

**Modern Painters** : 'Beats Art', by George Pendle, Summer 2009.

■ ARTIST'S COLLECTION

# Beats Art

**Richard Prince** collects signed first editions, manuscripts, letters—even canceled checks—by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs.

by **George Pendle**



ABOVE: Richard Prince, *Untitled (Original)*, 2008. Furniture, books, Sintra, Bordo, 13 x 60 x 25 inches. RIGHT PAGE: Books from Richard Prince's collection.

**O**f the three foundational subcultures around which Richard Prince's legendary book collection is based—the Beats, the hippies, and the punks—the 700 or so books and manuscripts that cover the Beat Generation are of special interest. Taking Kerouac's *On the Road* as its center point, Prince has built up possibly the greatest private collection of Beat books and papers in existence.

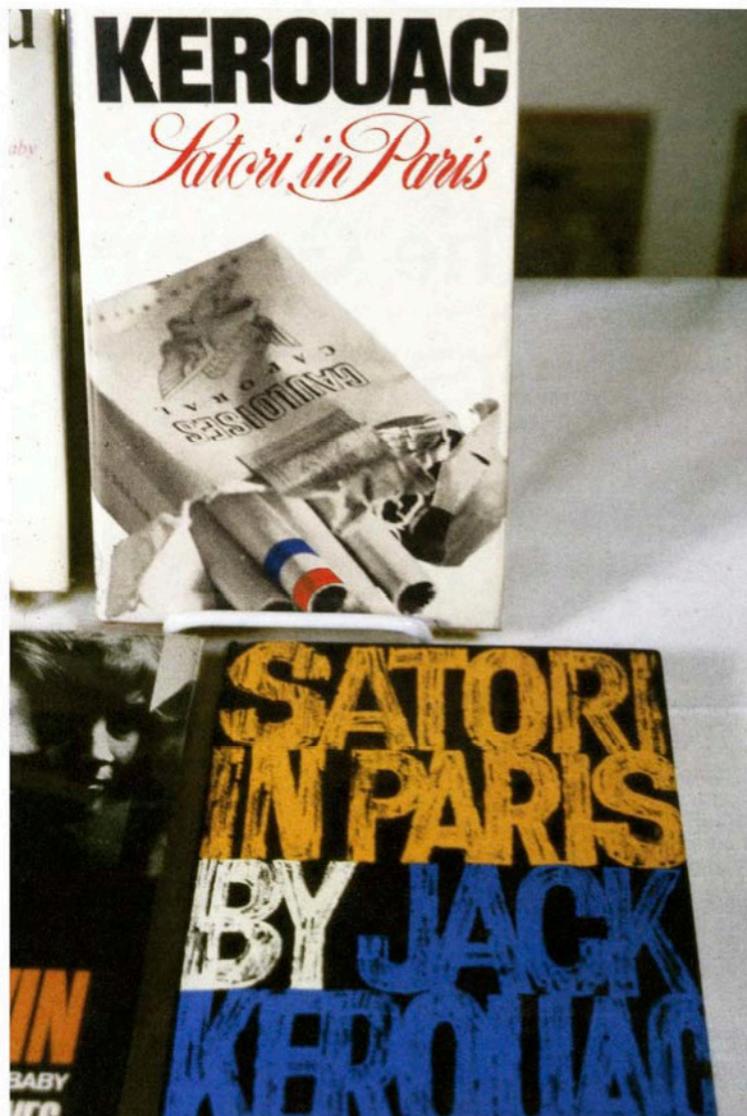
Prince has the copy of *On the Road* that Kerouac inscribed to his mother. He has the copy that Kerouac famously read on *The Steve Allen Show*, which is dedicated to Allen (actually Kerouac didn't read from the book itself but from some pasted-in pages that would later appear in *Visions of Cody*. Prince has these pages too). Prince has an original proof copy of the book and an original galley, but the prize jewel in the collection is the copy owned by Neal Cassady—aka Dean Moriarty—with Cassady's signature and marginal notes within. "It is," says John McWhinnie, the rare-book dealer who has created this collection in league with Prince, "the greatest 20th century association copy in American literature."

As well as the Kerouac books, Prince has copies of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" dedicated to Kerouac and to Lucien Carr, along with a copy signed to Kenneth Rexroth—mentor to the Beats. He has William S. Burroughs's own, heavily corrected copy of *Naked Lunch*, as well as the original manuscript for Burroughs's *Nova Express*. He has first editions by Lou Welch and an "almost complete" collection of Richard Brautigan, of whom he is a huge fan.

The first items Prince bought from McWhinnie were 33 "awe-inspiring" letters written by Kerouac to Cassady, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder—the pantheon of Beats—between 1947 and 1963. At the same time, Prince bought a \$10 check that Kerouac had written out in 1963 to Nunzi's liquor store in Long Island. The check eventually became incorporated into an art piece, as Prince would do with other checks throughout his career, but it also helped provide a neat bookend to his Beat collection, marking the spiritual demise of the movement with Kerouac's descent into alcoholism.

As much as Prince's Beat collection seeks to encapsulate a movement, it cannot help but be seen as something of a self-portrait. Indeed, Prince's consistent collecting and editing of the collection can be seen as another extension of his artistic practice. A recent show at the Patrick Seguin Gallery in Paris saw the books incorporated into his furniture designs. McWhinnie believes that "if his *Second House* was an artwork [it burned down in 2007], I'd argue that his library is an artwork. It really is a Richard Prince arrangement of discrete objects in a very specific way."

As for what Prince plans to do with the library, there have been rumors—since denied by the artist—about a donation to the Morgan Library. But one possible future mooted by McWhinnie is that the thousands of books will eventually be condensed into just one.



"In some ways, I was always struck by how Ed Ruscha had the title *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* before he had the photographs. And in many ways Richard Prince is one of the most significant artists who's contributed to the language of the artist book since Ed Ruscha. The artist's books themselves are ways in which he carries on art under a different cover and using a different language, but they are artworks. A way of carrying on art between covers, so to speak. And it wouldn't shock me if in some ways the entire collection existed for the sake of a book at the end of that. The ultimate artist book of books." ♦

Richard Prince has work in "The Pictures Generation" on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, until August 2, and in "Louis Vuitton and the Passion for Creation" at the Hong Kong Museum of Art through August 9.