

# Painting the President: Rob Pruitt's Daily Obama Portraits

BY SCOTT INDRISEK, MODERN PAINTERS | MAY 16, 2015



Details of Rob Pruitt's "Obama Paintings."  
(Mark Woods and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York)

"I didn't want to be reverting to my teenage self, when I would keep scrapbooks of whichever rock stars were the cutest. I didn't want it to be about fandom," says Rob Pruitt, who — since the morning after Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009 — has completed a two-foot-square portrait of the president each day, based on photographs culled from Google. When I interview the artist about the works in late February, they're installed in a chockablock grid on the walls of a private ground-floor gallery in the East Harlem home of dealer Gavin Brown. From May 15 through August 2, more than 2,000 of the paintings will be showcased at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (Pruitt will continue his daily practice through the remainder of Obama's second term). "Since I've never had the discipline to go to the gym," he says, "this is a ritual I've fallen into. It's very meditative."

To create the works, Pruitt first prepares a slew of store-bought canvases by giving them all the same gradient background — a subdued riff on the colors of the American flag. (The subtle palette gives the paintings more the appearance of a memory than a logo, he says.) Pruitt wakes up and scours the Internet for the most recent images of Obama, ranging from those taken at speeches and press conferences to more candid moments; once he selects one, he makes it into a transparency, projected on canvas and rendered in white paint. "Sometimes, I can separate myself from the subject matter," he says. "It's just about the beauty of the line and making it look like a pleasing image." Hung together, the portraits create an imposing whole. "I was thinking of the history of monuments," Pruitt says, noting that the gridded installation "approximates the veining and undulating waves in marble."

Without suggesting a direct equivalency, Pruitt explains that he thinks of both a consistent painting regimen and the presidency as being akin to endurance performance art: "I never missed a day, just as he doesn't miss a day." And how does Pruitt think Obama himself might react if he strolled into MOCAD and found himself confronted with several walls bearing his own image? "I think he'd say, 'My goodness, that's one very talented high school student with a lot of time on his hands!'"