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## Two Princes, Three Kilgallens by Christopher Bollen

“Others have tried to unravel the tangle. Most intriguing is Richard H. Popkin’s theory that there were two Oswalds. One was a bad shot; did not drive a car; wanted the world to know that he was pro-Castro. This Oswald was caught by the Dallas police and murdered on television. The other Oswald was seen driving a car, firing at the rifle range, perhaps talking to Mrs. Odio; he was hired by...? I suspect we may find out one of these days.” —Gore Vidal, 1976

Mythomania: a pathology to which the American psyche is particularly susceptible. In a nation founded on neither monarchy nor religion, it’s hardly a surprise that we fill the power vacuum at the top with a vast, glittery constellation of homegrown icons—heroes, gods, monsters, villains, and six-story billboard archetypes to prevent what could amount to a collective identity crisis and to help forge a national character. Exhibit A: the sacrosanct image of cowboy (never mind that the western sunset into which he rides is more likely the ecological devastation of a wildfire). Exhibit B: the glamorous movie star (never mind, the cowering self-destructive figure behind the industrial-level airbrushing.) We feed, nurture, cultivate, and worship our idols, believing in them besides all evidence to the contrary, and in return, they feed, nurture, cultivate, and worship us. Perhaps it is a particularly American attribute to make a god out of almost anyone or anything.

No artist since Andy Warhol has so adroitly exposed this national pastime of American-myth creation, maintenance, and repair as Richard Prince. From his epic series of cowboys rephotographed from Marlboro magazine ads and wiped clean of their specific corporate branding—emerging again as “pure” vessels of American masculinity and/or readied for their next use as poster boys of seduction and control—to his signed headshots and official Instagram accounts of pop celebrities—Prince, Barbara Streisand, Sylvester Stallone, Kate Moss—the artist demonstrates the ceaseless appropriative life cycle of popular iconography, eternal, sentimental, *ours* no matter the copyright laws, and yet forever on a horizon just out of reach. Prince, however, spikes the punch with poison. We can’t consume his delicious images without suspecting that they’re tainted—fixed, doctored, recycled, reprocessed by a contemporary artist, molested, the barrel spun around and pointing back at us. To stand in front of a Richard Prince artwork is to feel the internal struggle between an almost patriotic need to be seduced by our myths and not wanting to be the victim of a clever American con.

Prince, of course, revels in jokes. His series of joke paintings—Borscht Belt one-liners that the artist began silk screening on monochrome canvases in the mid-1980s—points to a different department in the machinery of American myth-making. As the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century critic Constance Rourke pointed out in her seminal 1931 book, *American Humor*, the popular comedy of stand-up jokes and gags worked as a social adhesive to cohere a diverse people who had no real inherent connections. “Laughter produced the illusion of leveling obstacles in a world which was full of unaccustomed obstacles,” Rourke wrote. “Laughter created ease, and even more, a sense of unity, among a people who were not yet a nation.” In a recent series of cartoon paintings, Prince blots out whole sections of the joke—the tell-tale drawing as well, often, as the punchline text—with thick patches of pigment. Yet, our American brains are so attuned to the vernacular rhythms and base logic of these bawdy set-ups, they play in our heads even when the artist redacts the essential ingredients—when culture is running efficiently, it can be set on autopilot.

Yet, Prince’s artistic process is pointedly reminiscent of another home-grown religion, arguably as American as cowboys and movie stars. Consider this description of his early studio strategy found in a primer text on the Guggenheim Museum website: ““He excised out all identifying text or logos, cropped and enlarged images, and rephotographed black-and-white photos in color and vice versa.” These tactics are the building blocks of coverups and conspiracies, the cloak-and-dagger, clandestine, authorless manner of manipulating and restaging reality in order to conceal the truth from a distracted public. Conspiracy theory is the nighttime side of airbrushed myth—or perhaps conspiracies are newly coined myths in their own right, as if our defense mechanism to the horrors of collective tragedy and loss is to make fresh icons even out of disillusionment. Think of the mythic, grainy, candy-colored frames of the 1963 Abraham Zapruder film. Think of that great leviathan of American conspiracies, the all-swallowing black hole swirling in the center of the media-saturated 20<sup>th</sup> century, a vacuum that won’t stop sucking every fact or bystander or random incident near its periphery into its hold, the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Exhibit C: Three watercolor portraits of Dorothy Kilgallen. Prince has created these large-scale prints, taken from a single vintage publicity headshot pilfered from the internet, in collaboration with New York print-making house Two Palms. The woman in the center of the frame might not be identifiable to most viewers. She's almost entirely lost to history. Nevertheless, at the time of her death in 1965, she was regarded as one of the most influential journalists of her age, as well as a beloved television and radio personality. Kilgallen first gained fame in the late-1930s for her syndicated daily newspaper column, "The Voice of Broadway," which mixed celebrity gossip with surprisingly incisive political critiques as well as her own dogged coverage of sensational criminal trials (she long asserted the innocence of Sam Sheppard, the Ohio neurosurgeon accused of bludgeoning his wife in 1954, who would later become the inspiration for *The Fugitive*). Kilgallen parlayed her media success not only into a popular morning radio show with her husband, but a regular spot on the hit prime-time game show *What's My Line?*, where celebrity panelists compete to guess the occupation (or "line of work") of a mystery guest. In other words, every morning Kilgallen's words landed on front porches, her voice was beamed through the airwaves on the radio, and her face appeared on evening television sets—as saturated as a media figure could wish to get in the minds and homes of the consuming public. She also had powerful friends, including two handsome Massachusetts brothers with serious political ambitions, John and Robert Kennedy. Kilgallen was a staunch Kennedy loyalist, although that didn't stop her from hinting in one of her 1962 columns of a brewing affair between Marilyn Monroe and a certain member of the White House (Kilgallen had meant Robert, but readers mistook her insinuation as meaning John; the week after she published that scoop Marilyn was found dead of acute barbiturate and alcohol poisoning).

In the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, Kilgallen didn't buy the lone-gunman theory of Oswald as unhinged executioner. She called the Warren Report "laughable"—at first, the American public seemed satisfied by the Oswald-acted-alone-theory, but it wouldn't take long for most to change their mind and agree. In her columns, she published confidential information that was supplied to her by anonymous sources and repeatedly poked holes in the Commission's conclusions. Kilgallen earned the ire of FBI boss J. Edgar Hoover, among other powerful enemies, but she refused to back down. When Oswald's killer Jack Ruby went on the trial in 1964, Kilgallen sat in the courtroom, and through her connections, became the only journalist to secure a private interview with the defendant, the result seemingly confirming Kilgallen's theory of a larger assassination plot. In 1965, the trailblazing journalist was still working the Kennedy case, preparing to write a book on the subject, and that autumn she planned a trip to New Orleans for a confidential meeting with an unnamed source that, she told friends, would blow the entire Kennedy investigation wide open and reveal the murky depths of the conspiracy.

She never got to make the trip to New Orleans. On November 7, 1965 after taping an episode of *What's My Line?*, Kilgallen went to New York's Regency Hotel for a mysterious rendezvous. She would be found dead the next morning in her East 68<sup>th</sup> Street townhouse by her hairstylist, the official cause of death a Monroe facsimile of an accidental alcohol and barbiturate overdose. Never mind the bizarre staging of Kilgallen's body. The hairstylist found her sitting up in bed in a bedroom in which she never slept. In her hand, upside down, was a book she had already read, and her reading glasses were nowhere near her. She never went to

bed without removing her hairpiece and makeup, but she was entirely done-up, complete with false eyelashes, wearing a blue robe that she never wore. Moreover, all her notes about the JFK assassination, including drafts of the explosive book chapters, were missing. Was Kilgallen's death another cover-up in that long chain of mysterious murders and convenient silences that stem directly from a president's motorcade passing the book depository on November 22, 1963? Has any single event in the history of our republic been so ingrained in our collective suspicions to no overdose, nor car accident, nor diagnosis of cancer exists outside the realm of an all-encompassing paranoid conspiracy?

The national obsession with the Kennedy assassination has its historic roots in the disenchantment with the social order after a decade and a half of post-War American boom, the bright optimism of the 1950s souring and the self-congratulatory war heroism as saviors of democracy curdling into tit-for-tat Cold War duplicity. Prince, born in 1949, would have been an adolescent beneficiary of this positive American 1950s ethos. The artist recalls growing up in that decade watching Kilgallen on *What's My Line?* He particularly loved the way the game show revolved around questions of reality and deception. The notion of things not being always what they seem lodged in his brain at a young age. But, of course, the JFK assassination proved to be a wrecking ball to the country's entire sense of itself—its innocence and its mythic status as arbiters of justice and peace. A young Prince felt the impact of the Kennedy's death, and in the years that followed he too fell under the spell of the mired questions of cover-ups and plots. Prince chose the subject of Dorothy Kilgallen not only because of his memories of her on a popular game show but because of what she might have known and what had happened to her on that night in November to stop her from speaking.

Why the country's unending fascination with one president's murder? It has been nearly sixty years since Kennedy's death. We know by heart almost every bleak fact and the nonsensical detail about that day in Dallas as if it were a Bible story. Or rather we treat it as the ultimate game-show puzzle that's still begging to be solved. The magic bullet, report of shots fired from the grassy knoll, the umbrella man, the badge man, the tampered evidence, the autopsy report, the mysterious deaths of key eyewitnesses, deals in Cuba, in New Orleans, in Ruby's strip club down the street... the list goes on. Like any myth, no law of gravity keeps these facts and fictions tethered to the ground. But why? Perhaps Norman Mailer nailed it to the wall most convincingly. "It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd." We fear chaos above all else. We invent intricate, implausible plots to prevent chaos from reigning in our world view. We would rather suspect our own government of organizing the brutal murder of our leader than accuse it of ignorance and incompetence. A runty lone gunman can't obliterate the nexus of absolute power, because that would confirm our own utter insignificance.

A world of disproportion. A universe that runs on chaos. In Prince's three portraits of Kilgallen, her face is warped as if bleeding off the page, the pigment swirling and running, her distorted face threatening to disintegrate into total abstraction. The Kilgallen portraits have the uncanny twofold effect of looking as if they are congealing into a solid image, as a photographic negative slowly appears in a chemical bath, or being burned with a flame, melting away with all

of her theories and damning evidence locked inside of her head. Ultimately, it feels as if we are witnessing the process of an individual transforming into a historical footnote, the ink not yet dried, the life reduced to her tragic implication in a larger world event. Prince has previously worked in the medium of watercolor, most recently in his 2017 series of joke paintings. “The cartoons that were submitted to the magazine were watercolors,” he explained of his process at the time. “That’s what was handed in, delivered to the art director. It was how they were made. Gouache on illustration board. Sketch, wash, and punch line. I bought the magazines on e-bay. I bought thirty-six issues. I flipped thru the magazine and tore my favorite ‘toons’ out of the magazine, put the torn page on the floor, and poured more watercolor on the cartoon. Water on water. My red watercolor on their yellow cartoon. Fifty/fifty. My contribution? My psychotic breakdown of my psychic connection. Also a contrasting color. My red water on their yellow water. I would come back the next morning and my red would dry in its own way. It had personality. Travel, leak, pool, stains and puddles. And on the way to drying, the dry would ripple the paper. The pour would do its thing. A secret ‘cover’...The form had a life of its own, a mind of its own, and each morning after ‘the evaporation’... I got a surprise.” One of the artist’s strategies is to refute sole authorship of a work, the material” having a life of its own,” the photographs appropriated from another source, the images already circulating, the icons pre-trafficking through culture and bringing all their baggage and meaning with them right to Prince’s studio. But we, the interested audience of his work, do not accept this version of the artist as mere witness to a medium running berserk. We want a Richard Prince that is the clever instigator, the devious puppet master, the artist who forms meaning out of chaos. Two Princes, like two Oswalds, the one who flips through cartoons and pours some watercolor over it and goes to sleep, and the other one who wakes the next morning, gauges the “surprise”, deems the results a strategic success, worthy of art, and pins it to the wall. The fool and the mastermind. The patsy and the killer.

For the three Kilgallen works, the Two Palms printmakers worked with Prince using an untested screen-printing process where the printed CMYK color screen dots lifted from the paper and moved around in an unpredictable fashion. The results are the Kilgallens in front of you, an image of a forgotten icon barely holding together, a pattern coming undone no matter how much we will the dots to connect to form a solid picture. Prince, the winking mastermind, signs Dorothy Kilgallen’s name as a celebrity autograph, complete with a message that references a different game show. *I’ve Got a Secret*, a 1950s spin-off of *What’s My Line?*, where a panel of celebrity judges tries to guess the surprising secret of a mystery guest. What did Kilgallen know? What was her secret? Would it have further ruptured the image of an innocent, high controlled America or would it have preserved it?