



STEPHEN PRINA

Stephen Prina
in his studio in
Cambridge, Mass.,
2013.

Interview by Steel Stillman
Studio photography by Leonard Greco

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Stephen Prina: As
He Remembered
It" at the Los
Angeles County
Museum of Art,
through Aug. 4.

STEEL STILLMAN
is a New York-based
artist and writer.

IN THE STUDIO

STEPHEN PRINA IS AN ART POLYMATH whose mediums include drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, installation, video and film. He is also a composer and musician who has interpreted works by Beethoven, Schoenberg, Sonic Youth, Steely Dan and many others. Indeed, his largest fan base may be not within the art world, but outside of it, where he is known as a member of the avant-garde rock band The Red Krayola and as a solo pop singer whose terrific album *Push Comes to Love* was released by Drag City in 1999.

Born in 1954, in Galesburg, Ill.—he received a BFA from Northern Illinois University in 1977 and an MFA from CalArts in 1980—Prina makes art project by project, developing discrete, thematically related bodies of work whose serial-like components often reappear, newly iterated, in subsequent installations. Projects are often grounded in historical subjects, and preexisting works of visual art, architecture, music and film are regular points of departure. In 2011, for instance, the artist conceived a sculpture installation for the Secession, in Vienna, that involved re-creating 28 built-in elements from two demolished Los Angeles houses designed by Rudolph Schindler (1887-1953), who had begun his career in the Austrian capital. Titled *As He Remembered It*, the installation originated in Prina's having seen, late one night in the 1980s in a La Brea Avenue storefront, a pink built-in bookshelf by Schindler that looked to him like an amputated limb.

In the following conversation, you will discover that, according to Prina, the sculptures in *As He Remembered It* accurately replicate neither Schindler's furniture nor Prina's memory image, their title notwithstanding. Beautiful and brainy, and by no means opaque, his work opens itself most fully to audiences willing to take the time to unravel its discernible clues. As with good pop songs, cascading coincidences matter more than right answers. From early in his career, Prina has improvised on the Surrealist convention of the exquisite corpse, and that device is a fitting metaphor for our engagement with his work, in that we, as audience, must complete it. His polymorphic art is transactional: its call awaits our response.

As He Remembered It is currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), where Prina has also installed new sculptures and scroll-like paintings in the Pavilion for Japanese Art. Over the past 35 years, he has had nearly 70 solo exhibitions, and his work has appeared in hundreds of group shows, including the Whitney Biennial (2008) and Documenta IX (1992). He taught at Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena, from 1980 until 2003, and has been a professor at Harvard since 2004. He divides his time between Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass. We met in both cities in February, concluding our discussions late one afternoon under the darkening skylight of his East Coast studio, an erstwhile Harvard squash court.

STEEL STILLMAN I've heard that you began your professional life as a lounge singer.

STEPHEN PRINA In high school, I performed with Joe Padilla & Co., a Mexican bar band, at the Taco Hideout Lounge, in Galesburg. The other guys were much older and hired me

because I could play the guitar solo for "Black Magic Woman." The first song I sang lead on was "It's Too Late," by Carole King, which I still perform in my solo act. The Taco Hideout was known for its mushroom enchiladas, and one night John Cage came in with a group of people from Knox College, the small liberal arts school in town. I don't recall exactly what we played, but I'd like to think I sang "It's Too Late" for him. Then, several years later, after college, I returned home for a year and joined a proper lounge group, Jeannie and the Aladdins, which played at the Harbor Lights Supper Club in Galesburg.

STILLMAN Growing up, were you involved in both art and music?

PRINA I was one of those kids who made oil paintings at 10 years old. My mother had enrolled me in a children's art class at Knox College where my teacher, Joanne Goudie, introduced me to proper art techniques. She was fantastic and dressed like a beatnik, in black turtlenecks and slacks, with a long braid down her back. I started in music when I was 11, and learned to play the guitar for folk masses at the local Catholic church, but by 14 I'd migrated to rock and roll. My Italian immigrant parents, with an eye to my future, encouraged me to consider architecture as a profession; my mother even gave me a subscription to *Architectural Digest*! But despite enjoying drafting in high school, and being accepted into an architectural program for college, I chose to do my undergraduate studies in painting and music composition.

STILLMAN Did you do a double major?

PRINA I considered it, but realizing it would take a decade to finish my degree, I majored in art with a minor in music. I was an education junkie, though, and took many more classes than were required. And I went to every exhibition and extracurricular event, several of which made lasting impressions on me. At one—a private gathering at the home of a music professor—Pauline Oliveros, who was a visiting artist that semester, and one of the only two women in the room, was asked to speak about her work. She began by talking about the imperialist quality of the Austro-German music tradition, whereupon our host interrupted her, saying: "That's all well and good, Pauline, but can you talk about *your* music?" Oliveros replied: "I *am* talking about my music." It was bracing to hear someone make such a direct connection between avant-garde practice and political history.

STILLMAN Did you struggle with whether or how to bring music and art together?

PRINA I went back and forth. It really wasn't until I was at CalArts, when Michael Asher turned me on to Theodor Adorno and I discovered the latter's *In Search of Wagner*, that my approach became clear. Adorno's dismantling of the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* helped me see that my goal might not be to synthesize the arts but to make discrete forays into multiple disciplines, confident that those pursuits would share underlying structural connections. By the mid-'80s, I understood that my interests were taxonomic, addressed to general principles and particular histories across a range of esthetic practices. Pursuing that diversity has been an important aspect of my career.

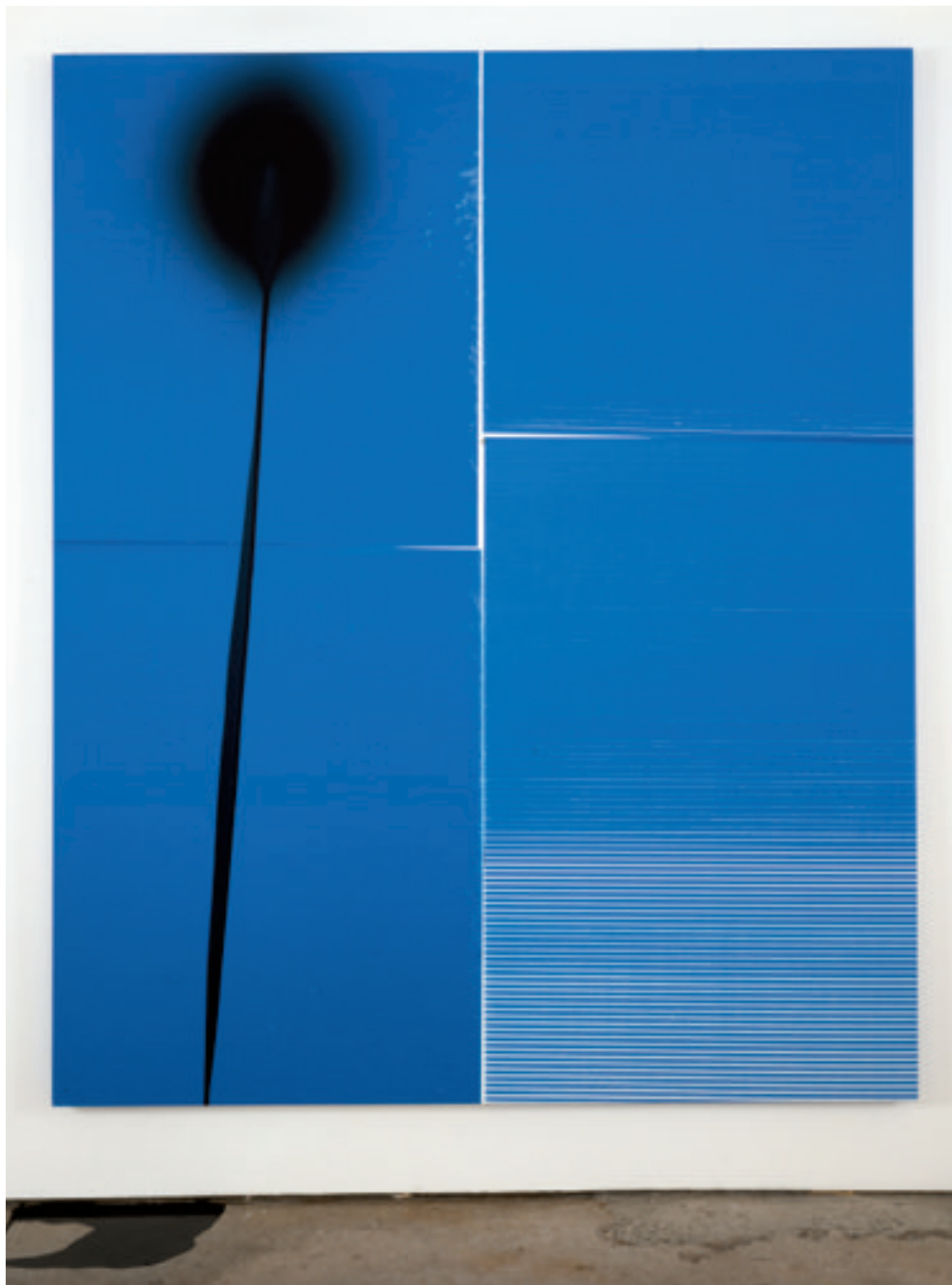


Two views of Prina's installation *As He Remembered It*, 2011, at the Secession, Vienna. All images courtesy Petzel Gallery, New York. Photos Wolfgang Thaler.



*Push Comes to
Love: Yellow*, 1999,
photo screenprint
with acrylic and
acrylic enamel on
canvas, 47% by
59% inches.





Wade Guyton/
Stephen Prina:
Wade Guyton,
Untitled, 2010,
Epson Ultrachrome
inkjet on linen,
Stephen Prina,
PUSH COMES
TO LOVE,
Untitled, 1999-
2010, 2010, Epson
UltraChrome
inkjet on linen
and the contents
of a can of enamel
spray paint,
84 by 69 inches.



STILLMAN From the beginning, your work has drawn on the archives of Western art and music. An early, ongoing series, “Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet” [1988–], will eventually consist of 556 diptychs in which the left panel is an ink-wash drawing, a field of sepia-tinted sponge-strokes the exact size and shape of one of Manet’s 556 paintings, and the right is a lithograph representing Manet’s entire oeuvre in a single grid. What prompted this series, which you often describe as the spine of your work?

PRINA There were a number of triggers. Among them was my interest in systems, inspired by Hanne Darboven’s and On Kawara’s projects; another was sitting in on Thomas Crow’s class on Courbet and Manet at UCLA in the summer of 1980, which motivated me to address painting in ways that were simultaneously contemporary and historical; and a crucial step was discovering a Penguin paperback of Manet’s catalogue raisonné on a friend’s bookshelf, and finding it strange that such a slender book could stand in for Manet’s oeuvre. When it came time to begin, I knew I needed a traditional approach, so I modeled my technique on Rembrandt drawings, in which the ground is often established by a sepia ink wash before figurative elements are added. In my series, that sepia ground becomes itself a figure, standing in for each Manet painting. The overall title is meant to be a provocation: just as Giorgione or Goya is in Manet, so Manet is in me. Artists are collaborators with history.

STILLMAN My first encounter with your work, in 1996, was with a series of 35 framed panels, incorporating film stills and word fragments, collectively titled: “What’s wrong? Open the door! Open the door! . . . I was scared. What happened? . . . You can’t lie underwater like on a bed and then just wait . . . It’s impossible . . . Wait for what? . . . Idiot! Do you know the mess you can get me into?” [1996].

PRINA That project stemmed from a class I’d offered at Art Center [College of Design in Pasadena] in which I showed Robert Bresson’s film *The Devil, Probably* [1977] every week for a full semester. The text and images refer to the character Charles’s first suicide attempt, and the lettering style derived from two mid-’80s series—both using the slogan “IT’S IN OUR OWN *BEST* INTERESTS”—for which I’d custom-designed fonts on a nearly room-size computer. The three series were installed in horizontal rows, so when all the works were viewed together the full texts [of their titles] could be read. In the “What’s Wrong . . .” project, the words were laser-cut from semi-transparent vinyl sheets that overlay the Bresson stills, highlighting the general principle that artworks are devices through which we look at other things.

STILLMAN In the late ’90s, you began employing what has become a signature visual trope, the emptying of an entire can of spray paint in a single spot on one of your pieces, with the excess dribbling down to puddle on the floor.



Two views of Prina's installation
What's wrong?
Open the door!
What's wrong?
Open the door! . . .
I was scared. . . .,
 1996, Ilfochrome
 print on vinyl
 computer film,
 35 prints total,
 31½ by 24½ inches
 each, at Luhring
 Augustine,
 New York.

PRINA I first used that gesture in three “Push Comes To Love” exhibitions, in 1999, which each included 15 framed photo-and-text panels, five monochrome paintings and a series of small photographs. The sprayed dot is grounded in the conceit that after I installed these meticulous works, which had been produced elsewhere, something felt missing. Curiously, this seeming marker of presentness becomes a trace from the past as soon as the last fume is expelled from the can.

STILLMAN Also in the mid- to late '90s, you began performing with The Red Krayola and putting together your solo album. Is making pop music fundamentally different from making visual art?

PRINA I don't think so. I take the genre of pop music very seriously. There is as much to study in it as there is in art history. I remember being in a music history class as an undergraduate, thinking I was growing up, leaving pop music behind, when the teacher put on Webern's *Concerto for Nine Instruments* [1934] as an example of the least representational music in the Western canon. At a certain moment, the piano voiced a chord that was not in the least bit nonrepresentational: it could have been straight out of Jimi Hendrix's “Purple Haze”! I couldn't keep those things separate because they weren't separate in the first place. Like visual art, pop music is full of allegory: beneath its sweet or aggressive veneers, subtle and complicated suggestions are being conveyed.

STILLMAN Music and visual art come together quite lyrically in your film *The Way He Always Wanted It II* [2008],

which was shot in the Bruce Goff-designed Ford House in Aurora, Ill. The film is a portrait of the Ford House and of Goff [1904-1982], seen, as it were, in progress, with the film crew and a troupe of musicians, and you as vocalist, performing its making.

PRINA Goff was a child prodigy, an architect, composer and painter, who famously gave up music for architecture when he was 30, saying that there were fewer great modern architects than great composers. The first time I walked in the door of the Ford House I realized immediately that I'd fundamentally misunderstood Goff's work, despite having known something about it. My next thought was, “Wow! Here's a house that's screaming for semicircular tracking shots!” There was no dressing of the house for the film, and the device of showing the crew and musicians was classic Brechtian cinema. The music was arranged using the often fragmentary scores of Goff's own compositions, which included hand-cut player piano rolls, created a decade or more before better-known pieces by [the American composer] Conlon Nancarrow [1912-1997]. As I was developing the score, I felt as though I were building a musical analogue for the curved slag glass and anthracite coal wall that is one of the house's remarkable features. And the lyrics were assembled in like manner, from cards and letters written to Goff by his presumed lover Richard San Jule. San Jule was an aspiring but unsuccessful writer, and I saw my efforts as an opportunity to finally publish his work.

View of the
exhibition "He
was but a bad
translation," 2011,
at the Kölnerischer
Kunstverein.
Photo Simon
Vogel.



STILLMAN Architecture, of course, is also the theme of your Schindler-inspired installation *As He Remembered It*. You've said that a pink bookshelf on La Brea led you to speculate about the unnamed phantom house to which it had once belonged.

PRINA For nearly 30 years I'd waited to do something with that remembered image, and, once the invitation from the Secession came, the pieces fell into place. I wanted a house that no longer existed, and when I found two from L.A., I decided to use both. Intermingling their built-ins made the project more about loss and what remains than about any particular house. I had help from two architects, Frank Escher and Ravi Gunewardena, and though we located Schindler's plans, not all the details were spelled out. At times we found ourselves working as Schindler himself apparently had done later in his career: we interpreted the score of his original drawings. We also discovered that Schindler's wife Pauline had painted the interior of the Schindler House on King's Road pink after they were divorced. Nobody seems to know why, but Kimberli Meyer, who is director [of the Schindler house], believes that Pauline was just trying to warm up its drafty concrete spaces. I will probably never know if the bookshelf I saw on La Brea was Pauline's doing, but authentic re-creation was not my plan. Instead, my pieces were all painted Honeysuckle, which just so happened to be Pantone's color of the year for 2011. That mass-market coincidence was too profound to ignore: the present was literally putting its gloss on the past.

STILLMAN Also at LACMA, you have an installation in Goff's Japanese pavilion, where you've installed new sculptures and a number of free-hanging paintings made on commercially produced window shades that roll down from the ceiling like Asian scrolls. You've been making paintings in this manner for several years and I'm curious to know what prompted them, and why you refer to their supports not as shades but blinds.

PRINA I believe the terms are interchangeable, but I thought calling them blinds might lead viewers to consider blind spots—everything that is unseen when we're looking at something else. The first time I painted on blinds was in 2006 for an installation titled *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You*, in which I used just one by itself. A year or two later, I began hanging two blinds together—abutting their hardware produces a 4-centimeter gap at ground level—and suddenly this new kind of diptych seemed to fulfill the requirements of contemporary painting. Covered in gestural brushstrokes, in washy transparent layers, the blinds' surfaces engage with the vertical gap between them and with the space beyond. In the Japanese pavilion, three diptychs will hang beneath Goff's parabola-shaped balconies, visually anchored on the floors above by sculptures consisting of chunks of anthracite coal and slag glass, which sit like scholar's rocks on sheets of milky fiberglass, references to the pavilion's fiberglass windows. The final component of the LACMA installation will be the premiere of my new flute sextet, which again draws on Goff's musical archive, and which will be performed with a conductor and musicians distributed throughout the pavilion to produce various effects, spatial and antiphonal.

STILLMAN Over the years, writers have connected your working method to the appropriationism that so many visual artists embraced in the '80s. I wonder if it would be more useful to compare your strategies to traditional musical procedures, in which composers recycle, or performers reinterpret, works from the past.

PRINA Coming of artistic age in the wake of modernism, the challenge was to maintain allegiance to the relative autonomy of an artwork while reestablishing its undeniable connection to the world. Appropriation reminded us that artists take on ideas and things from the world, which they then modify and put back into circulation. I think of my work as translation. In daily life we are continually translating between not just languages but entire ways of thinking, knowing and seeing. In 1992, I titled an exhibition "I Am But a Bad Translation," based on the fact that when my English ancestors moved to Italy, their name, which had been Frost, was translated as Prina instead of Brina, which would have been more accurate. Translations are invariably incomplete and always produce a surplus.

STILLMAN You remind me that despite its external sources, your work contains personal references. Another example might be the baby-blue tracksuit you inherited from your deceased brother, which I remember you singing in at the Knitting Factory in New York in 1999.

PRINA At around that time, I also performed in that tracksuit in Cologne, not knowing that it was the signature outfit for a then-famous German athletic coach. He was the important reference for that audience, and I didn't have access to their associations. Just because I use a particular material or subject matter doesn't mean I can control its signification. No one has that kind of power, and I don't expect or need viewers to get all my references.

STILLMAN And yet, as with allegory, your work becomes more interesting the more detective work one does.

PRINA When I first studied Neo-Classical art and learned, for instance, what was at stake in Jacques-Louis David's painting—that if he'd spoken directly he'd risk censorship or death—I felt a shock of recognition. As a queer boy and man, I'd been living allegory all my life. My interest in translation surely reiterates the veiled languages and behavior I adopted growing up in a hetero-normative culture. My pleasure in art and art-making is the pleasure of unraveling something, where unraveling is conceived not as destruction but as decomposition; the threads, after all, can be rewoven. In his autobiography, Roland Barthes likened decomposition to the process of steeping a sugar cube in water. The sugar is still present, but in another form, to be ingested another way. Barthes went on to say that he inevitably decomposed himself in decomposing his subjects, and added: "I scrape, catch, and drag."

STILLMAN In English, "to drag" is the etymological ancestor of the verb "to draw"—as in dragging a stick across the sand.

PRINA That's beautiful. It describes the point of contact between two things, each modifying the other, until the tide comes in. ○