

SKARSTEDT

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RICHARD PRINCE: EARLY JOKE PAINTINGS

Opening reception: Monday 25 June, 6 -8 pm

Exhibition dates: Tuesday 26 June – Friday 3 August, 2018

"MY PARENTS KEPT ME IN A CLOSET. UNTIL I WAS FIFTEEN I THOUGHT I WAS A SUIT.

I made some gang jokes but pretty soon I realized that I needed to paint the jokes. So that's what I did. I found a "subject" that I could paint. I started PAINTING jokes.¹

WHAT A KID I WAS.

I remember practicing the violin in front of a roaring fire. My old man walked in. He was furious. We didn't have a fireplace.

What a kid I was. I remember practicing the violin in front of a roaring fire. My old man walked in. He was furious. We didn't have a fireplace.

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Skarstedt is delighted to announce an exhibition of early 'joke paintings' by American artist Richard Prince at the London gallery this June. Spanning the period 1988 – 1992, this will be the first opportunity to view a dedicated exhibition of this important body of work in the UK.

Beginning in 1984, Richard Prince began assembling one-line gag cartoons and 'borscht belt' jokes from the 1950s which he redrew onto small pieces of paper.

'Artists were casting sculptures in bronze, making huge paintings, talking about prices and clothes and cars and spending vast amounts of money. So I wrote jokes on little pieces of paper and sold them for \$10 each.'²

Following the hand-written jokes and subsequent works in which cartoon images were silkscreened onto canvas, in 1987 Prince adopted a more radical, formulaic strategy of mechanically reproducing classic one liners and gags onto a flat monochrome canvas.

Going against the prevailing artistic genre of expressive gestural painting in the 1980s, the silkscreened jokes subvert the formal language of abstract painting, mixing high and low culture. With a block of coloured text on a warm but contrasting

background, the monochromatic joke paintings compositionally mimic the Color Field painters of the 1950s and 60s, notably Rothko's three-tiered compositions in *"What a Kid I Was"* (3 Times) from 1989.

In this work, the repetition of the anecdote highlights the notions of seriality, authorship and mechanical reproduction that is central not only to this series of paintings, but to Prince's work as a whole. Inspired by his Pop-Art predecessor Ed Ruscha, the contrast of the bright red text against the monochrome surface heightens the optical potential of the words.

'Within about six months I...started to do the jokes in 'colors.' I thought the color would be a substitution for an image. The background would be one color and the joke would be another. I picked jokes that were 'meaningful' to me. I don't know how to explain that except that the jokes' 'content' was something that I could identify with. These 'jokes' were later identified as the 'monochromatic joke paintings.' I fell into them. I was walking around in a dark room looking for the light switch. I was moving by wading more than swimming. I was moving the lawn. No direction home. I was caught in a landslide. My headaches were gone. I started painting with my fly open. I stopped crying. I started to laugh. Rock bottom sometimes isn't the bottom.'³

¹ R. Prince, *Birdtalk*, <http://www.richardprince.com/birdtalk/>. Accessed 01.05.18.

² R. Prince, <https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/jokes-and-cartoons>. Accessed 01.05.18.

³ Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still—look out' (R. Prince, interview with B. Appel, Rove Projects, accessed via <http://www.rovetv.net/pr-interview.html>, October 3, 2014).

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The exhibition will also include key works from Prince's 'White Paintings' series executed during the early 1990s. Unlike the monochromatic jokes, these paintings are characterised by their raw energy, mixing gestural marks, overlaid silkscreened imagery and text. Engaging directly with Abstract Expressionism – the dominant painting style of his youth, Prince remixes the same visual elements, analogous to the 'sampling' process applied in rap music.

Like the appropriated images in his iconic 'Cowboy' series from the early 1980s, which draw on stereotypes of the American dream, the 'joke paintings', whether on a monochrome surface or against a white pigmented backdrop, combine two very distinct American references: clean-edged abstraction and popular humour – *'I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name.'*

Presented with a deadpan sensibility, the 'joke paintings' are at once disarmingly immediate and resonant, yet subversive in their underlying intent. Masking hostile and uncomfortable truths beneath a veil of humour, jokes are 'a serious business'.⁴ Using comedy to create distance, Prince's 'joke paintings' riff on received notions of American popular culture, authorship and the myth of the artist.

About the Artist

Richard Prince was born in Panama in 1949. He began consolidating his style of appropriation during the early 1970s, whilst working at Time-Life publishing company in the tear-sheets department. Rising to prominence in the 1980s, he is a celebrated pioneer of a critical approach to art making. Appropriating images and text from advertising and popular culture, his photographs, sculptures and paintings explore ideas of American identity and consumerism, whilst simultaneously challenging ideas of authorship and the privileged status of the unique artwork. Prince's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at leading institutions worldwide, including Serpentine Gallery, London; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and IVAM, Valencia amongst others.

Richard Prince: Early Joke Paintings will be Skarstedt's fifth solo exhibition of the artist's work.

About Skarstedt

Focusing on contemporary European and American artists of the late twentieth century, Skarstedt is committed to mounting museum-quality exhibitions. Skarstedt London is located at 8 Bennet Street in the historic district of St James's. The gallery moved to its new space in October 2016 following four successful years on Old Bond Street. The inaugural exhibition *Cindy Sherman and David Salle: History Portraits and Tapestry Paintings* has been followed by curated historical exhibitions and primary programme including *de Kooning: Late Paintings* and *Eric Fischl: Presence of an Absence*.

Image: Richard Prince, *"WHAT A KID I WAS" (3 TIMES)*, 1989, acrylic and silkscreen ink on two joined canvases, 90 x 75 in. (228.6 x 190.5 cm.) © Richard Prince.

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Notes to editors

Exhibition: *Richard Prince: Early Joke Paintings*

Location: Skarstedt, 8 Bennet St., St James's, London, SW1A 1RP

Telephone: +44 (0) 207 499 5200

Dates: 26th June – 3rd August, 2018

Hours: Tuesday 26th to Saturday 30th June 10am-6pm; Sunday 1st July 10am-5pm (as part of Mayfair Art Weekend)

2nd July – 3rd August: Monday to Friday 10am-5pm.

Admission is free

www.skarstedt.com

⁴ N. Spector 'Nowhere Man', in *Richard Prince*, exh.cat., New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2007, p. 35.