

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

BLOUINARTINFO

Richard Prince Subverts the Selfie at Gagosian London

Nicholas Forrest



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Richard Prince's appropriated Instagram portraits, currently on show at Gagosian's Davies Street London gallery until August 1, have attracted plenty of attention of late, and not all positive. But there's far more to these works than meets the eye, not that they aren't visually compelling. In the spirit of Warhol's appropriation of pop culture imagery, which engaged with the commercialism and celebrity culture of the zeitgeist of the day, Prince has engaged with today's social media culture and the burgeoning "cult of the self," or perhaps "cult of the selfie" to create poignant commentaries that embody the tension between fiction and reality that exists within the digital realm we know as cyberspace.

Taking cues from his own personal social networking journey of discovery, Prince subverts the inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity of the social media generation, immortalizing the images of today's digital natives and suspending them within a conceptual framework that questions the way we assign value and meaning to images. By adding his own comments to the Instagram photos, sometimes using language directly from a TV advertisement that he heard while selecting photos and adding comments, Prince adds an element of "self" that contextualizes the works within his own creative process and further challenges the boundaries of authorship and appropriation.

Prince explains: “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.” Prince says. “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.

“How do I tell you who or why I pick? I can’t,” Prince adds. “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.”