

Rob Pruitt's "Pattern and Degradation," at Gavin Brown's enterprise and Maccarone, New York

Sep 11 – Oct 23, 2010

Rob Pruitt's joint exhibition at Gavin Brown's enterprise and Maccarone, "Pattern and Degradation," presses a few of my buttons. Even before stepping into the gallery I had some concerns—the notion of filling over 8,200 square feet with two years of new work without compromising quality seems a stretch, so naturally the show's theme is about excess. According to the press release, the work is informed by the Amish tradition of Rumspringa, a two year rite of passage in which Amish teenagers are allowed to indulge in all the excesses of modern life before returning to a more modest existence. Pruitt's exhibition posits a world in which he lives in a "Permanent Rumspringa," a concept that sounds suspiciously like a marketing ploy to explain over-production.

Seeing as how only two rooms of eight directly deal with Amish culture, there's not much reason to think otherwise even if indulging in contemporary excess is likely to occasionally exclude a lot of the religion. At the far end of Gavin Brown, rows of both modernist and traditional Amish chairs coated in silver weakly gesture to the religion, as do a number of large patterned paintings referencing traditional Amish quilting. The basic gist of these pieces seems to be "What if my tablecloth could be large and bold enough to create optical vibrations?"

As one might imagine, there's a fair amount of art exhibited that appears to have no other purpose than to be sold. This is particularly true at Gavin Brown, the weaker arm of the exhibition. A room full of exposed, stretched linen provides a surface for illustrative renderings of "Rob Pruitt" t-shirts. The same shirts hang just inside the office, only they can be worn and aren't nearly so pricey. Add to this, the artist's inbox printed out and affixed to the wall, a giant grid of faces and names drawn from his Facebook profile (at Maccarone), and his goofy Warholian self-portrait paintings—these works are characterized by gratuitous self-absorption: a problem the theme of excess is meant to excuse.

I don't buy it. Still, even if half of the exhibition is likely to grate on your nerves, Pruitt's formidable skill as an art maker shines in other parts of the show. In one gallery at Gavin Brown, the artist hangs two large glitter panda bear paintings, a giant tire painting, and towers of different tires with their patterned treads painted white. The black-and-white room overwhelms the viewer with its dizzying patterns. Inside many of the tire baptismal structures are piles of candy or fake plants. Excess is its own right of passage.

Presumably the Internet is its own form of excess: a wall covered in images from Hitlercats.com matches up with the artist's affinity for the black eye patches of panda bears. A portrait of Pruitt wearing Mickey Mouse ears and Jeffrey Deitch signature glasses hangs over the cat wallpaper. It's unclear what this means, though I'm inclined to read narrative into the work. Is this a criticism of Deitch's well-known interest in manufacturing celebrities from art? Certainly the new MoCA Director's decision to replace a show by Jack Goldstein with that of the late actor Dennis Hopper suggests as much.

Undoubtedly, the strongest work in the show makes no such commentary. It is a room full of humanoids, their square bodies made of compressed cardboard and supported by six or more log-like legs graced with various footwear. Mechanized googly eyes roll slowly, and though each figure is only given a first name—Gavin (Brown), Hope (Atherton), Jonathan (Horowitz)—it's easy to personify the sculptures. Gavin wears the work boots you'd expect him to, given the holes artists have dug into his gallery (though he's mysteriously small). High heels and coiffed cardboard seem in line with Hope's general appearance. Ex-boyfriend Jonathan Horowitz gets slapped with a dunce cap.

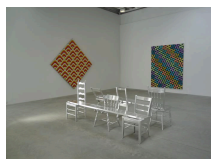
What this has to do with Amish adolescent Rumspringa is anyone's guess, but it doesn't matter. In this show, Pruitt's greatest successes are those that don't fit within a sound-bite thesis.

—Paddy Johnson

Paddy Johnson is the founding editor of the New York based blog [Art Fag City](#). She also maintains a weekly column at the *L Magazine* by the same name, and lectures at universities across the United States.



1. Rob Pruitt, *Mickey Mouse*, 2010.



2. View of "Rob Pruitt: Pattern and Degradation," 2010.



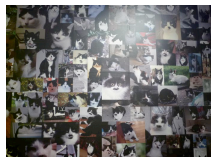
3. Rob Pruitt, *Rob Pruitt's T-Shirt Collection: Classic White*, 2010.



4. View of "Rob Pruitt: Pattern and Degradation," 2010.



5. Rob Pruitt, *Tire (detail)*, 2010



6. Rob Pruitt, *Kitler's*, 2010.



7. Rob Pruitt, *Cardboard Monsters*, 2010.

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