

## Rob Pruitt's Smiley Faces Will Make You Cry

BY *Robin Cembalest* POSTED 12/07/13

The bittersweet backstory of the happy faces at de la Cruz collection



It seems like a laugh fest of good vibes when you ascend to the third floor of Miami's [de la Cruz collection](#), where hundreds of [Rob Pruitt](#)'s candy-colored panels display scribbled faces that look happy, content, or at least bemused.

The first hint that these cheerful visages are not what they seem is that they are paired with elegiac works by [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#) that chronicle the loss of his father and his lover. These are one reason, Rosa de la Cruz explained, that Pruitt, best known for his [pop-culture content](#), was inspired to mine some bittersweet moments of his own life for subject matter.

When Pruitt was growing up, it became clear that he was different from other kids, preferring art to sports.

His father reached out and took him to museums, the artist writes in the collection's brochure, "despite his having no idea what art even was. We would stand in front of Mark Rothko paintings and while I would just be over the moon about them, he would make jokes like: 'Wouldn't this be a little better if the artists had drawn a face over it?' Then he would scribble in the air with an imaginary magic marker: two eyes and a mouth. All these years I still associate those moments with love and attention..."

Although the paintings seem to consist of a simple equation of color symbolism and quick, gestural drawings of facial expressions, ideally they communicate a deeper spectrum of emotion: sorry, lovelorn, excitement, envy."

Also on view: [Panda Erasers \(Spectrum\)](#), a montage the artist made last year with tires and of tiny erasers shaped like pandas. A recurring image in the artist's work, the bears are also inspired by moments in his childhood: [visits](#) to the National Zoo.

Copyright 2014, ARTnews LLC, 48 West 38th Street, New York, N.Y. 10018. All rights reserved.