RICHARD PRINCE
COLLECTABLE NURSES

VALENTINA FRUTIG

"What I'm collecting will, a lot of times, end up in my work."[1]

Richard Prince

Through light-colored, thin layers of paint, between different types of printed and handwritten words and surrounded by a rough material haptic, there she is: a nurse. Her clothing, the short, white staff uniform, the little cap on her head and painted surgical mask can be defined as universal symbols of nursing that allow patients to clearly identify her as such. Although the times of this clothing in hospitals are long gone, it is part of our collective memory; the textile industry still sells them for private, intimate use ...

The nurse as the main protagonist plays a central role in a series of works which the American painter and photographer Richard Prince has isolated from its original context. As a passionate collector of different kinds of memorabilia the artist amassed trashy, nurse-fantasy novellas of the 1950s and '60s and used their front covers for his famous "Nurse Paintings."[2] The great popularity of this specific literature genre is subtly reflected in the appropriation of its images to critically explore this particular eroticized archetype.

Already in his earliest works from the early 1980s, Prince started to investigate the stereotyping generated through images from mass media, including advertisement, novels, and magazines. The early *Cowboy* series, for which he rephotographed Marlboro cigarette ads with the cowboy, are another example—and probably definable as the male counterpart to the nurses—for his particular examination of circulating images and their hidden background "data."[3] Together with a few other of today's important American artists, generally summarized as the "Pictures Generation," Prince's appropriation strategy sought to redefine and question concepts of authorship and ownership as well as issues of power, gender, and consumerism.[4]

For the work *New England Nurse #1* in the Nicola Erni Collection the artist used the cover of the novel by the American writer Adelaide Humphries published in 1956. He scanned, enlarged, and ultimately transferred the front cover image and its wording onto canvas using an inkjet printer.[5] With acrylic paint he adapted certain attributes of the figure, such as the surgical mask, and finally placed her in a mystic and athmospheric painterly setting. On the left side of the painting one can find a list of words in capital letters which neither seem to have anything in common nor are they visually structured: They jump from diseases and their symptoms, to historical moments and chemical compounds and their reactions. Most of them define a negative impact to human beings, either affecting a single person or endangering humanity in general. Although all the terms are connected to human activity, the coquettishly posing nurse as a healthcare professional is not able to help in all of the cases listed.

Collecting these front cover images and thus recontextualizing this widely-spread genre of cheap, pulp romance novels also means engaging with the system of values within a certain time frame. It is Prince's choice of subjects and the contemporary composition he displays that make him a chronicler of his generation while at the same time his works of art radiate a timeless nature within a global language.

New England Nurse #1, 2000
Acrylic on canvas on gatorboard
152.5 x 101 cm