

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



### Artist Richard Prince's Secret Retreat

*Two-hundred miles from New York City, artist Richard Prince has been building towering sculptures on acres of rural land. Now he's getting ready to open to the public*

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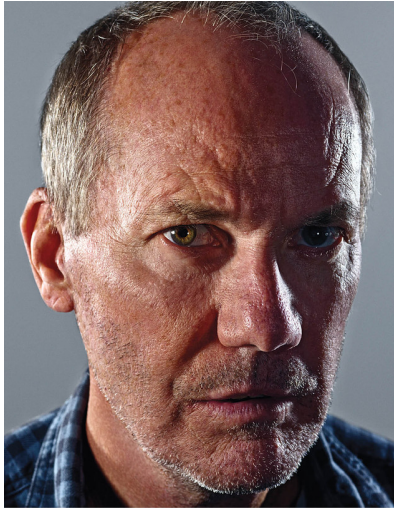
**RAW MATERIALS** | Prince clad a former hunting cabin in records he bought on eBay. Photography by Mario Sorrenti for WSJ. Magazine

**THE MASTER OF** appropriation art is quietly making his own Marfa.

Nearly two decades ago, the 65-year-old artist Richard Prince—who is well-known for photographing advertisements, biker magazines and book covers to create his own wry pieces—moved into a farmhouse. It sits at the end of a winding, woodsy lane in the Catskill Mountains, 200 miles north of New York City. He told friends that he wanted to live and work there because it was so remote no one would visit him.

But like Donald Judd, who famously housed his minimalist art in storefronts around rural Marfa, Texas, Prince has been reconfiguring his own surroundings in playful ways—and now he's more willing to receive company. Since 1996, Prince has steadily amassed nearly 300 acres around his home and studio in Rensselaerville, New York, some portion of which he will use to build a space for his Ryder Road Foundation. He'll hammer out details over the next five years, he says, but the plan for the foundation is to show emerging artists he admires, such as painter Genieve Figgis. It will also give the public a rare firsthand look at his other projects nearby.

Over the decades, Prince has built or converted at least half a dozen buildings in the area to suit his eclectic sensibility—from a former red-brick bank where he now displays his rare-book library (the best go in the vault) to a former hunting cabin whose exterior he has clad entirely in shiny vinyl records. Inside the Vinyl House, he has rigged speakers to play a “loud song” he wrote whenever anyone opens the door, he says; the disco ball dangling overhead once belonged to James Brown.



*Richard Prince. Photography by Mario Sorrenti for WSJ. Magazine*

The grounds surrounding his studio compound are also peppered with large-scale sculptures he’s never exhibited before. These include six totem-pole-like towers he created by impaling and suspending dozens of black rubber blasting mats, the kind used by highway construction crews to keep shards from detonated rocks in place. Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector calls the towers “existential” and “paradigm-shifting” and says major museums, including her own, are aching to show them. (His work already belongs to top collectors like L.A. billionaire Eli Broad and art institutions like New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

Prince’s hangar-like “body shop” contains a hulking monster truck and other artistic experiments—a hubcap filled with jewel-tone stained glass; a bronze cast of a gas tank painted iridescent green. Muscle cars abound.

“A lot of stuff here I don’t consider art, or at least it didn’t begin as art,” Prince says, steering his black Dodge Challenger around the area one drizzly afternoon. “I’m just trying to make something I haven’t seen before. Cool stuff.”

Only a handful of friends and collectors have ever been invited to visit him in Rensselaerville, so Prince’s decision to open his studio and outbuildings to the public is significant. His ambitions for the site began to grow after the Guggenheim bought a silvery ranch-style shack he was using to display his series of painted car hoods in 2005. The museum considered the space, called Second House, and its contents a collective work of art. Two years later, lightning struck and burned the house to cinders. It was undergoing renovation, so his hoods had been safely removed, but the house itself wasn’t salvageable, and Prince offered to buy it back. The museum accepted.

Still, the experience encouraged Prince to think hard about his other spaces—and the role they could ultimately play in promoting other artists’ work and contextualizing his own. (For its part, Second House remains in ruins, easy to miss except for the matte-black 1973 Plymouth Barracuda he keeps parked in the tall grass out front.)

“Most people don’t realize what he’s been working on up there, but he never rests—he’s indefatigable,” says Harper Levine, a friend and rare-book seller in East Hampton, New York. “I think he’s thinking more about his legacy.”

Whatever he does, expect the art world to pay close attention. Raised on the outskirts of Boston, Prince electrified the New York gallery scene in the late 1970s when he made a simple yet radical gesture: He photographed an existing photo and called the second image his own. As an

employee of the tear-sheet department of Time-Life, Prince clipped out hard copies of articles for magazine editors. On his own, he started saving the leftover ads, and he was struck by the stylistic similarities between everything from writing pens to luxury living rooms. He began cropping out the products' brand names and logos and then clicking his shutter. Even in isolation, the resulting images conveyed revealing values: a hunger for power and comfort.

Later, he focused on subcultures the art establishment typically ignored—cowboys, Hells Angels, itinerant rockers, monster-rally fans. He read Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and scanned the rack of brown-bagged magazines in America's gas stations. He saw more than titillation—he saw desire gone desperate. The yearning in his work resonates with baby boomer collectors, particularly his series of lush paintings of pulp-novel covers featuring coy nurses. In May, Christie's auctioned his *Nurse of Greenmeadow* from 2002 for \$8.6 million.

“Look at all the people today making things using sampled images, mashing up video clips and photographs in ways that feel incredibly common to us,” Spector says. “No one does it like Richard. He changed art practice in the 20th century.”

Lately, Prince has gained a younger following through his experiments on Twitter and Instagram. Most artists treat these social-media platforms as bulletin boards to promote their careers or personal lives, but Prince is trying to use these media to make art. Instead of rifling through biker magazines, he now scans Instagram for portrait subjects, adding wink-wink comments underneath slinky photos posted by models. (“All the 47 likes are mine” is one example.) In keeping with his practice, Prince then takes a screenshot of these one-sided conversations and reposts the package in toto. So far, the art world's reception of these pieces has been mixed, with critics hailing and condemning them in equal measure.

Prince's appropriating methods have gotten him into trouble, notably five years ago when photographer Patrick Cariou sued Prince for copyright infringement after the artist appropriated Cariou's images of Rastafarians for his 2008 series, “Canal Zone.” Prince won the suit on appeal in March 2014, but he says the ordeal took a toll. “I had museums calling me, yelling, ‘You have to win!’ ” he says. “I know it was a bigger fight for appropriation, but I also wanted to say, ‘F—you.’ ”

Prince says he wishes now that he had sought rights to use Cariou's photographs. He never wanted to be in the center of a cause célèbre. A lanky, balding man with a repaired harelip, he is affable but shy in crowds. Half Gallery dealer Bill Powers says Prince is the kind of artist who skips his own gallery openings or slips out early, uneasy amid the schmooze. He is liveliest in his writing about art or pop culture, but he often writes under aliases: John Dogg, Howard Johnson, Fulton Ryder. Even around longtime friends, Prince can be a mystery. Most days, they say, he would rather be at home with his wife, Noel Grunwaldt, and their two children, reading or making art or arranging other artists' works into fresh juxtapositions.

“Hugh Hefner did all his work from his bed,” Prince says. “He had a big-ass bed and a mini-fridge and a Franz Kline hanging in there. Home—that's where I'm fearless.”

All of which could make a visit to his house in Rensselaerville catnip for adventuring contemporary art lovers—if Prince can winnow a way to let the pilgrims in and still get work done.



*ON THE ROAD | After noticing local highway construction crews covering gravel with rubber blasting mats, Prince began amassing his own in tall frames that now dot the property. They have never been exhibited publicly, but the Guggenheim says it is waiting for a chance. Photography by Mario Sorrenti for WSJ. Magazine*

**RENSELAERVILLE (POPULATION 1,843)** is a former Dutch colony tucked into the rolling hills of the Catskills, at least 60 miles from the closest interstate. During the meandering drive up from New York City, it becomes clear what a profound influence the region has had on Prince's work since he moved here in 1996. His sculptures include renditions of tire planters, sawhorses, picnic tables and basketball hoops, a nod to the objects that adorn just about every yard here.

"Everyone here builds their own sawhorses, so I started collecting them," he says one afternoon, turning down the unmarked road that leads to his house. Eventually, he stacked his sawhorses nearly 20 feet high in delicate Jenga fashion and had the totem pole cast in bronze.

Prince discovered the area in 1991 through a friend who liked to fish for trout nearby. He moved first into a little house on Main Street; then, a few years later, he bought the rolling meadow he occupies now. "I needed to walk out my front door and walk on lawn instead of sidewalk," he says.

His compound is anchored by the green-and-white farmhouse, with its quaint porches and gables, and a semicircle of larger outbuildings he's added over the years. The space that comes closest to achieving the cavernous warehouse atmosphere coveted by rising-star artists today is the "body shop," with its 16-foot ceilings and concrete floor. In the back he's added several rooms with white-cube walls and honey-glow lighting, so he can bring in works and play around with layouts before big shows. Earlier this year, he had a quartet of orange-and-black 1970 Dodge Challengers and 1969 Chargers in the center. The walls were rimmed with "Joke" paintings—written *har-har* gags inspired by comic Rodney Dangerfield, part of a long-running series by the artist. A wall-size relief of the Allman Brothers on a train track hung nearby. (A cutout in the center of the relief contained some gravel. He's dubbing the photo-relief technology a "Photo Mil.")

For visitors, an arguably bigger reward lies in seeing elements like the clunky yellow Ford F-150 he has parked in the dim front room of the shop. He says he bought the truck from a neighbor soon after he moved here, but since then it's become an artistic dilemma: "I can't figure out what to put in the truck bed," he says, patting the tailgate. His stained-glass hubcap rims are a surprise as well; he says he recently taught himself the craft, but adds, "We're not going to hire 50 guys to start churning them out."

There are also some misfires, like the tall plywood security tower he has sitting in another area covered by a white car-camper top. He intended to paint jokes within conversation bubbles on its interior, but once he started mapping out the bubbles, he realized it didn't work. So he stopped, but he didn't toss it out. He doesn't mind walking around the albatross. He might set it on his grounds somewhere, eventually.

What the body shop reveals is that Prince has a working-laboratory approach to art; he tinkers and stews and isn't overly precious about his output. "I just need an environment where I can experiment," he adds.

Larry Gagosian, Prince's dealer, says the buildings mirror their maker: "He's not building these spaces to impress people; like his work, it's organic. But he's slowly and methodically creating this terrific cultural landscape."

The studio sits near the body shop, and it's half-library, half-workshop, with stacks of canvases (more "Jokes") and wall-size photos he took of the Grand Canyon a few years ago. His staff says he tends to play a song he likes—by Kanye West, say, or the Mamas & the Papas—on a repeated loop for days until they revolt. As a result, he can often remember what music he was listening to while he worked on specific pieces. "When I made Adam Lindemann's 'Rasta' painting, I was listening to Coldplay," he says.

The library in his studio spans a long wall, and it represents a fraction of Prince's vast collection. Prince ranks as one of the world's top collectors of rare 20th-century books—particularly authors from the Beat Generation and just beyond, according to his friend Levine. Prince owns several presentation copies of Kerouac's *On the Road*, versions that predate even the first edition. He owns the only known copy of *Howl* that Ginsberg signed and gave to Kerouac. He has 22 first editions of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and the original manuscript of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. These and others he keeps in custom-made, black clamshell boxes.

"The book is the central object of his life," Levine says, "and seeing his libraries shows you how his fascination for, and love of, books informs his art."

Take his prized "Nurses" series, which began when he and a bookseller buddy of his, John McWhinnie, started collecting old copies of pulp novels. After a while, Prince noticed that he had at least 30 different copies that featured nurses, a fetishist's Florence Nightingale dream. In a key twist, Prince printed copies of these covers but painted drippy, white masks atop the women's come-hither expressions. Suddenly, his cover of a cover looked more like a poster for a low-budget horror film.

In 1994, Prince opened his own bookstore in Rensselaerville, called R'ville Books. Locals enjoyed his stop-in visits to local eateries like the Hilltown Café and the Palmer House Café, but they didn't take to his bookstore's rows of gory comics and pulp novels. According to studio manager Betsy Biscone, "Ninety percent of the people who came in had no idea what to make of it." He shut down the store in 2000 but has since revived a by-appointment version as a zine publisher on Manhattan's Upper East Side. It is named after one of his noms de plume: Fulton Ryder. (He is also creating a work space in Harlem to use during his New York stays.)

One of his boldest book moves came four years ago when he printed his own version of *The Catcher in the Rye*, substituting his name for J.D. Salinger's. One day, he and a few friends set

up shop a block north of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, arranging the volumes on a picnic blanket. Asking price? \$66. “A few people stopped because they recognized the cover, but when they saw his name, they didn’t know what to do with it,” Levine says. After about an hour, it started raining, so the group left.

Prince later sold dozens of these books at a rare-book convention where his reputation—both as a collector and an artist—preceded him. But the rest he keeps in his archives, which could also become part of his foundation.

Sitting in his studio, Prince says books remain his biggest muse, with good reason: “They tell stories, and art is about stories—at least mine is.”

**RICHARD PRINCE’S STORY** doesn’t begin with a book, however; it starts with a painting of a sailboat. Born in Panama in 1949 to a father who worked for the government, he says, he remembers that the only work of art in their prim, proper house was a painting of a sailboat that his father loved and hung above the living room sofa. Prince hated the sailboat.

In 1954, Prince moved with his family to a “white, Protestant, Republican” neighborhood in Braintree, Massachusetts, south of Boston. His mother strove to create a respectable home for Prince and his sister, Susan, but Prince felt pinched by the Eisenhower perfection. What he liked was the wide green-and-beige-striped wallpaper at his grandmother’s house: “People gave her s— for it, but I thought that wallpaper was the best thing since sliced bread.”

Without books around, he began to develop his sense of aesthetics by noticing how neighbors and friends arranged their living rooms, how tables and lamps had certain places in a space. At a young age, he also found he had a natural talent for drawing and would sketch family members on holidays. (He says he’s been estranged from them for years.) At the age of 10, he saw *West Side Story*, and after that he dreamed of moving to New York and wearing a sleek, black suit like Bernardo, the Puerto Rican gang leader in the film.

His artistic awakening kicked into higher gear while he was attending a “hippie-dippie” college in Maine that has since closed. That’s where Prince met his mentor, George Burk, a barrel of a man who taught figure drawing. Prince befriended Burk and his wife, eating in their art-filled home. For the first time in his life, he says, “I didn’t feel like I needed to fit in.”

In August 1973, he moved to 34 Renwick Street in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant and quickly realized that he wasn’t going to make his mark on the New York art scene by drawing figures. He picked up a camera instead.

Glenn O’Brien, a writer who became friends with Prince in the 1980s, says he’s not sure Prince’s artistic epiphany arrived in the basement of the Time-Life building, as Prince so often recounts. “With Richard, you never really know the truth,” O’Brien says. “Even after all this time, I’ll sometimes say, ‘Wait a minute,’ but I know artists have to create a myth about themselves.”

Prince insists he was working at Time-Life in 1977 when he created *Three Coats of Paint*. A series of photographs of a green patch of paint—with the original photo and then a subsequent photo of each new snapshot—it’s the first work of art he says he felt proud of. Were they all the same patch or different iterations? Was that distinction clear? “When I did that, I felt like I’d hit

territory without a net,” Prince says. After that, he turned to magazine ads, seeking additional visual cues. His career snowballed from there.

Recently, he hung a sepia-tone, wall-size photo of a crowd at the original Woodstock concert on the side of his studio. He built a stage in front, where he plans to hold a jam-session concert on site every summer. Standing nearby that drizzly day, wearing paint-splattered khakis and a baseball cap, Prince chuckles and points up at it.

“I thought I had a big crowd, but see? The image has been repeated,” he says, gesturing to the same people, copied and multiplied to grander effect. “What a joke! I think it’s great.”