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# DON'T CALL IT A COKEBACK

**Rob Pruitt** has tasted art world success before. Back in the early 1990s as half of Pruitt & Earl (with then-boyfriend Jack Early) his bad-boy art earned him major international recognition and fairly sizeable amount of cash. Then, when one miscalculated show brought accusations of racism he found himself ostracised overnight. Now he's back, solo-style, ready to provoke once more

Text Steve Slocombe 09.07.00 Photography Elizabeth Peyton

The most striking thing about Rob Pruitt's work, both then and now, is its simplicity. Clever ideas made real with an economy of means. Take an interesting concept with wider implications, maybe inject some humour, an awareness of contemporary issues and present it in a form that almost any viewer can 'get'. It's a successful and endearing formula that first manifested itself into 'art' in 1990 when Pruitt & Early burst onto the New York art scene with a series of works entitled *Artworks For Teenage Boys*. Y'know, decorating beer cans with Heavy Metal iconography and stacking them up in galleries. That sort of stuff.

"I guess I was interested in documenting ephemeral aspects of culture that might otherwise have fallen through the cracks, so to speak, like teenage T-shirts and logos, for example. Remember, this was back in the days before the internet, and at that stage it didn't really seem as if this stuff was being gathered and recorded anywhere."

And the artworld lapped it up. So much so that two years later the duo were invited for a solo show at Leo Castelli, one of the world's most important galleries, ever. (Just to give you an idea, back in the day old Leo virtually owned Pop Art). What happened next was not, however, the leap into superstardom they might have hoped for.

"It was a show about Black culture produced in a period when the artworld was caught up in dealing with identity issues and had become pretty obsessed with political correctness. The common consensus then was that artists should only make art about who they were, or where they happened to come from. Obviously neither of Pruitt & Early were Black. So there were really bad repercussions."

So what exactly was in this show that invoked such harsh reactions?

"It was a pretty extensive collection of Job Spot posters that spanned 30 years, all blended together in an improvisational way that was supposed to approximate how Hip-Hop is constructed. We were interested in looking at the rise of Hip-Hop culture and the emergence of a new kind of racial equality that hadn't been part of America since the late 60s. It wasn't exactly political, it was just about the levelling of the playing field. Black music, entertainers and politicians were suddenly there on their own terms and this was just a show to celebrate that. Looking back it all seems pretty benign, to be honest."

Nonetheless, Pruitt & Early found themselves the brunt of a critical and personal backlash. "All our exhibition offers stopped immediately, even for group shows. It happened virtually overnight. If Jack and I showed up at an opening together in New York City suddenly no-one would talk to us. Being ushered out of the artworld so quickly like that after having had tremendous success felt really bad."

And then, according to admittedly rather simplistic sounding reports, they broke up.

"It probably was as simple as that. I just wanted to start everything over. Jack and I had set up housekeeping and artmaking like it was the family business and I'd also started pretty young, so I just felt like I'd lost sight and wanted to go back and redo everything."

So what did the solo Mr. Pruitt do next?

What does any artist do when no-one is interested in their art?

"I took some personal time. I went from being pretty rich to working in a thrift store for a while. Then I started to make art on my own and the only place I could find to exhibit it was in nightclubs, at special one evening art-shows and things like that. I started making these black glitter snowflakes that were to do with gothic nature and ecology, as well as identity in the sense of no two individuals and snowflakes are alike. They functioned pretty well in nightclubs as well, by the way."

Pruitt's CV official makes rather interesting reading. Under the section titled "Solo Shows" there is a rather poignant gap for the years between 1993 and 1999. How then, did he manage to reintegrate himself back into the hallowed society that had once shunned him?

"Kirsty Bell from Gavin Brown's Enterprise (a trendy New York gallery) came by my studio to see this project I was working on called *101 Art Ideas You Can Do Yourself*. She really liked it and decided to put me in a group show at the gallery and I was just kind of welcomed back."

And did anyone mention his past antics? "I think some people tend to have pretty short memories. The rest of them probably just wanted to wait and see what I was going to do before committing either way."

But he must be a bit wary of going 'too far' this time. "No no no, I always try to go far. One of the main things that really helped get me back was an installation that I did at the 3rd International Gallery where I made a 30ft line of cocaine on this long thin mirror on the floor. Everyone sat around for about half an hour not knowing if they were actually allowed to participate whilst I didn't really say anything either way. Then as soon as the first person did it it was gone in about 15 minutes."

So, er, how did that go down? "Everyone thought it was the best art they had ever seen in their lives. Of course, three hours later they probably didn't like it as much."

Maybe not, but this simple piece, along with Pruitt's *101 Ideas* have reinstated him as a name to drop amongst fashionable art world types on both sides of the Atlantic. (Not to mention garnering useful press attention amongst aching hip style mags like, er, us).

What else is he up to at the moment?

"I'm rendering panda bears with black and white glitter. Pandas interest me for a number of reasons. The way they represent what hum beings have done to the planet in terms of destroying bamboo forests and rendering them endangered, the fact they're equal parts black and white, the fact that they're big fierce animals yet they only eat bamboo, the way it seem to resent the scientists trying to help them. I'm also working with water. At the Whitechapel I'm going to show an Evian fountain that consists of 50 gallons of Evian, Evian cartons and plastic. I'm into the sheer economy of it as well as the more straightforward reference in terms of purity of sculptural materials. It relates back to the *101 Ideas* piece. In general I like the idea of confronting people with something simple, something that's not offputting. When I'm making work I often think about my parents and about people visiting Museums. I don't want them to look at my work and find it to too indecipherable that it ends up making them feel bad about themselves."

Rob Pruitt is showing at *New York Projects* at Delfin London 27.07.00 - 10.09.00 and *Protest & Survive* at The Whitechapel, London 15.09.00 - 12.11.00  
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