

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

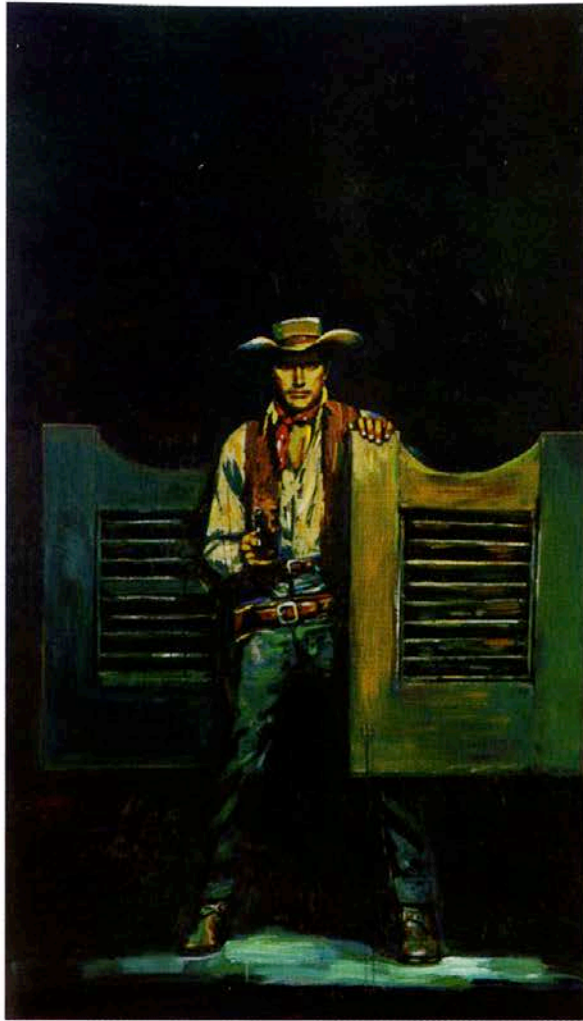
LOS ANGELES

Richard Prince

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Richard Prince's cowboy romance goes way back. In the early 1980s, his decision to lift imagery straight from Marlboro ads, which featured Stetson-and-chaps-clad loners riding horseback through vast western vistas or pausing for an existential break, resulted in some of the artist's most controversial and representative works. The legal disputes that followed reports of their financial success (in 2005, a 1989 *Untitled [Cowboy]* set an auction record of \$1.2 million) have no doubt informed every act of appropriation he went on to exercise. Famously, Prince has claimed that he never associated advertising with authorship, and hence always considered its products fair game for use, but this is not to deny that "there are actual people behind the pictures," as one of these "actual people" put it on the occasion of Prince's 2007–2008 retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. This spring, the cowboy theme resurfaced in Prince's exhibition of new work at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, this time via staged pulp-paperback illustrations ostensibly conceived in the shadows of Madison Avenue skyscrapers, and those "people behind the pictures" loomed large.

As opposed to his early-'80s cowboys, which entered the world as photographs, circulating as such before being rephotographed by Prince, these cowboys began as painted pictures, subsequently printed onto the covers of dime novels. Prince reshot the covers, then ink-jet-printed the images of the illustrations back onto canvas, finishing the works off with swaths of acrylic paint. As with his recent nurse paintings, there is a substantial difference here between the original and the "copy," which is no longer the right word (if it ever was) for what this artist has produced. Aside from consistently enlarging the source image and obfuscating the surrounding text—title, author, publisher sometimes just barely visible underneath layers of pigment—Prince indulges



Richard Prince,
Untitled (Cowboy),
2012, ink jet and
acrylic on canvas,
68½ x 40½".

artistic practice as a certifiable profession. And in these works, the joke is literally *on* both fields—that is, on the creative team “behind the pictures” and on the classically trained illustrators commissioned to paint them.

The cruelty that was always inherent in Prince’s humor is here pushed to the fore, and it cuts both ways. No matter how authentically invested he appears to be in painterly bravura for its own sake, it too must be read as a pointed reference—not to the ascendant period of the New York School (and by extension modernist painting in general) but to its decline. “Homeless representation,” the somewhat desultory term that Greenberg coined at the start of the ’60s to describe the tentative return of figures and landscapes to a site from which they had been unequivocally banned, becomes serviceable once more—doubly so. The cowboys, many bearing green-screen-like fluorescent outlines, are no less homeless than the brushwork that surrounds them. It is a historical excavation that Prince is conducting here, a search for the origins of his own critique of originality.

—Jan Tumlir

a broadly gestural painting style that conflicts tellingly with the conventional restraint of the underlying template. One might assume that his treatment bespeaks expressive freedom, except that it is finally no less conventional than that which it treats. Passing through the exhibition, viewers are led to tick off the references: here a de Kooning cowboy, there a Diebenkorn cowboy. The conflation of these AbEx exertions with western myths of gun-toting masculinity, American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and so on is a given and presented as such. It’s a dumb joke, but, as is so often the case with Prince, the very fact that there is nothing much in there to “get” is what keeps us guessing.

That Prince’s first cowboys were contemporaneous with the pictures on which they were based becomes salient inasmuch as the horsemen shown here are plainly not. The distance between the paintings made to appear on the book covers and the paintings Prince made from them marks a growing division between the fine and applied arts, perhaps a consequence of the emergence of advertising as an educational discipline and of