

10/08/2018

Hannes Schmid, American Myth: Paintings and Photographs at Mitchell Algus Gallery

September 8 – October 14, 2018

132 Delancey St, 2nd Floor, Norfolk Street at Delancey

New York City, mitchellalgusgallery.com



Hannes Schmid, Cowboy #5 (Tailgate), 2007. Oil on linen, 48 x 71 inches. Courtesy of Mitchell Algus Gallery

“Fuck Richard Prince”: The Stolen Memes of Hannes Schmid by Noah Dillon

In June, the European Union began deliberations on the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, a proposal to unify EU laws regarding copyrighted material online. It has alarmed Internet activists because Article 13 of the Directive apparently suggests that memes using copyrighted material could be outlawed. How this could be enforced is really a headscratcher, and protesters have posted many clever, teasing examples of how, using Photoshop filters or the like to slightly alter pictures, predicted regulatory mechanisms might be circumvented.

People *like* to copy familiar pictures, to take in hand the fruits of culture, even if they had no part in creating the original.

So now at Mitchell Alguis is a show of work by the Swiss photographer Hannes Schmid, “American Myth: Paintings and Photographs,” in which the artist has stolen his own memes. Schmid is best known for his iconic photos of heroic figures: arena rock musicians such as ZZ Top, David Lee Roth, Cheap Trick etc., and cowboys used in Marlboro Man cigarette ads between 1992 and 2002, shot with a memetic template established in the ‘50s. Those cowboy pictures were some of many (by various photographers) appropriated by Richard Prince, whose *oeuvre* entails rephotographing existing images. While Schmid is largely unrecognized by the general public, Prince is the art world’s notorious prankster/villain/thief. In “American Myth,” Schmid reclaims his own work, presenting four small black-and-white photographs, and four large hyperrealist paintings by Schmid of his own cowboys.

Of the photographs, made between 1998 and 2002, the one I find most interesting is *Walk in the Woods* (1998). It’s curious, as all of the photos show ranchers in rugged wilderness, the infinity of the mythical American West. *Walk...* shows its cowboy subject riding through forest accessible to probably teenagers, who’ve carved their initials into several tree trunks. The pictures have the kind of archetypal and repetitious western imagery that has been familiar since at least Frederic Remington, and have similarly romantic names: e.g. *Long Shadows of Rest* (2000), *A Drag Moment* (2002), punning a cigarette jutting from the creased lips of a drover.

Schmid’s a capable enough painter. Although the canvases reach for and don’t accomplish, say, Richard Estes, they’re good—the best being the dusty *Cowboy #230* (2017). (They’re more technically adept than Prince’s own paintings, for what it’s worth.) The images are bromidically heroic and familiar. One, *Cowboy #1 (Round ‘em up)*, from 2007, shows a group of ranchers driving cattle through Monument Valley. It’s an ur-Western image, recalling, for instance, John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). *Cowboy #5 (Tailgate)* (2007), features a man laying erotically on his side, in the bed of an old pickup,

leaning forward to light his cigarette, Stetson obscuring his chiseled face. I can't tell if these are paradigmatic because they refer to the characteristics that define masculinity in the west, or because these familiar images helped define exactly what those characteristics are.

This move of Schmid painting his own photos is presented as triumphant and pugilistic, though it's very little of a victory to reiterate the same photographic meme. The philosopher Vilém Flusser bleakly described, in his 1983 monograph *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, the tendent entropy of images, that many are reproduced over and over into cultural background noise, such as cowboys, for instance. Schmid's tactic is shrewd, and so is claiming agency pitted against the villain Prince. But one might ask: what else are we supposed to do with these pictures?

I think there's a divide between how art-worlders and lay people perceive the morality of artistic copying and appropriation—that the latter thinks it's illegitimate. But more and more I imagine a contingency. A few years ago, trolls berated Prince on social media when he showed a body of work made by printing other people's Instagram selfies on canvas. Many of the aggrieved, if you looked at their social media, also traffic in memes appropriating copyrighted content, making their outrage look confected and hypocritical. The qualifier I think is the belief that copying and appropriation should be reserved for regular Joes as forms of folk art, opposed to both the professionalism of the international art market and large corporations. (There are obviously caveats here: both small-time artists and, say, huge movie franchises can win plaudits for basically being hacks.)

When I told a friend I was going to see a show of Schmid's work, explaining that his pictures had been appropriated by Prince, my friend declared, "Fuck Richard Prince," citing Prince as a larcener of vulnerable artists. Schmid is a photographer who has hung around the upper echelons of entertainment and was paid to continue an iconic campaign glorifying a food industry that is objectively bad for people and the planet, used to market a product designed to addict and kill users, but he's one of the *hoi*

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

polloi trampled by a corporation like Prince. There's the old adage, paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, that good artists borrow, great artists steal. And perhaps in the arts, most of the looting actually resembles petty theft at a chain store: calculated into the business model, with no apparent victim, and being of little consequence.