

## **RICHARD PRINCE | FREAKS**

November 1–December 23, 2023

The story behind the paintings in Richard Prince’s new series, **FREAKS**, began some fifty years ago. In 1972, the artist drew a series of heads with a black ballpoint pen, which he called “dead” heads and said, “were the first things I did that ever had any soul.” When he moved to New York in 1974, he set the heads aside and cued the ads, cowboys, girlfriends, cartoons, jokes, car hoods, and nurses.

In 1998, the “dead” heads made a cameo in his series of Hippie Drawings. These wild, vibrant “hippie” figures with big eyes and toothy grins “brought all of us freaks together.” With each figure illustrated, a counterculture collective was slowly forming. They were a visual nod to the glorious hippie culture of the sixties and seventies.

The figures from the Hippie Drawings were translated into paintings called High Times nearly twenty years later. Here, the individual hippies coalesce into a community—a camaraderie of outsiders, an anti-establishment alliance. Inkjet, collage, and pigments of energetic hues form each figure and create a kaleidoscopic assembly much like the free-spirited hippie festivals a half-century earlier.

There was safety in this collective.

But when the whole dissolves, only the individual parts remain.

And a hippie without a tribe is just a FREAK.

In the summer of 2020, the FREAKS surfaced. They emerged as vestiges of a disbanded group, its constituent parts holding the coffin of a bygone culture. These figures occupy a solitary existence, nothing more than paint and canvas. A sense of gravitas, reflection, and introspection is perceptible. They are kindred with Picasso’s harlequins, once esteemed members of their troupe, now estranged jesters. Yet they are fragmented and nuanced like the musketeers that Picasso used as vessels for complex self-expression. Their previously psychedelic hues have patinaed, now burnished as if lit from behind. Maybe they are relics of hippies past, leathered by years of earth, sun, and Kumbaya. Or the hippie-turned-freaks have just seasoned and dispersed to the beach, where their remembrances are refracted through a coastal haze. Gone are the trippy festivals, and what remains is the fog of memories. Perhaps it is these memories that emerge as abstracted forms alongside each figure, a suggestion of something tangible yet out of reach. Once-flailing arms now flank the body, and mechanical silhouettes veil the mouth or interlock like gears across the chest. It is within these impenetrable, varnished physiques that the past is neatly entombed.

Two years later, in 2022, Prince found himself between studios and without paint or canvas. Reverting to an elemental mode of creation, he used pen on paper to draw one head per day, each succinctly called *Untitled (1967)*. If 1967 was Prince's "favorite year ever lived," then these drawings recall the ease and simplicity of that era—the Summer of Love when he used rudimentary pen and ink to make his first works.

Now, an intricate pattern of lines model shapes and textures, a technique that summons the age-old traditions of Northern Renaissance printmakers. Yet these figures are not Rembrandt's presumptuous self-portraits or Dürer's declarations of artistic genius. These are the FREAKS, presented in meticulous detail and manifesting their unique idiosyncrasies. As if behind a magnifying glass, every kink in their hair and gap between their teeth is sharply defined. Prince said, "freaks are something between a monster and a friend." They are a figural horror vacui that is both eerie and familiar. They have come to terms with their identities and relish their otherness. They fly their flag.

**FREAKS** will be on view at Nahmad Contemporary, New York, from November 1 through December 23, 2023.