

STYLE

The Artist Rob Pruitt: Paradox on a Pedestal

By DAVID COLMAN MAY 13, 2015

The twice-yearly opening at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center, a private museum in Greenwich, Conn., founded by the newsprint magnate Peter M. Brant, never fails to draw a fashionable art crowd.

They come up for the afternoon, taking in exhibitions of in-crowd artists like Nate Lowman and Dan Colen before adjourning to a barbecue buffet in a white tent alongside a polo field.

Last Sunday's opening was no different, picking up some extra glamour by serving as an unofficial kickoff to this week's melee of art galas, auctions and the Frieze New York art fair, the third edition of which opens on Thursday.

But in some respects, Sunday's opening, of the work of the New York artist Rob Pruitt, was different. For one thing, Mr. Pruitt decided to make the occasion extra festive by combining it with his birthday. He even titled the exhibition "Rob Pruitt 50th Birthday Bash."

For another, what greeted guests was not the artist's familiar panda paintings, but a flea market: designer shoes and clothing culled from the closet of the '90s supermodel (and Mr. Brant's wife) Stephanie Seymour as well as housewares, stuffed animals, a Vespa and a rack from Mr. Brant's own closet, including three pieces of monogrammed leather Asprey luggage, from \$300 to \$500.

And just like the art at Frieze, it was all for sale. It was a sight to behold, with well-heeled attendees pawing through goods like game-show contestants.

Though Mr. Pruitt had other works on display, including a cheeky fountain made of cases of Evian water, the flea market may have best captured the mixture

of daring, curiosity, perversity and innocence that has made Mr. Pruitt into one of the art world's most popular provocateurs over the last 15 years.

He is certainly one of its most media savvy, with appearances just the last month in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Independent*, *Style.com* and *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*.

And while he has struggled with institutional approval — having never been in the Whitney Biennial as a young artist, and yet having a serious survey at a major museum — he is certainly having a moment now.

Another of his flea-market exhibitions opened this month at the 56th Venice Biennale. And a new show, featuring nearly 2,300 paintings of President Obama, one for every day since he took office, opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit on Friday.

Lately, critical response has been swinging his way. Last October, in reviewing his most recent solo show in New York, the *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith said it was “possibly the best of his career,” delivering “engrossing, weirdly thought-provoking visual experiences.”

The adulation does not seem to be going to his head. In Greenwich, dressed casually in a striped green polo shirt and white pants, he moved a bit awkwardly through the crowd, saying hi to friends and shyly accepting congratulations from strangers.

“I set up a couple of things to deflect the stress of being judged by calling it a birthday party, and having a tag sale, so I didn't feel like I was hanging my soul on the wall,” Mr. Pruitt said after. “But I'm not savoring any moment, that's for sure. That's just not the kind of person I am. I'm just happy to get back to work.”

Operating both inside and outside the art world, Mr. Pruitt has been able to embrace a peculiar irony that is omnipresent in the art world today: the paradox of a crass, hypervalued luxury market for the world's super rich, wedded to a left-leaning ideology that sees art as a public good for the common folk, reminiscent of the uneasy marriage of Hubbell Gardiner and Katie Morosky in “*The Way We Were*.”

Consider this: The 2015 Venice Biennale, which opened last week, features public readings of all three volumes of Karl Marx's 1867 magnum opus, “*Das Kapital*.” And this week, at Christie's in New York, Picasso's “*Les Femmes d'Alger (Version 'O')*” from 1955, went for \$179.4 million (including fees), becoming the most expensive artwork ever sold at auction.

In this curious art world of limousine liberalism, Mr. Pruitt is happy to play

chauffeur, more interested in reflecting modern culture than critiquing it.

He made this crystal clear in 1998, when, for a group show at the artist Jennifer Bornstein's loft in Chelsea, he made what is now an art-world legend: two narrow eight-foot panels of mirror, with a 16-foot line of cocaine running down the middle. "Cocaine Buffet," as it was called, didn't last long in this state, and more than 15 years later, it is still one of the most provocative works in the genre of so-called relational aesthetics.

Rather than denying that art and consumerism shared any border, Mr. Pruitt just bulldozed the wall between. The next year, he inaugurated his flea-market concept for a group show that he curated at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, telling a handful of artists they could fill a table with whatever they wanted. He has since held flea markets of his own stuff in other locales, including regular sales on eBay.

"With some people, there's a sense of denial about the context we find ourselves in of extreme luxury goods, or denial that capitalism has embraced every aspect of creative endeavor," said Gavin Brown, Mr. Pruitt's dealer (and the buyer of that Asprey luggage). "And some artists try to pretend they're not part of that, and cloak themselves in radicality, but Rob really is a radical, partly because he doesn't do that."

Indeed, Mr. Pruitt's first show with Mr. Brown, in 1999, was called "101 Art Ideas You Can Do Yourself," a nod to his stint at Martha Stewart Living magazine. What makes Mr. Pruitt's work so engaging is not that he distances himself from consumerism, but that he acknowledges his own very human, very American place in it.

A longtime fan of yard and estate sales, Mr. Pruitt took his art one step further in 2002 when he and his partner, the artist Jonathan Horowitz, bought an 11-bedroom Victorian house in Fleischmanns, N.Y., painted the exterior coal-black and decorated the interior à la Warhol-meets-Addams-Family — all for less than \$150,000 — as an art project that they sold two years later for twice that amount.

His aesthetic forebears like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Richard Prince posited themselves as fabricators of culture rather than consumers. Andy Stillpass, a well-known contemporary art collector, said he remembers meeting Mr. Pruitt at his first show at Gavin Brown in the late 1990s and being impressed with Mr. Pruitt's fresh outlook.

"All the political correctness and media critique — this idea of a society of spectacle that you were supposed to detach from — got really boring," Mr.

Stillpass said. “Certain artists like Jack Pierson and Karen Kilimnik and Rob accepted that world of illusions as real. They weren’t out to deflate them.”

As his star grew, along with the sales of his panda paintings, Mr. Pruitt continued to churn out ideas, a mere handful of which are on view in the Brant Foundation, including a kick-line of concrete-filled jeans that evokes both the Rockettes and a dinosaur skeleton, and a half-dozen candy-striped portraits assembled 1950s-Identi-kit style.

And with his customary blithe enthusiasm, he has torn down other walls. In 2009, he started the Rob Pruitt Art Awards, an Oscars-style ceremony complete with honest-to-God categories for the year’s best artists and exhibitions, art-star presenters and scripted jokes (full disclosure: some of which were written by me). He created a chromed monument to Andy Warhol in Union Square for the Public Art Fund, designed shoes for Jimmy Choo, had a book signing in the nude at the Karma bookstore and made wallpaper out of web “Kitlers,” or cats that look like Hitler. The list goes on.

But as socially engaged and engaging as his art is, Mr. Pruitt is invariably more at ease under the fluorescent lights of his Gowanus Canal studio in Brooklyn than around party photographers or art critics’ notepads.

“That’s why I wanted to make this a 50th birthday bash,” Mr. Pruitt said on Sunday at the opening, where guests drank Champagne and ate roasted pork. “I love to embrace these conventions of actual life. I don’t want to make operas. I am more interested in ‘Star Trek’ conventions. So instead of having this be just a retrospective, which is usually tied to age anyway, I decided to make it more of a birthday party.”

For an artist who likes to needle the art world’s pretensions, it was perfect timing. Mr. Pruitt actually turned 50 last year (on May 17, to be precise, he said), but that didn’t stop him from delaying the celebration.

“That’s just another popular convention that everyone can relate to,” he said. “Lying about your age.”

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