VALUE FOR MONEY

How do you install a great body of work by Richard Prince – an artist who refuses the concept of greatness?

Everyone expects museums to be bastions of good taste. The equation is beautifully enacted in Tino Sehgal's situational work this is good, in which a museum guard erupts into motion whenever a visitor enters the gallery and announces: 'Tino Sehgal, this is good, 2001, Courtesy the artist.' The utterance emphasizes the general assumption that things on view in museums are considered 'good' – i.e., of high quality and historical importance – while also announcing itself as a 'good', a commodity available for exchange. This tautology is nowhere more apparent today than at the Neue Galerie in Manhattan, where the world's most expensive painting, Gustav Klimt's radiant, gold-flecked portrait of his muse Adele Bloch-Bauer (1907), has been on view since Ronald Lauder purchased it for a record $135 million this past summer. People have been lining up for a glimpse of the newly anointed 'Mona Lisa of New York City'. Even my father asked if I might have sufficient 'pull' to gain him access to the museum so that he could avoid the crowds.

Museums have long exploited the lure of the masterpiece. The concept of the blockbuster exhibition plays on the audience's desire to witness greatness, to stand enthralled in front of what they perceive to be the best, most valuable treasures of our culture. It is a cliché by now that if you include the names Picasso, Monet or Cézanne in an exhibition title, the throngs will come, no matter what the subject of the show. The art fair, in all its current ubiquity, plays on this phenomenon by making the exchange of art explicit. People tend to equate the conspicuous consumption of artwork en masse with its cultural value. If everyone is buying this, that or the next thing, it must be good. The contemporary auction raises this formula a notch. Bidders can literally perform their good taste in front of an audience of their peers, transforming an already singular art work into a masterpiece by virtue of the price they are willing to pay. Which brings me to Richard Prince, whose Untitled (Cowboy) (1989) sold at Christie's last year for a record $1,248,000, making it the most expensive photograph ever purchased at auction (until this price was eclipsed by Edward Steichen's $2,928,000 The Pond – Moonlight, 1904).

The irony of this transaction was not lost on anyone who has followed Prince's career from pioneer appropriationist to painter of our pulp fictions. His deceptively simple act of re-photographing ads for living-room furniture from the New York Times magazine in 1977, cropping out all identifying text and calling the image his own, shattered modernist paradigms of originality and authorship. Prince creates the **anti-masterpiece**, the work that refuses to behave in a museum context that privileges the individual object as a sign of artistic genius. And herein lies his brilliance. This has become increasingly apparent to me while working with Prince on his forthcoming retrospective at the Guggenheim. For the longest time I have been grappling with the installation – how do you show a great body of work that refuses the concept of greatness? Prince works in series – 'Cowboys', 'Jokes', 'Girlfriends', 'Nurses', 'Car Hoods' etc. – which are **undeniably important, aesthetically pleasing and conceptually provocative.** But within each series (particularly the appropriated photographs and monochrome joke paintings) there is no single, greatest hit. This is not the case with artists such as Christopher Wool, whose Sell the House, Sell the Car, Sell the Kids (1988) is a clear winner, or Jeff Koons, whose Michael Jackson and 'Bubbles' (1988) has become an icon of the 1980s. If anything, Prince's practice is a skilfully calculated inversion of the value system we ascribe to art. With the monochrome 'Joke' paintings one has simply to decide which joke appeals: is it the one about the psychiatrist, the farmer, the drowned husband or the two-trouser suit? Alternatively, you can make a selection by colour; backgrounds vary from ochre to purple. With the 'Cowboys' it is a question of backdrop: do you like your men on the prairie or set against a mountain range? On a horse or off? In the snow or shallow water?

The seeming equivalency inherent in Prince's work (at least within each of his series) is, I believe, part of a deliberate conceptual strategy: one that emulates, in the most Warholian fashion, **how mass culture operates.** What appears as a choice, as a symbol of personal taste – Coke or Pepsi, Ford or Chevrolet, Compaq or Dell – is an illusion of marketing aimed, ultimately, at the lowest common denominator. Prince owns this reality. He knows his work looks best in seemingly casual configurations – a Cowboy with a Nurse, a Hood with a cartoon, a Joke with a Girlfriend – that play like samples from popular cul-

ture. And for those who need their fix of fine art, Prince is now 'collaborating' with Willem de Kooning, wreaking wonderful havoc on the painter's abstractions of the female form. With his mix of irreverence and devotion to his subject Prince is now producing classical painting, which will eventually find itself enshrined in a museum, like the Klimt, **as an emblem of good taste**, even though it was made to fly in the face of it.

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