

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN

**Richard Prince: *The Figures***

23 April – 6 June, 2015

Luxembourg & Dayan

64 East 77<sup>th</sup> Street

New York City



Richard Prince arrived in NYC in August 1974. He stayed in Bed-Stuy Brooklyn with a friend of a friend for two weeks and then rented a small one bedroom sublet on Prince and West Broadway. He had saved 1,500 dollars from teaching pottery to high school students working at a private country day school south of Boston. He had read an article in the New York Times Magazine about Soho. He wanted to check

it out and thought he'd come down and stay for three months. He had spent most of the summer of '74 in southern Maine house sitting for a family, and when they returned he thought it might be a good time to go the place he always wanted to go to.

One of the first things he did after he arrived in New York was look for a drawing class. Figure drawing. He'd been going to one up in Maine for three years. He found a class on Greene St that met twice a week... maybe twenty people went... chipped in ten dollars to pay for a model, sometimes two models at the same time. The figure drawing sessions back in Maine were organized by friends. After three hours of drawing, they would open up beer and pass around their drawings and talk to each other about what they had just drawn. This didn't happen on Greene St. No beer. No talking about what they drew. It wasn't AA. They didn't share. What they did was private. Everybody was in their own worlds.

"I didn't know anybody when I came to New York City. I was on my own and spent days where the only conversation I would have was with a bartender."

Figure drawing class in 1974 was out of fashion. "I'm not sure when it went out but I can tell you, in 1974, it wasn't in." Figure drawing was something he needed to do. He felt connected to something when he did it... and the tradition of drawing the figure put him in a place where El Greco, Goya, Cezanne, Picasso, de Kooning, Sigmar Polke, and R. Crumb had already been. There was something safe about the place. It wasn't crazy or wild or new or different or groundbreaking or what was next. It's where things started. And Richard wanted to be in the beginning.

Passing the hat.

"Whoever showed up and took off their clothes got whatever we could afford to put in the hat."

This class met over on Broome and Mercer. It was a real dump. Tin ceiling. Exposed pipes. A bunch of cats would sit on the sills or pass by and rub up against you while you were trying to connect a hip to a thigh. The place belonged to some women and part of what was in the hat went toward their rent.

Drawing the nude was fundamental, unexciting... "squaresville." Whatever every other artist was doing outside THE SQUARE had nothing to do with Richard. There was video. There was performance. There was post studio. There was Avalanche. Richard knew about Acconci. He knew about Smithson. He knew about Nauman. He knew about Hesse. He knew about Hannah Wilke. But he also knew about Walt Kuhn and Alice Neel... Abner Dean, Gregory Gillespie, George Tooker, Whitney Darrow Jr., James Avati and William Bailey. And he knew for himself, in August '74, there was

gouache on hot press arches, a No. 4B pencil, and a naked body. "It's what I loved to do." And hooking into something that was so basic and old, felt genuine. It was all about continuation... and there was nothing better when it came to "continuation" than the human body.

Richard has said that he'll never stop thinking about human flesh. He calls this never-ending thinking "second nature." Sure, the thinking gets interrupted by other ideas and mediums, but head to toe is simple. It's always there. Right next to you. All around. "It grounds you and makes you think about posture."

He does it alone. No assistants having to show or give instructions to. He usually makes some kind of figure study during the summer or on vacations, or makes it part of his day, like when he goes to museums and tries to find a room that's empty, and sits and stares at the scale of the human form.

Every artist that he's ever thought about has tried it. Whether they admit it or not, at some time during their life, they've drawn an arm, a leg, a foot, a head.

Philip Guston. Perfect example.

"I'm not sure I would've paid much attention to him had he not given up and cartooned his way into fat one eyed faces smoking stubby cigars. When was that show? 1970? Talk about hate. The reviews were vicious. Was he mad? Lost his mind? It's strange to think that one of the only people who came to his defense was Willem de Kooning."

The figure.

Relevant?

Who cares?

Dinosaur?

Not to Richard.

Like he's said, "Get it on bang a gong... T-Rex."

Richard knows the figure isn't on everybody's radar. Old story. Old hat. It's all been done. Taken care of. But that's just it. He doesn't think it has. He likes the dead-end. "In my mind the "conventions" of the figure is what's cool. Trying to make something different out of something that's already been done to death makes me bend over backward, hold my breath and count to ten. I take a pulse. It's faint. But I feel it. It's barely there. Flat line? Almost. But I hold on. Lay it on me. Give me some skin. Give me some bones. It's just like that The Mamas & the Papas song... 'I'm in the mood for love.'"

Image: Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 2013, inkjet, acrylic, and charcoal on canvas, 63 ¼ x 50 in.