

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Richard Prince Fetes Hippies, Beatniks, Punks in Paris: Review

By Jorg von Uthmann - Apr 12, 2011 7:00 PM ET Tue Apr 12 23:00:01 GMT 2011



"Untitled (Jimi Hendrix)" acrylic and t-shirt on canvas by Richard Prince. The work is on view at the Paris National Library through June 26. Source: Bibliotheque Nationale de France via Bloomberg



"Untitled (Allen Ginsberg)" crayon and marker on paper by Richard Prince. The works are on view at the Paris National Library through June 26. Source: Bibliotheque Nationale via Bloomberg

An unfortunate coincidence or a PR agent's dream?

Ten days before the opening of Richard Prince's first major exhibition in Paris, a New York judge ruled that he violated the law by creating a series of collages and paintings based on photographs by Patrick Cariou.

Prince, 61, is a star among the so-called appropriation artists who pirate images, manipulate them and present them as their own work. His best-known series feature cowboys, taken from the Marlboro Man advertising campaign, and blonde nurses copied from pulp-fiction covers. Ethical issues clearly do not perturb his clients.

After a 2007 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, prices for his works soared. Prince is now one of the biggest earners on the contemporary art market.

Amazingly, it's the National Library, not a museum, that presents his work to Parisians. Prince is a compulsive collector of books, from rare first editions to dime novels and porn paperbacks whose covers are waiting to be blown up, painted over and sold for a fortune.

The exhibition, "American Prayer," its title notwithstanding, isn't aimed at evangelicals. It's a homage to beatniks and hippies, punk rockers and Hell's Angels and to the three decades between 1950 and 1980 when the Woodstock generation discovered LSD, flower power and sexual liberation.

Atlantic Divide

At the center stands a wooden hut symbolizing what the French call "l'Amerique profonde," rural America. Here are some 40 U.S. and U.K. first editions of the same book, glued to homemade trays. The covers are supposed to illustrate the differing sensibilities on both sides of the Atlantic.

The hut is surrounded by 17 display cases in which Prince presents his treasures. They include first editions and autographed copies of classics such as Nabokov's "Lolita," Kerouac's "On the Road," Ginsberg's "Howl" and Burroughs's "Naked Lunch."

There's also an early draft of Lenny Bruce's "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People," which the comic abandoned because he decided it was too raw to be published. Admirers of Truman Capote will be happy to discover him with his bulldog Charley on a postcard to Perry Smith, one of the two killers immortalized by Capote's book "In Cold Blood."

The National Library has invited Prince to delve into their own holdings and look for precursors of his heroes -- "paleopunks," as he calls them. He has come up with proofs of Baudelaire's "Flowers of Evil," a draft of Rimbaud's "A Season in Hell" and "Suck," an early European sex paper, published in 1969 in Amsterdam.

Naked Brooke

The walls are covered with Prince's assemblages -- photographs, posters, book covers, and cartoons, reworked and neatly framed by the artist.

They include a nude snapshot of the actress Brooke Shields, taken when she was 10. Two years ago, the Tate Modern in London was forced to remove it from an exhibition because of concern that it violated obscenity laws. Whether those laws also apply in Paris, remains to be seen.

To get you in the right mood, Bob Dylan, Rosemary Clooney, the Byrds and others sing in the background.

To complement the National Library show, Prince's dealer, the Gagosian gallery, displays two series of his variations on Willem de Kooning's "Women." To the Dutchman's savage females Prince has added well-endowed males and other figures, some drawn, some cut and pasted from catalogs and vintage porn magazines. Prices are revealed only to serious customers.

"American Prayer," the exhibition at the Bibliotheque Nationale de France (Site Francois Mitterrand), is supported by Champagne Louis Roederer SA, LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton SA (MC) and Banque Neuflyze OBC SA. It runs through June 26. Information: <http://www.bnf.fr> or +33-1-5379-4949.

Galerie Gagosian is at 4 Rue de Ponthieu. Its show runs through May 21. Information: <http://www.gagosian.com> or +33-1-7500-0592.