consent. Like the Cowboy series, these images are coded with signifiers of American masculinity. This time, however, the subjects are possessions rather than gods. They are trophies to be held up as proof of their owners’ power and, through the appropriation of them, Prince is able to bolster his own macho aspirations.

Prince has appropriated many of these images in different series throughout his career<sup>56</sup>, but a visual analysis of one early piece highlights why Prince’s claiming of these images is so misogynistic. *Untitled (Girlfriend)* from 1993<sup>57</sup> shows a blue, black, and silver motorcycle displayed sideways in a natural backdrop. Some long grass protrudes in the foreground and a dark, leafy tree provides a textured background. The bike is front and center of the image, being displayed as the most prized possession of its owner. Holding the bike is a woman with curly strawberry blonde hair and stiff high-waisted jeans. She stands behind the bike in neutral posture, keeping her hands on the seat of the

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<sup>55</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 42.

<sup>56</sup> *Gangs* and *Untitled (parties)* both feature partially nude women with motorcycles in Prince’s appropriated images but will not be discussed at length as they are too similar to *Girlfriends* to warrant their own visual analysis.

<sup>57</sup> Fig. 7: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (Girlfriend)*. Ektacolor Photograph, 1993.

bike to keep it steady. If it were not for her partial nudity, this could be a “For Sale by Owner” post in a local newspaper. The woman is casually topless, both breasts displayed for the camera. She is posed like the bike, in the center on the frame on full display. This visual pairing of the two subjects implies the equal status and purpose of the two. Both are being shown as property. The woman is an accessory like the bike. She is the cameraman’s possession, and seems honored to be counted with the Harley. There is something intimate and vulnerable about this photo, which makes it more interesting to Prince than the shiny and polished fashion shoots where we usually see women on sexual display. “My ‘girlfriend’ gangs weren’t like the Hollywood-playboy-girl-next-door-thing,” he said. “The girl in my gang *is* the girl next door.”<sup>58</sup> Prince is right. This is not a super model that has been trained to perform in front of a camera. The woman in the photo is decidedly unglamorous with her natural face and hair. She looks real. The inherent myth of the image is less obvious because the subject seems so attainable. Her shoulders are tensed, evidencing her discomfort and exposing the artificiality of her feigned nonchalance. Despite the discomfort of the body language, this woman looks at the camera, and by extension her boyfriend, with affection and willingness to please. Her boyfriend is behind the lens, calling the shots and art directing the shoot. Because of this comfortable gaze and the girlfriend’s seeming willingness to do what she is asked, this image carries within it a different kind of myth. The promise of this image is not of glamour or status through consumerism, but of affection. The promise of the image is the availability of the woman featured. She presents herself to the camera openly and willingly. This *Girlfriend* consents to her own objectification and commodification,

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<sup>58</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 130.



submitting herself to the man behind the camera. However, that man is not Richard Prince.

The primary issue with these photos is not necessarily that they exist in biker magazines, in the context to which each woman originally consented, but that Prince has stolen them and claimed them as his own. By re-photographing these images, Prince is enacting the power of the male gaze in a process that he himself recognizes as being explicitly tied to his own voyeuristic sexual desires.<sup>59</sup> However, he also acknowledges that lack of consent and the distance provided by his method of appropriation add to the appeal. “The *Girlfriends* first began when I re-photographed biker girls that had their picture in biker magazines,” He explains in the Jeff Rian interview. “Then, when I moved upstate, I actually met some real biker girls, at biker parties. I started to take their pictures, but it wasn’t the same. I liked it better when I’d buy the magazine and look at their pictures that were already there.”<sup>60</sup> What Prince is describing here is the dehumanization of his subjects. Prince prefers the images of these women to the real thing because the images are better vessels for his own desire. The appearance of sexual availability is what appeals to Prince, and this appeal is complicated by in-person interaction. He views the women in his art as objects and from a distance, where their own opinions and desires are completely irrelevant and unnecessary. Critic Luc Sante gets to the heart of this objectifying aspect of the *Girlfriends* in his essay analyzing a piece called *Untitled (girlfriend)*, 1999.<sup>61</sup> “In the end though, the effect is simply and

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<sup>59</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 129.

<sup>60</sup> Jeff Rian, “In The Picture: Jeff Rian in Conversation with Richard Prince,” in *Richard Prince*. 21.

<sup>61</sup> Sante, Luc. “Untitled (girlfriend), 1999.” In *Richard Prince*, 70–80. New York, N.Y., United States: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003. 71.

crudely masturbatory. The girlfriend is requisite as a prop but no more capable of deriving pleasure from the situation than the machine itself.”<sup>62</sup> These women are props in a male fantasy and nothing more. Sante makes an excellent analysis of the power dynamics between the girlfriends and the men behind the camera, but exempts Prince from any implication or responsibility. Instead he asserts that Prince is the “true portraitist, the one who could see beyond the blinkered vision of the man who pressed the shutter.”<sup>63</sup> Sante credits Prince with restoring humanity and honor to these desperate women. This is not the case. Prince is treating the *Girlfriends* in the same way their boyfriends are. Just because he is putting them in the context of an art gallery does not mean he has restored any agency, understanding, or respect. Instead of critiquing or exposing the misogyny, Prince simply exploits it for both his art career and for his own personal sexual desires. The criticism that many scholars seem to see in Prince’s treatment of both consumer culture and of sexualized women is completely unfounded when looking at the images themselves and at Prince’s own words. Criticism does not seem to be Prince’s primary concern. He is much more preoccupied with understanding his own desire and attempting to prolong his pleasure.

Critics and art historians often ignore the sexual overtones in Prince’s work, and if this vulgar and masturbatory aspect is acknowledged at all, it is done so under the constant assumption that Prince is exempt from this type of misogyny. The dominant narrative seems to claim that because Prince is so obviously and explicitly sexually objectifying women without their consent, he must be doing so ironically in order to highlight the injustice. The evidence for this reading simply is not there. Prince never

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<sup>62</sup> Sante, Luc. “Untitled (girlfriend), 1999.” In *Richard Prince*, 70–80. 73.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid* 78.

condemns the sexualization or objectification of women in his work, instead claiming it and perpetuating it. This popular misreading of Prince's work among critics and scholars is constructed and perpetuated in order to excuse the offensive and explicit content being replicated without consent of the subject. Prince's status as an appropriation artist serves as an excuse and screen. He did not create these images. He only appropriated them and claimed them as his own, so he cannot be held responsible for the abhorrent content. However, in choosing to re-photograph and re-produce certain damaging images, Prince must retain some accountability. This conversation becomes particularly important in addressing Prince's brief foray into child pornography.

*Spiritual America*<sup>64</sup> is one of Prince's most controversial works, first displayed in 1983, which features a naked pre-pubescent Brooke Shields posed in front of a bathtub. The image presents a ten-year-old child as a sexual object. Her small and boyish body presents a striking contrast with her completely adult face, which has been extensively made-up. The image was originally taken with parental consent before Shields became famous.<sup>65</sup> It was photographed by Garry Gross who, not surprisingly, was well known for his controversial and risqué photography. While this image in the original context is quite upsetting already, Prince's decision to steal and re-present it in an art gallery under his name is particularly disturbing. Young Brooke Shields, like the *Girlfriends* and early photos of consumer products, symbolizes a promise of American consumerism. "His title, *Spiritual America* is not at all ironic because the picture really does re-present the child-goddess of the consumer culture ideal; Brooke Shields is simultaneously untouchable,

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<sup>64</sup> No image reference for this work is included in the appendix of images due to concerns regarding legality and out of respect for the subject.

<sup>65</sup> Brooks, Rosetta. "Spiritual America: No Holds Barred." In *Richard Prince*. 87.

young, pristine, and “brand new” as well as being available inviting and accessible.”<sup>66</sup>

Once again, we see the myth of accessibility that has appealed to Prince previously. This sexual availability and placement of the artist in a position of erotic power becomes inexcusable when the object of his voyeurism is a small child. He is interested in the treatment of Shields as a consumer product being sold through the image. However, once again Prince does not seem interested in disrupting and condemning this commodification of sexuality, but rather claiming it. He fixes Shields in the cycle of his own *desire* and *drive*, suspending the promise of her sexuality and prolonging it within the physical image of a child.

Later works by Prince continue this theme of sexualized youth as the ultimate unattainable product, focusing on celebrity headshots. Prince collects signed publicity shots from a variety of actors and actresses and assembles them into ganged groupings, moving away from re-photography and into something more akin to art collecting than art production. Prince tracks down these celebrity headshots at “meet and greet” events, and sometimes even purchases them online. Many are made out directly to Richard Prince, while others are clearly forged signatures written by Prince himself.<sup>67</sup> Through this addition of handwritten messages and signatures, celebrities seemingly sign away their image, and through his signing of them, Prince exerts his ownership. Despite this change in his method of appropriation, Prince is still exerting ownership over these celebrity bodies. These images of famous women and girls present a juxtaposition of accessibility and glamour that can be fixed within a Lacanian dynamic of the gaze. The

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<sup>66</sup> Brooks, Rosetta. “Spiritual America: No Holds Barred.” In *Richard Prince*. 91.

<sup>67</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 45.

portraits, featuring sex symbols, like Madonna and Cindy Crawford<sup>68</sup>, and their accompanying signatures, are carefully constructed to promote the myth of intimacy, to create an imagined relationship between the fan and the star. Actresses in particular must pander to the fantasies of their male audience. “The aura of the celebrity is directly contingent upon the average fan’s feeling some form of connection with them. The personalized, signed celebrity photograph symbolizes this sense of identification and feeds the illusion of two-way association.”<sup>69</sup> Cindy Crawford and Madonna must convincingly convey their sexual availability and indulge the fantasies of their fan base and this process is done deliberately through the styling and posing of the photo. It is a carefully constructed lie that is used to sell these women in the same way advertising imagery is used to sell a product. They create a *drive* with no hope of fulfilling the *desire*.

The marketing of actress’s sexual availability becomes increasingly troubling when those actresses are still children, like Brooke Shields and like the subjects of an *Untitled (publicity)* from 2000.<sup>70</sup> This work features a gang of child stars who have just barely reached puberty. River Pheonix, Thora Birch, Christina Ricci, Reese Witherspoon and Jodie Foster<sup>71</sup> are all lined up side by side and paired with a cartoon drawing of Winnie the Pooh. Three of the children are topless and all of the girls are significantly made up with lipstick, blush, and mascara. Like the nude Brooke Shields, these children are being visually constructed as sexual objects, despite being too young to understand their own sexuality. They are being treated in the same way adult celebrities are. Yet,

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<sup>68</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 44.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid* 45.

<sup>70</sup> Fig. 8: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (publicity)*. Six publicity photographs and text, framed, 2000. David and Kim Schrader Collection.

<sup>71</sup> Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. 45

while Madonna understands on some level the sexual intimacy being sold with her photograph and is able to consent to it, these child stars are not quite old enough to grasp how their public personas are intertwined with sexual voyeurism and the imposed male gaze. They exist somewhere between reality and fantasy, remaining completely unattainable while still insisting on their own attainability. Prince did not create these images, but he claimed them as his own by including them in his work. He was captivated by the contradiction of naiveté and seduction, and rather than critiquing this exploitation, Prince takes the images as they are. He does not deconstruct them or expose the lie inherent within them. He simply writes his name all over them. They become objects in Prince's collection, commoditized and cultivated for the male gaze.

Prince's method of art production relies on existing images found in magazines and other print media. He appropriates these images by adding his own gaze into the equation and by presenting them in the context of an art gallery. Through his position behind the camera lens, Prince has the power to retell the message of the image, to craft its inherent promise according to his own fantasies. Essentially, Prince creates art by declaring an image as such, by elevating that which exists already in the canon of pop culture and re-contextualizing it into something deemed worthy of artistic merit. Prince makes the decision of which images to elevate and which to leave in the dog-eared pages of a cheap magazine. That is where he exercises his power as artist and creator. As one critic, Jerry Saltz, wrote about his most recent exhibition, Prince is a "real wizard of his tastes."<sup>72</sup> This is true in that Prince gives himself over entirely to what seduces and enchants him, letting his taste control his art. However, Richard Prince's taste is not

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<sup>72</sup> Saltz, Jerry. "Richard Prince's Instagram Paintings Are Genius Trolling." *Vulture*, September 23, 2014.

always in good taste. It treats women's bodies like living room furniture, which can be purchased and consumed in pursuit of ever-elusive *desire*. Prince's taste enjoys the sexual voyeurism of women he does not even know. He calls them the *Girlfriends* and, in a sense, they are all his girlfriends: The three women who avert their gaze, the biker chicks who objectify themselves in search of acceptance, and the young Brooke Shields who does not fully understand the sexuality her image conveys. Prince claims all of them as his and appropriates them into his own artistic identity by imposing his gaze.

### Chapter Three: Youthful Cool in *The New Portraits*

Although many of the works previously discussed appear dated in both style and content, trapped in the bohemian glamour of the late 1970s, and rooted in a moment when print media dominated American culture, Richard Prince is more than just a relic of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century post-modern art he pioneered. His moment within the art world is not yet over. Discussions of Prince and his work are ongoing. Prince is still making and selling new works. Although none of Prince's works are entirely "new," as he continues using re-photography and appropriation to steal and repurpose content from existing sources. This artistic process still elicits the same impassioned response from audiences that it did over forty years ago when Prince first began borrowing advertising images from *Time-Life*. Remaining within the cultural discourse is in itself is a significant accomplishment, especially when considering how attention spans are getting increasingly shorter as our dependence on technology deepens. Perhaps it is because of this shift to the digital that Prince's work remains relevant. Perhaps the Internet is the perfect location for appropriation of images, of ideas, and of identities; an online utopia where users can try on different selves like masks, as quickly and as often as they please. So, despite the rather repetitive nature of appropriation art, it seems the American public is still fascinated with issues of ownership and authenticity as they relate to personal identity; and Prince has continued to be wildly successful.

Prince exhibited his most recent series, *The New Portraits*, at New York's Gagosian Gallery in October of 2014 and is selling each individual piece for upwards of \$100,000.00. Scholarly and popular reviews of this new series have run the gamut from



lavish praise to deep disturbance, which is exactly what we have come to expect from critical receptions of Prince's work. Two online reviews, written within a month of one another, illustrate this polarization; one title declares him "Genius,"<sup>73</sup> while the other is simply titled, "Richard Prince Sucks."<sup>74</sup> Prince is still making waves among the contemporary art community and clearly his *New Portraits* have struck a nerve.

This new series attempts to update Prince's past appropriation techniques into the social media age by using images found on the popular social networking site, Instagram, and appropriating them into canvas prints. Instagram is a mostly visual and entirely mobile app that allows users to share pictures with a community of followers. Among Instagram's features are the capability for likes and comments on each individual post, the ability to geotag a location, options to tag friends, added hashtags and emojis, a scrolling home feed, individual user profiles, and a variety of photo editing options called filters. The app also has an iconic user interface of blue and white, which frames each post to include the relevant user information. Prince's *New Portraits* involve a two-part process of appropriation. During the first step, Richard Prince's account @richardprince4<sup>75</sup> responded to an existing user's image, adding his own comments. He then re-photographed the Instagram image digitally, by screenshotting it to include the blue and white text and frame. The copy and pasted image is then inkjet-printed onto large squares of canvas, and then hung side by side in a single row around the walls of an otherwise empty gallery. The exhibition features 38 portraits, each 65 by 48 inches and

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<sup>73</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Richard Prince's Instagram Paintings Are Genius Trolling," *Vulture*, September 23, 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Paddy Johnson, "Richard Prince Sucks," *Artnet News*, October 21, 2014,

<sup>75</sup> This Instagram account has since been deactivated, possibly due to inappropriate content. Prince previously had his account temporarily suspended after his Brooke Shields image *Spiritual America* was ruled in violation of Instagram's content agreement

featuring a different Instagram user. These users tend to be minor celebrities: artists, poets, models, musicians, and socialites who have significant social media followings. Some of the included users are Pamela Anderson, Cara Stricker, Kate Moss, Jessica Hart, China Chow, Elizabeth Jagger, Sky Ferreira, a rap musician called Junglepussy, and a self-proclaimed “amateur web entrepreneur” who calls herself Nightcoregirl.

The featured images have a lot of variety in color, composition, and tone. Some are dark and moody, filtered with high contrast in black and white. Other images show groups of people in bright urban landscapes. At first glance, it is difficult to see a connecting thread between these varied Instagram shots. But as the title of the series suggests, one central characteristic connects all of the images into a single thematic message: they are all portraits. Specifically, each is a self-portrait. The original Instagram users from which Prince took his images, freely offered these representations of their respective selves. These are the identities that they broadcast to their online communities of fans, friends, and followers.

There are many similarities to be drawn between the *New Portraits* and the earlier *Girlfriends* series. First, a large proportion of these works feature partially nude women in sexually provocative poses. One portrait features an incredibly thin young woman with the account name @prettypukedood.<sup>76</sup> She is wearing nothing but a pair of white men’s underwear and black high top sneakers and is shown from behind as she crouches atop an antique wooden desk. Most of her ribs are visible, as are her breasts, and a small tattoo on her right ankle. This piece and others in the series bear a striking resemblance to the topless biker chicks that posed atop their boyfriends’ Harleys. The most obvious

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<sup>76</sup> Fig. 9: Prince, Richard. *New Portraits*. Installation View, October 24, 2014. Photo by Rob McKeever.

reference is a “portrait” appropriated from user @niinhellhound, which, apart from the blue and white Instagram frame to display comments, is completely indistinguishable from his *Girlfriends*.<sup>77</sup> The image features two topless biker girls in leather chaps and metallic heart-shaped pasties. It is not at all surprising that Prince would have chosen these women to claim as his own, considering how accurately they mirror the rebellious provocativeness of his earlier works. There is the same sexual availability, as well as the same outsider status highlighted in the portrait. These women are rebels who exist outside the mainstream and who project an aloof “tough girl” “up for anything” attitude. In other words, these women are just Richard Prince’s type. The images are not over edited or overproduced like those found in a glossy magazine. Instead, they attempt to show real women, just like the *Girlfriends*—women who would have seemed more accessible to Prince. Plus, there is an added layer of agency and consent, implicit in each of the portraits because each individual personally uploaded their photo to their own Instagram account. They actively sent these depictions of themselves into the open ether of the Internet. Like in the *Girlfriends* series, this willingness to be objectified solidifies the fantasy of their availability. Once again, Prince is drawn to the myth of the sexual accessibility of these women and attempts to exert his ownership over them through re-photography. @Niinhellhound has since disabled public access to her Instagram profile.

Prince takes this process of sexual voyeurism and control even further in his *New Portraits* by including his own comments beneath the images he stole for the gallery exhibition. “Enjoyed the ride today. Let’s do it again sometime. Richard,” is posted below an image of musician Sky Ferreira. This is just one example of the vaguely sexual

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<sup>77</sup> Fig. 10: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (portrait)*. Inkjet on canvas, 2014. Appropriated from @niinhellhound. Photo by Tiernan Morgan.

innuendoes Prince chooses to caption his images. If Ferreira had some response to this comment, the audience never sees it, nor do they see her original caption for the photo.<sup>78</sup> Prince imposes his voice and his desires onto the images of these women. Through adding his own text, Prince changes the original narrative and compromises the link between the image and its offline context. He forces himself into the memory, forging a relationship with the subject through salacious comments. Through this added step in the appropriation process, Prince silences women, stripping them of their agency and making consent impossible. These women have become voiceless objects, added to Prince's growing collection of female fantasies.

These imagined conversations with the photographed women also mark a departure from the deliberate voyeuristic distance of Prince's previous works. In the *Girlfriends* series, Prince is able to exert his dominance through enacting the male gaze without fear of it being reciprocated. Through the camera lens, he can see without fear of being seen. But in the *New Portraits*, Prince has moved beyond voyeurism. He has created fictional relationships between himself and these women through the added captions. It is no longer sufficient for these subjects to submit to Prince's gaze, but now they must also unwillingly and unknowingly participate in his sexually charged fantasies. "Let's hook up next week," Prince says to an image of Pamela Anderson, at once constructing and exploiting a fake relationship. This enacting of a social fantasy, however, is found among many social media users who follow celebrities on Instagram. It is not unusual for a user to comment on a celebrity's post as if the two are best friends. Social media breeds this type of imagined relationship across multiple platforms and

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<sup>78</sup> Paddy Johnson, "Richard Prince Sucks," *Artnet News*, October 21, 2014, <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/richard-prince-sucks-136358>.

creates a culture of “reciprocal obsession in sallies of boundary-free intimacy that are either real or make-believe, and absent any way to tell the difference.”<sup>79</sup> This is how Peter Schjeldahl, art critic for The New Yorker explains the relationship between Prince and his appropriations. Prince takes a cue from contemporary social media use and the fan-celebrity relations enabled through online communities. Prince is definitely not the only American male with an imaginary relationship with Pamela Anderson. In fact, Anderson’s social media accounts are littered with comments of similar tone and subject. Because she makes herself publicly available online, men presume that their affection is reciprocated. Prince, however, does not just comment on Anderson’s social media posts, he takes them, edits them to reflect and indulge his own fantasy, and then sells them as his art. He takes the problematic and inherently nonconsensual appropriation of the women’s bodies seen in the *Girlfriends* series, then pushes it one step further.

The *New Portraits* are also thematically linked by another of Prince’s desires, one that becomes increasingly evident in his later works: the desire to be young, hip and cool. Just as with any media content, there is a promise inherent in the Instagram images circulating on the app. Prince attempts to suspend this promise within the frozen cycle of *desire* and *drive* through his re-photography. Like with his previous series, Prince focuses on the false promise instead of the hidden reality. He is more interested in the irresistibility of the lie. However, the promise being perpetuated on social media is quite different than the promise of magazine advertisements in the 1970s and 1980s. Social media does not promise perfection, nor does it promise luxury. It does however promote

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<sup>79</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Richard Prince’s Instagrams,” *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/richard-princes-instagramms>.

a rebellious and youthful attitude, a freedom of expression and frank openness about your every thought and whim which characterizes the millennial generation.

This generation shares more than any other that has come before and is the most documented generation to date. There is an incredible focus on self-expression and self-promotion through online platforms like Instagram. Social media platforms have become almost synonymous with personal identity, breaking down the barrier between what is publicity and what is truth. In the advertising images of Prince's early gangs, there was a clear distinction between the world of the ads and Prince's reality. There was a separation between the advertisements and the viewers. Now, however, every social media user maintains a personal brand. They construct their identities through gathering various signifiers of their desired public personas; much in the same way Prince assembles a personal identity through appropriated images. The millennial generation also marks a break down in the separation between publicity and personal expression. This constant assembling of personal identity is called by media theorists the "reflexive project of the self,"<sup>80</sup> and is defined by the borrowing and combining of existing brand identities into an idealized public self.<sup>81</sup> For those who grew up in a social media saturated environment, "digital natives" as they are sometimes called, appropriation is second nature.<sup>82</sup> Identities are constructed through carefully curated galleries of digital images that promote the myth of effortless cool and create a personal brand. Digital natives imbed within their self-portraits the promise of youth and freedom, two things that Prince is desperately trying to steal back as he ages.

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<sup>80</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*

<sup>82</sup> Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001), <http://ictlogy.net/bibliography/reports/projects.php?idp=629>.

Freedom and rebellion have often been themes in Prince's work. Many of the gangs he assembled were focused on rebel communities like the 1980s hair metal rockers or the motorcycle clubs, those which existed outside of the mainstream and which represented a carefree attitude and an assurance in one's own identity. Prince envied this self-assurance and sought to capture it in even the earliest of his works. "A lot of people wish they were someone else. And some of us would like to exchange parts with other people, keeping what we already like and jettisoning the things that we can't stand,"<sup>83</sup> wrote Prince in 1984, using the third person voice, as he often did in his written work. "There are those too, that are quite satisfied with themselves and never think about such things as another person's blessings, and it seemed appropriate to him, that these satisfied ones were the ones that he most wanted to be like and to exchange with and to try to take the place of."<sup>84</sup> Prince uses his work to explore those parts of himself that he would like to exchange with someone else, to try on desirable new identities. However, it is the ability to be comfortable in one's own skin that Prince desires most. The persona he would most like to embody is that of someone who wants only to be himself or herself. This is a deeply ironic aspect of Prince's work that sheds light on his obsession with youth and with cool. Many of the artists, musicians, and models of the *New Portraits* series embody this attitude. They are free spirits and bohemians who actively participate in identity construction online and who have their own personal brands. These are not nameless individuals who post and repost found material; these are creators and trendsetters who use social media to publicize their confidence and uniqueness.

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<sup>83</sup> Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. 37

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*

Prince has a lot in common with the digital natives of the millennial generation. He shares similar identification with luxury brands and advertising imagery. He buys into the neoliberal concept of self in which personal identity is constructed through collecting outside elements. He also believes in the democratization of images online. Prince believes in his own right to take images and claim them as his own. Many of the millennials featured in his *New Portraits* actually agree with him on this front and believe wholeheartedly in the democratization of image sharing online. Model Cara Stricker wrote in an open letter to Prince that “Our generation accepts appropriation and borrowing from all pasts because we accept a future of unity. ‘The Yes Generation’... How else could we move forward except through this acceptance and the freedom it gives us?”<sup>85</sup> This statement really encapsulates the current utopian attitude towards exchange of ideas online. She goes on to write, “The online space is a new sort of palette for artists to offer new perspectives on voice and freedom.”<sup>86</sup> Stricker, however, is not the only featured Instagrammer who has since publicly commented on Prince’s stealing their work.

Rapper Junglepussy highlights how Prince is not in fact participating in the process Stricker describes and takes issue with the profit being made from something she shared for free. “I’m not flattered to have a screenshot of my Instagram deemed ‘art’ in a gallery. I call it a repost on Tumblr. Most things we do get taken away from us and profited off of—same old story, new Internet money.”<sup>87</sup> Similarly, artist @rasfotos expressed concerns over Prince’s profit margin: “There’s obviously that part of me that’s mad [at Prince] because I’m a poor starving artist with six-figure student loan debt, and

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<sup>85</sup> Cara Stricker, “An Open Letter to Richard Prince from Cara Stricker,” *Alldayeveryday*, accessed April 8, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*

<sup>87</sup> Chloe Mackey, “Tracking Down the Subjects of Richard Prince’s ‘New Portraits,’” October 23, 2014.



you're just a giant that runs through Instagram pillaging, taking things into your own museum, and calling them yours.” @rasfotos, or Sean Fader, is an appropriation artist in his own right who creates and distributes work through Instagram. He creates viral performance pieces and encourages natural circulation of his art online.<sup>88</sup> Yet Fader feels that Prince's treatment of his work does not respect this process. “By not communicating with me, by not talking to me, [Prince] denied every level of shared authorship, or engagement, all of those things that were so important to me in the work. That's what irked me about the whole thing.”<sup>89</sup> As this quote exemplifies, Prince doesn't truly understand the community he is appropriating from. He misses the whole point of sharing images on social media. Prince is not participating or collaborating in his work, but rather stealing. That is all he knows how to do because he still works and thinks within the framework of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prince developed his artistic process in a time when ownership applied to material possessions, those perfect objects and bodies in the glossy pages of magazines, always available for sale. Prince doesn't fully understand or care how to collaborate in a sharing economy; he only knows how to steal. He exploits this online system of reciprocity for material gain, making thousands of dollars off art created for free distribution. He is stuck in an outdated method of art production and distribution and is still working within that system. Prince is not a part of the community he appropriates from. Prince does not belong to the “Yes Generation” Cara Stricker refers to. He does not participate in their culture of reciprocity and exists instead within the rigid and outdated economic structure of the art market.

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<sup>88</sup> Chloe Mackey, “Tracking Down the Subjects of Richard Prince's ‘New Portraits,’” October 23, 2014.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*

In a lot of ways, Prince was born too early, in an age where appropriation was radical and new. He was grappling with complex issues of appropriation and ownership when they were just beginning to enter the national conversation, and when the tools for this process didn't even exist yet. Most contemporary Internet users share Prince's basic attitude towards ownership of images and exert the same type of Lacanian power over found material. Most social networks encourage and rely on this type of collective ownership, and when a user posts to a commercially owned social media site like Instagram, which was purchased by Facebook for \$1 billion in 2012<sup>90</sup>, they agree to this social contract. Tumblr is another social network that relies heavily on the free exchange of visual content and one that Prince has spoken about in interviews and on his website several times. Tumblr is a social media platform similar to Instagram, except it is web-based and is focused almost entirely on arranging found images. Prince described Tumblr profiles as digital art galleries where images can be assembled and recontextualized in a way that articulates the aesthetic taste of its user<sup>91</sup>. He tells a story of first learning of this social network from his daughter and draws a correlation between the popular site and his early work:

The first time I saw Tumblr I saw it on my daughter's computer. I said, "what's that"? She had organized a bunch of photos according to color. As she scrolled down I was reminded about how I used to look at hundreds of slides on my custom made giant light box. What I was looking at and what I was remembering wasn't that different. The next question I asked her was, 'whose images were those and did you have to ask 'permission' to use them.' She looked at me like I was the man from Mars. 'Permission?' 'For what?' (That's my girl)... Her looking at me sideways for asking about 'copyright' backed-up my position about

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<sup>90</sup> Bruce Upbin, "Facebook Buys Instagram For \$1 Billion. Smart Arbitrage.," *Forbes*, accessed April 8, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Prince, "The Social Network," *Birdtalk*, November 18, 2014.

published photographs... there's 'no right, no wrong' when it comes to copying from the wide wide world of photolandia.....Just like I've always said... 'It's a free concert from now on.'<sup>92</sup>

Through this story and others from interviews with Prince, It seems that he feels an ownership over contemporary image sharing in online social communities. He compares Tumblr to the gangs he made in the 1980s and even states on his blog that micro-blogging site Twitter was originally his idea.<sup>93</sup> This online community is one that Prince wants to be a part of and one that he feels entitled to be a part of. Prince pioneered appropriation art and, with his *New Portraits* series, has fashioned himself into a self-proclaimed social media icon. He speaks about current digital technology as if it was handcrafted especially for him. "It's almost like it was invented for someone like myself... It's like carrying around a gallery in your pocket,"<sup>94</sup> claimed Prince of Instagram's social interface. He feels that our current cultural moment and the "Yes Generation" attitude is the Richard Prince legacy. Essentially the *New Portraits* are an assertion that Prince invented decades ago what we currently ascribe to the millennial generation. He is asserting ownership over social media appropriation as an art form and is attempting to reclaim the digital sphere as his own. Just like Prince wrote his name on the American West with his *Cowboys* series and on topless biker chicks in *Girlfriends*, Prince is now writing his name all over Instagram.

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid*

<sup>93</sup> "Richard Prince Blog Watch: Why Tumblr Is His Favorite Social Media Platform," *Blouin Art Info*, July 12, 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Matthew Israel, "Your Instagrams Are Richard Prince Artworks," *The Huffington Post*, accessed April 8, 2015.

## Conclusion

### “Tell Me Everything”

Prince is not a cowboy. He cannot and will never achieve the hyper masculine ideal of his childhood. Those women are not Prince's girlfriends. They do not love him or care for him or submit themselves to him anywhere outside the edges of the canvas. The social media generation is not Prince's legacy. He neither rules over nor belongs to the sharing economy of online communities, nor does he fully understand it. Prince's art chronicles his own failures to obtain the objects of his desire, while providing a detailed list of those things he most desperately wants. These motifs of masculinity, sexuality, youth, luxury, wealth, and celebrity, have appeared again and again in Prince's re-photography. Prince's art is, at its core, aspirational and stems from the desire to possess that which he does not have. Prince wants to try on different identities and construct himself through collecting cultural artifacts of the world around him. He wants to be and own so much more than he is and has. Prince is insatiable in his desire and is relentless in his pursuit of those desires. He has also discovered a way to make money off of this endeavor. It is in this sense that Prince embodies the spirit of post-modern capitalist America. It is because of this unabated desire to own and to possess that Prince's work remains relevant to this cultural moment. It is the thread that weaves his various works together, creating a thematic link throughout his forty-year long career. Prince does not critique or combat consumerist constructions of personal identity. Prince is a worshiper of contemporary visual culture, so enamored of the false media images that he prefers them to their actual signified objects. Despite what scholars and critics like Phillips and Lewis would have you believe, Prince is not condemn or expose the images he

appropriates. He does not separate the promise from the reality. Instead he takes the seductive aspect of a work and repeats it back to his audience, using the lure of advertising imagery for his own personal gain.

Prince's creation of identity through appropriated images, while often misguided and misogynistic, encapsulates the changing attitudes towards authenticity and self-actualization happening in contemporary society. Prince constructed a persona by assembling popular images. He created himself in the same way advertising images create meaning. This is also how social media users construct an online profile. Individuals in society are increasingly defining themselves through outside brand and image associations. While Prince never succeeds in crafting himself through his art and never fully becomes the identity he is seeking, perhaps the process of being deceived by the reflections he sees of himself in the world and the constant reevaluation of that positioning are what resonate with contemporary audiences. In his failure, there is clarity for the audience.

In a 1986 gang by Prince called *Tell Me Everything*, Prince introduces his audience to phrase which would later appear many times in his art throughout his career. The phrase, a joke found and repurposed as is Prince's method, reads: "I went to see a psychiatrist. He said, 'tell me everything.' I did, and now he's doing my act."<sup>95</sup> While not an original phrase, Prince's appropriation of it proves an anxiety central to his work and identity. Prince has a constant fear of being exposed and of being revealed as culpable to his audience. Re-photography provides a shield from scrutiny. The anxiety of the gaze as Lacan would describe it, is a paramount theme to Prince's art and identity. He steals

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<sup>95</sup> Fig. 11: Prince, Richard. *Tell Me Everything (detail)*. Ektacolor Photograph, 1986. Collection of Marvin and Alice Kosmin.

images from others in an effort to be always looking but never seen. Just as his appropriation provided a way to circumvent the cycle of consumerism and to remain forever in the pleasure of the *drive*, Prince's art attempts to freeze him forever in the position of power. Prince hides behind re-photography in an effort to never be held responsible. He takes from outside sources to ensure that he will always be seen as the psychiatrist and not the patient. The Psychiatrist in this joke is in control. He manipulates and steals but remains invulnerable. Prince fancies himself the Psychiatrist. Is he? Or is Prince the punch line?

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## Appendix of Images

Fig. 1: Kruger, Barbara. *Face It! (Green)*. Photograph, 2007.



Fig. 2: Prince, Richard. *Super Heavy Santa*. Ektacolor Photograph, 1986. From: Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992.





Fig. 3: Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, Ektacolor Photograph, 1986. From: From: Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007, 70-71.





Fig. 4: Richard Prince, *Untitled (cowboy)*, Ektacolor Photograph, 1998 1997. From: Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007, 70-71.



Fig. 5: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (Living Rooms)*. 1977, Set of 4 Ektacolor photographs, 51 x 61 cm each. From: Brooks, Rosetta, Jeff Rian, and Luc Sante. *Richard Prince*. New York, N.Y., United States: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003, 36-37.



Fig. 6: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (Three Women Looking in the Same Direction)*, 1980, Set of 3 Ektacolor photographs. 27 x 40 in. each. From: Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007, 70-71.





Fig. 7: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (Girlfriend)*. 1993, Ektacolor Photograph. 60 x 40 in.  
From: Spector, Nancy, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, and  
Serpentine Gallery. *Richard Prince*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2007, 159.



Fig. 8: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (publicity)*. Six publicity photographs and text, framed, 2000. David and Kim Schrader Collection.

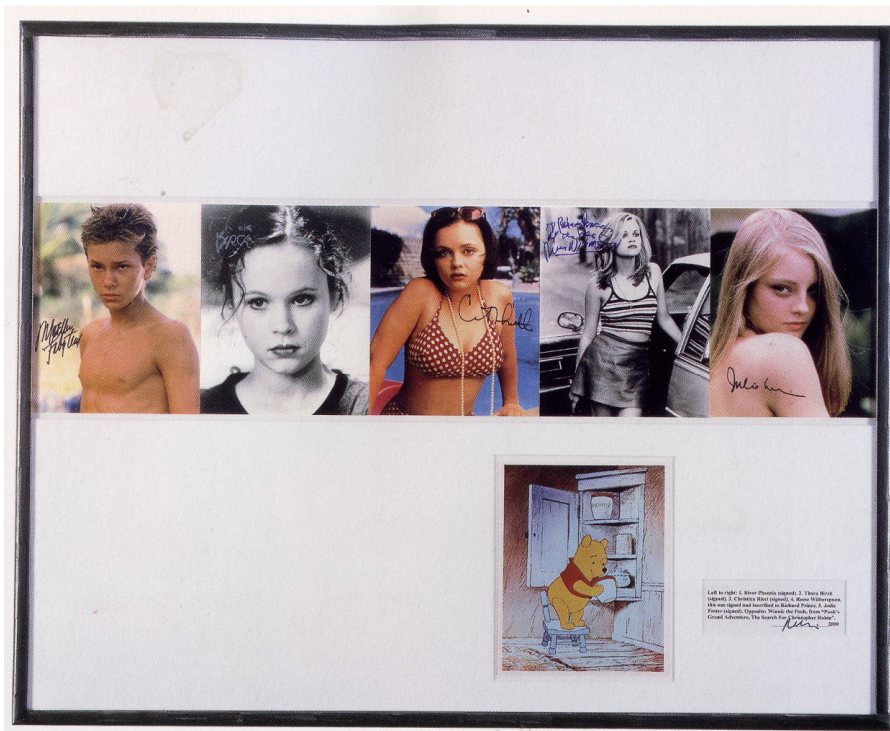


Fig. 9: Prince, Richard. *New Portraits*. Installation View, October 24, 2014. Photo by Rob McKeever.

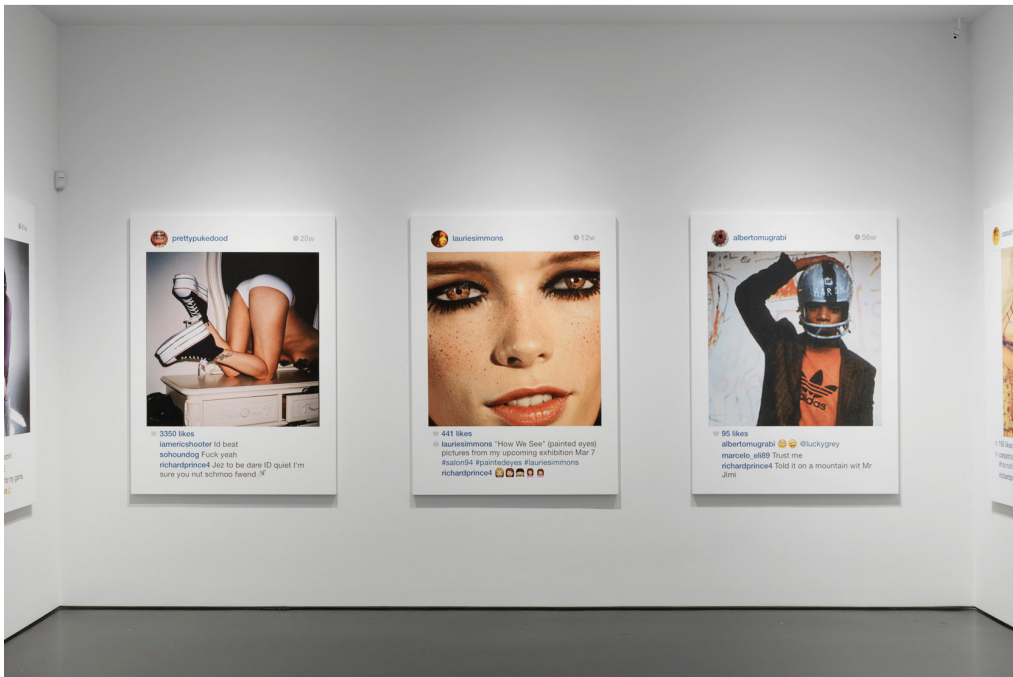




Fig. 10: Prince, Richard. *Untitled (portrait)*. Inkjet on canvas, 2014. Appropriated from @niinhellhound. Photo by Tiernan Morgan.



Fig. 11: Prince, Richard. *Tell Me Everything (detail)*. Ektacolor Photograph, 1886. Collection of Marvin and Alice Kosmin. From: From: Phillips, Lisa, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Richard Prince*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by H.N. Abrams, 1992.

