

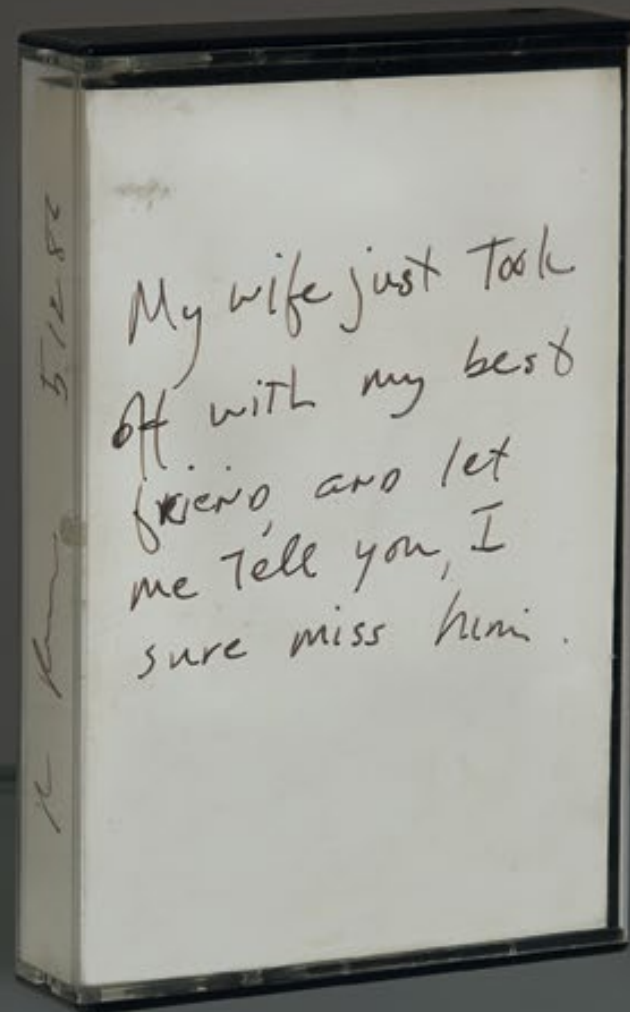
RICHARD PRINCE  
*MONOCHROMATIC JOKES*

NAHMAD CONTEMPORARY

"I eat politics and I sleep politics but I never *drink* politics."

"I understand your husband drowned and left you two million dollars. Can you imagine, two million dollars, and he couldn't even read or write."  
"Yeah, she said, and he couldn't swim either."  
"I understand your husband drowned and left you two million dollars. Can you imagine, two million dollars, and he couldn't even read or write."  
"Yeah, she said, and he couldn't swim either."

I never had a penny to my name so I changed my name.



Cassette tape with handwritten joke, 1986

*I went to see a psychiatrist. He said "tell me everything,"  
I did and now he's doing my act.*

It's a confession, an admission, but of what exactly?

It's anecdotal and anonymous.

At least in written form.

It's culture if you define the term as that which outlives the lifetime of its maker.

The one thing we can all agree on is that the psychiatrist bit is now a classic American joke.

Before Louis CK.

Before Jerry Seinfeld.

Before Sam Kinison.

From an era when people still told jokes.

The heyday of Henny Youngman.

In the retelling it got stronger somehow.

More defined.

One of the few oral traditions our country maintains.

A litmus test of taste.

Of shared sensibility.

You think something's funny + I think something's funny = consensus.

And that's a powerful emotion.

When he first heard the joke, Richard Prince wasn't entirely sure he understood it.

Maybe he still doesn't.

But he knew it was about appropriation.  
And he knew he wanted out of the Pictures Generation.  
A club he'd never intended to join.  
Here was his chance to escape.  
A chance for the kid to skip the picture.  
He wasn't a funny guy.  
He wasn't the life of the party.  
But most comedy isn't about entertaining as much as it is  
about survival.  
And he wanted to live.  
He didn't make art looking for love.  
Who could love four men looking in the same direction?  
It was so ugly he wouldn't hang it in his own house.  
He wouldn't hang it in *your* house.  
He lived with his girlfriend.  
Her apartment was at 303 Park Avenue South.  
In the back he set up a little studio.  
This was after his post studio period.  
Post, post studio.  
The year was 1986.  
He started writing out stolen jokes.  
Maybe not stolen, but almost authorless.  
Borscht Belt stuff.  
A step above knock knocks.  
Old jokes for young people.

Ten dollars a joke.  
Which quickly became twenty dollars a joke.  
They weren't his lines, but they were written in his hand.  
And that counted for something.  
He wrote out a few jokes on the liners of cassette tapes.  
He thought of them almost as mix tapes.  
Almost as set lists.  
But if you bothered listening to one there was nothing  
recorded on it.  
Only white noise to greet you.  
He thought he might give the cassettes out at galleries  
like demo tapes.  
Like musicians did at record labels to get signed.  
Within a year he began silk-screening jokes on canvas.  
He made them with black text on a white background, but then  
decided that wasn't quite right.  
He painted over them.  
There's an installation shot in *Spiritual America* before he  
destroyed the paintings.  
The answer he arrived at finally was to paint the jokes using  
strange colors.  
Strange combinations.  
The colors would be a stand-in for the missing image.  
Or rather lack of image.  
It's not for nothing that his friend Christopher Wool was making  
text pieces at the time.  
Except Wool was a deconstructionist, exploding syllables and  
reshuffling etymology.



Richard Prince was vacillating between ideas about painting and illustration.

Studying cartoon captions one comes across in men's magazines.

A struggle he would explore later in the white paintings.

For now, he was deep in his monochromatic joke phase.

The year was 1987.

The month was March.

*Art In America* puts Prince on the cover.

It turns out to be a real game changer.

Print periodicals still meant something then.

Maybe he wouldn't have to take the assistant teaching gig in Maine that he'd been offered.

Maybe there'd be pennies to his name.

Or at the very least he could keep his name—be himself—and that might end up being enough.

A month or two passed.

He gets a call from Barbara Gladstone.

Would he like to be part of her gallery line-up?

She would pay him a monthly stipend to cover his studio expenses, something to live on.

They planned an exhibition for 1988.

He showed up with the monochrome jokes.

She asked him what happened to the photographs?

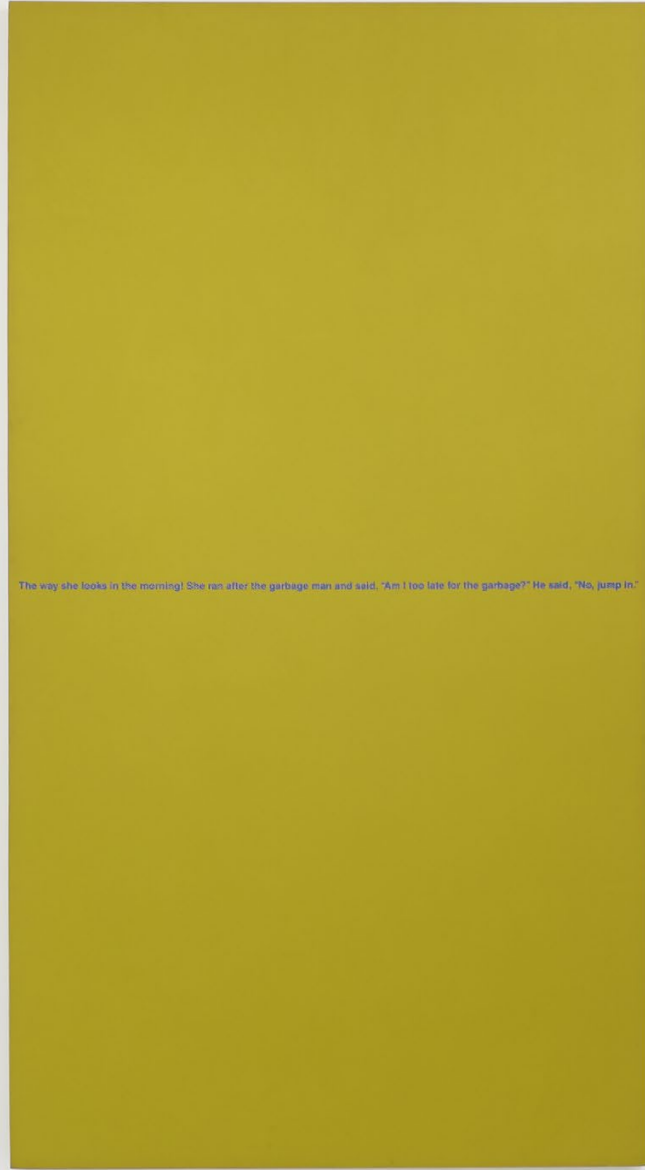
Where were the gangs?

She wasn't kidding.

—Bill Powers



*Tell Me Everything*, 1987, Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 56 x 48 inches (142.2 x 121.9 cm)



**Richard Prince  
Toasted at the Friar's Club**

**By Glenn O'Brien  
November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010**



**Ladies and Gentlemen:** It's a real honor for you to see me. In fact I am humbled to be here at the famous Friar's Club founded in 1904. The motto of the Friar's is *Præ Omnia Fraternis*, "before all brotherhood." Making it the earliest gay club in New York City. No, actually the Friar's has admitted women for years. Liza Minelli was the first female member— *that* should prove it isn't a gay club. I think she met her last husband here. You know David Gest, the guy Michael Jackson's face doctor practiced on.

The Friars Club was founded as the Press Agents Associates. At that time there were sixteen daily newspapers in New York and people would impersonate members of the press to get comped at the Broadway shows. So the press agents started this organization to put a stop to the fraud, but then they wound up having such a ball at their meetings, drinking and telling jokes, that their clients, the show people began to infiltrate the club. And so here we are tonight, infiltrating the Friars Club to honor a great fraud and impersonator Richard Prince.

I hope you don't mind if I occasionally refer to my notes. This is not stand up. I want to keep this on the high level Richard deserves.

We are in the Milton Berle Room tonight—the Shecky Greene and Corbett Monica rooms were unavailable—and that seems especially appropriate since many consider Uncle Miltie to be the inventor of appropriation. Berle was notorious for stealing jokes. Bob Hope said he "never heard a joke he didn't steal". Once when Berle was doing a bit with another comic, he said to the other guy, "I wish I'd said that," to which the comic replied, "Oh, you will. You will". When Berle accused Jack Benny of stealing a joke from him Benny said, "When you take a joke from Milton Berle, it's not stealing it's repossessing." Berle was really an archivist. He collected jokes scientifically and published them in the Milton Berle Private Joke File and the Rest of Milton Berle's Private Joke File, each of which contains over 10,000 jokes, only a small percentage of which have been appropriated by Richard Prince.... the Uncle Miltie of art.

Milton Berle was not only a famous joke thief, he was also known as one of the largest men in Hollywood. If you catch my drift. Interestingly, Richard is known as one of the largest men in the art world. He is so well endowed he could endow the School of Visual Arts. I read that on

the wall of the toilet at the Odeon, and in the toilet at Indochine, and the toilet at the Waverly...funny, it looked just like his handwriting.

I heard that during his swinging days Richard only once encountered a woman who was too big for him. He told her to try douching with Crest toothpaste—it reduces cavities 40%. He's a kinky cat. You go to Richard's place and there are these old nudist magazines all over the place. I said what's with all these nudist magazines. He said "I like nothing better."

Anyway, Far from simply taking jokes, Richard *asks* people for them. In fact, he has been known to offer \$1,000 to anyone who gives him a joke that is used painting. I know he offered it to me. He didn't pay me, but he offered.

"I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name." Henny, did you get a grand for that? I hope so. I'll have to talk to the Henny Youngman Authentication Board about that one.

I once said to Nancy Spector, the delightful curator from the Guggenheim, did you know Richard stole that joke from Myron Cohen. She said "No, you're wrong. It was Ellsworth Kelly." What did I know? I didn't really know anything about art. Until I met Richard I thought the Guggenheim was named after Crazy Guggenheim, the drunk on the old Jackie Gleason show. "Hiya Joe...heh beh beh." (I'm too old for the room.) Anyway, I didn't know anything about art. When Richard said "Do you like Beuys?" I got nervous. When he asked me if I liked Weiner?" I thought he was coming on to me. I didn't know about conceptual art.

People have asked me about Richard's interest in old jokes. I always say, "As far as I know he doesn't pay any interest on them." But seriously, he came about these jokes not as a comic as a scholar— it was an intellectual pursuit. He actually became interested in jokes because of Freud. Not Lucien Freud, the painter, but Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis who wrote the book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Maybe he was high on coke at the time, but Freud was obsessed with jokes.



The clue is in Richard's most famous joke painting. I went to see a psychiatrist. He said Tell me everything. I did. Now he's doing my act.

In 1899, when Freud was preparing his landmark work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the proofreader complained that there were too many jokes in the dreams. I kid you not. Freud was really into jokes, especially Schnorrer jokes. but he told them really badly. For my fellow goyem, Schnorrer is Yiddish for Scottish.

Anyway, allow me to read a passage from Freud.

A doctor, as he came away from a lady's bedside, said to her husband with a shake of his head: "I don't like her looks." "I haven't liked her looks for some time," the husband replied.

Freud continues: The doctor was of course referring to the lady's condition; but he expressed his anxiety about the patient in words which the husband could interpret as a confirmation of his own marital aversion."

"Marital aversion," I've had that. (Not with you, honey.)

Here's another Freud joke: "Two Jews meet near the bathhouse. One says "Have you taken a bath?" The other says, "Why is there one missing."

Fantastic book. Freud tells jokes by Henri Bergson and Immanuel Kant. I guess he was sort of the Milton Berle of Vienna. Anyway, if anybody says Richard's jokes are really bad—first of all they aren't his, they belong to humanity and the sphere of the intellect, and secondly, next to Sigmund Freud he's a real top banana.

Richard Prince has always been a great artist but I think he came into his own when he left the city and headed off into the Wilderness to discover what he calls "Spiritual America." He was a man on a quest, looking for America's spirit. He looked in the dive bars, topless joints, and truckstop brothels in decayed Airstream trailers. He looked in crackhouses, amphetamine labs and shooting galleries. He looked in glory holes and under rocks. He looked at the YMCA, and then finally he looked in that small upstate town—Barville. It was a simple town

with an abandoned mill, vacant storefronts, and down at the heel Federal townhouses. But what Richard found there transformed him, and it transformed the town which is now known as the Marfa of the Borscht belt.

Prince developed that little town. He built a bookstore, he built a combination custom car workshop and strip club, and he turned the old town library into a Fort Knox of hipster manuscripts and bound proofs. He also created an extraordinary installation there known as Second House—transforming a typical ranch style single-family Federal Witness Protection Program type dwelling located amid abandoned farms into a museum of Spiritual America. It was a humble structure filled with priceless paintings and sculptures, and, after it was made Chuck Close accessible, it was purchased by the Guggenheim Museum. Then, tragically Second House was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. And like a good neighbor, State Farm was there. But, alas, at yesterdays price per square inch. I told him to put a mezuzah by the door. He doesn't listen.

Why does he not listen? It might be because he was raised in a closet. He thought he was a suit. Until he came out of the closet. Actually Richard really did come from a strange family. I met them. Real oddballs. Imagine Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in rubber thongs. They might have answered an ad that Richard put in a swingers magazine. Richard hints that his parents were in the CIA or the NSA. I think maybe they really worked for CAA or ICM—but who knows? A strange clan. Like Gypsy meets Marathon Man.

Mama look at me now. I'm a star! Is it safe? Look how I live! Is it safe? Look at my friends! Is it safe? Look where I'm going! Is it safe?

You can't make up a life story like this. How many guys are born in the Panama Anal Zone. Oh, wait, that's the Panama Canal Zone. (This prescription is kinda old.)

Anyway, Richard Prince turned out to be an artist for our time. He has changed the landscape. First with re-photography, photographing photographs. Probably the best known example is the Cowboys series in which Richard photographed Marlboro cigarettes advertising to create an extraordinary portrait of America. (cough) The cynics have

claimed that this work is somehow about the vanishing cowboy...vanishing because of lung cancer. I doubt this. Richard used to smoke Marlboro lights himself. I smoked the reds. One day I had a bad cough so Richard sent me to his Park Avenue Doctor. He said I needed a \$50,000 operation. I told the doctor couldn't afford it. He said give me 2 grand and I'll retouch the X-rays.

I hate when people look at art and all they see is negativity. The Marlboro men are beautiful men. Manly men. In chaps and boots. Richard and I used to go to a happy hour like that in the West Village. People don't see the beautiful side. Richard gets the same sort of negativity regarding the bunny skull. He's got Hugh Hefner worried that it's about AIDS. The bunny skull not about AIDS. You've heard of memento mori. This is memento Bugs.

Richards Girlfriends series took appropriation in a whole new direction. Called swinging. Fortunately none of the bikers whose girlfriends he appropriated seemed to mind. Here was a series with nothing negative about it. It was about sharing. Laissez faire. At one point I was hoping that Richard would appropriate my second wife, but it didn't work out. Instead she wound up appropriating half of my art collection.

I first knew Richard as a writer. He wrote that great little book *Why I Go to the Movies Alone*—Well you know why most men go to the movies alone. Dice. No, really there are other reasons. Sometimes you don't want your wife or your date asking you what's going on, you want to just watch the damn movie. But I think Richard actually liked to the movies alone so he could meet people. He told me he once went to a theater in Times Square alone and had to change seats five times. I said "You mean you got molested?" He said "Yeah! Finally."

Richard loves the movies. They're larger than life. *His life* anyway. When I first met him he was always chasing movie stars. I remember him dating the actress Sheryl Lee back when she was playing Lara Palmer, the dead girl in *Twin Peaks*. She was gorgeous. I don't know about that blue makeup, but she was gorgeous. Drop dead gorgeous. That reminds me of a joke.

A man is brought into a courtroom in shackles. The bailiff says "Your honor this defendant is charge with raping a corpse six times." The

Judge looks down at this quivering little wretch and he says "In all my years on the bench that is the most disgusting charge I have ever heard. If you are found guilty I will do everything in my power to see you receive the maximum sentence. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The little defendant looks up at the judge and he says, "Your honor I am completely innocent. First of all, it wasn't six times, it was three times. Second it wasn't a stranger, it was my wife. And third, how did I know she was dead? She always laid there like that."

You better laugh. When you get the check you're gonna blow your brains out. This is an expensive exhibition in Paris. The interns are staying at the Ritz. Richard is staying in Sarkozy's closet. He still thinks he's a suit when it suits him.

Say, James Frey, is here tonight. You know the great Italian writer. He wrote a *Million Little Pizzas*- a fantastic memoir. I know some people have quibbled and said parts of that book are fiction, but if you're married you understand that there's a very fine line between truth and fiction. Especially when you're fucked up. And this guy has been through hell with the drugs and the booze. I know exactly how he feels. That feeling of knowing you'll hate yourself in the morning. Whenever that happens to me I just sent the alarm for 1PM.

James Franco is supposed to be here. He's not only a great actor, he's a fine artist. Did you catch his exhibition at the Cock Tower. The *Dangerous Book Four Boys*. The art world is crazy about this guy. They find him intriguing. People are always asking me if he likes Beuys. I don't know. I know he collects. I heard he has a Weiner. Maybe it was James Franco who burned down Second House.

I'm sorry Larry Bogosian couldn't be here tonight. He's out of town. He's either doing *Law & Order Criminal Intent* or an opening with Cy Twombly, I can't remember which. Larry came up to me the other day and told me that one of his best friends had just died after a sudden illness. I said "What did he have?" He said, "Oh, a nurse painting, a couple of Basquiat drawings and a pretty good Warhol."

Have you ever been up to the Petrossian gallery. It's impressive. I mean the art, sure, but all those chicks. There's all kinds of chicks

working there. I even met some Polish lesbians? They don't like women. I went up to the receptionist and I said, "If I told you you have a fantastic body, would you hold it against me?" She slapped me in the face, then she sent me to Mary Boone.

Speaking of fantastic bodies, Richard also created a fantastic body of work known as the check paintings. He got the idea from buying up the cancelled checks Jackson Pollack and Jack Kerouac wrote to liquor stores—anyway these were paintings made on canvases completely covered with Richard's own personal checks—the last time I checked. These paintings created a sensation and collectors lined up to buy them. I heard Peter Brant bought one and it bounced.

Richard's amazing nurse painting series changed the face of painting. Some see the Nurse paintings as an indictment of the HMO system. Some say it puts the burka on the All-American girl next door. Hey you never know? Those billionaire Arab sheiks are into collecting art now, too. They know what they're doing. In some cases the veil is not a bad idea, if she's ugly you don't have to flip her over. Richard was so into the nurses that he was addicted, he just couldn't stop making these paintings. Wet Nurse, Deadpan Nurse, Bedpan Nurse, Urologist Nurse, Fingers up the butt nurse, Sponge Bath Nurse, Dull Needle Nurse. Most of those were sold at Gagosian Guam. My favorite of all was East River Nurse—they found her under a doc.

Richard Prince will go down in Art History. Hopeful not too far down. He's done his homework. He's copied his homework. He studied with the masters. Most people don't know that he was actually close with de Kooning. Even de Kooning didn't know they were close. I remember when we were all flying to Europe—Richard, Bill and I had the whole first class cabin to ourselves. Richard put on a Chevy Chase movie. When it ended, we were 40,000 feet over the Atlantic and deKooning said "That stunk, lets get the hell out of here."

Did you know Richard also erased a de Kooning just like Rauschenberg? It was during his White Paintings period. We were both staying at the Chateau Marmont. He had a room under the Marlboro Man billboard and wore white t-shirts and leather chaps over his white levis. He used to come to my room to borrow Wite-Out. I was making a lot of mistakes at the time. He'd say "I've gotta erase this

DeKooning." Richard says that when those white paintings were done there was a lot of white powder around. I always thought it boric acid for the cockroaches. But Richard was a mess. It wasn't just drugs. There was the tequila too. Once we went down to Tijuana and he got so drunk that when we came back Customs made me pay duty on him. One night he said "I just can't take this life of wine, women and song anymore." I said, "Give up the singing. You're not that good."

Anyway, we are here tonight to support an incredible exhibition of Richard's collection of books and art that Mr. Robert Rubin has put together at the Bibliotheque National in Paris. The Bibliotheque National is like the library of Congress in Washington, except it's in Paris. It contains every book ever published in France, literally. And you know how the French are, intellectuals with dirty minds. Paris is the only place where philosophers can get laid. So the BNP has a world class collection of everything from philosophy to smut and sometimes philosophical smut. The BNP collection is unique I'm talking la crème de la crud. Lacanian filth. Derridean porn. Guy on girl, girl on girl, guy on guy, guy on goose. And now they've got Richard's collection, which I can't believe was let out of America and into France. I also heard from Bob Rubin that the exhibition also involves restoration of some of the most rare, disgusting and perverted smut in the BNP collection. Imagine centuries of smut in the hands of French civil servants who can't be fired. Books ravaged by red wine, semen, snails. Pages stuck together. The French are not neat people. They coulda used a rubber or at least a tube sock.

But this exhibition is truly a labor of love, self-love maybe, but a labor of love nevertheless. Richard loves French erotica and the Olympia Press. He loved the Travellers Companion Series so much that he once slept with Iris Owens. She told him she was Harriet Daimler. And she was wearing a hijab. From Hermes. She looked like Edward G. Robinson as Mata Hari.

Most of the credit for this show goes to Mr. Robert Rubin. Not the Bob Rubin who was Secretary of the Treasury, and not the comedian Bob Rubin who looks like he's got a muskrat on his head. I'm talking about Bob Rubin who went from commodity trading to architectural history. Bob Rubin runs the Bridge in Long Island which is undoubtedly the coolest golf course in the world. Where else do you have Richard Prince

art in the clubhouse, and you can hit 150 mph in the rough off the 18<sup>th</sup> fairway. Bob Rubin is so cool he had James Brown yelling "Take it to the Bridge" on the club answering machine and when members complained he just asked them if they wanted their money back. He's so cool that when one of the members killed his wife with a seven iron, he said "Too much club." Then he said "How many strokes."

Bob has been a great influence on Richard. He has shaved several strokes off his handicap. And now Richard is a calm, collected, happily married man. We have his lovely wife Noel to thank for that. I remember the first time I met Noel thinking, "Now there is a down to earth girl." At the time, he was laying on top of her in the back yard. Richard is a great husband and father. He is obsessed with Noel's happiness. And fortunately the detectives haven't come up with anything.

I've known Richard so long. When I met him he had beautiful dark curly hair running halfway down his back. Then when he met Noel she made him get his back waxed. Now that we've gotten older I like the way he's mellowed. And he's so wise about getting old. Like when he first turned me on to Viagra he said "Swallow it quick or you'll get a stiff neck." He once said to me "The most important thing in life isn't money. It's love." Which is fortunately because he really loves money.

Aren't you glad I'm not a performance artist?

I'm proud of Richard's great success and maturity. I remember when he was into the chicks and wild partying, but now that he's with Noel he's just a hi fi nut. (Hi fidelity.) He stays home, drinks Chardonnay and passes out. He doesn't get into trouble any more. Sometimes he even pretends he's not even interested anymore. The other day he said to me, "At this point sex is just a pain in the ass." I said, "Richard, Richard...you're doing it all wrong."



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

# RICHARD PRINCE

## *MONOCHROMATIC JOKES*

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Cover: *My Name*, 1987, Acrylic and silkscreen on canvas  
Diptych: 56 x 96 inches (142.2 x 243.8 cm)

I would like to express my gratitude to Sandy Heller  
for believing in this exhibition from the beginning. Special  
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We would not have put on this show without the blessing  
of Richard Prince. It has been an honor.

– Joseph Nahmad

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