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Rene Ricard

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Rene Ricard, *Eros*, 2008 - 2009. Acrylic, charcoal, Conte crayon, and oil on canvas, 48 x 26 inches. © Estate of Rene Ricard; Courtesy Vito Schnabel Gallery

I feel fortunate to have briefly shared New York with Rene Ricard, despite not having met him before his death in 2014. The longer I live here, immersed in the city's cultural ongoings, the more reverence I feel for those who shaped the creative landscape far before I ever imagined participating in it myself. For Ricard, the legendary assortment of vibrant, unforgettable personalities he was surrounded by working out of Andy Warhol's Factory as a young man no doubt proved formative. After all, it's hard to deny that the poet's magnetism, charm and wit are the stuff of New York myth. His writing on art and culture was imbued with an infectious wonderment (once wielded in a 1981 *Artforum* essay in support of a then-barely known Jean-Michel Basquiat), and his role as a catalyst for originality and creativity made him a pillar in the many intellectual circles he frequented.

At Vito Schnabel Gallery's exhibition "Growing up in America," nearly 40 works Ricard produced between 1989 and 2014 are evidence of the enduring, intoxicating effect of his persona. Ricard began producing visual art in the late 1980s after working for decades as a poet and writer. His compositions are usually centered on original texts—anything from a brief phrase to a few sentences—that he rendered in longhand over appropriated imagery or color fields. One work, *With Flower* (2014), consists of a rug emblazoned with the words, "You're stepping all over me."

Ricard, who moved to New York at 18, certainly grasped the importance of a well-honed sense of humor—arguably the most vital asset for anyone attempting to make their name in this city without inherited wealth or a lucrative occupation. A deadpan, matter-of-fact approach to provocative sentiments—like that in 2012's *Untitled (Blow jobs...)*, which reads, "blow jobs 5 ¢ w/ lipstick 25 ¢"—attest that he's in on the joke. Of course, Ricard must have also understood how releasing one's internalized pain in the form of scathing, darkly humorous exploits is a way to avoid watching it drive people away, a vital lesson when the company of others is the only respite to be found.

The smallest piece on view, *Hold Me the Forgotten Way* (2009) stopped me in my tracks. Reading "please hold me the forgotten way," the text is superimposed on a 19th-century medical illustration depicting a human's nervous system after being isolated from a cadaver. The grotesqueness of the visual, combined with the plea, so vulnerable and meek—all while a pair of gaping eyeballs stare out from a blank void where the rest of a face should be—make for a tragic-comic scene indeed.

Still, most pieces, with lettering expressed in bold, confident strokes, bring to light Ricard's urge to make sense of unknowns—and conferring explanations that feel both wide eyed and morbid. In any case, it would have wasted precious mental real estate to ever dwell on regrets or loneliness. "A beautiful life cannot be a waking life," he etched in cursive over a work from 2011. Made the same year, *Untitled (don't do it...)* offers this reassurance, unfolding on the canvas in a downward zig-zag pattern: "don't don't don't worry we'll soon know nothing about it at all." —Rachel Small