

GAGOSIAN



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RICHARD PRINCE

New Portraits

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In 1984 I took some portraits.

The way I did it was different. The way had nothing to do with the tradition of portraiture.

If you wanted me to do your portrait, you would give me at least five photographs that had already been taken of yourself, that were in your possession (you owned them, they were yours), and more importantly . . . that you were already happy with.

You would give me the five you liked and I would pick the one I liked. I would rephotograph the one I liked and that would be your portrait. Simple. Direct. To the point . . .

Foolproof.

I started off doing friends. Peter Nadin. Anne Kennedy. Jeff Koons. Cookie Mueller. Gary Indiana. Colin de Land.

They didn't have to sit for their portraits. They didn't have to make an appointment and come over and sit in front of some cyclone or in front of a neutral background or on an artist's stool. They didn't have to show up at all. And they wouldn't be disappointed with the result. How could they? It wasn't like they were giving me photos of themselves that were embarrassing.

Social Science Fiction.

Another advantage was the "time line." If you were in your sixties and you gave me a photograph that had been taken thirty years earlier, and that's the one I chose, your portrait ended up in a kind of time machine. I couldn't go forward, but I could go backward. Vanity. Most of the people I did liked the younger version of themselves. So the future didn't really matter. Half of H. G. Wells was better than no half at all.

Who knew?

After friends, I did people I didn't know.

I had access to Warner Bros. Records and their publicity files. The files were filled with 8 x 10 glossies of recording stars that they had under contract. How I had access is beside the point. It was a long time ago. Let's just say an A&R guy gave me access, "permission."

I spent time in their LA headquarters, in Burbank, and went thru the metal cabinets and took the "publicities" I wanted, took them home, put them in front of my camera, and made a new photograph. The first one I did was Dee Dee Ramone.

I did Tina Weymouth, Tom Verlaine, Jonathan Richman, Laurie Anderson. I did the two girls from the B-52s.

Not knowing these people, having never met them, or talked to them, but still being able to do their portraits, excited me. Satisfaction. I spent weeks in the basement of Warner Bros. I thought I had an advantage. My method, if you could call it that, was far more flexible than the regular way portraits were taken. I didn't need a studio. A darkroom. A receptionist. A calendar. Makeup. Stylists. I didn't have to deal with agents or the "personality," good or bad, of the sitter. My overhead was minimal and I could do the portrait all by myself.

By myself. That was the best.

Why I Go To The Movies Alone.

At first I thought this could be a business.

Up till then none of the art that I was making sold . . . or sold enough to make a living. I had just quit my job at Time Life the year before and was trying to make a go of it living near Venice Beach in LA . . . sharing a house with three roommates and living off the occasional sales that Hudson, my friend from Chicago, would make selling my "cartoon" drawings.

This idea of a "portrait business" made sense to me. Who wouldn't want their portrait done this way?

I continued to do friends. Paula Greif. Dike Blair. Meyer Vaisman. I did everybody's portraits for *Wild History*, a book that I put together for Tanam Press of downtown writing. The author's portrait accompanied their contribution. Wharton Tiers. Spalding Gray. Tina L'Hotsky.

By the end of '84 it was over.

I'm not sure if it was the lack of interest in me, or in others. (My energy evaporated.) Maybe it was the inability to convince people to commit to a commission. It was a good idea, but after doing about

forty of them, I put them in a drawer and moved on. Bored? Restless? I don't know. Let's just say it didn't take off.

Leave it at that.

My cartoon drawings turned into jokes and the jokes started taking up everything. In the end, I think most people would rather have their portrait done by Robert Mapplethorpe.

Thirty years. Time passes.

The social network.

I looked over my daughter's shoulder and saw that she was scrolling thru pictures on her phone. I asked her what she was looking at. "It's my Tumblr." "What's a tumbler?" I asked.

That was . . . four years ago?

About three years ago I bought an iPhone. Someone had shown me the photographs you could take with the phone. I had given up taking pictures after they got rid of color slide film. I tried digital, but couldn't make the adjustment. I never liked carrying a camera and was pretty much inkjetting and painting anyway . . . so the idea of using a big boxy camera with all its new whistles and bows wasn't for me.

Enter the sandman.

The iPhone was just what I needed. I couldn't believe how easy it was to point and shoot. You didn't have to focus. You didn't have to load film. You didn't have to ASA. You didn't have to set a speed. The clarity . . .

I could see for miles.

The photos you took were stored in the phone. And when you wanted to see them, they appeared on a grid. The best part: you could send a photo immediately to a friend, to an e-mail, to a printer . . . or, you could organize your photos, like my daughter had, and post them publicly or privately.

When worlds collide.

I asked my daughter more about Tumblr. Are those your photos? Where did you get that one? Did you need permission? How did you get that kind of crop? You can delete them? Really? What about these "followers?" Who are they? Are they people you know? What if you don't want to share? How many of your friends have Tumblrs?

What's yours is mine.

My daughter's "grid" on Tumblr reminded me of my *Gangs* I did back in '85 . . . where I organized a set of nine images on a single piece of photo paper and blew the paper up to 86 × 48. The gangs were a way to deal with marginal or subsets of lifestyles that I needed to see on a wall but not a whole wall. Each gang was its own exhibition. Girlfriends, Heavy Metal Bands, Giant Waves, Bigfoot Trucks, Sex, War, Cartoons, Lyrics . . . were all rephotographed with slide film, and when the slides returned, they were "deejayed" and moved around on a custom-made light box until the best nine made the cut. The "cut" was then taped together (the edges of the slide mounts were pushed up against each other and Scotch-taped), the nine taped slides were sent to a lab where an 8 × 10 internegative was made, and from the internegative the final photo was blown up. I've probably lost you. Technical stuff . . . application and technique. Sometimes it's better to leave the "background" out of it. Better to "take it for granted." Why should I care how a photograph is made?

Only sometimes.

How was it called back then? Sampling?

Primitive now, but back then . . . 50-inch photo drums were few and far between. The paper was 50 inches wide and came in a huge roll. If you wanted to, you could take a roll and roll it down the street, roll it down the sidewalk, roll it all the way down the West Side Highway.

Shakespeare's in the alley?

No. Philip Roth is in the alley.

Joan Didion is in the alley.

Don DeLillo is in the alley.

What's up, pussycat?

There's a lot of cats on Instagram. Food too.

And there's tons of photos of people who take photographs of themselves. (Yes, I know the word.)

On the gram. I was just asked why I like Instagram. I said, "Because there's rules. And if you break the rules, you get kicked off."

I got to Instagram thru Twitter.

Twitter first.

I'm not sure when I first started tweeting, but I liked trying to fit a whole story into 140 characters.

I call it Birdtalk.

I used to bird in the early '90s for *Purple* magazine and birded in my first catalogue for Barbara Gladstone in '87.

Short sentences that were funny, sweet, dumb, profound, absurd, stupid, jokey, *Finnegans Wake* meets *MAD* magazine meets ad copy for Calvin Klein. Think Dylan's *Tarantula*. Then think some more and think Kathy Acker's *Tarantula*.

Or, don't think at all. I know I don't.

Sometimes.

Sometimes I write down the first sentence that starts off my favorite novel.

Relative. I'm not much of a theory guy. But sometimes I think there was a reason why Einstein was a technical assistant in the Swiss patent office.

Let me fill your cup.

Twitter accepts photos, but is mainly text-based. I like to combine the two and tweet both photo and text.

I called the photo/text tweets I was posting . . . "The Family."

I posted photos of my extended family . . . mother, brother, sister, nieces, cousins, uncles, aunts, in-laws, stepchildren, boy- and girlfriends. I would caption the photos with a short description of who, what, why . . . measuring my words so that they fit into the guidelines of the platform.

After posting the photo/text, I sent the information to my printer and inkjetted an 11 × 14 print of the marriage. I made thirty-eight "Family" tweets.

Distribution.

I placed each "Family" tweet in a plastic sleeve and pushpinned the sleeve to the wall. The wall was at Karma. I put all thirty-eight up. Salon style. It was Saturday. The doors opened at 12 pm. By 12:15

pm all thirty-seven were gone. One to a customer. I kept the one that had my father, mother, and sister in it. (My father and mother were naked, and my sister was sitting in between. My family wasn't like yours. *Hobnob* doesn't begin to describe them.) I sold the "Family Tweets" for \$12 each. First come, first served.

Well, well, well . . .

In ma ma ma my wheeeeeeeel house.

I used to stutter. By the ninth grade, the sparkle was in my eye. It got so bad, the impediment turned me into a clam. I slept all day, every day. I wouldn't get up until Sunday. I waited for *Bonanza* to come on the TV. I loved the cowboy father and his three sons.

Two summers ago, my niece was working for me out on Long Island and she showed me how to screen save. I didn't know about the option. What other options don't I know about?

Screen Save.

This might be one of the best applications in an apparatus that I've ever encountered. All-time. Hall of fame. First place. Just what I need. MORE photographs.

Hey kids . . . what time is it?

Now I have a theory.

I was beside myself.

Congratulations.

This past spring, and half the summer, the iPhone became my studio. I signed up for Instagram. I pushed things aside. I made room. It was easy. I ignored Tumblr, and Facebook had never interested me. But Instagram . . .

I started off being RichardPrince4.

I quickly recognized the device was a way to get the lead out. If Twitter was editorial . . . then Instagram was advertising.

A gazillion people.

Besides cats, dogs, and food, people put out photos of themselves and their friends all the time, every day, and, yes, some people put themselves out twice on Mondays. I started "following" people I knew, people I didn't know, and people who knew each other. It was innocent. I was on the phone talking to Jessica Hart and had just looked at her "gram" feed before picking up the phone. I asked about a picture she posted of herself standing in front of a fireplace wearing what looked to be ski clothes and big fur boots. The post was in black and white, head to toe, full figure, and behind her, above the mantel, there was a portrait of Brigitte Bardot. I told her someone should make a portrait out of this photo. She said, "Why don't you?"

Come to think of it.

I'm not sure if she knew about my Family Tweets. She might have. I think we even talked about them after she came to my studio for a visit. After I got off the phone, I thought about her suggestion: "Why don't you?"

I went back to her feed and screen saved her "winter" photo. I sent the save to my computer, pressed "empty subject," pressed "actual size," and waited for it to appear in a doc, checked the margins and crop, clicked on the doc, and sent it to my printer. My inkjet printer printed out an 11 × 14-inch photo on paper . . . I took the photo out of the tray and put it on my desk.

Looking at Jessica's feed reminded me of 1984. Except this time I had more than five photos to choose from. I went back to her feed a second time. I scrolled thru maybe a hundred photos she had

posted and looked at all the ones that included her. The one in front of the fireplace was still the best.

Walk on.

Jessica had tons of followers. Thousands. And a lot of them had “commented” on what she posted. I read all the comments that had been posted under her fireplace photo. There was one comment I wish I could have gotten in my original screen save. When you screen save an Instagram image, you can get maybe three, four comments in the save if you include the person’s “profile” icon that appears on the upper left of the page. I decided early on I wanted the person’s icon to be part of the save. But what else could I save?

I went back to my desk and kept staring at the printout of Jessica. What do I do now?

I didn’t want to paint it.

I didn’t want to mark it.

I didn’t want to add a sticker.

Whatever I did, I wanted it to happen INSIDE and before the save. I wanted my contribution to be part of the “gram.” I didn’t want to do anything physical to the photograph after it was printed.

Five cents.

I went back to the comment.

I commented on Jessica’s photo in front of the fireplace, but my comment was one of hundreds and showed up outside, way down at the bottom . . . out of the frame.

If I wanted my comment to show up near her picture . . . how?

I got lucky.

I’m terrible when it comes to the tech side of technology. But somehow I figured out how to hack into Jessica’s feed and swipe away all her comments and add my own so that it would appear under her post. The hack is pretty simple and anyone can do it. You hit the gray comment bar and pick a comment you don’t want and swipe with your finger to the left, and a red exclamation mark appears. You press on the exclamation mark and four things come onto the bottom of your screen.

1. Why are you reporting this comment?
2. Spam or Scam
3. Abusive Content
4. Cancel

To get rid of the comment, you click on Spam or Scam. It’s gone. Just like that I could control other people’s comments and Jessica’s own comments. And the comment that I added could now be near enough to Jessica’s photo that when I screen saved it, my comment would “show up.” Make sense? It’s about as good as I can do. What can I say? Einstein and cuckoo . . .

So now . . .

So now I was in.

Waiting to follow.

Richardprince4 would appear at the bottom of Jessica’s final portrait. My comment, whatever it would be, would always be the last comment. The last say so. Say so. That’s good. That could work.

My “in” was what I ended up saying. And what I would say would be everything I ever knew . . . what I knew now and what I would know in the future.

Tell Me Everything.

Finnegans Wake meets *MAD* magazine.

Zoot Horn Rollo. You seem to be where I belong (emoji).

The first three portraits I did were of women I knew. Or almost knew. Jessica, I knew. Pam Anderson, I knew. Sky Ferreira? I didn't know, but was following her and had been reading about her new album and seeing posters of her album broadsided on sheets of ply on the Bowery and on Lafayette near Bond. I wasn't sure what I was doing or why I chose these three. I just had lunch with Pam and had seen Jessica in LA. Sky, I was following because she seemed interesting. There was nothing more. No attraction. No fan. No desire. No date. No wanting anything from her. And the pictures she posted were candid, boozy, and seemed to be letting the viewer in on some kind of backstage diary. She also had thousands of people following her, and I could tap into her followers and follow them. I can do that? I didn't even know I could follow the followers. Like I said, the hardware was all new . . . and I was just getting started.

The shoreline is never the same. (Like it should be.)

When I first started getting rid of comments, I thought the person whose comments I was getting rid of might get pissed. “What happened to all my comments?” I found out quickly that “the getting rid of” only affected my feed. The deleted comments didn't affect the followers' feeds. Their comments were still there even though they were gone from mine. All that happened is that MY comment showed up below their photo. Was I allowed? Yes. I guess so. It's hard to explain. But the process is open, and at the moment, it's the way it works and anyone and everyone can do it.

The language I started using to make “comments” was based on Birdtalk. Non sequitur. Gobbledygook. Jokes. Oxymorons. “Psychic Jujitsu.”

Some of the language came directly from TV. If I'm selecting a photo of someone and adding a comment to their gram and an advertisement comes on . . . I use the language that I hear in the ad. Inferior language. It works. It sounds like it means something. What's it mean? I don't know. Does it have to mean anything at all? I think about James Joyce confessing to Nora Barnacle. I think about opening up to page 323 of *Finnegans Wake*. Then I think about notes and lyricism. Policy. Whisper. Murmurs. Mantra. Quotation. Advice.

Chamber Music.

Didn't Duke Ellington say, “If it sounds good, it is good”? He did say that, didn't he?

Who are these people?

Larry Clark, Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe take great portraits. I've watched Larry take photos and I don't know how he does it. I wouldn't know where to begin. I could never go up to a stranger and ask them if I could take their picture. I've done it maybe two or three times and didn't enjoy it. That part of art is in Larry. It isn't in me. I feel more comfortable in my bedroom looking thru *Easyridders* and poring over pictures of “girlfriends” that are right there on the page. Page after page. Looking. Wondering. Anticipating. Hoping. What will be on the next page? Will I find a girlfriend that I really like? That's my relationship with what's out there. It's as close as I want to get. That's what's in me.

IG is a bedroom magazine.

I can start out with someone I know and then check out who they follow or who's following them, and the rabbit hole takes on an out-of-body experience where you suddenly look at the clock and it's three in the morning. I end up on people's grids that are so far removed from where I began, it feels psychedelic. Further. I'm on the bus. I feel like I'm part of Kesey's merry tribe. I'm reminded of Timothy Leary's journals, which I purchased years ago from John McWhinnie, and the

concentration that came over me when I discovered his hand-drawn map of his escape from jail. How he literally shimmied on a wire that had been strung up from an outer utility building to the perimeter prison wall . . . and how I would trace with my finger his overland express to Tangier, where he hooked up with Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver and spent the next year seeking asylum in different parts of North Africa, ultimately ending up in Switzerland where his ex-wife ratted him out, and how fighting extradition took up the rest of his life. Wow, now it's four in the morning.

Tune In, Turn On, Come Out.

"Trolling."

If you say so.

I never thought about it that way. The word has been used to describe part of the process of making my new portraits. I guess so. It's not like I'm on the back of a boat throwing out chum.

"We're going to need a bigger boat."

Included.

Everyone is fair.

Game.

An even playing field.

"Outside my cabin door. Said the girl from the red river shore."

Men. Women. Men and women. Men and men. Women and women. Blacks Whites Latinos Asian Arabs Jews Straights Gays Transgender. Tattoos and scars. Hairy.

I don't really know the score.

The ones I adore.

I just know where I belong.

"Oh, there I go. From a man to a memory."

How do I tell you who or why I pick? I can't. It would be like telling you why I pick that joke. WHY THAT ONE? There's thousands of jokes. I read them all. It takes days to read just one joke book. 101 of the World's Funniest Jokes. Days. If I get one, find one, like one, out of the 101, it's a good day.

People on IG lead me to other people. I spend hours surfing, saving, and deleting. Sometimes I look for photos that are straightforward portraits (or at least look straightforward). Other times I look for photos that would only appear, or better still . . . exist on IG. Photos that look the way they do because they're on the gram. Selfies? Not really. Self-portraits. I'm not interested in abbreviation. I look for portraits that are upside down, sideways, at arm's length, taken within the space that a body can hold a camera phone. What did de Kooning say? "When I spread my arms out, it's all the space I need."

At first I wasn't sure how to print the portrait. I tried different surfaces, different papers. Presentation? Frame? Matt? Shadowbox? I tried them all. Finally this past spring my lab introduced me to a new canvas, one that was tightly wound, a surface with hardly any tooth. Smooth to the touch. Almost as if the canvas were photo paper. It was also brilliantly white. I don't think it could be any whiter. And . . . the way the ink jetted into the canvas was a surprise. It fused in a way that made the image slightly out of focus. Just enough. The ink was IN and ON the canvas at the same time. When I first saw the final result, I didn't really know what I was looking at. A photographic work or a work on canvas? The surprise was perfect. Perfect doesn't come along very often. The color that had been transferred from the file of the computer to the jet, from jet to canvas, was intense, saturated, rich. If someone I followed had blue hair, their hair looked like it had been dyed

directly onto the canvas. Dye job. Rinsed. Beauty salon. It was brilliant, great color. You might call it “vibrant.” The vibe between the image and the process was “sent away for,” seamless, effortless . . . all descriptions I used to use when I tried describing my early “pens, watches, and cowboys.” (Has it really been forty years?) The ingredients, the recipe, “the manufacture,” whatever you want to call it . . . was familiar but had changed into something I had never seen before. I wasn’t sure it even looked like art. And that was the best part. Not looking like art. The new portraits were in that gray area. Undefined. In-between. They had no history, no past, no name. A life of their own. They’ll learn. They’ll find their own way. I have no responsibility. They do. Friendly monsters.

Speak for yourself.

To fit in the world takes time.

For now, all I can say is . . . they’re the only thing I’ve ever done that has made me happy.

<http://www.richardprince.com/writings/bird-talk>

#RichardPrince

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