

DETROIT

## Rob Pruitt

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Painting one portrait of Barack Obama for each day of his tenure as president of the United States—for a total of 2,922 pictures by the time Obama leaves office—Rob Pruitt is making a “monument . . . about the entire presidency.” Each day, Pruitt browses online news sites in search of images of the president, and then, when he has settled on one picture, loosely brushes its contours with white paint onto a ready-made two-foot-square canvas primed with bands of red and blue pigment. The Museum of Contemporary Art hung as many of the paintings as its gallery walls could reasonably accommodate (Pruitt has executed more than two thousand); they abutted one another like Warholian wallpaper, leaving no space between. Leftovers and paintings that were made after the exhibition’s opening were propped against one another in a bank of shelving designed for the installation; one could peruse these plastic-sheathed canvases as one would a selection of books or vinyl records. The quantity of pictures and the obsessiveness of Pruitt’s enterprise made for a visually impressive exhibition. Yet, as is especially evident in comparison with the similarly temporal practice recently celebrated in the stunning On Kawara retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, *The Obama Paintings*, 2009–17, is unapologetically uncritical. At best, it allows us to grapple with the ways in which image, narrative, and truth are entwined, but this is hardly a novel conceit nearly fifty years on from Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*.

By copying thousands of pictures of Obama and presenting them in aggregate, in a space devoted to visual contemplation and analysis, Pruitt has made a monument to the *image* of the presidency. He gathers his source material from the limited number of images photojournalists have been allowed to capture and from official White House press photos, made available for media use through its Flickr feed: photo ops with world leaders; the president at meetings, shaking hands, golfing, playing basketball, throwing out the first pitch; and so on. As one isolated individual paintings from the installation’s anachronistic grids, themes began to appear. We’ve seen these images before (even if we haven’t, really). Some are profound: a low-angle picture of the president dwarfed by the portrait of Abraham Lincoln before which he stands. Others are sweet: A boy pats Obama on the head in the Oval Office. But many are so banal that they approach the status of stock

photographs: The president gives a speech; he walks across the White House lawn; the First Family boards Air Force One; Obama uses the telephone; he golfs (again). These images (ostensibly of nothing) are the most compelling pictures.

*The Obama Paintings* shows us a cross section of the photographed activities of the presidency, but its assembly also makes clear to what extent the depiction of that office is manicured (some might say sanitized) for our consumption. (The strongest aspect of the show was the curatorial decision to make all the surplus images available to handle.) In seeing these images en masse and slightly abstracted by Pruitt’s brush, their monotony comes to the fore. The consistent use of white pigment, the uniform canvas shape, and the installation design reinforce this effect, and the cumulative uniformity of images gave this viewer pause. Indeed, in 2011, it was revealed that an image of the president addressing the nation had actually been restaged, taken after the fact by a photojournalist who had not been allowed to shoot while Obama spoke. And in 2013, news organizations protested when members of the White House photography pool were barred from covering certain events, only to have the White House release its own photographic documentation—no need for the press to verify what had occurred. Had these (and other) insidious efforts to manipulate the American public’s view of its leadership been more explicitly addressed, Pruitt’s project might have informed, rather than simply reaffirmed, what we know about our president.

—Jeffrey Saletnik

Rob Pruitt, *The Obama Paintings*, 2009–17, acrylic on 2,922 canvases (when completed). Installation view, 2015. Photo: Corine Vermeulen.

