

Allie Biswas, "Stephen Prina: 'The exhibition was really about considering whether I could embark on an autobiographical project that I would deem acceptable,'" *studio international*, May 17, 2016.



## Stephen Prina: 'The exhibition was really about considering whether I could embark on an autobiographical project that I would deem acceptable'

The post-conceptual artist talks about his hometown, studying with John Baldessari at California Institute of the Arts, and a missed encounter with John Cage

by ALLIE BISWAS

Stephen Prina, who was born in 1954 in Galesburg, Illinois, is an artist whose practice has included sculpture, installation, painting, drawing, video and performance since he began exhibiting in the 1980s. Concurrently, he is a musician, particularly known for his involvement with the experimental rock band The Red Krayola and his solo pop album, *Push Comes to Love*, which was released in 1999.

Prina is renowned for his multilayered and associative approach to art-making, where the starting point for a project is often a pre-existing or historical subject. His eighth show at Petzel Gallery, New York, entitled *galesburg, illinois+*, is filled with reference and memory, drawing on the artist's hometown. Music also takes on a foundational role within the exhibition, with songs from Prina's 13-track conceptual album *Ode to Galesburg* streaming through the gallery.

The artist is based in Los Angeles and Cambridge, where he is a professor in the department of visual and environmental studies at Harvard University.

# Petzel

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**Allie Biswas: The work in Galesburg, Illinois+ was initiated and developed first at the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen in Switzerland last autumn, and then at the Museum Kurhaus Kleve in Germany earlier this year. This show at Petzel marks the work's US premiere. Is it a homecoming?**

**Stephen Prina:** Perhaps it could be considered that way. I thought you were going to say that it was a homecoming in a different way.

**AB: Well, it's about home as well, isn't it?**

**SP:** Yes, it deals with Illinois+. I don't know if it is about that – that's one of the things I'm still grappling with. It's a project that I had worked on in one way or another for the past couple of years. The show's debut was at the Kunst Halle in Sankt Gallen, in September last year. Then it travelled to the Kurhaus Kleve, where the curator Susanne Figner became very ambitious and doubled the size of the show by adding earlier work. That first component, shown in Sankt Gallen is coming to New York.

**AB: What role does autobiography play in these works?**

**SP:** I would say that I am reticent about divulging autobiographical material. Maybe I'm of the generation where it was drummed into our head that autobiography is not pertinent to the artwork. Of course, there are certain artists who have mined the autobiographical quite successfully, I think. Frances Stark, for instance, in the myriad ways that she is always mining the site that might be her own constituted subjectivity. That's fascinating. But then there are other artists who constantly return to the autobiographical as an affirmation, and they will remain nameless (*laughs*). So the exhibition was really about considering whether I could embark on an autobiographical project that I would deem acceptable. I don't know if I've made that or not, but that was the intention. I've attempted that in this project.

**AB: How would you describe your hometown?**

**SP:** Galesburg, Illinois – my hometown – is a small town in the midwest, a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Chicago. It's very close to Peoria, of the famous stereotype: "If it plays in Peoria..." You know, that was like the test. So we are supposed to be the median subject for cultural reception in the United States. But even though Galesburg is a small town of 36,000 people, there are a couple of things that render it distinctive. It is the birthplace of [the poet and writer] Carl Sandburg and [painter] Dorothea Tanning. I always thought that those were important coordinates. Starting with that, already I'm not singular. The idea of the biography has tripled. Not to sound like Deleuze and Guattari, but there is something going on with that. I was thinking of Galesburg, Illinois, as a field that contains a variety of different components, and it depends on how I would like to isolate them, and choreograph references to these elements, and put them into a certain kind of motion. That was the originary point.

**AB: There is also a personal anecdote that played a role, is that right?**

# Petzel

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Stephen Prina, *galesburg illinois+* (installation view), Petzel Gallery, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

**SP:** Yes, I formalised it in the show. There are two anecdotes that are actually on the wall as official didactic panels. So, when I was between my undergraduate and graduate work, I went back to Galesburg because I was broke and needed to raise some money. The idea was that I was going to move to California so that I could go to graduate school there. I was working at my brother's supermarket during the day, then donning a tuxedo at night and playing guitar and singing in a band at the Harbor Lights Supper Club.

I did that for about a year. Then I moved to California to attend California Institute for the Arts in 1978. And then, in 1979, I finally scraped enough money together to visit New York for the first time. At that point I thought I had really arrived. But really what I mean to say is that I had separated myself from my past – I had successfully divested myself of that history. I'm in New York, standing in line at the Dance Theatre Workshop for a production commissioned by The Kitchen of a video-opera work-in-progress by Robert Ashley. At the time, the work was entitled *Perfect Lives, Private Parts*. Now it's known as *Private Parts*. I'm standing there with Laurie Anderson, whom I'd known from CalArts, as she had conducted a workshop there for a couple of weeks. I'm thinking, the umbilical cord has been snipped! As an audience, we file into the theatre and the lights go down, and all the video monitors are fired up. This was before video projectors, so there weren't any beamers. So the monitors come on, and on one monitor I see the facade of the Harbor Lights Supper Club from Galesburg, Illinois. I immediately knew how this was going to function symbolically for me. I'm laughing at myself, thinking, well, I guess I will never sufficiently be able to distance myself from my roots. So that was also part of the motor for this exhibition.

**AB:** Was going to California an alternative to New York, assuming New York was the only other option?

**SP:** I was this land-locked kid from a small town in the midwest and I went to a large university near Chicago, which was fantastic. It had a huge art department and a huge music department. I was exposed to many, many things there. That was my luck of the draw. I thought I needed to do an MFA because I knew that my studies had not come to an end. When I was at Northern Illinois University I had started to work in a way that could be identified as coming out of the legacy of conceptual art. I was encouraged to do that by all of my professors, but not one of them worked in that way. I thought that maybe I should put myself in a context where those issues

# Petzel

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were at stake. Maybe I didn't have what it takes to do that. So I did not entertain the fantasy of becoming a beach boy. California didn't have an appeal as such. The attraction was the school, and particularly the teachers there. On the faculty at CalArts at that time were John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler. I thought, how could these two luminaries of conceptual art be at the same school. I didn't realise until I got there that the Michael Asher on the faculty was *the* Michael Asher. The bounty did not stop there, because Baldessari always had his eye out for young artists that he could invite early in their careers to be a visiting teacher. We had Jonathan Borofsky, Barbara Kruger ... that formative point in their careers was a very important thing for me, too. The plan after was to move to New York, of course. At that time, in the 1970s, the "of course" part was not even spoken. Something happened to me while I was in graduate school. We were talking about ideological constructs and I had been exposed to the principles of deconstruction. I thought, isn't it interesting that we're deconstructing everything in our midst except our career strategies? And I thought, why do we always have to do it the same way? One of the things that I recognised as a graduate student was all of the younger artists who were attracted to study with the faculty. At one point, I looked at my peers and thought, these are the people I'm going to be working with for the rest of my life. I forged some very close relationships with those artists and realised that such people were not easy to come by. I didn't want to surrender those relationships. When you meet someone like Christopher Williams and you spend several hours a day talking to him, you don't exactly want to give that up. But I was also broke, and I was offered a teaching job right out of school. It was the perfect storm and I thought I should take advantage of it. I accepted the job thinking that I would teach for a semester, maybe two, and then be exposed for the fraud that I am, having no credentials. I ended up teaching there for 23 years.

**AB: Having had such positive experiences with your own teachers, did you come to teaching feeling as though you would have to offer your students the same?**

**SP:** I think would have been petrified and paralysed if I had thought about it that way. What I do say to my students every semester is that I had some very good models. My teachers had very active, international careers, but they took teaching very, very seriously. I always got the sense that teaching was part of their practice; not something that stood apart from it. I have tried to hold that dear to my heart and my practice. I love doing it. Teaching is such a generative experience for me.

**AB: What sort of research did you carry out for this latest exhibition? Did you feel as though you had to go back to Galesburg and study it?**

**SP:** I went back to Galesburg for a week or two to do some research. I went to Knox College, which is a liberal arts and sciences college. I gained access to its archive, and was working with some of its librarians. They were able to find some materials for me. I didn't really know what the project was going to be at that point. I didn't even know what I was looking for. For instance,

# Petzel

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I knew that, at one point, John Cage had been a visiting artist at this college. But I didn't quite remember the context under which that took place. After doing that research, I found out that the Merce Cunningham Dance Company had been invited to be in residence. David Tutor and Cage came as musicians who provided scores for the dance troupe. But because Cage had a suitably large reputation, he was invited to deliver a lecture. During this time, I was playing guitar in a band at the Taco Hideout Lounge in Galesburg, which was before I started playing at the Harbor Lights club. One night, I suddenly saw all these people come into the bar. I recognised a few of them from what was, at that time, my father's grocery store. Some of them I knew taught at Knox College. A couple of weeks later a woman came up to me in the grocery store and said: "We came to see you perform the other night. Did you see who the person of honour was at that dinner?" I said I hadn't recognised him. She said: "Well, that was John Cage." So they brought him there for enchiladas or something.

**AB: The exhibition's foundations seem to split into two parts. One half is like an archival project, or a study, that you are approaching as a researcher. The other half is based on an extremely personal narrative. I think a lot of people come to your work with the knowledge that it will be very referential, and those references will be external to you, associating to other things. They wouldn't be expecting to find much "you" in it.**



Stephen Prina, *galesburg illinois+* (installation view), Petzel Gallery, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

**SP:** When I talk to people about my aversion to autobiography, a lot of people chime in and say, well, you know, every artwork, in small or large parts, is autobiographical, and I say, yes ... I understand that. With these other works that I have made that are not ostensibly autobiographical, I actually think I'm all over them because of the decisions that I make, and because of the way I choreograph materials and sources. Maybe this is teasing that out in a more explicit way. Or, it could be allure, too, because you know how that functions with viewers – some people will look for that, and they will maybe be extremely frustrated unless they get that. So at one point I thought, well, let me try and offer that, which was almost a decoy for something else. You mentioned the archival work as part of this; it's quite partial. For instance, I was investigating very particular kinds of things, such as the Lincoln-Douglas debates, which took place on the campus of Knox College. It was one of the most important discussions of slavery in



# Petzel

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this country at the time. It's interesting because Abraham Lincoln didn't win that election, but it put him on a national stage that allowed him later on to run for president and be elected. There is a similar contemporary story that resonates with that too, don't you think, with Obama? One of the things that I left out of this project is that Obama has been to Galesburg on more than one occasion, before and during his presidency, to use it as an example of economic decline.

**AB: When people visit an exhibition that is concerned with where an artist has come from – geographically at least – the notion of home is brought to mind. How would you talk about Galesburg in terms of home? Does home play a role in the show?**

**SP:** I would turn the question around. I don't like to predict what a spectator will do with my work, but I can imagine someone knowing about this kind of framework, and walking in and saying: 'What kind of a home is this?' The field that I assemble in the gallery is quite different from a mimetic field of Galesburg, Illinois. So my Galesburg is very different and is built in fragments, albeit quite concrete fragments, such as the six volumes of Lincoln's biography, written by Carl Sandburg, which are included. Here is a terrain that I have deemed to be Galesburg, Illinois.

**AB: When you start making something, do you have an idea of what you want it to look like? I think your most visually compelling work is *As he Remembered It*, and it stands out for its incredible use of colour.**

**SP:** Oh, yes. But I think I focus more on how do I have to make it, and I try to be very specific about the "how". It leads to an aesthetic result that would be very difficult for me to predict. With the *As he Remembered It* project, using the pink paint, that was generated by an anecdote. I remember seeing a piece of built-in furniture by Schindler that had been ripped out of a house that had been painted pink, which was presented as an autonomous commodity. I didn't invent the pink. The pink was a memory. At one point, when I was in the midst of developing this project, I knew that there would be pink included, but I didn't know what kind. I thought, am I just supposed to manufacture a pink from my memory? The "aha" moment came when I was on the phone with Kimberli Meyer, who is the director of the Schindler House in Los Angeles. The house was built for Pauline and Rudolf Schindler to occupy. They then got divorced and though they lived in the house together, they arranged to never see each other. They would leave messages for each other in the kitchen. She painted her half of the house pink. Some people read that as being feminist retribution against her husband. Other people read it as ... well, it's a beautiful house, but it is not easy to live in. Schindler was a little optimistic about the climate in Los Angeles. All of the bedrooms had sleeping porches. Well, people were freezing to death, sleeping on these porches. So anyway, I was talking to Kimberli about this, and she said: "I've been working in this building for 10 years now and do you know how many times my staff and I have got together and huddled around a space heater? So this is Pauline trying to make things a

# Petzel

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bit cosy. But in the late 70s when they renovated the house, they had to try to remove all of that pink. They couldn't remove every last trace, so Kimberli asked if I wanted to go over and look at it. At that moment I thought, no, I didn't want to do that, because it wasn't about that. That's where the luck of historical exigency happens, because the Pantone colour of the year happened to be Honeysuckle pink. So culture at large, if we want to see Pantone as part of culture at large, selected pink for me. I then used that colour. It spins outwards from the anecdote.

**AB: Earlier on you mentioned playing in bands when you were younger, and you have pursued musical projects aside from your artistic practice over the course of your career. But music is a part of this as well, now.**

**SP:** I also made visual art when I was young. There were times when one would be emphasised over the other. When I was a teenager, all I wanted to do was be in a rock'n'roll band. Even now, there will be moments when I will focus on a music project, and it will be very complicated having to organise all of these scores and musicians, and I'll finish it thinking that I really don't want to do any more of that right now. So then I'll almost self-consciously focus my attention elsewhere. For a long time, I kept the works quite separate. Even within my visual art practice I thought that I wanted to dig my heels in and establish the parameters of what, for example, a photo project could be, or what a drawing or painting project could be. I wanted to keep these things quite separate. I didn't want to make hybrids per se. It was the same with the music. Then I came in contact with the book *In Search of Wagner* by Theodor Adorno, and that very clearly articulates the tendency towards the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the total artwork. Adorno very well articulated my inchoate thoughts. That was something that I followed in my practice for some time. It wasn't until 2000 when I was commissioned to make an artwork for the Getty Museum, I told them I would like to make a music film, and that was the first project where there was this full integration of the visual and the musical.

**AB: There is a music component in this exhibition, with your album *Ode to Galesburg* being played in the gallery.**

**SP:** Yes, by the time I got to this show I realised very early on in its conception that there was the potential for a music component. I wondered what it could and should be. It took me a while to follow that thread.

• *Stephen Prina's exhibition galesburg, illinois+ is at Petzel Gallery, New York until 18 June.*

<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/stephen-prina-interview-galesburg-illinois>