

## Rob Pruitt

Gavin Brown's Enterprise,  
New York

Jorge Luis Borges was convinced that the best metaphors are trite and well worn. 'Life is a dream', 'love is a journey' or 'hope is a child' are the literary equivalents to images of rainbows, sunsets and butterflies. Unashamedly, these popular visual tropes are migrating from mass and folk culture to the contemporary avant-garde where they are made even more fantastic than their natural world counterpart and more graphically seductive than their popular incarnation.

This appropriation of similes, once strictly the province of kitsch, has nothing to do with blurring the distinctions between high and low. Instead, rainbows and butterflies have come to symbolize a magical new world where order is without hierarchies, edification is without snobbishness, prosperity is without greed, and most importantly, where imagination and consumption are exceedingly valued. This is the world of Rob Pruitt.

Pruitt acts as a conduit, shuffling images from mass culture to high art production. He also subscribes to the empowering and inventive 'do-it-yourself' attitude of visual design and art making. Yet what makes him more contemporary and thus more germane than the rash of late 20th-century Duchampian appropriationists is that Pruitt produces his art without the slightest glance of irony. He makes glamorous and admirable our drive for worldly success while commiserating with our search for inner virtue.

Pruitt also understands spiritual pastiche. Because contemporary culture frames most of its activities through the pseudo-spiritual lens of individualistic pluralism, the artist gives us permission to customize our lives, helping us to feel good about not only being resourceful but extravagant. He allows our political affiliations to be both shallow and profound, and, instead of challenging our material culture, insists we make our materialism and consumption something to be proud of.

*101 Art Ideas You Can Do Yourself* (1999) is a project for which Pruitt suggests activities that delight, amuse and charm the viewer into action, real and imaginary. For example, 'slash open a bag of potting soil, sprinkle seeds in the wound and watch grow'

arena where nature clashes with culture. The paintings' clichéd imagery neutralizes their real endangered status making us less culpable in the creatures' pending extinction. And therein lies the beauty of the clichéd image. The trite is pliable; its meaning is so depleted that we must reassign significance to it.



Rob Pruitt  
*Winter*  
2001  
Enamel paint,  
glitter on canvas  
215 × 158 cm

Enter *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*, the giant woolly panda whose remote mountain habitat and strange behaviour confound the most sophisticated biologists.

or 'fill a desk drawer with gravel and make a secret Zen garden.' The suggestions are always basic and he doesn't supply us with a materials list or a colour chart. This recent exhibition of *101 Art Ideas You Can Do Yourself* presented visual examples. An exercise bike facing a painting and a handsome pile of pennies tossed onto the floor to create an inexpensive Carl Andre-like sculpture for the home are just two

examples of ideas made to thwart joyless lifestyles.

Enter *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*, the giant woolly panda whose remote mountain habitat and strange behaviour confound the most sophisticated biologists: East and West, black and white, Yin and Yang, herbivore and carnivore, private and public, cuddly and ferocious. In the 19th century it was the horse that fell victim to

Western industrialism. But Pruitt's glitter panda paintings are not Franz Marc's blue horses. Pruitt's empathy lies in craft, cuteness, painting and formal design, and, if the subject matter happens to touch on soft geo-political rhetoric, all the better. Unlike his glitter-encrusted cartons of Evian, Volvic and Crystal Geyser water, these pandas don't easily slip into the heavily politicized

Back in the 1980s the work of Pruitt & Early was out of kilter with the time. Either they weren't ironic enough in their investigations into codes of consumption or they were too obvious in their indiscriminating approach to popular culture. The end came quickly when the pair bravely celebrated the commodification of black culture and its marketing push

on educated, upper-class white teens. Accusations of political incorrectness brought the collaboration to a halt. Less than 15 years later, Pruitt, on his own, offered the public *Cocaine Buffet*, a line of coke stretching down the middle of an elongated 16-foot mirror. This feast operated on several levels: a Minimalist floor work, a generous treat

to anyone who would get down on their knees and be photographed snorting and an antiquated cliché from the 1980s when capitalism was secular and uninventive. Pruitt's recent Evian water fountains offer a similar gluttonous indulgence. Yet in both cases the work's beauty softens its moralizing forces.

Michelle Grabner

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Frieze, 2000  
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