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ART & TELEVISION

Rob Pruitt's Quirky Vision

BY KELLY CROW

MOST ARTISTS ASK COLLECTORS to pry open their wallets, not clean out their closets. But New York artist Rob Pruitt's latest show—opening May 10 at the Brant Foundation Art Study Center in Greenwich, Conn.—will include a flea market of items from the home and family of the center's patron, Peter Brant.

For weeks, Mr. Brant said, the 11 members of his family, including nine sons and daughters from age 10 to 41, have been sorting out things to turn over to Mr. Pruitt to sell. Mr. Brant, a newsprint maker, found a Vespa scooter he doesn't ride anymore. His wife, model Stephanie Seymour, plans to sell some vintage haute couture dresses. Among the other 100 items? Dishware, Victorian furniture, children's books and DVDs. "Things do tend to pile up, especially for a person like me who doesn't like to throw anything away," Mr. Brant said.

The sale could be dismissed as a tabloid stunt, a chance to ogle or scoff at the flotsam and jetsam of a family better known for owning million-dollar works by Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. Except Mr. Pruitt has been staging flea markets as art for the past 15 years—including a version six years ago in London's Tate Museum—because he feels a "Velveteen Rabbit" poignancy about objects other people can live without. "When you go to a garage sale, you're thrown into the thick of a curated environment, surrounded by things people lived with but no longer need," he said. "It's a form of family portraiture." Next month's flea market will operate like any rummage sale, albeit one with the artist's imprimatur that this is an installation. The Brants' items will be displayed and shoppers can browse and buy. Proceeds will go to charity.

Like Warhol and Mike Kelley before him, the 50-year-old Mr. Pruitt has gained a reputation for transforming tchotchkes into something finer—from rainbow-hue paintings of smiley faces and glittery pandas to sculptures of tractor tires and bluejeans. Two years ago, his painting of a panda chomping on bamboo against a neon background, "6:20 p.m., late Summer," sold at Christie's for \$315,000, double its high estimate.

At a time when artists struggle to claim a signature style, Mr. Pruitt stands out for toggling among several distinct bodies of work, said Elysia Borowy-Reeder, executive director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, which is planning a show of Mr. Pruitt's work opening May 15.

A common thread in his oeuvre is multiplicity. Mr. Pruitt rarely makes one-offs. That's partly why he is so fond of flea markets, with their cram-packed booths. Since breaking into the New York art scene in the 1990s, he has experimented with seriality—groups of paintings that share the same subject yet contain twists in composition.



Working as an art handler for a New York gallery in the 1980s, Mr. Pruitt said he wondered why artists often repeated motifs in their works. Were they complacent or trying to tease out subtle differences? Partly as a joke, Mr. Pruitt decided to paint pandas over a five-year span, starting in 1998. "I thought it would be an exercise in poking fun at repetition," he said, "but I got really into it because I learned I could actually tell endless stories with the same image."

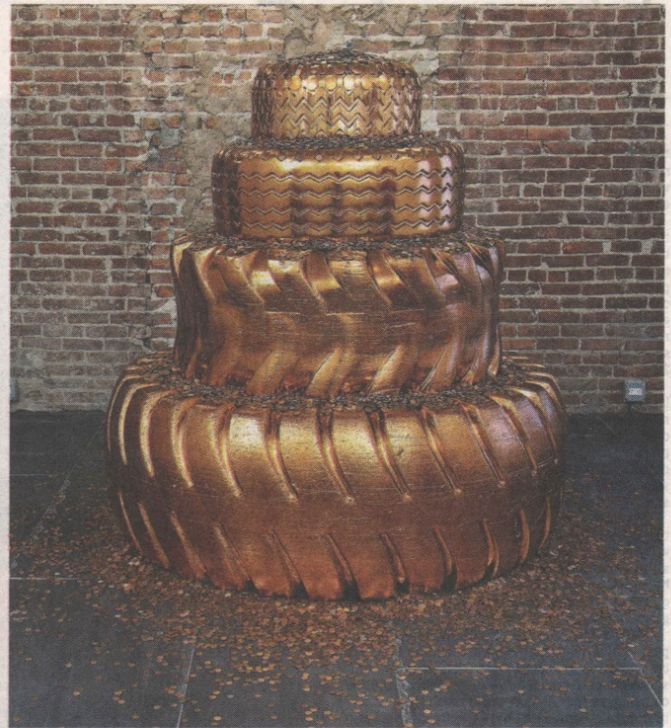
Since then, he has painted a series of crudely scrawled facial expressions as well as a group of about 20 self-portraits, each featuring him wearing props like a beret or a Santa Claus hat.

He has never felt compelled to sustain, or retire, any one series: "I think of my output as a rock'n'roll band; my overall style may shift, but I can always go back."

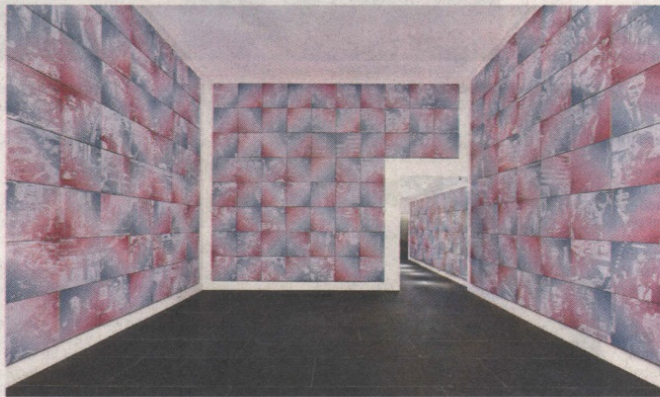
Ms. Borowy-Reeder said Mr. Pruitt's earlier work, including the flea markets, reveals a frisky sense of humor. But his coming exhibit in Detroit underscores the tenacity it takes to make art, repeatedly. 5

Every day for the past six years, Mr. Pruitt has painted a portrait of Barack Obama, nearly 3,000 canvases since the start of his presidency. Mr. Pruitt said the series also began on a whim, as a way to chronicle Mr. Obama's tenure. The artist plans to continue through the president's final day in office.

Every morning, he culls media images for inspiration and then spends "under an hour" painting in red, white and blue on a 2-foot canvas. In some, the president looks triumphant and in others, he looks fatigued. Mr. Pruitt said



ROB PRUITT/GAVIN BROWNS ENTERPRISE (3)



Rob Pruitt's self portrait, left; the artist's "Lincoln Monument" and, below, his daily paintings of President Obama.

said Mr. Pruitt's portraits will cover the 14-foot walls of nearly 9,000 square feet of gallery space within the museum. Additionally, the exhibit will include "Lincoln Monument," a 6-foot tower of tractor tires Mr. Pruitt painted in copper leaf. Around 200,000 pennies (that's \$2,000 worth) will cascade down the tires like a fountain.

Like the items being sold in the Brants' flea market, Ms. Borowy-Reeder said Mr. Pruitt's copper fountain proves he sees value in what society overlooks—and overlooks once again. "People think the penny has lost its usefulness, but if we get rid of it, where do we put Lincoln? Rob takes our cues, and makes things interesting."

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Collectively, "The Obama Paintings" will represent his longest series—and among the largest group of paintings the Detroit museum has shown in a single exhibit. Ms. Borowy-Reeder

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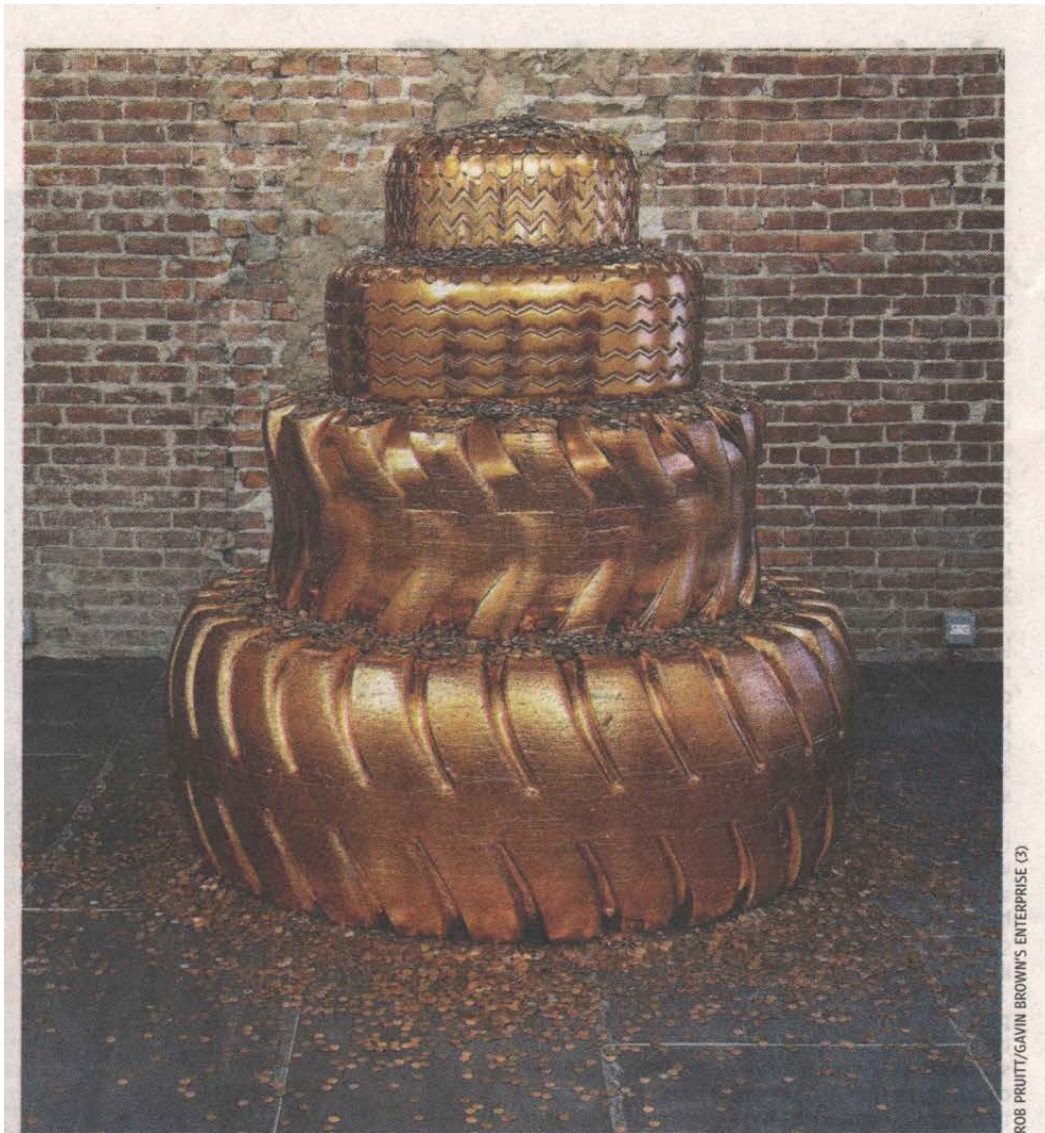
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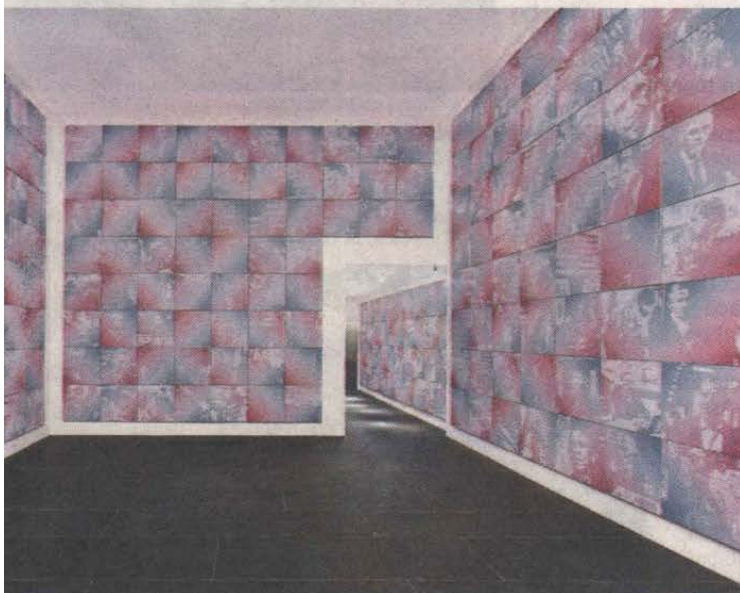
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