

MENU



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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

## **Richard Prince at Nahmad Contemporary**



*Richard Prince, Untitled, 2020, Acrylic, oil stick, and collage on canvas*

*75 1/4 x 63 3/4 inches (191.1 x 161.9 cm)*

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN** December 24, 2023

Richard Prince, now in his mid-seventies, spends most of his time in Sagaponack, a town in the eastern part of Long Island—a long, established area for artists. For many years, Prince worked with found imagery - in advertising especially. He is considered the founder of appropriation art. His hand, unlike the hand of most artists, was usually invisible to the viewer. Then the Covid virus set in, and it became difficult to get out and see current progress being made in art. In “Freaks,” an eight-painting gathering of figures placed in [Nahmad Contemporary](#), Prince makes a return to actual painting and drawing technique. The show turns out to be an excellent reintroduction to Prince’s painterly skills.

“Freaks,” presents portraits of figures who came of age in the Sixties, but who are now marginalized by a society turned materialist and technology-centric. As the primary founder of appropriation art, a genre excluding visible influence created by the artist himself, Prince goes against his earlier work, making large, skilled paintings that describe the forlorn, often destitute survivors of a time now historically finished. His isolated figures are signs of a very different past...



*Paintings © Richard Prince Studio, Photography by Tom Powel Imaging*

The large paintings on view are pretty close in general form. A normal-size head is supported by an oversize torso and huge legs and feet. Some sort of abstract design is found just under their necks, while their clothes are light colored and slightly idiosyncratic. Columns lacking functional value stand on either side of the standing forms. In one figure, the black abstract, a nearly aboriginal symbol starts at the neck and moves down over a light-colored robe or long shirt. Nothing in

each figure's garments makes obvious sense. The entire portrait is absurd—the red shoes look like carpet slippers, while the white socks seem athletic. Two columns, yellow on the left and blue on the right, may be sculptures announcing a minor god. But the reading is strange, given that the figures are hardly heroic.

Maybe that is the key? The tacit pathos of these reticent souls who took part in what was, at the time, a substantial alternative culture as a warning. A valid culture cannot be alternative beyond a hint or two. Now that alternative culture is mostly gone, the pathos of the freaks we see has become the symbol of its decay. Prince in part, given his age and the fact that he himself was once a "hippie," may identify more strongly with these figures than we know. But the portraits are also efforts to analyze a painting of alienation; souls walled in by a culture entirely moribund.



*Paintings © Richard Prince Studio, Photography by Tom Powel Imaging*

Another painting shows a youth with a shock of hair. He appears to be bare-chested, with two differently colored legs, blue and yellow, attached to the front of his pants - his feet are orange and green. He is framed by two poles that add structure to an image bordering on eccentricity. We don't know that these figures are outsiders; our knowledge only comes from the title hanging over the collective and organizing the audience's perception. What does it mean to be a "freak" anyway? The word is pejorative—the kind of term one reserves for people undeserving of respect. That is the way most people see outsiders today, yet we forget how much the culture of the Sixties has been internalized as a current way of life. The awkwardness of these paintings thus becomes a signal of derangement, as understood by the mainstream.

The last painting, like the “Screen Shot” series, offers a figure much like the others: a man with a pile of hair curved to one side, wearing an obscure heretical symbolic form. It hangs from his neck, past his chest. A yellow bib descends from the symbol above it, covering much of the blue gown the man wears. Columns unequal in height stand on either side of this person, who is perhaps a saint or perhaps a charlatan, or both. As a group, the men look more like near saints than scruffy survivors.



*Paintings © Richard Prince Studio, Photography by Tom Powel Imaging*

And maybe that's the point. Maybe the lost tribes of Armageddon, the Sixties generation, have retreated into symbolic gestures that would protect them from being savaged by a hostile reading of their values. If you are parading as a saint in America, no one takes you seriously, but no one bothers you either. Eccentricity of dress, along with an idiosyncratic treatment of hair, of shoes, etc. can be dismissed by others, even if those dressed see their garments as statements of rebellion and truth. To be a “freak” today is to be vulnerable. But art mediation between conservative realism and heady thoughts provides alternatives to lost dreams. Without art, as Prince knows so well, we become freaks of our own imagination. **WM**