

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

Richard Prince and the New Meaning of High Art *Guests at Prince's show in San Francisco got a peek at the artist's latest paintings — and a sniff of his new cannabis venture.*

Thomas Fuller



Richard Prince holding his new line of marijuana, Katz + Dogg, at his launch party. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO — The large, brightly colored canvases sparkled beside the white walls of the Gagosian Gallery downtown. Larry Gagosian, the art world's megadealer, stood toward the back of the room in blue jeans and loafers while the star of the evening, Richard Prince, the artist perhaps best known for tweaking iconic images and pushing the boundaries of intellectual property, stood reticently at the gallery entrance in a blazer and black Dr. Martens boots.

The only hint that this show on Thursday night might stray from the norm was the faint smell of marijuana.

Mr. Prince, who turns 70 later this year, used the occasion to introduce both an exhibition of his vivid, faux-primitive paintings and drawings called "High Times" and a line of branded joints and cannabis vape pens in packaging adorned with his art.

"Everybody seems to be piling into pot," Mr. Gagosian said.

"It's like Clooney with tequila," he said, referring to the actor's brand of booze that went on to sell for around \$1 billion. "Hopefully it will do as well."



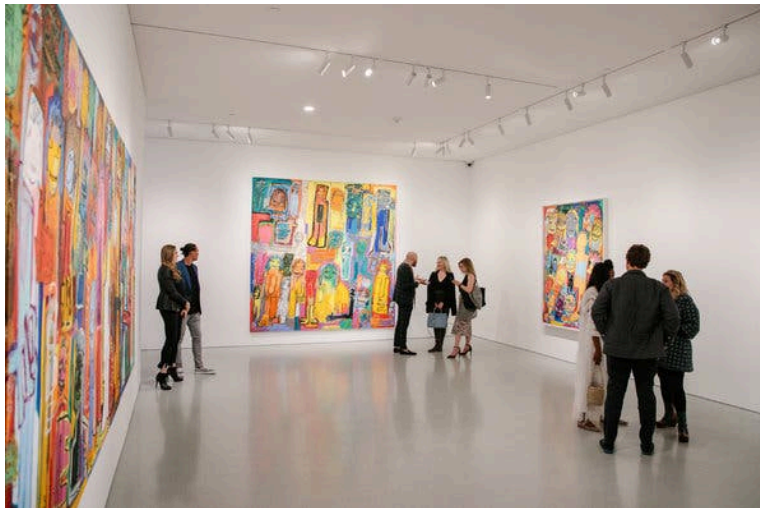
Mr. Prince at his Gagolian Gallery opening in San Francisco. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times

As the number of states legalizing marijuana has grown in recent years, celebrities of all stripes have started their own pot brands — Joe Montana, Mike Tyson, Gwyneth Paltrow, Willie Nelson and Snoop Dogg to name just a few — but until now the high-end art world had not intersected with commercial weed.

High Times magazine, the counter culture publication revitalized by legalization, put Mr. Prince's work on its cover twice in the past year, including a garishly colored Prince sketch in the January edition with the headline, "High Art."

On Thursday, a fleet of chauffeured SUV limousines idled outside the gallery, testament to the wealthy patrons who mingled inside. Selected guests were shuttled to a nearby dispensary to test samples of Mr. Prince's marijuana brand, Katz + Dogg.

The dispensary, Moe Greens, is a short walk from the headquarters of Uber and Twitter and has a lounge where Mr. Prince's guests sat in avocado-green banquettes sucking on bongs and smoking joints. In a separate room, guests stepped up to a bar where they were offered dabs, the concentrated doses of marijuana extract that are heated and inhaled.



Guests mingled at the Gagolian Gallery on Thursday. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times



*An untitled 2017 work, using cel and inkjet on canvas, in Mr. Prince's show "High Times." © Richard Prince and Gagosian.
Untitled (Hippie Drawing), 2019, by Mr. Prince. © Richard Prince and Gagosian*

San Francisco has some of the country's most stringent laws against cigarette smoking but is also one of the only cities in the country that allows cannabis to be smoked in what are known as "consumption lounges."

Nate Haas, the chief executive of Moe Greens, said servers don't spend more than a few hours at a time in the smoking area lest they get a contact high.

When it was his turn to travel to the dispensary, Mr. Prince, accompanied by his daughter, Ella, walked into a haze of marijuana smoke.

"Do you want to take a dab," she asked her father, who declined.

For Mr. Prince, his marijuana venture completes a journey that began in the 1960s. He says the first time he tried marijuana was after flying to Los Angeles in 1967 from his home near Boston. He saw a Doors concert and then went to a party in Laurel Canyon where he was offered weed.

"I was already interested in art and music," he said. "It seemed like a kind of a natural fit."



The cover of High Times, limited edition, August 2019, with Mr. Prince's childlike drawing. © High Times and Richard Prince

The informality of the pot economy of the 1960s has been replaced by a vast cannabis commercial universe in California today: ubiquitous delivery services, apps that tell you the closest dispensary, legal or not, and an ever-growing list of pot-derived products, from hops-flavored drinks to roll-on pain reliever. High-end restaurants pair cannabis with morel mushroom pasta dishes (among many other delicacies), caterers offer pot-themed weddings and at least one company promises to sooth the nerves of anxious pets with pot snacks.

Mr. Prince says he took a three-decade hiatus from the drug but when he renewed his interest several years ago he was surprised and dismayed to learn how much more potent new strains had become.

He instructed the company that helped him formulate his marijuana products to make something much weaker, a nostalgic nod to the pot of his youth.

Ian Skelly, a partner at 710 Labs, a cannabis company, has chosen a variety called “ice cream cake,” with a lower level of the main psychotropic ingredient, THC.

“You could smoke it first thing when you wake up and it wouldn’t be overwhelming,” Mr. Skelly said.



The gallery show led to a pot tasting at Moe Greens dispensary nearby. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times



*A smoker at Moe Greens for the launch party for Mr. Prince's new line of marijuana. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times.
Mr. Prince considers his new line of marijuana an extension of his art. "It's not necessarily an accessory but it's not that different from making a T-shirt," he said. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times*

Mr. Skelly, whose specialty is knowing a vast repertoire of cannabis varieties, was one of the reasons that the Gagosian Gallery smelled like pot. The sweet odor seemed to radiate from him like perfume from eager spritzers competing at a department store cosmetics counter.

Mr. Prince said in an interview that he does not use marijuana for artistic inspiration, although the viewer might be forgiven for thinking that he did.

Roberta Smith, a co-chief art critic for The New York Times, said his new works "radiate an unusual heat."

"Their flat, dark surfaces are covered with cartoonish, robustly painted figures," she wrote. "Some of these creatures loom; others are tiny, and many flaunt bright colors and bristling masks. Still others are so simply outlined that they might be wearing onesies. Big, mitt-like

hands are the norm. These figures conjure jubilant trick-or-treaters, comically armored avatars or rock fans leaving a concert.”

A number of works had already sold when they were displayed in New York, said Mark Francis, a Gagosian director who handles Mr. Prince’s work. But he wouldn’t say how many or what they sold for. “We never talk to the press about prices,” Mr. Francis said.

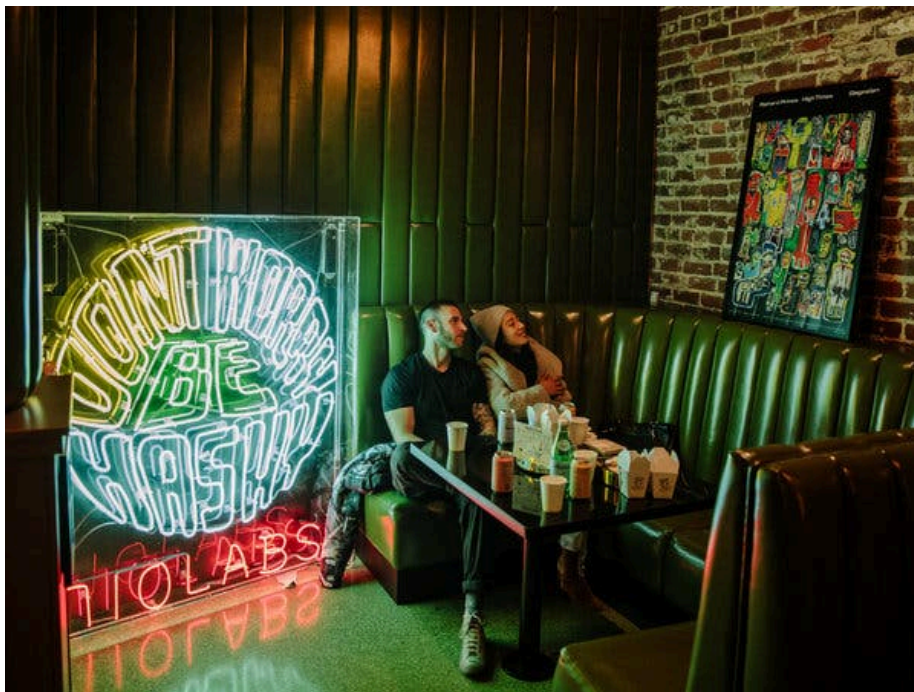
There is less mystery about the price of the cannabis: a five pack of pre-rolled joints of the ice cream cake variety goes for \$146.

Mr. Prince says starting his cannabis brand felt like an appropriate extension of his art.

“It satisfies this idea of creating something or making something,” he said. “It’s not necessarily an accessory but it’s not that different from making a T-shirt.”

Mr. Prince has been seen by many in the art world as somewhat of a provocateur for pioneering the notion of appropriation, photographing images like the Marlboro Man and reframing them just enough to claim them his own, as he did with the “Cowboys” series in the early 1980s.

“The pictures I went after, ‘stole,’ were too good to be true. They were about wishful thinking, public pictures that happen to appear in the advertising sections of mass-market magazines,” the artist has said. “I wanted to re-present the closest thing to the real thing.”



The dispensary, Moe Greens, has a lounge where Mr. Prince’s guests could smoke marijuana. © Brian Flaherty for The New York Times

But while starting a marijuana brand might feel provocative in some parts of the country like Idaho or Alabama, where it is still fully illegal, in California it was greeted with shrugs by some who attended.

“I heard about it and thought, yeah, of course,” said Ben Rogers, a restaurant owner who came to both the opening and the dispensary. “There’s such a marijuana culture here I was surprised this hasn’t been done already.”

Sean McAllister, a lawyer who specializes in the cannabis industry in California and Colorado, said marijuana entrepreneurs have become increasingly skeptical of celebrity brands. Artists like Carlos Santana and members of the Grateful Dead launching brands means little to a 22 year old today, he said.

For many consumers, Mr. McAllister said, a joint is just a joint.

“Honestly some of these artists don’t have much connection with young people,” he said.

Mr. Prince, whose auction record is \$9.7 million for his painting, “Runaway Nurse,” says he has ignored the business aspects of this venture.

Will it be a commercial success?

“I don’t know, can you make money from selling weed?” he asked. “We’ll find out.”