

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

A Painting for Every Day of Obama's Presidency

by [PD Rearick](#) on May 25, 2015



Installation view, 'Rob Pruitt: The Obama Paintings and the Lincoln Monument' at MOCAD (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — Entering the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) for [Rob Pruitt's new exhibition](#), the viewer is enticed immediately by a meticulous grid of President Obama-themed, patriotic-colored paintings. The entire elevation view is taken up by a solid network of red, white, and blue gradient canvases, which are random in orientation but collectively become massive in scale: quilt-like wallpaper in relief. Yet the allure of shiny objects tends to steal people's attention, and in this case that happens to be an installation of money. "The Lincoln Monument," which rests before the exhibition's title wall, is a four-tiered, copper-colored stack of tires with an overflow of pennies covering each layer. While initially it might look like a wishing well, or just an exaggerated heap of coins, there is a slight resemblance to the Lincoln Memorial, represented on the verso side of the penny. The tire layers nearly become classical architecture, the treads, the colonnade. The human scale of the piece makes it humorous and approachable, creating a desire to add a contribution to the pile.

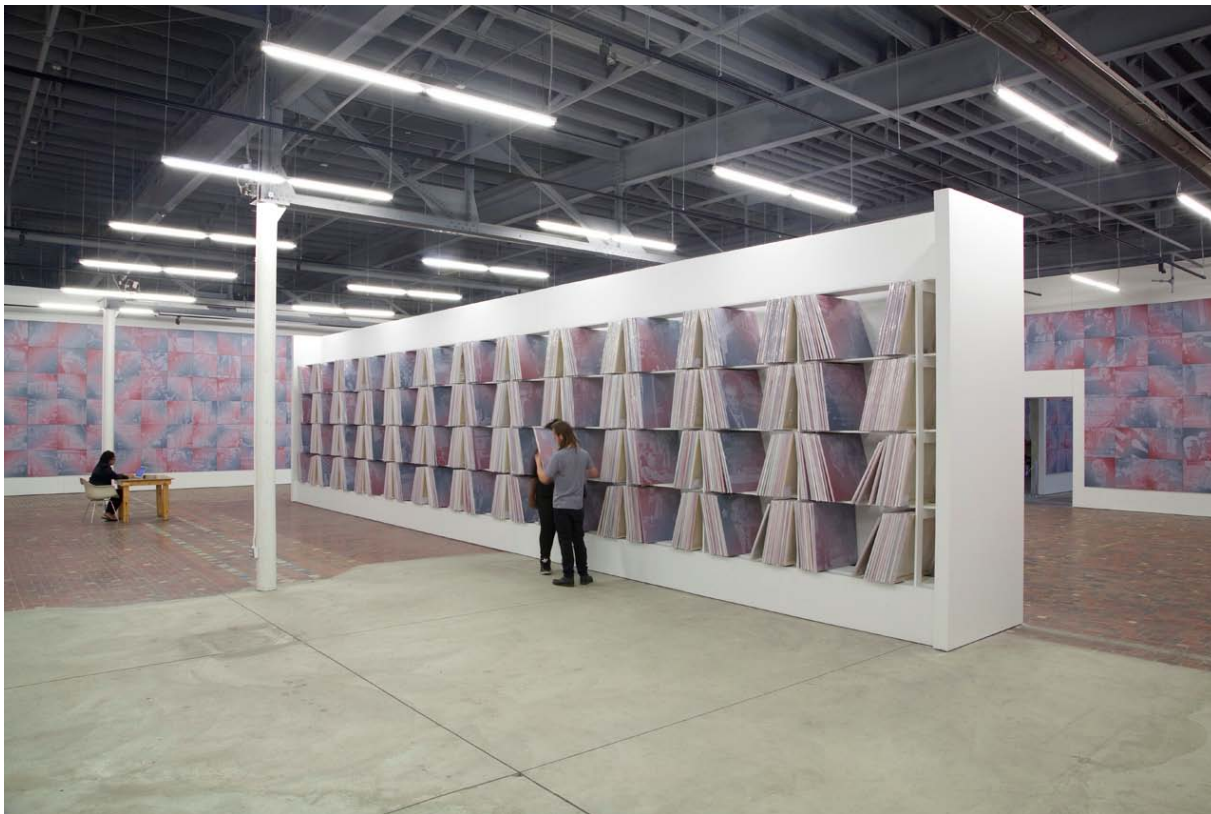


Detail of Rob Pruitt's 'The Obama Paintings' (2009–2015), acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24" each (click to enlarge)

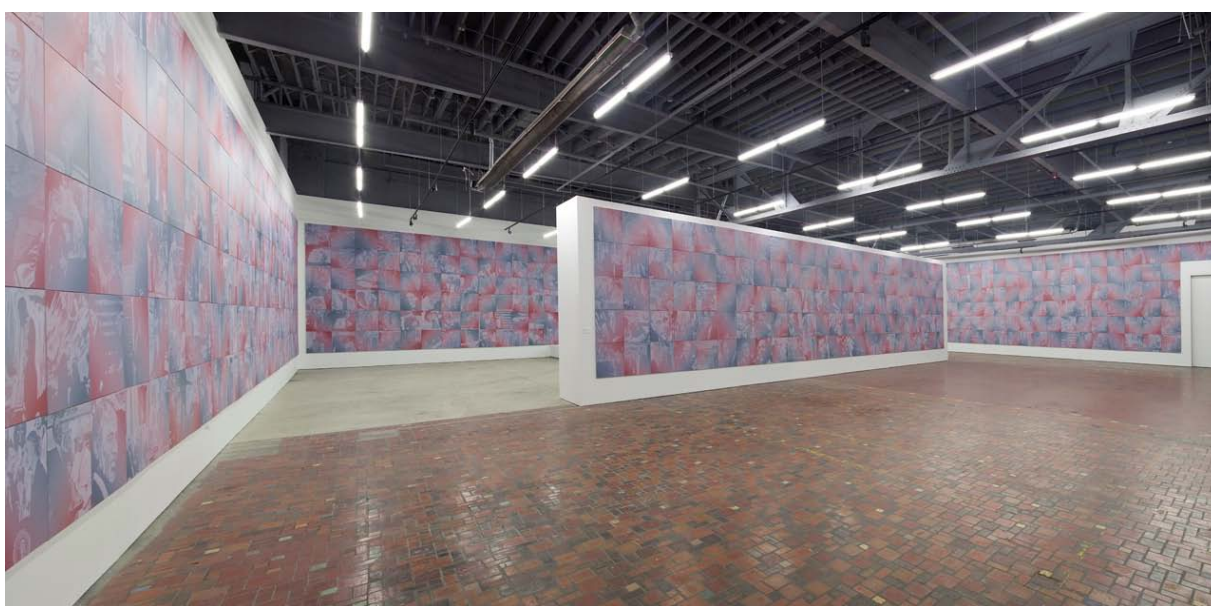
Only after seeing this sculptural work does the awesome breadth of Pruitt's painted grid become obvious. The museum corridor opens up to reveal a staggering number of 2'-by-2' canvases covering the entire perimeter wall space and into an overflow shelving system. Pruitt has made one painting based on President Obama's public appearances for every day he has been in office, the images sourced from media stills and rendered on canvases. By opening night, May 15, there were 2,307 finished works. Each piece is square with a diagonal gradient of blue that meets an opposite gradient of red in the middle. The gestural white brushstrokes that define Obama are cheerful silhouettes of surprising transparency and depth against the colored backdrop. The vast display is hypnotic to stand before and cinematic to walk past. The exhibition is not hung in chronological order — appropriate, since the repetitive handshakes, waves, and smiles from the President are occurrences that could happen on any given day. The museum experience is to be immersed in an oversize game of Memory, a cataloging of events

rather than the construction of an official presidential portrait.

A surplus wall in the middle of the space functions like a slide carousel or a bin for record covers, the paintings lined up like books on shelves with only end pieces visible. While this presentation hides most of the Obama-themed subject matter, the color variation of the canvas edges reveals gradations tapering off in different areas, highlighting the individuality of each piece. Though the viewer can guess at the content, the installation piques his curiosity, since this is the one area where surprises may be concealed among the stacks; there are, however, no guest privileges to flip through and investigate.



MOCAD staff inventories new paintings to add to the collection wall.



Entry view into the main gallery space (click to enlarge)