

LEVEL & CO

GRIT: GRAFFITI, GRUNGE, AND THE 1990s

BANKSY
CECILY BROWN
GLENN LIGON
YOSHITOMO NARA
ELIZABETH PEYTON
RICHARD PRINCE
MARTIN WONG
CHRISTOPHER WOOL

30 EAST 74TH ST
LEVELANDCO.COM



EVAN BEARD
President, Level & Co.

JENNIFER YUM
Managing Director, Level & Co.

HANNAH POSS
Private Sales Associate, Level & Co.

GEMMA CIRIGNANO
Researcher, Level & Co.



INTRODUCTION:
Jennifer Yum

ARTWORK DESCRIPTIONS:
Gemma Cirignano

PHOTOGRAPHY:
Dan Jackson

EXHIBITION LOGISTICS:
Abigail Nakassa, Lia Taus,
Hannah Poss

SPECIAL EVENTS:
Hannah Poss

DESIGN:
Michael Enten

IMAGES COURTESY OF:
Elizabeth Peyton, David Zwirner,
Christopher Wool, P·P·O·W, Martin
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Level & Co. is pleased to present **GRIT: Graffiti, Grunge, and the 1990s**, an exhibition of works by eight artists who embody the decade's shift from cultural hegemony to hyper-specific scenes and subgenres. We focus on New York; the city emerged from the recession of 1990 with a hangover from the previous decade of outsized appetites and excess. The flashy aesthetics of the eighties gave way to art that reflects a cooler, more detached approach. In doing so, the 1990s heralded identity as a driving force of creative meaning and embraced what would otherwise be considered the other or detritus. The archetype of the slacker dropped out of the 1980s yuppie world and chose irony over optimism, edge over refinement, and anarchy over obedience. Music, art, and literature became distinctly lo-fi, raw, and unfiltered, reflecting a nonhierarchical structure or lack thereof. Art was for the people and championed the subjective experience of the artist and the viewer. Artworks by Christopher Wool, Glenn Ligon, Cecily Brown, Richard Prince, Martin Wong, Elizabeth Peyton, Yoshitomo Nara, and Banksy, share this exact sentiment.

While Wool first began showing his text and silkscreen paintings in the late 1980s, his references to graffiti and his photographic snapshots of the urban streets surrounding East Broadway quickly became associated with the 1990s attitude. The cityscape was also a dominant focus for Wong, whose early works of Chinatown in San Francisco and later New York, as well as the graffiti and denizens of the Lower East Side, culminated in a major solo exhibition at the New Museum in 1998. In 1990, Max Hetzler Gallery exhibited a prescient two-work collaboration between Wool and Prince that merged Wool's stark 'words' with Prince's deadpan 'jokes.' Prince went on to formalize a series of joke paintings in the 1990s that show the possibilities of text as a formal element in a monochromatic context and as a vehicle for witty sarcasm. Ligon's text-based paintings take from the writings of well-known Black authors and balance legibility with the emotional weight of the texts. Peyton's intimate portraits of living and historical figures are poetic in their sensitive renderings, her bodies decidedly androgynous and long-limbed, ascribed to the preferred aesthetic of grunge rock stars of the 1990s. Her first exhibition took place in the Chelsea Hotel, where previous notable artists, writers, and musicians lived in the shabby but creatively enriching space.

These artworks encapsulates the ethos of the 1990s and show how vital the city was to its artists, who found fresh inspiration in the marginal and neglected spaces of the urban environment.

Jennifer Yum, Managing Director, Level & Co.



ELIZABETH PEYTON

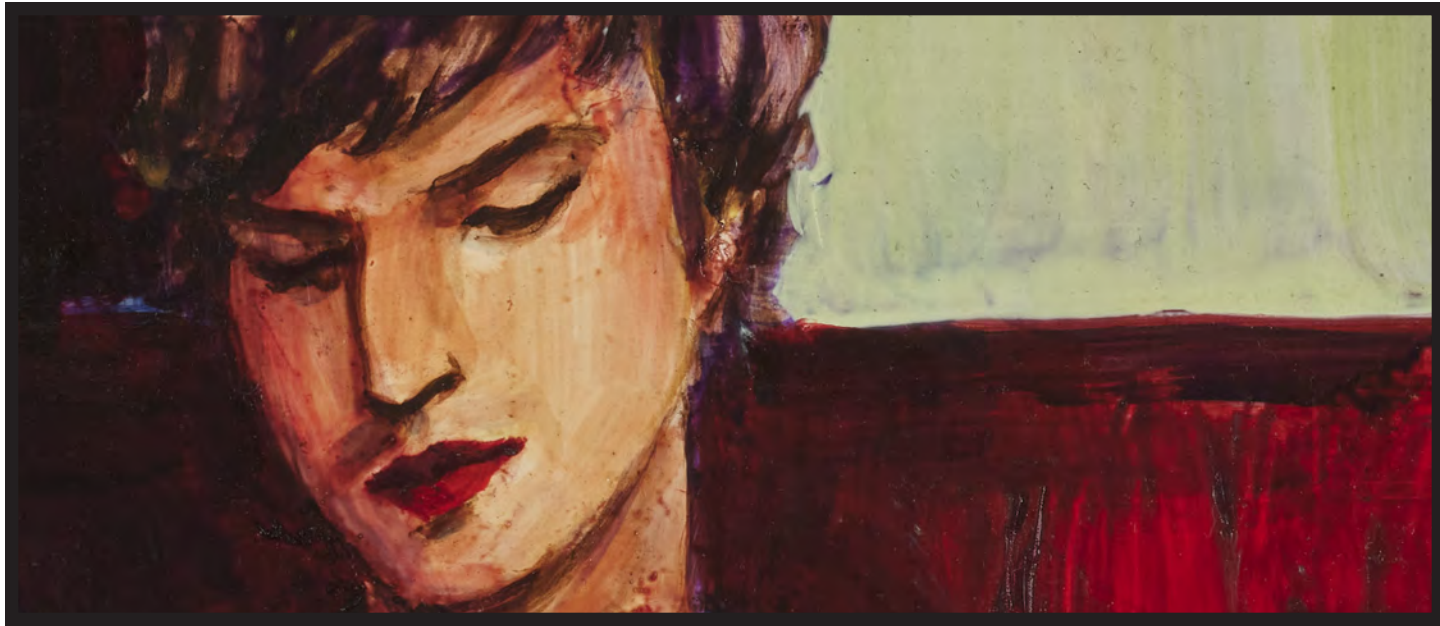
Haircut (Ben & Spencer), 2002

Oil on board

12.1 x 9.2 in. (30.7 x 23.4 cm)

© Elizabeth Peyton;
Courtesy of the artist and
David Zwirner

Elizabeth Peyton (b. 1965, Danbury) graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1987 and began exhibiting in alternative spaces like hotel rooms, bars, and restaurant bathrooms around the city. Her groundbreaking 1993 exhibition with Gavin Brown in a room at the Chelsea Hotel is often credited as a catalyst for the subsequent return to figurative painting, and more specifically portraiture, in contemporary art. The intimacy of her exhibition spaces—like a hotel bedroom—echoes the vulnerability of her portraits, which illustrate cultural icons and close friends. *Haircut (Ben & Spencer)* (2002) features a friend, likely Spencer Sweeney, trimming the shoulder-length hair of the DJ and her former assistant, Ben. This tender presentation of care work in a male friendship reconsiders the traditional, hegemonic performance of masculinity. Aligned with Judith Butler's theory of gender, Peyton moves away from the binary of masculinity versus femininity and focuses instead on the individuality of her subjects.



Detail of *Piotr Uklanski*

Often working from photographs, Peyton cultivates intimacy in her portraits with small canvases, close crops, and lively colors. Her shallow depth of field evokes the familiarity of a crowded, New York apartment. In *Piotr Uklanski* (1996), Peyton illustrates her friend, the provocative Polish conceptual artist Piotr Uklanski seated on a worn loveseat near a radiator typical of pre-war apartments. Uklanski's downcast gaze and demure demeanor offer a private glimpse into the psyche of a bold artist.

ELIZABETH PEYTON
Piotr Uklanski, 1996
 Oil on board
 9 x 12 in. (22.9 x 30.5 cm)
 © Elizabeth Peyton;
 Courtesy of the artist and
 David Zwirner





CHRISTOPHER WOOL

Untitled, 1995

Enamel on aluminum
108 x 72 in. (274.3 x 182.9 cm)

© Christopher Wool

Christopher Wool (b. 1955, Chicago) moved to New York at 17 and drew inspiration from the city's punk and no wave scenes. By the 1990s, he had established himself as a prominent postmodern painter who experimented with mechanical modes of production in a black-and-white palette. *Untitled* (1995) rebels against his artistic accomplishments, whiting out layers of spray paint over roller stamps over silkscreens. The accumulated layers of black enamel paint flatten behind thick, dripping white brushstrokes. His self-defacement calls to mind the sloppy municipal paint jobs of graffiti removal, which often leave passers-by questioning whether the restorations are worse than the vandalism. Neither a blank slate nor a complete image, the compelling, anti-compositional result defies categorization and embraces disorder.

Wool's word paintings appropriate the stenciled font from street signage to question the role of signification. He uses language as a visual medium and prioritizes aesthetic cohesion over grammatical conventions or legibility, often omitting punctuation, spaces, and even letters. The meaning and relevance of his words or phrases remain ambiguous; some reference popular culture while others originate in the artist's mind. Both callous and alliterative, the alarming message, "Dog Dead," confronts the viewer with the unsettling realization of their linguistic moral ambiguity. As the viewer grapples with the significance of the message, they also relish in the monosyllabic rhythm of Wool's hard-driving consonant.

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

Untitled, 1992

Enamel on aluminum
20 x 14 in. (50.8 x 35.6 cm)

© Christopher Wool

DOG
DEAD



CHRISTOPHER WOOL

Lazy and Stupid, 1992

Enamel on aluminum
20 x 14 in. (50.8 x 35.6 cm)

© Christopher Wool

Wool's *Lazy and Stupid* (1992) calls out the slacker stereotype of the 1990s assigned to a generation of young adults who rejected the capitalist conventions of their parents in favor of countercultural modes of self-expression. His generation's apathy for tradition led to a critical engagement with mainstream norms and modes of artistic production. Ironically, this contrarianism generated a prolific decade. Through his aestheticization of the letters "L-A-Z-Y-A-N-D-S-T-U-P-I-D," Wool manipulates their signification and defuses the insult, disarming potential critics.



Inner City Outer Limits postcard for exhibition at the Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, 1991. Offset on cardstock. 6 1/2 x 5 1/4 in. Photo: John Ranard, Courtesy of the Martin Wong Foundation and P·P·O·W.

Martin Wong (b. 1946, Portland, Oregon; d. 1999, San Francisco) moved to New York in 1978 and quickly became an iconic figure in the downtown community. His paintings convey the textures of New York's urban landscape from the nuanced perspective of an openly gay Chinese American living in a Puerto Rican neighborhood at the height of the AIDS crisis. An active participant in the Lower East Side arts scene, Wong developed close relationships with many graffiti artists. He idolized them for navigating the complex system of subway tunnels and subsequently supported their careers, accumulating an impressive collection of 300 works. *Untitled* (1989) depicts the muscular back of graffiti artist Lee Quiñones behind the wheel of a skeletal car against a night sky. Wong hosted Quiñones on his couch for a year before the artist's career took off. Quiñones went on to successfully navigate the art world with gallery and museum exhibitions, becoming one of the most influential street artists of the period.

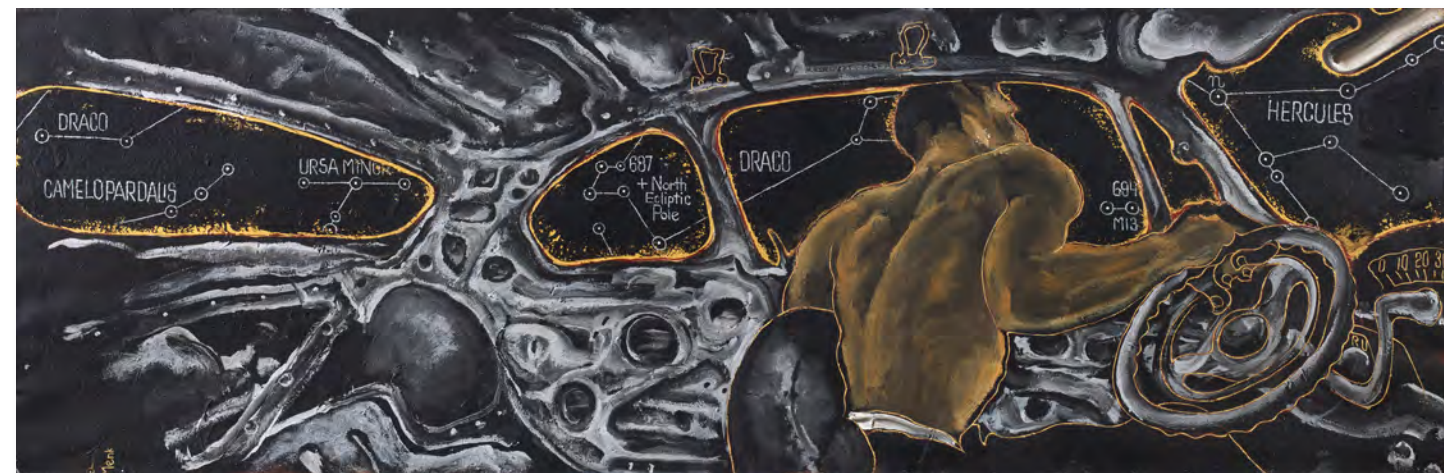
MARTIN WONG

Untitled, 1989

Acrylic on canvas

36 x 96 in. (91.4 x 243.8 cm)

© Martin Wong Foundation;
Courtesy of the Martin Wong
Foundation and P·P·O·W.





Detail of *Angelito*

MARTIN WONG

Angelito, 1997

Acrylic on canvas

60 x 38 in. (152.4 x 96.5 cm)

© Martin Wong Foundation;
Courtesy of the Martin Wong
Foundation and P·P·O·W.

Wong's *Angelito* (1997) captures the likeness of Angel Ortiz, a Lower East Side Puerto Rican graffiti artist who works under the name LA II (or Little Angel), a nod to his short stature. Wong created several portraits of LA II and the two even collaborated on a painting, *LA2 - Malicious Mischief (collaboration with LA II)* (1997). Wong's Spanish caption, "Chiquito pero Peligroso (Cute but Dangerous)," pays homage to the language of his surrounding Puerto Rican community and highlights the paradox of LA II's petite demeanor and criminal record. The closed metal gates, a recurring motif in Wong's oeuvre, signal the after-hours nature of their antics. He gilds the gritty, late-night street scene with metallic gold and silver paint, elevating the portrait as if it were a Byzantine icon.



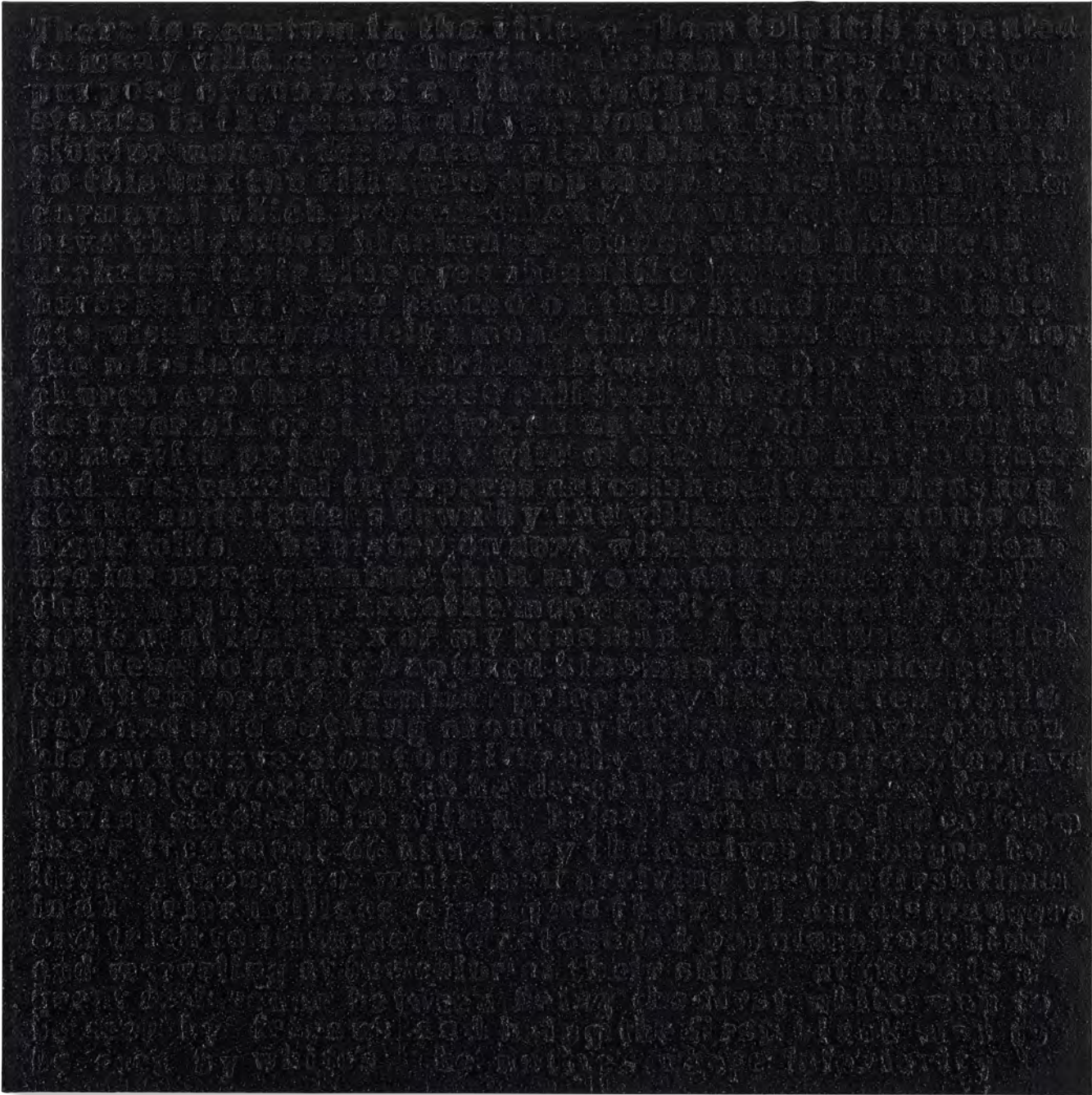
Detail of *Stranger #55*

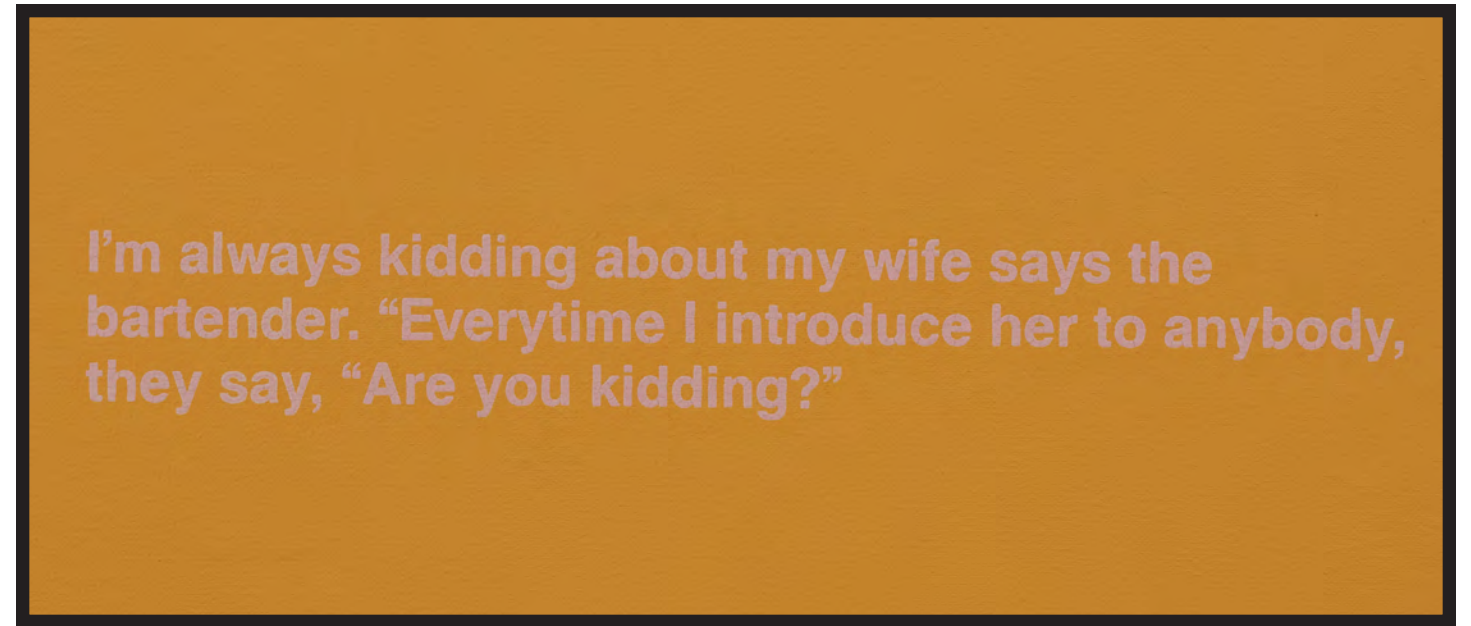
Glenn Ligon (b. 1960, New York) introduced text to his conceptual art practice in the late 1980s after attending the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1985. His text-based paintings harness the words of influential 20th-century cultural figures, such as James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Genet, and Richard Pryor. *Stranger #55* (2011) honors the origin of the work's eponymous series in 1997. These canvases feature passages from James Baldwin's 1953 essay, "Stranger in the Village," stenciled with black oil sticks and coal dust. The embedded sparkling loose particles, a waste byproduct of coal processing, transform grit into an art material. Ligon purposefully abstracts language to simulate the difficulty of cross-cultural communication for the viewer/reader, just as Baldwin faced as an African American in a Swiss village. He invites the viewer not just to accept ambiguity but to find beauty in it.

GLENN LIGON

Stranger #55, 2011
Oil stick, acrylic, and
coal dust on canvas
72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm)

© Glenn Ligon; Courtesy of the
artist, Hauser & Wirth, New York,
Regen Projects, Los Angeles,
Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and
Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris





Detail of *Are You Kidding?*

RICHARD PRINCE

Are You Kidding?, 1988

Acrylic and silkscreen

on canvas

66 x 54 in. (167.6 x 137.2 cm)

©Richard Prince;
Courtesy of Gagosian

The literary device of the joke uses humor to test a reader's linguistic and cultural fluency. Publications often accompany punchlines with cartoon images to avoid misinterpretation and guarantee humor. In his monochrome joke paintings from the late 1980s and early 1990s, Richard Prince (b. 1949, Panama Canal Zone) clips jokes from print media and then silkscreens the text in a Helvetica font onto vibrant monochrome backgrounds à-la Color Field painting. As a result, the works oscillate between objects of formal aestheticism and conceptual satire. His conscious decision to retell the jokes, rather than illustrate them, rebels against the role of a visual artist. Prince leans into his controversial reputation with a provocative punchy two-liner on *Are You Kidding?* (1988), which lands at the expense of the narrator's wife. The ironic twist of screen printing a lowbrow, offensive quip onto a stretched canvas embodies the subversive nature of Prince's career in New York through the 1990s.



Detail of *Kaputt Pup King*

Yoshitomo Nara's (b. 1959, Aomori) connection to American popular culture dates back to his childhood as a "latchkey kid" in remote post-Pacific War era Japan, where he grew to love American pop music and comics. Nara defined his iconic "kawaii" style, meaning cute but creepy, in his edgy portraits from the 1990s. His recurring white dog character emerged as a pseudo-self-portrait for Nara to impart childhood feelings of loneliness. Nara crowns his dog in *Kaputt Pup King* (1999), subverting the power dynamics of an obedient dog and owner relationship. The crown also introduces American hip-hop vernacular, recalling Barron Claiborne's iconic portrait of the Notorious B.I.G. from 1997.

YOSHITOMO NARA
Kaputt Pup King, 1999
 Acrylic on canvas
 15.8 x 23.6 in. (40.1 x 59.9 cm)
 © Yoshitomo Nara





Detail of *One Touch of Venus*

CECILY BROWN

One Touch of Venus, 1999

Oil on canvas

60.25 x 75 in. (153 x 190.5 cm)

© Cecily Brown;
Courtesy of the artist and
Paula Cooper Gallery

Cecily Brown (b. 1969, London) moved to New York in the early 1990s and paved her way as a figurative painter while her peers in London formed the Young British Artists movement. She replaced the decades-old dichotomy of representation versus abstraction with a harmonious synthesis of painting strategies that capture the energy of bodies in motion. Brown's investigations of sexuality and the nude distinguish her from her contemporaries in the late 1990s. In *One Touch of Venus* (1999), she positions contemporary feminist discourse in conversation with European art history's long-standing subject of the nude. Brown borrows her title from the 1948 musical romantic comedy starring Ava Gardner and Robert Walker. Created in a decade informed by Butler's groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* published in 1991, the fluidity of Brown's ambiguous hedonistic scene destabilizes the antiquated allegorical feminine trope.


The anonymous street artist Banksy (b. Bristol) brought his graffiti painting to canvas in the 1990s and held his first solo exhibition of works on canvas in an apartment in Easton, Bristol, in 1998. Although an important development in his artistic practice, Banksy remains resolute in his nonconformist approach to art making, displaying, and distributing. *Exclamation Rat* (2003) exemplifies the rebellious spirit the artist cemented for himself in the 1990s. The unofficial mascot of the New York subway, rats embody the outcast, underground spirit graffiti and hip-hop artists both embraced in the 1990s. A variation of his recurring *Gangsta Rat* stencil, this baseball cap and chain-wearing rat also pays homage to the New York rappers who defined street style in the 1990s.

BANKSY

Exclamation Rat, 2003
Spray paint on canvas
15.75 x 12 in. (40 x 30.5 cm)

© Banksy; Courtesy of
Pest Control Office





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Haircut (Ben & Spencer), 2002
Oil on board
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