



THE LAS

Richard Prince has shocked the cultural establishment again and again with norm-breaking—some say lawbreaking—conceptual artworks. But since the pandemic, he’s been holed up in his Hamptons home, rarely making appearances. In an unprecedented interview late in his career, he spills to NATE FREEMAN about the surprising new series he calls Folk Songs and his six-hour film, *Deposition*. And for the first time, he discusses what will happen to his estate after he’s gone



T STAND



It was a Saturday in July, perfect weather in Sagaponack, and Richard Prince walked to the door of his beach house wearing a shirt with one of his hippie drawings. He had on beat-up khakis and sneakers without socks. There was golf on the TV, paintings of flowers and birds and seashells on the walls.

Prince has been out East for a while. He got property in this secluded spot in the '90s, when he followed his friend Glenn O'Brien to the houses near potato fields. It was pretty empty then, and collectors Don and Mera Rubell had a place nearby, so they would all get lunch. Later, Prince spent summers here with his family. Boogie boards and a surfboard his kids used growing up were leaning on the deck, filthy. They didn't get to use them much anyway.

"The breaks off Wainscott Beach aren't shit," Prince said.

He wanted to bring me to the guesthouse he converted to a studio. I was excited. I'd be maybe the third person to see his first completely new series of work since 2018. It has a great name, like all his best series: *Girlfriends*, *Hoods*, *Nurses*, *Cowboys*, *Jokes*. These new works are called *Folk Songs*.

As he enters his late 70s, Prince is now the greatest living artist depicting the good, the bad, and the ugly of cultural Americana. Not quite half a century ago, he shocked the art world with brazen acts of appropriation: rephotographing the cowboys in Marlboro cigarette ads and blowing the results up into his own art, modifying the source material. Those works now sell for more than \$3 million at auction, making them among the most expensive photographs in history. His paintings sell for more. In 2021 Prince's *Runaway Nurse*, a painting over an inkjet print of a pulp novel on canvas, sold for more than \$12 million.

As he's gotten older he's built out the Prince business as a Gesamtkunstwerk. There's the art, a books collection that's an artwork in and of itself, the operational body shop churning out trucks, the merch, the weed vape pens, and what's perhaps his grand opus: a town-size series of buildings as sculptures in a remote part of the Catskills. After a career of constantly breaking the rules—and, in the mind of some, the law—Prince's omnivorous eye has become a gold standard for American art.

"He's a genius, there's no doubt about it," said Larry Gagosian, the world's most prominent art dealer, who's featured Prince solo shows at his global network of galleries 23 times in 20 years. "He's one of the great artists of his generation and maybe *the* defining cultural artist. I mean, you have to think of an artist like Warhol—that's pretty good company."

Over and over, Prince has transformed.

After painting jokes on monochromatic canvases, he painted car hoods. He meddled in the legacy of de Kooning, Kline, and Pollock. After his scandalous Instagram portraits, he made *High Times*, large-scale colorful paintings celebrating the 1960s.

Prince is not that easy to get hold of. Before we chatted he hadn't given an extended interview in more than a decade. He isn't planning on giving any more after this one. He's had a health scare. Since 2020 he's been mostly at his Hamptons home, doing work in isolation. He isn't a recluse on the level of, say, J.D. Salinger, whose work Prince has appropriated in the past. Prince still has a place in the city, two connected town houses perched on a desirable East Side block dotted with blue-chip galleries. Edward Hopper's *Chair Car* hangs over the fireplace in his kitchen. Downstairs is a maybe Pollock with a disputed provenance. There's a piece from Warhol's little-known *Retrospective* series that shows the Pope of Pop in a rare contemplative mode, mashing up his most famous series. (Prince and Warhol share a birthday 21 years apart.) The town houses also have part of his rare books collection, which the book dealer Matt Shuster has called the finest of its kind in the United States.

"Richard Prince's book collection might be his best work," Shuster said. "It's not just source material—it's his worldview, a private club with one member."

And he has a few hundred acres upstate, where he's installed vast sculptural works, storage facilities, hangar-size gallery spaces, and a house shingled with vinyl records and a disco ball once owned by James Brown inside.

The Hamptons is a good place to play art-world bingo. I had a full dance card that evening. I told Prince that Joe Bradley and Valentina Akerman were holding a dinner at their Amagansett art space, Galerie Sardine, for new work by Nate Lowman. Prince was intrigued. He's collected Bradley's work, and Lowman's. When I later told Lowman and Bradley that Prince said hello, they were slightly agog. You saw him...*in person*? No one had in a while.

Apart from shooting 18 holes at The Bridge, one of the world's most expensive golf clubs, he's been mostly up in his studio, working like mad, with no assistants, just painting away.

"Listen, Richard barely *noticed* COVID," said Bob Rubin, who founded The Bridge in 2002. "I mean, it had the least impact on him. He kind of keeps to himself anyway."

Prince has been playing golf since he chased down balls at the Hyannisport Club in the '60s—as a malcontent teenager, he was keeping grounds right next to the Kennedy Compound in Hyannis.

There was a rumor that even among those willing to spend \$1.5 million to join The Bridge, Prince won the club championship one year.

"He won the *senior* club championship. Let's not get carried away," Rubin said.

DARK ARTS

Untitled (Folk Songs), 2022.

Richard Prince's new work will be shown for the first time in November at the Gagosian gallery. Previous spread: Prince, photographed on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean.

RICHARD PRINCE, UNTITLED (FOLK SONGS), 2022, ACRYLIC, INK, JET, AND COLLAGE ON CANVAS, 58 15/16 X 44 INCHES





A selection of Prince's new work will be shown at Gagosian in November. Even for Prince, who's made a career of departures, it's a departure. It explores mortality, the unknown, and folk art.

"This idea of making things but not necessarily calling them art, I do that a lot," he told me. "And sometimes what I make remains just the making of it, but sometimes what I make does turn into art."

The series began with the gigantic rubber blasting mats he found upstate and installed on his property as just that, not art, just the making of it. One night he heard the wind going through the rubber and it made a squeak, a song through the folk art. A folk song. He started making new paintings. He brought in garish motifs, bloody mouths with appropriated cigarettes inkjet printed onto them, the trail of smoke making an ab-ex whorl Hula-Hooping through the canvas. Then there's the surfers, the figures hanging ten, also inkjet printed with the ripple of wake painted behind the figures. Some of these paintings are massive.

"A lot of this work has been in the racks for a couple of years before the train got in," he said.

He went off on the train thing and how it relates to the history of the folk movement, something he was on the ground floor of in the '60s.

"I'm not sure when I thought about the train or looked at the train, but I remember the train being part of the Dust Bowl, Woody Guthrie, the hobo—there were a bunch of trains. On the Cisco Houston album there's a train. And whatever is inherent in that name, whatever the name suggests, Folk Songs, whether it suggests acoustic guitars or protest, that's part of it for me."

I wondered who else has seen this indelibly Princean but radically different new work that will also no doubt make people quite angry.

"I've shown this to maybe three or four people so far, really," he said. "I've shown the Folk Songs to one other artist. And I did show it to Larry."

When asked about the perhaps unexpectedly dark nature of the new works, Gagosian said, "I can't wait for the show. I think people are going to really be fascinated by this work, and puzzled by it, and enthralled, and all those things. I can't wait to see it on the wall."

When Prince in 2017 unveiled his previous new series, *High Times*, it already felt like a coda to a career. In a rave *The New York Times* praised it as "one of his best." This coda to the coda will kick off an enormously busy 12 months for any artist, but especially one approaching his late 70s.

"Every time I go to the studio, there's something new, and Richard is always making work daily," said Nancy Spector, who put together the Prince retrospective, *Spiritual America*, that took over the entirety of the Guggenheim in 2007. "There's no way that he can't make work."

CONTACT HIGH
Prince's last series, *High Times* (including this work, *Untitled*, 2017), got rave reviews and already felt like a coda to a career.

So there's so many series, some of which have probably never been seen by the public."

In May, Prince will be part of a two-person show with Arthur Jafa, curated by Spector, that will take over the Fondazione Prada in Venice. (Jafa, a fellow appropriation artist, once said, "Richard Prince is clearly the blackest white artist out here.") Later next year he'll take over Museo Jumex, the David Chipperfield-designed private museum founded by art-collecting fruit-juice billionaire Eugenio López Alonso. His show at Max Hetzler's remote West Texas space in Marfa features works from Prince's Posters series until December.

This past summer a new work by Prince was installed in a thousand-year-old church in Rome, put down right where the altar used to be. It is the first Prince work in the medium of film. It is nearly seven hours long. The artist himself is onscreen the entire time. The film is appropriated footage of the artist giving a deposition after being sued for allegedly appropriating commercial photography in his art. He calls it *Deposition*.

"He's an anarchist," said Gavin Brown, the dealer who staged the show at his Sant'Andrea de Scaphis space in Rome's Trastevere district and who is a partner at Gladstone, the gallery founded by Barbara Gladstone, one of Prince's early devotees. Brown's enthusiasm for art is legendary, but I've never seen him quite this animated by love for a single artwork. He thinks *Deposition* is one of the great artworks of our era and one that, in its conceptual rigor and imposing length, is something of a key to the entire Prince ecosystem.

"It's the first time where you feel Richard Prince is wearing his heart on his sleeve," Brown said. "But then you wonder, is it his sleeve or just a photograph of somebody else's sleeve?"

For years Prince has been publishing essays, first as zines, then books, then in what he called his "birdtalk," and eventually he just started putting everything on Twitter. (The account still exists, but it's mostly retweets of anti-Trump talking heads.) Lots of material about his life, some of it real, some of it fake, some of it true, some of it lies. Prince-heads are wont to remind you: There was a Robert Zimmerman and there was a Bob Dylan. Prince shares Dylan's penchant for weaving in the real and the artifice. In the Prince ecosystem there are noms de ars and noms de plume, genders blurred in social media handles, matryoshka dolls of LLCs within companies that sometimes have legit business storefronts.

Here's a primer. Prince was born, he has said, in the Panama Canal Zone, to parents in the proto-CIA. He sent me his passport. It looks real. His parents were apparently OSS agents. A source close to him said he recently took a trip back to Panama to revisit his roots and keeps a picture of a cobblestone street in the Old Gorgona district of the Canal Zone on a shelf of his cherished objects in his upstate studio. His family moved outside of Boston when he was young, and his Masshole accent is still remarkably

**"I THINK RICHARD IS REALLY THE REAL DEAL," SAYS JEFF KOONS.
"WE'RE ALIVE, WE'RE FUNCTIONING. I THINK OUR LOVE OF ART—
AND OUR COMMITMENT TO ART—IS VERY SIMILAR."**

RICHARD PRINCE, UNTITLED, 2017. ACRYLIC, COLLAGE, OIL STICK, AND INK JET ON CANVAS, 77 X 57 1/2 X 3 1/2 INCHES FRAMED.

“HE DOESN’T GIVE A FUCK ON ONE LEVEL—AND ON ANOTHER, HE DEEPLY CARES ABOUT ETHICS, DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM OF SPEECH, ALL OF THE CORE VALUES,” SAYS NANCY SPECTOR.

intact—“idea” is “idear” and so on. He grew his hair long. He spent time in California—missed Monterey Pop but saw the Doors at the Whiskey.

“I met someone on the street on Sunset, went up to a party in Laurel Canyon that evening, and then did some hits,” as he put it.

He went back to Boston, fought with his parents, skated through school, hitchhiked to Woodstock but left before Jimi Hendrix played, smoked a lot of dope, and developed a healthy skepticism toward the establishment.

He always had a gift for draftsmanship. After enrolling at a third-rate liberal arts school in Maine, he befriended the art teacher, who took him under his wing. He taught pottery to middle school students in Massachusetts. While house-sitting, he read a magazine article about artists in SoHo, so he moved to New York, lived in a shithole at Prince and West Broadway, and took drawing classes at Broome and Mercer. The next year he got a job at the Time-Life Building, collating pages from the magazines, and in 1976 staged a guerrilla show in the basement, where he placed four magazine covers on four sides of the table. *Time*. *Cosmopolitan*. *Photo*. *People*.

No one saw the work, but he documented the installation with photography. This got him to the idea of the original copy. A photograph of the magazine would be the object. The camera was an electric scissor, an eight-track recording tape, a beat maker. In 1977 he took pictures of furniture company advertisements from *The New York Times* magazine and created the artwork *Untitled (Living Rooms)*.

To Prince, depicting something that already exists is as close as you can get to true art, because it’s real. So he started taking pictures of cowboys in cigarette ads.

“I’ve always liked the idea of taking as much subjectivity out of the image—or *interpretation*, which is what usually is associated with art,” he told me. “What I’d like to do is take that out so that I don’t have to have it. Someone doesn’t even have to really weigh in. You sort of remove the umpire, the critic, the opinion. There is none of that.”

This continued for years, as he expanded his vision of appropriation. Metro Pictures opened in 1980, and he showed there and at the East Village gallery International With Monument along with other artists who came to be associated with the Pictures Generation: Robert Longo, Laurie Simmons, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger, and Sarah Charlesworth.

After bumming around the West Side, Prince moved to the East Village.

“I lived in the same building with Allen Ginsberg. I just didn’t want to bother.... I should have. I wish I had. He lived five floors above me or whatever. ‘Hey Allen, can you come in and sign one of your poetry...’ I just don’t have that, whatever that is.”

He did meet fellow East Village resident Jeff Koons. They hit it off and drank beer and talked to girls at a no-frills joint called Red Bar at Seventh Street and First Avenue. They were both working

on radical ideas. In the years that followed, Koons would start his lifelong transubstantiation of the humble inflatable toy rabbit into what would become a \$91 million über-Duchampian icon. No one would show him. Koons is now the most expensive living artist. Prince got the work immediately.

“Jeff Koons was the first artist that I met that when I saw his work I thought...this guy’s making art like I wanted it to be made,” Prince once wrote.

“We probably would hit almost every bar and just have a beer—any bar below 14th Street, at some point, we probably visited at one time or another,” Koons said when I spoke to him in September. “I think everybody enjoyed beer, and we enjoyed sitting around and talking about art.”

Koons, who then was working a day job at the membership desk at MoMA, saved his museum wages to buy two essential early Prince works: *Single Man Looking to the Right* and *Golden Acorns*.

“I think Richard is really the real deal, and we are of the same kind of a generation,” Koons said. “We’re alive, we’re functioning. I think our love of art—and our commitment to art—is very similar.”

Prince didn’t get the press lauded upon the likes of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Ross Bleckner. But things were happening. *Untitled (Woman With Compact)* was on the cover of Hal Foster’s *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, the defining art treatise of the era. Steven Meisel staged a photo shoot on Prince’s bed for a young singer named Madonna. He rented a room to the actor who played Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*. He hung out with Dike Blair at the Mudd Club. He started making the Cowboys. Nobody bought them. In 1983 he rephotographed an image by Gary Gross of a naked 10-year-old Brooke Shields and turned it into an appropriation work he called *Spiritual America*. (In 2005, Shields, a noted arts philanthropist, collaborated with Prince on an updated version of the work by posing, this time clothed, in front of a motorcycle.) Metro Pictures declined to show it, so he opened his own gallery, called *Spiritual America*, at 5 Rivington Street.

Prince was essentially cast out from the art world, so he moved to California and made rephotographs of ads with red and orange that looked vaguely like the end of the world. He called them Sunsets. It wasn’t about the money. He never knew any sold until he saw one while watching Lena Dunham’s film *Tiny Furniture*. Her parents, Laurie Simmons and Carroll Dunham, had one on the wall of their Desbrosses Street loft.

It turns out, Carroll Dunham saw the Sunset work up at Metro Pictures and had to have it—and spent what was a lot of money to him at the time to get it.

“When I saw them all together, I loved them and thought they were a big development in his work,” he told me. “I had a job then and a steady paycheck—I really wanted to get one so I did. Never regretted that, although it felt like a stretch at the time.”



PHOTOPLAY

Untitled (Self-Portrait), 1980. Prince believes that depicting something that already exists is the closest thing to true art because it's real.

"It was hanging in our loft on Broadway in SoHo forever," Simmons said, chiming in on the group chat. "The kids grew up with it."

"Yes," Dunham said. "Still a cherished possession."

He moved back to the city and into the back space at 303 Gallery, which was run by the art dealer—and later his wife—Lisa Spellman. In 1987 he got a loft on Reade Street. For a few years he had been making these strange works on paper, just handwritten jokes on a specific thick card stock: "I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name." "I went to see a psychiatrist. He said 'tell me everything,' I did, and now he's doing my act." In the loft he found he could paint the text against a monochromatic background. People started taking the jokes seriously, and thus began his first-ever period of any kind of commercial success. By 1992, he was firmly in Barbara Gladstone's stable. She was selling his work for more than \$160,000 in today's cash. That year he had a survey at the Whitney and a dozen works in the epoch-defining Documenta show in Kassel, Germany.

Smash commercial success really came a decade later, when Prince began a new series he dubbed Nurses. Working with the Hamptons-based rare book dealer John McWhinnie, Prince started buying pulp-fiction paperbacks featuring women in various guises—buying them at used bookstores, pulp purveyors, flea

markets. He inkjet printed them onto canvas and then painted over them.

The Nurses were an immediate hit and started getting flipped for insanely high prices. A few years after the first were shown at a gallery, *Overseas Nurse* sold for more than \$8 million at Sotheby's. The record for a Nurse stands at more than \$12 million—putting Prince in a very small club of living artists with work that has sold for eight figures: among them Koons, David Hockney, Gerhard Richter, Peter Doig, his old East Village pal Christopher Wool, and Damien Hirst, an artist Prince collects in depth.

That should have been Prince's ultimate crossover moment. The Nurses brought collaborations with Marc Jacobs and photo shoots with Kate Moss. But a decade later, he got into social media through his kids. He watched how his daughter got absolutely addicted to a photo sharing app called Instagram. Back in the day, Prince would do this thing where he commissioned portraits by asking folks for three pictures of themselves that they liked. He chose one to rephotograph, and that was the artwork. He found the feed of the model Jessica Hart and liked a photo of Hart in big fur boots standing in front of a picture of Brigitte Bardot.

"I told her, someone should make a portrait out [of] this photo," Prince wrote in 2014. "She said, 'Why don't you?'"

"The Instagram portraits are really what I call my hit record—and I never had a hit record," he told me in the studio in July. "You just can't make that up, and you certainly can't control it. I wasn't prepared for the reaction."

The series was called, with neo-Koonsian banality, *New Portraits*. It came out of the Instagram paper printouts sold through the gallery Karma in Amagansett in the summer of 2013 for \$12 a pop. By early 2014, he was ready to treat them as artworks, in a white cube. And on September 19, a new body of work arrived sans fanfare in a gallery behind Gagosian's bookstore on the ground floor of 980 Madison, almost hidden. There was no press release. The inkjet-on-canvas works were priced at \$40,000 each.

"I liked them immediately. I thought, What a clever idea. These are going to sell like *crazy*," Gagosian said to me.

Prince later testified that he made \$45 million purely from sales of his art in 2014, and at least that amount in 2015. "Maybe a little bit more than \$45 million," he said.

The critical response was torrential, every writer feeling the need to weigh in, most of it scathing. Peter Schjeldahl said the show made him wish he were dead, and that counted as a favorable review. Artnet ran this as a headline: "Richard Prince Sucks." Jerry Saltz got Prince's bit right off the bat, but his love for the work just reignited the discourse, forcing other critics to respond to him. Eventually, the model Emily Ratajowski got in on the dialogue with an essay titled "Buying Myself Back," a saga of how Prince came to make an Instagram portrait of her that ended up above the couch of an unnamed art boy, forcing her to negotiate to get control of her own image.

It's a searing attack on the ex who tried to keep the work, but at the same time Ratajowski had a much more generous take on Prince's Instagram works than the art critics were willing to say publicly: "I'd studied art at UCLA and could appreciate Prince's Warholian take on Instagram," she wrote.

She was also game to be a part of the whole stunt.

"Prince's comment on that post, included among several others at the bottom of the painting, alludes to an imagined day he has spent with me on the beach: 'U told me the truth. U lost the [anchor emoji]. No hurt. No upset. All

CONTINUED ON PAGE 99

RICHARD PRINCE, UNTITLED (SELF PORTRAIT), 1980. SIGNED ON VERSO. EKTACOLOR PHOTOGRAPH, 24 X 20 INCHES.