

## The Edicts of a Prince

Correspondence collection lets viewers look into the mind of enigmatic artist Richard Prince

By Christina Campodonico, June 22, 2016



To some, Richard Prince is a genius. To others he's a fraud. The millionaire appropriation artist rose to fame and fortune in the 1980s for re-photographing cowboys in Marlboro cigarette ads and then shook up the art world again for painting on blown-up images of nurses from pulp fiction paperbacks in the early 2000s. One of these nurse paintings even fetched over \$8.5 million at auction.

More recently, Prince has been embroiled in lawsuits involving appropriations of photographs of Sex Pistol's bass player Sid Vicious and posts the artist culled from his Instagram feed, screen-grabbed, enlarged, printed and sold for as much as \$100,000 a pop.

Yet when producer, writer and collector Douglas Blair Turnbaugh first met Prince in the late 1970s, he didn't think that the young artist would go very far.

"Thousands of people come to make their mark in New York. And I thought, 'Oh God. Here's another nice young man who's going to, well, fail,'" says Turnbaugh.

But seeing an early work by Prince completely changed his mind.

“Just imagine a table. It had a white sheet thrown over it and it was pierced with wooden dowels, which were kind of pencil-shaped. They were painted blood red and they pierced the sheet ... and it was called, ‘Born to Draw,’” recalls Turnbaugh, who was astonished by the work’s gorgeous colors, incredible beauty and sublime expression of “the pain of trying to be an artist.”

“I thought I saw a masterpiece.”

Buying one of Prince’s early works for \$150, Turnbaugh became not only one of the artist’s earliest collectors and devotees, but also a close friend and pen pal. From 1977 to 1988, Prince sent birthday cards, art show invitations, doodles with dirty jokes, and postcards and letters from his world travels to Turnbaugh.

Resolving to collect everything written about Prince, Turnbaugh kept many of these “tokens of friendship.” Over 200 of them are now on view at Edward Cella Art + Architecture on La Cienega’s gallery row. The collection of rare and many never-before-seen artworks, ephemera and personal correspondence represents a “critical moment” in the life of Richard Prince, says gallerist Edward Cella.

“As an artist he goes from almost complete anonymity to great success in this short period of time, and the works in this collection document that rapid and significant transition in his life and his work,” says Cella.

Curator Carole Ann Klonarides says that the exhibition reveals an intimate rapport between the artist and his patron.

“They kind of feed off of each other in a very seductive, almost love-affair way,” she says, metaphorically speaking.

Turnbaugh insists that the pair was never romantically involved, but Prince’s notes to Turnbaugh play on their friendly familiarity with each other. They’re peppered with innuendo, illustrations and jokes about, shall we say, a certain part of the male anatomy.

But that was par for the course with Prince, says Turnbaugh. One time when Turnbaugh was working on a series of nude drawings in the style of crime scene chalk body outlines, Prince was so insulted that his friend hadn’t asked him to pose that he ripped off his clothes and laid on the ground for Turnbaugh to draw him.

“He was so enthusiastic about the idea, flopped down and I did my line around him ... and it’s finished and he said you didn’t draw my dick!” recalls Turnbaugh. “And I said, ‘Richard, it’s a silhouette. Don’t you understand it’s a silhouette! ... If you want, you draw them in. So there’s a penis on the drawing.”

You can see the final product in a photograph of Turnbaugh, lounging on his side wearing a black leather jacket given to him by Prince. Above him is the drawing of Prince with his boots and genitalia clearly outlined — a proto-dick pic if you will.

While many pieces in the show do show Prince's bravado, they also show a more vulnerable side of the artist. In one letter to Turnbaugh, Prince confesses anxiety over the artistic merit of his work.

"When will this explode? People still don't quite no [sic] what to make of my work. Sixteen year olds seem to be like it," he writes from London.

In another, he expresses his uncertainty about the economic viability of his artistic career.

"Christ, I don't know about this large photo making — it just doesn't seem financially plausible," he writes in a 1981 letter from Houston.

Another letter from 1981 reads: "God, do I hate the business side of art. It just doesn't mix — it does of course if you [are] phenomenally popular and prove to be the meal ticket. To be a meal ticket is to have someone's undivided attention."

Prince's fears of not being appreciated or compensated for his art no longer hold water in the years since he wrote these letters, but they are also prescient of the worldwide attention Prince would garner for his provocative way of presenting art and reaping the profits.

"He told me when we first met that his big ambition in life was to write a song that would be playing on all the car radios all across America. And I thought that was a very peculiar ambition," says Turnbaugh. "But you need to translate it. He meant he wanted to be famous, and he is."

The Douglas Blair Turnbaugh Collection (1977-1988) is on view through July 30 at Edward Cella Art & Architecture, 2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., West L.A. An expert roundtable discussion about the exhibit happens at 2 p.m. Saturday, June 25. Call (323) 525-0053 or visit [edwardcella.com](http://edwardcella.com).