

Fondazione Prada

HELTER SKELTER ARTHUR Jafa AND RICHARD PRINCE

ENG

Venezia

THE EXHIBITION

“Helter Skelter: Arthur Jafa and Richard Prince,” curated by Nancy Spector, presents the work of two American artists, Arthur Jafa (b. 1960) and Richard Prince (b. 1949).

Born a decade apart, they siphon material from movies, pulp novels, comic books, YouTube videos, sci-fi stories, album covers, record sleeves, rock ‘n’ roll posters, first-edition Beat volumes, news reels, celebrity memorabilia, and social-media posts, trafficking heavily in American popular culture. What comes into focus through the stereoscopic lens of their appropriation-based practices is an unflinching exposé on America in all its grit and grift. Both artists chart peculiar topographies specific to the United States: Jafa’s reflecting his identity as an African American man coupled with a mission to invigorate Black cinema and art; Prince’s hovering between a self-conscious critique of white masculinity and a fascination with the underbelly of the American psyche. They are quintessentially American artists in subject and medium, literally enfolding objects and images from the empirical world into their works, subsuming them as readymades—Trojan horses, as it were, designed to disrupt established belief systems.

“Helter Skelter” reveals a creative conversation between the work of Jafa and Prince that, until now, has never been actualized or examined. This is not a question of influence. Rather, to quote Jafa, it is about unveiling “elective affinities” between their artistic projects, which bring to the fore critical points of intersection in the oeuvres—shared obsessions mediated by their respective experiences as an artist of color and one who has benefited from a system that historically rewards being white (and male).

The overlaps and synaptic connections reveal much about the milieu in which both artists work: a country forever tarnished by its history of slavery; a country defined by its remarkable musical traditions rooted in Black culture; a country of doing without, but making good; a country of spirit and prayer and freedom of expression; a country of protest and subcultures and humor and celebrity.

This two-person exhibition unfolds through a series of thematic juxtapositions—combinations of works by both artists that illuminate each of their practices and tease out shared subject matter and

mutual obsessions. Set in the eighteenth-century palazzo Ca' Corner della Regina, the Fondazione Prada's Venetian venue, this contemplation of the American vernacular—as seen through the stereoscopic vision of Jafa and Prince—couldn't be farther from home. But the ornate, historical backdrop is an architectural foil, an energizing field that allows for risk-taking, slippages in meaning, and pure creative conjecture.

BIOGRAPHIES



Arthur Jafa, *Mickey Mouse Was a Scorpio*, 2017 (detail). Private collection
© Arthur Jafa / Midnight Robber © Photo: Ian Watts.TV
Richard Prince, *Graduation*, 2008. Collection of Larry Gagosian
© Richard Prince

ARTHUR Jafa

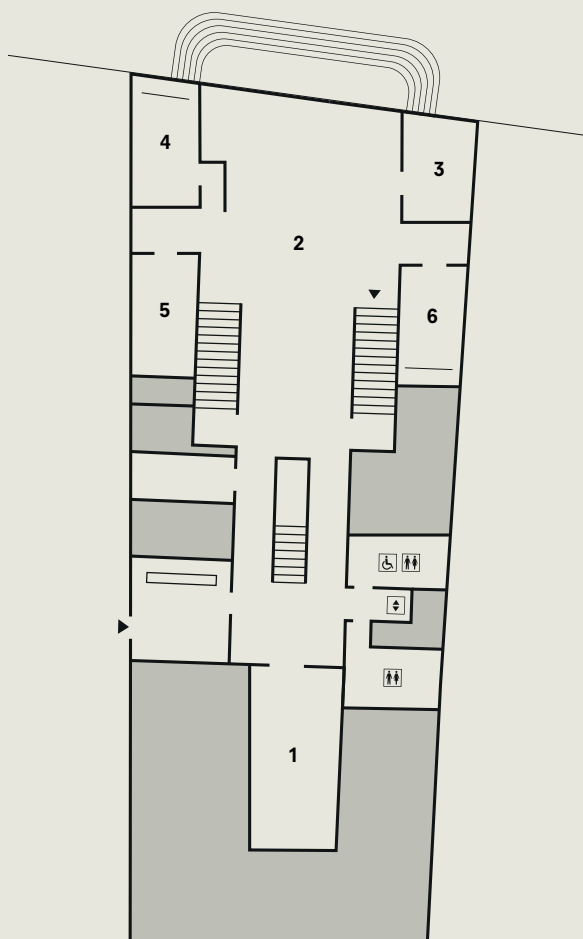
Arthur Jafa (1960, Tupelo, Mississippi) is an artist and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. Over the past three decades, he has developed an artistic practice that includes films, artifacts, and events, exploring and questioning different expressions of Black identity. Jafa's films have garnered acclaim at the Los Angeles, New York, and Black Star Film Festivals, and his work is held in prestigious collections worldwide. In 2019, he won the Golden Lion at the 58th Venice Biennale. Select institutional solo exhibitions include Serpentine Gallery, London; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Fundação de Serralves, Porto; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk; Glenstone, Potomac; LUMA Foundation, Arles; OGR Torino; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

RICHARD PRINCE

Richard Prince (1949, Panama Canal Zone) is a New York-based visual artist known for appropriating images from mass media, advertising, and entertainment since the late 1970s. His work challenges notions of authorship and ownership while exploring American identity, subcultures, and stereotypes. His work is held in museum collections worldwide. Prince's work has been the subject of major solo exhibitions, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Museum Boymans–Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Haus der Kunst / Süddeutsche Zeitung, Munich; Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel; Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Kunsthaus Bregenz; and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebæk.

The exhibition includes artworks featuring explicit and potentially disturbing content, such as scenes of violence, nudity and sexual imagery. Adults are advised to consider these factors before visiting the exhibition with minors.

GROUND FLOOR



1 – COURTYARD

Richard Prince, *Folk Songs (Blasting Mats)*, 2006

Richard Prince, *Folk Songs (Blasting Mats)*, 2006

In the courtyard of Ca' Corner della Regina, two giant sculptures by Richard Prince are suspended from metal structures like slabs of meat. They are made from blasting mats—slashed rubber tires tethered together with cables used to contain debris at demolition sites or unfurled along the sides of American highways to trap fallen rock. In their raw, hulking presence, these works shift and sag under the pull of gravity on their lattices of deconstructed wheels. Titled *Folk Songs (Blasting Mats)* (2006)—a type of traditional music passed down orally through generations—the sculptures may, in form, evoke the Stations of the Cross, a story of martyrdom transmitted across centuries.

For Prince, the automobile is a potent symbol steeped in the archetypes of virility and speed. A cipher for escape, car

culture is a particularly American phenomenon with its endless highways and once cheap gas. America's love affair with the automobile is rooted in the same well of desire as its passion for the cowboy and the motorcycle—emblems of a rugged individualism born of testosterone and velocity.

This installation establishes a material and symbolic resonance with Arthur Jafa's sculpture *Big Wheel II* (2018). Immersed in American car culture, both works evoke an on-the-road narrative that extols emancipatory values. Their battered—even mutilated—appearance, and the proximity of their materials to violence and constriction, associated with explosives and monster trucks, render these installations uncanny artifacts: archaeological remains of a lost future civilization defined by the atrocities of its past.

2

Arthur Jafa, *Big Wheel II*, 2018

Since a young age, Arthur Jafa has been fascinated by the culture of monster vehicles and the truck demonstrations he attended in the Mississippi Delta, where he grew up. These events featured heavily modified off-road vehicles equipped with enormous tires and powerful engines designed for spectacle and destruction, capable of crushing ordinary cars beneath their weight. Emerging in the late 1970s, monster trucks became symbols of mechanical prowess and excess.

This monumental, shackled tire—the second in a series of six sculptures exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2019—is laced with a mesh of iron chains. Its hubcap is replaced by abstract medallion sculptures 3D-printed from melted metal. Jafa's *Big Wheels* (2018) have been associated with themes such as the automotive industry, Black labor, resilience, trauma, and the shrinking economic opportunities within American society. With its unmistakable automotive grammar, the work also evokes another powerful set of associations. As an object fundamentally tied to movement, the tire recalls the yearning for unencumbered travel, the mythology of the open road, and the enduring American ideals of mobility, freedom, and futurity. As in *Folk Songs* sculptures (2006) by Richard Prince, the tire in *Big Wheel II* is an assisted ready-made, transforming a familiar industrial material into art. Birthed from the same physical matter, both sculptural works evoke America's preoccupation with the automobile and all the symbolic valence it carries.

3

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Sunsets)*, 1981–82

These C-prints by Richard Prince photographs silhouette black-and-white figures—frolicking poolside or at the beach—against an abstract backdrop ablaze with tones of orange, red, and yellow. Shot from odd, oblique angles, the scenes show couples, parents, and children playing in the water, tossing sand from a pail, sunbathing, or reading. Yet everyone and everything—an inflatable dolphin, an inexplicable clown—

appears as if dipped in an acid bath, as though on the verge of melting under the relentless sun. In this, these works dialogue provocatively with Arthur Jafa's video *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), on view in an adjacent room, with its repeated motif of a glowing solar orb.

The *Untitled (Sunsets)* (1981–82) present scenes of leisure from a world on fire, where the relaxed abandon of upwardly mobile families on vacation seems to conceal more troubling truths beneath the surface. There is something distinctly malevolent in the atmosphere, and the images appear strangely prescient, anticipating a dystopian future in much the same way that the best science fiction does. Created well before any collective awareness of the climate crisis, these visions now seem uncannily prophetic. While much of Prince's early photography captured the cool codes of Madison Avenue commodification—a symbol of the American advertising and marketing industry from the 1920s—this series sounds a warning for the five-alarm fire already smoldering on the eve of the Reagan era—a period that ushered in the rise of the conservative Christian Right that continues to shape American politics today. At the same time, the work reflects Prince's understanding of the image as an entity capable of harboring subconscious fears and desires.

4

Arthur Jafa, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016

Arthur Jafa's video *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (2016), set to motion his vast collection of images and found footage representing Black life in America. The bricolaged imagery provides an onslaught of visual fragments chronicling in shorthand a history of Black exploitation, Black power, Black talent, and Black resilience. Decades in the making (yet assembled as a first cut in about two hours), the film premiered at the advent of Donald Trump's first term in office, a cry of rage at the unrepentant racism of his platform. Within the seven-and-a-half-minute film, one brief sequence showing the molten surface of the sun appears five times in close detail. Rather than suggesting ordinary daylight, this image evokes an infernal vision in which heat itself takes on a tangible presence. The significance of this recurring motif remains deliberately unresolved, though the burning orange sun continues to appear in Jafa's later photo collages and videos, inviting interpretation and dialoguing here with Richard Prince's *Untitled (Sunsets)* (1981–82).

Jafa has frequently commented on how his collated and collaged imagery—both moving and still—operates according to the concept of "affective proximity" a term he borrowed from filmmaker John Akomfrah to describe how unrelated things find new meaning when perceived together. Drawing on fragments from YouTube, cable news, video archives, and other sources, *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* is a tightly structured audiovisual montage set to Kanye West's *Ultralight Beam* (2016).

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Girlfriend)*, 1993

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Girlfriend)*, 1993

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Girlfriend)*, 1993

When explaining his appropriative strategies, Richard Prince remarked that his way to “make it new was to *make it again*, and making it again was enough for him and certainly, personally speaking, *almost* him.” In the early 1980s, he expanded his subject matter from Madison Avenue advertising to the homespun portrayals found in a range of American subcultures. His gateway to these worlds was special-interest magazines. The resulting cast of characters ranges from the pathetic to the heroic. Early works feature, among others, porn junkies, muscle-car fetishists, surfers, bikers and their girlfriends, cuckolded husbands, alcoholics, and stand-up comedians. They populate an arcade of sleaze: America’s run-down backyards, redneck motorcycle rallies, and other marginal spaces. Yet Prince’s inclusion of these subjects is never intended to ridicule them; rather, he recognizes their inherent, dilapidated beauty and, moreover, identifies with them. “My choices [of images],” he explained, “always evolved from my wanting to participate in the specific world being represented. I wanted to put myself into the scene, to exchange places. Even if I never actually could or did, rephotographing girlfriends, heavy metal bands, criminals, and celebrities was a way of being, becoming, acting, substituting, without ever leaving the room.”

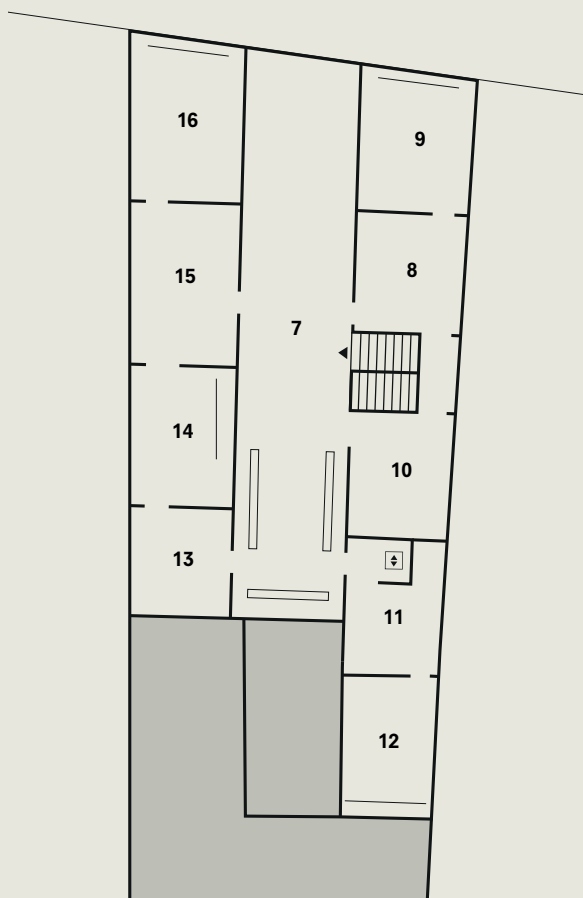
This approach is evident in his *Girlfriends*, a series of photographs depicting women posing with motorcycles started in 1986. Pirated from the “readers’ contributions” sections in the back pages of biker magazines, these works revel in a kind of amateur exhibitionism, as bikers offer up their own girlfriends for voyeuristic delectation, transforming them from generally awkward companions into fleeting, sultry pin-ups. Conflating longing and self-identification, these images also entertain the possibility of deferred desire and, ultimately, deprivation. There is an ineffable sense of distance, of unattainability, that echoes in Arthur Jafa’s video *LOML* (2022), which contemplates the deep identification of true friendship and grief over its loss.

Arthur Jafa, *LOML*, 2022

In the video *LOML* (2022), Arthur Jafa gives visual and sonic form to bereavement through abstraction. Its blurred black-and-white imagery unfolds as a shadow play of static and light set to a soundtrack that samples Michael Jackson’s love ballad *Someone in the Dark* (1982). *LOML* pays tribute to Greg Tate—an influential writer on Black music, art, literature, film, and politics, and a dear friend of Jafa’s, who died suddenly in 2021. It represents the artist grappling with loss, the depth of which is ineffable and ultimately unrepresentable. The title—an acronym for “Love of My Life”—evokes Jafa’s profound affection toward Tate, extending beyond the personal

to a bond shaped by shared cultural memory and intellectual pursuits. With *LOML*, Jafa departs from the rapid montage and use of found imagery that characterize many of his earlier works, adopting instead a minimalist cadence. “Many people told me that they felt a sense of sadness or melancholy ... despite it not representing anything concrete—just light, dark, and grain,” the artist commented. While visually distinct from Richard Prince’s *Girlfriends*, the video also invokes the sense of longing and loss inherent to desire.

FIRST FLOOR



7

Arthur Jafa, *Viriconium*, 2026

Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 2018–20

Richard Prince, *The Entertainers*, 1982–83

The sculptures by Richard Prince and Arthur Jafa shown here contemplate the idea of self-representation through surrogate portraiture. Prince's *The Entertainers* (1982–83) date to the period he worked at Time-Life Books in New York City. During midnight visits to nearby Times Square's adult cinemas and dive bars, he encountered aspiring actors trying to break into show business, but most often ending up in commercials or porn films. Displayed in tall black Plexiglas boxes reminiscent of adult theater displays, the "head-shots" are set against faked backdrops showing dressing-room-mirror lights or mar-

quee signs. The goal, he said, was to emulate the tawdry beauty of this milieu. And, like his *Girlfriends* series, they indicate an identification with his subject.

Jafa's *Viriconium* (2026) is a new iteration of his multipart sculpture *___Array* (2020), conceived as a composite self-portrait of cultural references and influential figures. Its title derives from the decaying future city described in the science-fiction novels of M. John Harrison. The aluminum cutouts—some double-sided—evoke a distinctly American history marked by violence, struggles for social justice, and extraordinary creativity. Figures such as political activist Angela Davis, jazz singer Billie Holiday, and poet Walt Whitman appear alongside images drawn from art history and contemporary media. This assemblage of disparate souls, spanning different races, generations, and disciplines, complicates any singular reading of the work as exclusively Black.

Although *The Entertainers* and *Viriconium* encapsulate diametrically different sources, both works extend the idea of self-presentation. For Prince and Jafa, they suggest an expansion of self, the transgression of limitation, and the belief that consciousness contains multitudes.

8

Arthur Jafa, *Man Monster-Duffy*, 2018
Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 2016
Richard Prince, *Untitled (de Kooning)*, 2006
Richard Prince, *Untitled (de Kooning)*, 2006

In this room, the notion of “monstrosity” unfolds by probing the slippages within gender identification, revealing subtle connections between the two artists’ practices. From his earliest appropriated photographs, Richard Prince has played with gender stereotypes, identifying “masculine” and “feminine” codes in advertising aimed at heteronormative audiences. His *de Kooning Paintings* (2006) complicate this theme. The series began when Prince drew on the pages of a book devoted to artist Willem de Kooning’s sketches for his *Women* series (1950–53). He first altered their anatomy and then collaged male figures into the compositions. The pages were enlarged and transferred to canvas via an inkjet process and further transformed through painterly interventions. The figures emerge as intersex beings—orgiastic monsters that defy convention—combining body parts that do not traditionally belong together and enacting a radical transgression of boundaries.

While Prince problematizes the binarism expressed in sexual stereotyping, with *Man Monster-Duffy* (2018) Arthur Jafa brings the questions of race to any discussion of difference. He posed for a photographic self-portrait in the guise of a Black transgender sex worker from the mid-19th century named Mary Jones. A lithograph from the period refers to her as a “Man-Monster,” given her hybridized state and her seduction of unsuspecting white men. Jones wore a leather codpiece, pierced to resemble a vagina and secured with a girdle. Jafa depicts himself wearing such an apparatus, sitting with legs spread in a defiant pose. His self-presentation as

a transgender prostitute is a provocation to think beyond binaries and to refuse the heteronormative, patriarchal systems that label anything outside the “universal” code—straight, white, and male—as “other.” To be trans is a threat to the status quo, a usurpation of a system dependent on dualistic thinking. Jafa challenges viewers to imagine “themselves in someone else’s circumstances without having to paint that person white, make that person straight, or a man.”

9

Arthur Jafa, *The White Album*, 2018

Richard Prince, *I Know This Guy*, 1980

Richard Prince, *Future*, 1992

Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 1990

Whiteness is a social and cultural construct that finds expression in both Arthur Jafa’s and Richard Prince’s respective works. Jafa’s video *The White Album* (2018) maps what white identity looks like from a Black perspective, an ontological state he traces in his oeuvre through the legacy of the Middle Passage—when millions of Africans were transported to a foreign continent and a distinct Black American diaspora emerged. Blackness, for Jafa, is as much a conceptual paradigm as is whiteness, but only the latter is suffused with an uncoded, universalizing mythos. The video borrows its title from the eponymous Beatles album, whose song *Helter Skelter* was adopted as a rallying cry by cult leader Charles Manson who directed a murder spree in 1969 as the catalyst for his imagined race war. Composed of found footage unfolding in a meandering cadence reflective of its subject matter, *The White Album* is at once an indictment of white supremacy—the ideological systems that sustain racial inequality—a comic look at white absurdity, with its contradictions, excesses, and irrationalities, and a love letter to Jafa’s allies in the field.

Whiteness also surfaces in Richard Prince’s *White Paintings* from the early 1990s. In these works, fragments of pirated cartoons and one-liners drawn from humor magazines are transposed onto canvas in an ether of white pigment. They evoke a milieu in which it is always cocktail hour in 1950s America. Prince collects jokes as readymades that reveal the pathos of an era with all its prejudices and fears. The visual shorthand in the *White Paintings* encapsulates the bourgeois imagination shaped by Madison Avenue—long synonymous with the 1920s American advertising industry—and, ultimately, for whiteness. What emerges is a transgressive humor that exposes the hostility embedded in a strain of American comedy, foregrounding both the pervasiveness of white identity and its unbridled capacity to offend.

Arthur Jafa, *I Don't Care About Your Past, I Just Want Our Love To Last*, 2018

Arthur Jafa, *LeRage*, 2017

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Protest Painting)*, 1991

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Protest Painting)*, 1994

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Summer Rain)*, 2022–23

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Summer Rain)*, 2022–23

In their work, both Richard Prince and Arthur Jafa evoke political protest. Growing up in a time of social upheaval, Prince was engaged with the anti-Vietnam War movement, civil rights activism, and the countercultural spirit of the era. He decided at that formative moment to reject violence and simply “paint the protest.” His *Protest Paintings* series (1989–94) materializes this idea. Vertical canvases incorporating the shapes of placards or picket signs—objects typically used in demonstrations—appear as ciphers for dissent, devoid of slogans or messages. By presenting them in this way, Prince shifts attention from specific political causes toward the structure and language of protest itself. In more recent works, the placard forms remain, but instead of being blank they depict images of warplanes dropping bombs like rain over vast fields, as seen in two collage paintings from the series *Untitled (Summer Rain)* (2022–23). Prince has cited as a reference the song *The End* by the rock band The Doors, used in the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola. The film’s footage of helicopters bombing the Vietcong—as replayed in the fevered visions of the film’s protagonist—casts the song’s lyrics in a new light.

Jafa recuperates the entangled histories of slavery and Black accomplishment throughout his work. No matter how harrowing the imagery, he does not turn away, choosing instead to confront the brutality of white supremacy head-on. There is grace in bearing witness—in memorializing the victims of lynchings, police shootings, and harassment. With the graphic representation of violence, he certainly risks censure and censorship, but that may increasingly be the point. Across all his work, Jafa dares to depict Black suffering, even when that practice itself threatens to erase reality through vicarious identification or the expiation of guilt on the part of the viewer.

Arthur Jafa, *Ex-Slave Gordon*, 2017

Arthur Jafa, *Nirvana*, 2025

Richard Prince, *American Place*, 2008

Richard Prince and Arthur Jafa are truth tellers, unearthing the real from our most entrenched fictions. In their dual worlds of subcultures and countercultures—juke joints, auto body shops, keg parties, megachurches, smoky bars, porn shops, pawnshops, basketball courts, and strip malls—belief is an inalienable right, but this is an ideal more than a reality. Their work confronts a persistent void in the cultural ethos it evokes: a psychic state, a dystopic place, Spiritual America has yet to fully reckon with the foundational violence at its

core. This is a vast project with no end in sight. Yet each artist, in his separate, but inevitably punk ways, probes both its fallacies and its promises. *Spiritual America* may ultimately take shape as a space of emancipation, where outcasts and icons, the ordinary and the extraordinary, coexist beyond the binaries of good and evil, of us and them.

12

Arthur Jafa, *BEN GAZARRA*, 2024

Alfred Stieglitz, *Spiritual America*, 1923

In the video *BEN GAZARRA* (2024), Arthur Jafa revisits Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). Filmed in a derelict New York City, Robert De Niro plays a troubled Vietnam War veteran whose rage drives him, vigilante-style, to "rescue" an underage prostitute in an unforgettable cinematic massacre. Fascinated by the film not only for what it depicts but also for what it leaves unspoken, Jafa brings into view the storyline that had been suppressed, exposing the racism embedded in its narrative. In the original screenplay, the pimp and the johns were to be played by Black actors, which was revised amid qualms about depicting racial violence. While the fear of shooting Black men at close range was cited by the studio as the rationale for the cast change, the deeper issue lay in anxieties around interracial relationships and sexual transgression, which crossed the lines of acceptability. With *BEN GAZARRA*, Jafa effectively corrected the historical record, using technical wizardry to reimagine the film's climactic scene by substituting Black actors for the white pimps and johns. The result is a shocking assertion of cinematic "truth."

BEN GAZARRA is presented here alongside Alfred Stieglitz's *Spiritual America* (1923), a photograph of the hind-quarters of a bridled, castrated horse from which Richard Prince's 1983 appropriated photograph takes its title. In that work, Prince rephotographed a 1975 picture by Gary Gross depicting a nude, prepubescent actress Brooke Shields standing in a bathtub. Ever provocative, Prince's appropriation of this image underscores the power of photography to expose subliminal content and destabilize meaning.

The connections between *BEN GAZARRA* and *Spiritual America* run deep. The plot of each circulates around an underage girl as the object of desire, yet the works are less concerned with sensationalism than with the power of representation to tease out latent meaning. These works underscore the artists' use of existing narrative tropes to unlock the subterranean imaginary of American culture.

Arthur Jafa, *Untitled 1 (Venice 2026)*, 2026

Arthur Jafa, *Untitled 2 (Venice 2026)*, 2026

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Publicity)*, 1999

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Publicity)*, 1999

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Publicity)*, 1999

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Publicity)*, 1999

Richard Prince, *Untitled (Tire Planter)*, 2001

American mass media, often typified in celebrity culture, is a rich source for both artists. Richard Prince's *Publicities* (begun in 1999) are most related to his *Gangs*, in that they contain photos arranged according to type. The *Publicities* are catch-all collages, receptacles for collectible ephemera—pulp book-covers, sketches, and posters—but they mostly emanate from celebrity headshots, pics distributed for public consumption brought together in visually alliterative ways. The portraits of rock musicians, movie stars, athletes, and TV personalities are typically autographed (perhaps by autopen), but more often than not Prince signs them, dedicating the photos to himself. These sundry images play upon a fan's desire to connect with, be seen by, the object of their devotion. Collecting is a form of longing.

Prince's sculpture *Untitled (Tire Planter)* (2001) is a resin cast of a "tire planter," foregrounding the artist's engagement with the logic of the readymade—the radical repositioning of everyday objects within an art context. A devoted collector and keen observer of American subcultures, Prince first encountered this vernacular form after moving to upstate New York in the late 1990s, where he noticed common features in people's yards: a basketball hoop, an above-ground pool, numerous car carcasses, and a tire planter.

Arthur Jafa similarly populates his photographic assemblages from the wellspring of mass media; the ethos is largely American. The impulse is not just fandom, but rather a profound embrace of the syncopated, intersectional mosaic that constitutes popular culture in the United States. This aspect of American life, one of its biggest exports, may be its super power and what saves it, ultimately, from the homogenizing tendencies of the current administration in its attempt to whitewash history and the media.

Arthur Jafa, *SloPEX*, 2023

Richard Prince, *Bitches and Bastards*, 1985–86

Richard Prince, *Criminals and Celebrities*, 1986

Richard Prince, *Two or Three Worlds*, 1986

Arthur Jafa and Richard Prince are serial appropriators, drawing on pre-existing cultural material as the basis of their practices. For Prince, who began rephotographing advertising images in 1977—working, as he has said, "without a license"—this approach marked a deliberate rejection of established rules grounded in traditional notions of originality, authorship, and ownership. In the 1980s, the artist used 35mm slide film for his rephotography often producing multi-

ple variations of the same image. Once developed, he would mix and remix the slides on a light table, forming visual categories plucked from the bottomless pit of print media. By taping selected slides together—heavy metal hair bands, people hiding their faces from paparazzi, and blazing sunsets—he would return them to the lab to produce single sheets of gridded photos through a process called “ganging.” A game changer for Prince, who thinks taxonomically, this new compositional format made manifest his impulse to see things in relation to other things.

Jafa’s collaged notebooks prove his lifelong passion for amassing pictures that, collectively, represent the profound experience of being Black in America. Eventually, his practice of clipping magazines migrated to the computer, where he digitized his photos and downloaded others from the Internet, later putting them on a timeline. The resulting video *SloPEX* (2023), comprises 841 still images seen in succession. Striking in its relentless progression of imagery, advancing but seemingly staying in place, the work mesmerizes with its cascade of visual references to history, science, outer space, celebrity culture, film, music, art, and so on. Photographs of carnage coexist with 19th-century shows in which white actors painted their faces black. The persons depicted, comprising Black, brown, and white bodies—are emissaries from an intertwined history of American slaughter and American success.

15

Arthur Jafa, *Mickey Mouse Was a Scorpio*, 2017

Richard Prince, *Abstract Threat*, 2008

Richard Prince, *Graduation*, 2008

Richard Prince, *It’s All Over*, 2008

Arthur Jafa and Richard Prince help themselves to existing cultural content as the primary vehicles for their art. For Prince, the act of pilfering was always only part of the story. He has consistently said that he wanted to work with things that were already there, imagery to be plucked out of its original context and transposed into another. Prince aimed to reveal what was real in the contrived images he (re)photographed. He wanted to unleash what he called the “virtuoso real,” enacting a kind of seance with his camera. In later work, the artist routinely transferred images—including Willem de Kooning figures, Rastafarians, and pin-up nudes—onto canvases, subsuming them into painterly collages.

Jafa has recontextualized the act of artistic appropriation through the lens of ownership, pointing out that Black culture has a conflicted relationship with the idea of property given that, in the context of slavery, people were owned. With no means to acquire goods, enslaved people resorted to what can be called “theft” but, in hindsight, should be understood as basic survival tactics, conventional ethics aside. In Jafa’s feverish extraction of pictures from the realm of popular culture’s Black imaginary, he freely mixes cultural references—like Mickey Mouse and Damballa—arguing that their juxtaposition reveals startling affinities. Both artists exploit the readymade paradigm and its innate capacity to anoint a mun-

dane item as art by virtue of choice. Their reuse and reframing of existing images shows the uncanny real at the heart of the stories that seduce the public into believing and adhering to the norm.

16

Arthur Jafa, *akingdoncomethas*, 2018

Arthur Jafa contemplates a spiritual America in the video *akingdoncomethas* (2018). The work montages televised scenes of revelation in Black megachurches across the United States, melding Pentecostal oratory with gospel music. The focus on song, spoken word, and movement as intangible vehicles for expression illuminates Jafa's conviction that Black culture resides in the body. As he points out, enslaved people torn from their ancestral homes in Africa could carry nothing with them other than their traditions, faith, and knowledge. This trove of civilizational wisdom interwove over time with Western culture to form the hybridized reality of African American identity. The title of the video is an invented word that in part refers to a belief in Biblical end-times, an apocalypse that will usher in a heaven on earth. This is the doctrine informing some of the radical impulses behind the dangerous intersection of Christianity and conservative politics in the United States, one that is threatening hard-won civil rights. In the video, footage cuts away to scenes of wildfires engulfing the hills of Los Angeles. The flaming solar orb from *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) makes a momentary appearance, perhaps a cipher for seismic transformational change. Not a religious person himself, Jafa has explained his approach to piety, saying "I believe in Black people believing." Salvation lies in the act, and not the target, of faith, in a conviction that a better future is possible.

CREDITS

Pradazine

© Figueroa Mountain Entertainment – Photo: Sam Emerson. Copyright and courtesy Birney Imes. Courtesy of American Zoetrope / Poster design by Bob Peak. Courtesy of Pickwick Group. Getty Images / Corbis Historical / Photo Lynn Goldsmith. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington. Photo: Dmitry Valberg

Viriconium

© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York. © The Lisette Model Foundation, Inc. (1983). Used by permission. Alamy / Black Star / Gainew Gallery. Avalon.Red. Bob Fitch Photography Archive, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Library. Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society. Courtesy of The Walt Whitman Archive. Getty Images / Bettmann / Corbis Historical / Ted Soqui / Premium Archive / Charles Moore. Jacob Holdt, www.american-pictures.com. Kansas State Historical Society – kansasmemory.org. Roma, Galleria Doria Pamphilj © Amministrazione Doria Pamphilj S.r.l. Trust Doria Pamphilj. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library

Untitled 1 (Venice 2026)

© 1978 MLive Media Group/ The Ann Arbor News. All rights reserved. Used with

permission. Foto Scala, Firenze / bpk, Bildagentur fuer Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin / Photo Fine Art Images/Heritage Images / RMN-Grand Palais / Michel Urtado / Dist. Getty Images / Archive Photos / Smith Collection/Gado / Bettmann / Bloomberg / Charles Moore. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington. Mary Hastings Bradley papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago

Untitled 2 (Venice 2026)

© Klarwein Family. Alamy / Album. Associated Press/ LaPresse. Avalon.Red. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, Saturn, 1820–1823, Pinturas Negras, Prado Museum, Madrid. Getty Images / Hulton Archive / Hulton Archive / Photo Michael Putland / LMPC / Michael Ochs Archives. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Kathleen Cleaver at a Free Huey rally in DeFremery Park, Oakland, 1968. Still from the film *Black Panthers* by Agnès Varda. *Black Panthers* © 1968 Succession Agnès Varda. U.S. National Archives (FL-FL-22). *Urban Romances*. Webber Films

PRACTICAL INFORMATION
FONDAZIONE PRADA,
VENICE

Ca' Corner della Regina
Calle de Ca' Corner
Santa Croce 2215
30135 Venice

Opening days and hours
Monday – Sunday:
10 am – 6 pm
Closed on Tuesday
Last access at 5.30 pm

Information
+39 0418109161
info@fondazioneprada.org
fondazioneprada.org

For group visits (10 or more people) and guided tour requests, please visit the Guided Tours, Schools and Groups page at fondazioneprada.org

PUBLICATION



HELTER SKELTER
ARTHUR Jafa AND
RICHARD PRINCE

An illustrated book designed by Peter Saville with Graphic Thought Facility accompanies "Helter Skelter: Arthur Jafa and Richard Prince." It features an introduction by Miuccia Prada, a conversation between Arthur Jafa and Richard Prince, who also contributed photographic sections, an essay by Nancy Spector, and critical texts by scholars, curators, and writers. Published by Fondazione Prada
436 pages, 70€

The book Helter Skelter is also available in the new "Dispense" series, which features a selection of Fondazione Prada's catalogues reprinted in a medium format and in black and white.
436 pages, 20€

Both publications are available at Fondazione Prada's bookshop and on fondazioneprada.org.

HELTER SKELTER
ARTHUR Jafa AND RICHARD PRINCE
FONDAZIONE PRADA, VENEZIA
9.5–23.11.2026