

BABY, I'M A STAR!

THE TITLE FOR THIS ESSAY ON STEVE CARR'S LATEST WORK IS TAKEN FROM THE SONG BABY, I'M A STAR! BY PRINCE. CARR CLAIMS THAT PRINCE IS HIS ALL-TIME FAVORITE ARTIST: 'I REALLY LOVE THE WAY HE'S QUITE FEMININE AND COMPLETELY DIRTY BUT EVERYONE'S MUM LOVES HIM. I MEAN, YOU READ HIS LYRICS AND THEY'RE REALLY DIRTY BUT PEOPLE DON'T SEEM TO QUITE NOTICE THAT. THAT HE GETS AWAY WITH IT, I FIND REALLY GREAT.' IN HIS RECENT ARTWORKS CARR SEEMS TO BE COVERING SIMILAR TERRITORY, AT TIMES HE PRESENTS HIMSELF AS A GOOD, CLEAN MAMMA'S BOY AND AT OTHER TIMES HE SEEMS DOWNRIGHT PERVY.

*HEY, CHECK IT OUT
BABY, I KNOW WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT
- PRINCE, BABY, I'M A STAR!*

CARR PRESENTS AUDIENCES WITH SEEMINGLY STRAIGHTFORWARD WORKS AND LEAVES US TO MAKE UP OUR OWN MINDS. IN SHOWSTOPPERS, CARR WILL EXHIBIT FOUR BODIES OF WORK: TWO VIDEO WORKS (HAY FIGHT AND COWBOY AND INDIANS), FOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS FROM THE SERIES WRESTLE, PARIS AND A SINGLE BLOWN GLASS FIRE EXTINGUISHER. WHILE EACH IS A SEPARATE PIECE OF WORK, READING THEM TOGETHER DOES SHED SOME LIGHT AS TO WHAT CARR IS ALL ABOUT.

THE FOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS, FOR EXAMPLE, ARE CLEARLY POSED, ARTIFICIAL SCENES IN WHICH THE ARTIST IS INVOLVED IN BASIC WRESTLING POSES WITH A YOUNG FEMALE MODEL CALLED PARIS. THIS IS RITUALISTIC FIGHTING – IN THESE WORKS THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE TWO OPPONENTS IS A CAREFULLY STAGED POWER STRUGGLE. THESE IMAGES ARE BASED ON WRESTLING POSES TAKEN FROM A HOW TO WRESTLE BOOK, AND YET THEY ALSO SUGGEST A CALVIN KLEIN UNDERWEAR ADVERTISEMENT, A CONTEMPORARY DANCE PERFORMANCE, OR BASIC RESUSCITATION INSTRUCTIONS ON A MEDICAL POSTER. THE MATT FINISH OF THESE PHOTOGRAPHS FURTHER ENCOURAGES SUCH READINGS OF THE WORK. THE WRESTLING PHOTOGRAPHS OFFER A FOIL TO THE TWO VIDEO WORKS. LIKE THE WRESTLING PHOTOS, THE VIDEO WORKS ARE STAGED SCENES, YET THERE IS A MORE SPONTANEOUS ASPECT TO THEM WHEN FICTION MELTS INTO REALITY – WHAT CARR DESCRIBES AS 'BEAUTIFUL LITTLE MOMENTS'.

IN THE PLAY FIGHTS IN CARR'S VIDEO WORKS HAY FIGHT AND COWBOY AND INDIANS THE POWER RELATIONSHIPS ARE LESS CLEAR. AT SOME POINTS, IT IS CLEAR THAT CARR HOLDS THE POWER, AND AT OTHER TIMES HE SEEMS TO BECOME POWERLESS AND VULNERABLE. FOR EXAMPLE, IN HIS VIDEO WORK COWBOY AND INDIANS (WHERE CARR IS DRESSED IN BLUE JEANS AND A BLACK T-SHIRT AND WEARS A KIDDIE'S SHERIFF BADGE) HE IS CHASED AROUND A VERY ORDINARY SUBURBAN BACK YARD BY THREE YOUNG BOYS AND A GIRL ALL DRESSED UP AS INDIANS. THE KIDS ARE THRILLED TO BE IN THE CHASE, AND WHILE THEY THINK THAT THEY ARE IN CONTROL, THE VIEWER THINKS DIFFERENTLY, PARTICULARLY WHEN THE BOYS TIE A ROPE AROUND CARR'S KNEES – IT IS OBVIOUSLY A SET-UP AS CARR COULD SO EASILY ESCAPE THE BONDS THEY HAVE CREATED. WHEN, LATER ON IN THE VIDEO, THE BOYS PICK UP THE HOSE, CARR BECOMES EFFECTIVELY PARALYZED BY THE STRONG, PAINFUL SPRAY OF THE HOSE DIRECTLY INTO HIS FACE. LIKewise, IN THE ACCOMPANYING WORK HAY FIGHT, AN ILLUSION OF POWERLESSNESS IS SET-UP BY CARR. FOUR YOUNG GIRLS – POSSIBLY AGED AROUND 10 YEARS OLD – ARE THROWING HAY AT CARR AND COVERING HIM ENTIRELY WITH HAY MAKING HIM ALL BUT INVISIBLE. THEN CARR JUMPS OUT OF THE HAY AND SCARES THE GIRLS, TAKING THEM COMPLETELY BY SURPRISE.

*HEY, LOOK ME OVER
TELL ME DO U LIKE WHAT U SEE?*

*HEY, TAKE A LISTEN
TELL ME DO U LIKE WHAT U HEAR?
- PRINCE, BABY, I'M A STAR!*

CARR PLAYS A LEADING ROLE IN HIS VIDEO AND PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK. HIS PAST VIDEO WORKS HAVE INCLUDED HIM GIVING OUT FREE MR. WHIPPY ICE-CREAMS, JOINING IN PILLOW FIGHTS AT A TEEN GIRLIE SLEEPOVER, AND DONNING SCUBA GEAR AND SITTING AT THE BOTTOM OF A SWIMMING POOL WATCHING TEENAGE GIRLS SWIMMING AROUND HIM IN BIKINIS. CARR IMPLICATES HIMSELF IN HIS WORKS AND AS JON BYWATER PUT IT IN A RECENT REVIEW OF CARR'S WORK – 'IT'S A JOKE AT HIS OWN EXPENSE. SORT OF.' THERE IS MORE THAN A FAINT WHIFF THAT CARR GETS SOME PERVERSE KIND OF SEXUAL KICK OUT OF FROLICKING AROUND WITH YOUNG GIRLS (AND BOYS). IN HIS MORE RECENT WORK, THE SEXUAL INNUENDO IS LESS OBVIOUS, ALTHOUGH IT'S STILL THERE IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR IT. WHEN I SPOKE TO CARR ABOUT HIS VIDEO WORK HAY FIGHT, WHICH WAS UNFINISHED AT THE TIME OF WRITING,

HE COMMENTED ON THE SOUNDTRACK THAT WOULD BE USED. HE SAID THAT HE HAD PLAYED THROUGH THE SOUND FROM THE VIDEO WITHOUT THE PICTURE AND WAS TAKEN ABACK BY HOW SEXUAL IT SOUNDED – WITH HEAVY BREATHING AND GIGGLING.

*AND IF I DON'T TURN U ON
JUST SAY THE WORD AND I'M GONE
- PRINCE, BABY, I'M A STAR!*

IT FEELS AS THOUGH CARR IS DARING THE VIEWER TO OWN UP TO SUCH PRIM AND PRISSY ATTITUDES, AND THEN INSTEAD TURNS THE SPOTLIGHT BACK ON US FOR READING SUCH CONTENT INTO HIS WORK. COMPARING CARR'S WORK TO ROHAN WEALLEANS, BYWATER WRITES THAT THEIR WORK HAS 'FLAGRANTLY SEXIST ASPECTS. AND DARE YOU TO THINK SO. INDEED, THIS SEEMS TO BE A DUFFER BAIT THE ARTISTS ARE DANGLING OUT THERE, WAITING FOR THE FEW KNEE-JERK "PC" RESPONSES. THE NOT SO SECRET WEAPON THEY HAVE IN RESERVE, OF COURSE, IS THE CLAIM THAT IF THEY DO PROVOKE, THAT'S ALL THE BETTER. MY SUSPICION, THOUGH, IS THAT IN THESE CASES THIS MIGHT BE THE ART VERSION OF "WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR?"

*OH BABY, I'M A STAR!
MIGHT NOT KNOW IT NOW
BABY, BUT I ARE, I'M A STAR!
- PRINCE, BABY, I'M A STAR!*

STEVE CARR CERTAINLY APPEARS TO BE THE STAR OF HIS OWN SHOW AND A STAR ON THE RISE IN THE NEW ZEALAND ART SCENE. LIKE PRINCE'S LYRICS, CARR'S WORK COMBINES LIKEABILITY, DIRTY TALK AND A LOT OF SELF-PROMOTION. CARR'S WORK IS FULL OF IRONY: HE PRESENTS WHAT APPEAR TO BE STRAIGHTFORWARD EVENTS, AND THEN LEAVES US TO MAKE UP OUR OWN MINDS AS TO WHETHER THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE GOING ON. ANDY WARHOL ONCE SAID THAT 'ART IS WHAT YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH' AND CARR PROVOKES VIEWERS INTO HAVING A RESPONSE, AS THOUGH HE WANTS US TO SAY, 'OOOHHH, YOU CAN'T DO THAT!' BUT HE DOES DO THAT, AND WHAT'S MORE HE SEEMS TO BE GETTING AWAY WITH IT TOO.

SARAH FARRAR

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EXCERPTS IN ITALICS ARE FROM PRINCE, BABY, I'M A STAR! (PURPLE RAIN ALBUM)