

## Multiples and Me *by Rob Pruitt*

The multiples project that I've created for *ArtReview* is based on some big colourful paintings that I've been making which are gradient colour fields with a rapid sketch of a face overlaid on them. I was thinking about a couple of different things when I started making these. The first thing I was thinking about was when I was a kid. My father, a really loving man and a great father, tried to get me to play sports with him in the back yard, and I did that, but it wasn't really what I wanted to do. What I really wanted to do was to be taken to the art museums. We lived just outside of Washington, DC, and my father had no idea what art even was, but he would take me to the museums even at eight or nine years old, and I would stand in front of Mark Rothko paintings and just be over the moon about them. He would make jokes like: "Wouldn't this be a little bit better if the artist had drawn a face over it?" Then he would gesture with his hands: two eyes and a mouth. I guess all these years later I still associate that with love and attention.

Fast-forward to two years ago in my studio, where I was thinking that for many years a lot of my work had lots of pop-cultural, and so personal, content. I had a slight inclination to move away from that, so I began to revisit, through books and the Internet, the minimalist art period and things that tend to have less content. I was thinking about what my interest in that direction would be, and these paintings evolved, informed by my remembrances of my father. I was thinking about how I could get the most impact with the least amount of information. How one static image can elicit an extreme emotional response and, more specifically, how I could make a very simple face and instil it with emotion: sorrow, feeling love, excitement, envy.

There's a little bit of colour symbolism involved in the process. There are shifts from culture to culture: red means one thing in Spain and another thing in America during the elections, and in China it is associated with joy and luck. But I like to think about the Internet and global associations with blocks of colours: the blues and blue-greens are earthy and natural, and the other end of the spectrum, red, orange and yellow, is fiery and passionate. So I just use this rudimentary colour system to express emotions without using drawing expertise. It's almost as if you were to make a drawing of a face as you were dozing off to sleep, in semiconsciousness. That's how I like to think about making the drawings and the expressions: so they're not too specific. I think that in their

nonspecificity, a large audience can find someone they know, or themselves, in the faces.

It's so fun to watch them accumulate: I make them really small before I make them really big. So there are many, many more of the small ones than there are of the big ones. I haven't shown the small ones, but I'm amassing so many. First it was a group, and then it was a chorus, and now it's emerging as, like, a population. I have maybe a couple hundred of them, and it's really exciting to see the population of these spaces all on one wall.

I've made a couple of projects that have a DIY theme, such as *101 Art Ideas You Can Do Yourself* (1999), and a lot of this goes back to my parents. When I was a kid they didn't have much money, so almost every aspect of our life was kind of DIY, from my mother's decorating of the house to holiday meals and how to get close to something that might be gourmet but for \$7. So I think that's totally ingrained in me.

This even influences the line I recently made with Jimmy Choo. Of course Jimmy Choo is a luxury brand, but we are in the middle of the deepest recession ever, probably, both in America and globally. So even though it's a luxury brand, I think that the line that I did for Jimmy Choo looks pretty cheap. The shoes I made look like shoes that you could probably get from Payless. Of course, being Jimmy Choo they're exquisitely crafted from the best materials, but I have a way of making anything and everything look cheap! I suppose the direction that I really took was the roleplaying that one can engage in when one is shopping for new clothes, and what happens when someone slips into something that is brand new. That roleplaying can be anything from sexual to aspirational. If you're an attendant at the counter at the airport, you might aspire to be the pilot, so I was thinking about that, roleplaying. When you get dressed up, you don't always dress for whatever station you occupy in life.

In my recent show *History of the World* at Kunstverein Freiburg, I showed paintings of hoarders' homes with dinosaur sculptures. Upstairs was a working thrift store. I had become engaged with several television shows that had popped up in the past year or two about people with a psychological disorder that compels them to shop endlessly. So their homes are no longer able to function as proper living environments because they're so filled with crap. *Hoarding: Buried Alive* is the show I'm most familiar with, but I think there are several clones. It's very depressing. Usually the format of these shows is to

introduce you to the person, and then show you their living environment, and then they bring in a therapist, who tries to help the person. All of this is done, because of the nature of producing a television show, in a matter of about four days. And then they bring in a specialist in organising, which I think is a new kind of career in the last ten years. You can hire a personal organiser, and they try to solve what looks, to me and probably to everyone else, like a problem that has evolved and escalated over maybe a 10- or 20-year period, and they try to cure this person in three days. In the final scene, after lots of arguing and lots of tears, you just see a house that resembles what we expect a regular domestic environment to be. Still, it's very unsettling.

I guess I'm more interested in a more mild compulsion to collect, and how a lot of us do that to define ourselves. You know, the act of going into a clothing store or a big department store and making our selections can be a creative act. A real form of self-expression. When I thought about making the paintings for the *History of the World* show, I was thinking as I looked at the stills from the television shows that the personalities of the people who amassed each particular collection were somehow revealed. It was a big pile of junk, but also like an abstract painting. I think that within the pile you can discern a mood and personality trait. So they're really portraits in a way. They're portraits of individuals, but they're also portraits of a culture in decline. The end of the Roman Empire, somehow: a gluttonous civilisation.

I knew that the paintings, like the TV show, would elicit some feelings of superiority in the viewers: 'Oh, I would never be like that' or 'Those poor people with their terrible mental problem.' So by creating a thrift store upstairs, I wanted to dangle a carrot that would get them to engage in the same activity that had spiralled out of control in the paintings, so that they would be a little bit more sensitive to the problem.

Fifteen years ago I started to organise artist flea-markets. To be honest about the origins of that project, I just had a little bit of a desire to curate a group show but really wanted to devise my own distinct way of doing it. I had always been fascinated with shopping and going to secondhand stores and thrift stores, flea markets and garage sales. Just to see the wear-and-tear of prior ownership, and then to see the way things get displayed when they're not in something like a chain shop. Flea markets are generally staffed with lots of volunteers, and the little arranged displays made by nonprofessionals are often completely enchanting and artistic.

So I was thinking about how I would organise a group show. I had a list of names of artist friends and artists that I admired, and I didn't really see any common thread. It didn't feel right to place some kind of philosophical idea over all of these disparate artists. So as I often do, even with my paintings and sculptures, I just turned to the day-to-day real world, as opposed to something that might be more familiar in a gallery space. A lightbulb went on over my head and I thought: I can just give everybody the same size table and invite them to do whatever they like on it. The flea market became really

inspiring, because it worked out so well: it was such a beautiful environment. Usually an artist hangs their work on the wall, and then they leave and the viewer just encounters it in solitude. This really was so performative – I mean, you could walk through the rows of tables and engage with each artist, and haggle over prices, and hear a little story about each thing that was being sold. It was so wet with human emotion and interaction.

But it's a marketplace, too, and that element of the artworld was also really interesting to me. A thought I had when I first started making art was that the artist, like the storybook alchemist, can spin straw into gold. That idea held real fascination for me, and it was something that I wanted to be involved in and be a part of. Then, one step further, there's the issue of capitalism in general and how the art market works within that. On the one hand everyone is aware of recent auction prices, but you can walk into any of the best galleries across the globe, and the prices are not posted. There's this extreme discretion, which is very Victorian, but then the flipside of that is boasting about how much things are going for. When those issues creep into my work, as in the flea market, it just has to do with making a full disclosure. It's fine to think that something has extreme value: let's just be open about that.

When I was in my early twenties I worked for a famous gallery called Sonnabend, and so many of the best living artists showed there. I was helping the owner, Ileana Sonnabend, sort through one of the storage areas one day. We came across all of these paintings by Robert Petersen, and I could have the details wrong, because it's been more than 20 years, but I asked her what they were. She said, "Oh, he was a very pleasant young artist that I gave a show to because he was Robert Rauschenberg's boyfriend." Then she went on to say: "We'll just keep them here, but they really have no value." This was a life-changing experience for me. They were occupying the same amount of space in the storage area as things that had tremendous value. There were all these questions that were so big for me at that moment that I couldn't even begin to answer them. I was overwhelmed with a sadness, and then an egotism. I probably really thought, 'Oh, gosh, I don't want a story like that to ever be told about me.'

Rob Pruitt's Autograph Collection 1993–2012 is on show at Luxembourg & Dayan, London, until 15 December

## Rob Pruitt's Face Paintings *Do-it-yourself editions*

I love minimalism, and I also love melodrama. So with my face paintings, I combined the two. First I make a shifting colour, gradient backdrop - colour is one of the best ways to express emotion - and then I draw a face. Sometimes the lines of the face are steady and bold, sometimes they skip and falter. I just go with my emotions, which are always changing. What results, whether the simple lines of a smiling face over a pastel blush, or a sorrowful cry dashed over a range of fiery reds, really paints a story, not just a picture.

Now I invite you to take a Sharpie and try your hand at making a face painting. To get you started, I've drawn a face on the first of five provided gradient backdrops. It's an expression of pause, perhaps on the verge of a confession. I thought the violet-to-aqua fade seemed to say, 'I've got something I need to tell you.'

So have no fear, and draw what you feel. I think you'll find that a smiley face or a frowning face can speak way more than words.

- Rob Pruitt