Richard Prince

He is one of our most successful and prolific artists, and a golfer, a car nut, a collector, and a connoisseur of the side of American culture they don't write about in books. He's a hepcat who removed himself from urban bohemia to explore America from a ruined rural landscape in hollering distance of the borscht belt. A pioneer of appropriation, lately he's been suggesting art could be a car, a handbag, or a video game.

By Glenn O'Brien Portrait Craig McDean
In the spirit of full disclosure, yes, I was good friends with Richard Prince, and, no, he never gave me more than four strokes a side. Actually we became friends quickly because in the '80s there weren't too many congenial bohemians a guy could play a round of golf with. We belonged to the same club once, Hampton Hills, on Long Island, and I remember the day we were on the first green papering when a guy came over to us in a golf cart and said that Richard couldn't play in the black, point-organized jam he was wearing. Richard offered to take them off, but that wasn't legal either, so he went off the way back to the clubhouse, bought a pair of shorts, put them on, came back to the green on the long put four, and sank the putt for a birdie. Years later we were sitting by Richard's pool in Bridgehampton, New York, watching a huge plume of smoke rise from the Central Pine Barrens, where thousands of acres were aflame, and we both said at once: "I hope Hampton Hills is on fire." Today Mr. Prince plays at the Bridge in Bridgehampton, where he has curated the great contemporary art collection in the clubhouse. Until recently, he was club champion. I remember we were walking up a fire road when he told me a secret: that he was collaborating with Marc Jacobs. "If this works," he said, "it can retire." That's one of his jokes that won't wind up on a painting. Some people, like him, could never retire. Sometimes I sense he thinks that the art is getting in the way of the golf and the beach, but, hey, a guy has to make a living.

He's making a living, all right. In the last decade the world has discovered what his forefathers knew all along: In golf, he's good; in art, he's a grand master. For a while he held the record for the highest amount ever paid for a photograph—for his photograph, he wasn't the buyer. I have to point out, however, that among other things, Richard Prince is a fierce collector. If you said that he has elevated collecting to an art form, you would be accurate. You can see it in the galleries, in his plumes of enclosed first editions arranged to create a certain exotic resonance. If you know him, you may have seen it in his extraordinary personal library, the building where much of his collection of books, manuscripts, art, and ephemera is located. Like Andy Warhol, Richard Prince loves art so much he not only makes it, he buys it too.

I interviewed Richard at Gagosian Gallery in downtown New York, where he showed me his new Rasta paintings. (With his Massachusetts accent, Rasta cafes in N.Y.) Richard said it was the first time he'd set foot in the gallery. Why's he kidding? You got me. Sometimes you don't know. While we were talking, his friend Leonardo DiCaprio showed up and also got his own corner to have along with a sandwich.

GLENN O'BRIEN: So what have you been collecting?

RICHARD PRINCE: Well, I'm still collecting books. John McWhinnie tracked down Carlos Casas—a man he's living in England—so we got a whole bunch of what was on this shelf. I get Neal Cassady's copy of On the Road, which is pretty exciting...

GO: Is it dedicated?

RP: No, I think it's just the copy that Jack Kerouac gave him. Cassady wrote his name on it and read it over the cover and made some marginal notes. But it's getting to the point where I need to almost separate myself from the book collection because it's becoming too much of a responsibility. I just got hold of Neal Cassady's original typescript for The Dharma Bums, but nobody knew that he did a typescript for On the Road and The Dharma Bums, but nobody knew that he did it with Big Sur.

GO: My star might be the most depressing book I've ever read.

RP: Well, the scroll was twice as depressing because it was two as long. It might even be three times as long as the finished book—they edited it completely. What they ultimately published is about one third of the scroll.

GO: Did Kerouac's estate just have that? Or where was it?

RP: It came from the Sampson estate (which controls Kerouac estate). John McWhinnie and Glenn Horowitz [of John McWhinnie & Glenn Horowitz in New York] are very good at locating things. They got me one of the draft manuscripts of The Red by Cormac McCarthy. It was the same thing with Hunter S. Thompson...
I got an e-mail last night from someone saying, "Page Six wants to know if you just bought a jet. I e-mailed them back saying, "No, but I just bought a power chute."
abstract expressions were all drinking gin, and today we're drinking brandy or demerara cherry.

RP: Everybody thinks that heroin is the most dangerous drug, but I think most of the celebrities who've died have died from mixing alcohol and barbiturates. I heard what Marilyn Monroe and Hendrix died from.

RP: Yeah, it's sort of a strange way to die.

GO: So what else have you been collecting? I hear they bought Brigid Berlin's coke-bottle set.

RP: Yeah, there were a lot of different things that I bought. I don't know the whole story of the Oak-land-bred kid—she might have been in film—there are still a few left. They're really expensive now. People are making up the media. They're eating their black. And people are buying them.

GO: Everybody thinks that heroin is the most dangerous drug, but I think most of the celebrities who've died have died from mixing alcohol and barbiturates. I heard what Marilyn Monroe and Hendrix died from.

RP: Yeah. She will make them, but I don't know if you can buy those from her. She has a website.

GO: Is it a limited edition?

RP: I don't know if it's a limited edition. All I know is that she made them herself and she stands up like a paper bag. I was bought, maybe down the line I will create a show about the male physique. At this point, I have a fairly significant collection of pieces featuring the male nude. I have a Mapplethorpe set that I would love to show. I have a few of the last limited edition. It's just a kind of work on a life of its own. So when the Oak-land-bred kid up, I went for it, thinking that maybe she should be part of the exhibition someday.

GO: So you've lost interest in this penis collection?

RP: Well, I mean, that's probably the defining area of the male anatomy that the collection would be seen but there was also a nice touch.

GO: You could call the exhibition "Little Richard."

RP: "Little Richard" would be a great title.

GO: When I was in college, there was always this rumor that you could go to the Armory Show Museum in New York, and see John Dillinger's penis. It was supposed to be true.

RP: That's because it's true.

GO: And it was supposed to be like, 20 inches long or something like that.

RP: The things people save.

GO: So what's the weariest thing that you've collected?

RP: I have a collection of clothes from the 60s and 70s that are supposed to be for auction at a little place on Long Island. I was actually going to take that piece and put it up on my own little garage sale.

GO: You'd want to know someone looking like that? Did I understand what you're saying?

RP: Yeah, I understand. But the whole idea of a collection is interesting to me. I have a few of the Oak-land-bred kid—she might have been in film. People are making up the media. They're eating their black. And people are buying them.
GO: Yeah. We were all refugees.

RP: And they all came to New York City and disappeared into this alternative environment and started to experiment. What's interesting to me is that it still goes on today. It might take a little bit of a variation, but that's what's great about going to see new art or music or even film—the way it can now be made and distributed.

GO: But when we were coming up, I remember going to Max's Kansas City, and all of the older artists would be sitting at the bar and the young freaks would be in the back room, but everyone was kind of in the same place, you know? Do you think that generations still have the same kind of dialogues that they did back then?

RP: I think it depends on how open you are. I mean, as an older artist, I'm pretty open. I've sought out and had conversations with people like Nate Lowman and Dash Snow and Dan Colen. I just met Rita Ackermann literally 15 minutes ago, but when I was younger, I was always fairly timid and withdrawn. I went to Max's and CBGB's a lot but I was always afraid because I just didn't fit in. One of the places that I went to was the Ocean Club—I wasn't so much afraid there, but I could still only peer into the place where everyone ate. I remember watching Brice Marden because he had his own table.

GO: All the girls wanted to meet Brice Marden.

RP: I also remember going to Mickey Ruskin's and seeing Lawrence Weiner and Carl Andre—high-five each other. But you know, that's the kind of thing that gets pushed off, and you start to establish your own place. That's where places like the Mudd Club and Tier 3 and Barnabas Rex came in, because you didn't have to stand in the wings any longer—you were a part of what was happening. I don't have any idea where that happens in Manhattan now—can't even imagine that happening because who could afford to live in New York City now, you know?

GO: Maybe it doesn't happen to much anymore.

RP: Well, if you're an artist or someone creative, it's all about cheap rent and not having to work for a living. That's what's always been about. Unless you're a trust-funder or you somehow score a great part-time job or you work for another artist, you're going to live where you can afford to live. I remember coming to New York. The plan was to come here for three months—if I could last that long. I remember saving $2,900 and saving $2,900 and saving. "Well, I'm just going to check it out." I'd read about this thing called SoHo and I just came down here... I sublet an apartment from this guy who made porno films, and he charged me $390 a month. I was outraged because it was a roadside, unbuilt, road-side piece of coprolite, and I was used to paying $60 a month in Boston. And I couldn't afford it. But I couldn't find anything cheaper. So I guess it's all relative.

GO: So what's your rent now?

RP: I don't rent, and I don't own, and I don't have a mortgage.

GO: Yeah, I know.

[Leonardo DiCaprio enters.]

LEONARDO DICAPRIO: Sup, buddy?

RP: Do you know Glenn O'Brien?

GO: Hi.

LD: Hi, how are you?

GO: Good, nice to meet you.

RP: Leo, this is his magazine, [shows DiCaprio a copy of Interview]

LD: Right. I was speaking with Mr. Tony Shafrazi about that.

RP: You want something to eat?

LD: Sure, I'll eat something. Tobey [Maguire] can't make it until later now.

RP: That's all right. [looks at plate] I don't know what that is for it—

LD: Fishy.

RP: I don't know. Is it fish?

GO: I think it's roast beef, isn't it?

RP: Is it roast beef?

LD: Ham?

RP: Ham? Turkey?

LD: Is this eaten?

RP: Nope.

LD: I'll eat this. The magazine looks great, though.

GO: Thanks.
little section of the guitar and pasted over their missections, so it's like the new big leaf.

GO: What about the eyes?
RP: I had done the lounges eyes for your book of poems a long time ago. I also did a whole portfolio of historical Jesus paintings that I put these lounges on. And then, all of a sudden, Marc Jacobs was in the studio, and I must have had one of these lounge faces out, and he says, "What's this? I've never seen this before." He really liked it, so he made some jewelry with it. It sort of got me thinking about them again. The other thing is that a lot of the imagery is black and white, so the lounge is almost like one of those old black bars that they used to put over women's faces in porn magazines if they didn't want to be identified. I like the idea—it's almost like it has this kind of relation to the nurse's mask [in Prince's nurse paintings]. It's a way of making it all the same and getting rid of the personality. It also comes out of the de Kooning paintings. It really emerged out of that because right at the end of working on the de Koonings, I started to use images of black women with a black-and-white process. I liked the matte tone that came out of the inkjet process—it was just something accidental.

GO: Why did you get sick of doing the de Kooning paintings? It seemed like you did more nurse paintings than de Koonings.
RP: Yeah, I did do more nurses, but with the de Koonings, I just did one. I didn't like the idea of the had, I had to pay attention to someone else's work. And I wanted to get rid of the color. So the thing is that, you know, two years of doing the de Koonings was enough. It was enough of my attention. The Rastas came really fast. And they're going to be over really fast, too.

GO: The last time I was at your house on Long Island, you had this Velvet Underground painting up. And then I saw it on an auction list right after that.
RP: That's because it was donated to the red auction. I still occasionally do a Velvet Underground painting. I've done a Sonic Youth painting and two of The Band. Those are the three bands that I've done.

GO: I was listening to Sirius Satellite Radio the other day and "When I Paint My Masterpiece" came on. I had been listening to the second album [The Band, 1969] that came out with them standing in the field, upstate, in the woods. They looked like they were out of that McCabe & Mrs. Miller [1971] western with Warren Beatty. It was a very simple cover, just them staring at the camera. You really couldn't tell who was who.
GO: Did you ever go up to Woodstock when they were living up there and hanging out?
RP: We went down to Woodstock like once every two months. It's pretty near where we live. I've always wanted to go back to the field where the original festival took place in Bethel [New York], Max Yasgur's farm. Apparently they have a marker there now and it's a public space. I always wanted to go back there. I wanted to go back to that field and take a photograph of it. The same place where I took my one photograph of Woodstock.

GO: With the one frame that you had left in your camera.
RP: You don't believe that, do you?
GO: After all these years, there are a couple of things that I'm still not quite sure about.