

ARTFORUM

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Rob Pruitt

GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE/MACCARONE

If *The Book of the Courtier*, the etiquette guide penned by the sixteenth-century Italian diplomat Baldassare Castiglione, is known at all today, it's probably for its coinage of *sprezzatura*, a word it uses to describe a very particular, and very practiced, mode of nonchalance. One classic translation renders the term an approach that "shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought." According to Castiglione, then, "true art" will be that "which does not appear to be art" at all.

All the ripest paradoxes of the courtier's Renaissance koan were on view at Rob Pruitt's recent extravaganza—a hilariously gigantic, tirelessly ironic, and sociologically fascinating show that featured dozens (hundreds? thousands?) of works deployed across a truly astonishing expanse of Greenwich Street floor space. At once a ravishing display of earnest exertion and a cynical hymn to indolence, "Pattern and Degradation," as Pruitt called his hot mess, was at first blush a great gust of raw affirmation, a big sloppy *yes* from an artist both blessed and cursed with a unique combination of unbridled enthusiasm and seriously limited impulse control. Yet there's something deeply guarded in Pruitt as well—this is, after all, an artist whose career was famously derailed over the badly misjudged blaxploitation show he mounted with his then-partner Jack Early at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1992, so Pruitt's relationship with the socioeconomic dynamics of the art world is, as they say, complicated. And the deeper one waded into the mind of the show, the more one saw questions of genuine effort and thought being turned on their pointy little heads.

Built of an array of antic, strenuously disharmonious artifacts (all, somehow, made in the first nine months of 2010), the show was apparently inspired by the Amish *rumspringa*, or "running around," a period of freedom during which adolescents are expected to get their ya-yas out before deciding whether or not to formally sign on for the austerity of their socioreligious community. With a checklist that ran to twenty-two pages, the exhibition was designed to offer something



for everyone (and a few things probably for no one at all, save the artist), including huge Day-Glo paintings and faux hipster T-shirts; face-shuffling silk-screened self-portraits that owe as much to registration errors and Mad Libs as they do to *le cadavre exquis*; googly-eyed robots constructed from repurposed clocks and flattened cardboard boxes; flea-market chairs wrapped in aluminum tape; screen grabs of a zillion or so Gmail subject lines; walls covered with ink-jet prints of cinnamon rolls and hundreds of pix of Hitleresque lolcats harvested from teh internets. Viewers keen on oils could contemplate a suite of overpainted IKEA canvases, while those hungry for the artist's trademark pandas could find them sitting on Saul Steinberg chairs in one work and surfing Hokusai waves in another. (Meanwhile, those who were just plain hungry could sup from a series of low-

Rob Pruitt, *Exquisite Self-Portrait: Father Martian*, 2010, silk screen on canvas, 84 1/4 x 63 1/2". Gavin Brown's Enterprise.

brow snack caddies made from zebra-striped truck tires: Filled with Oreos, M&Ms, mini pretzels, and more, they were piss-taking pseudo-Gonzalez-Torres spills stripped of elegance and solemnity—Pruitt's junk-food riposte to the epicurean tastes of the canon.)

Living giddily up to its description in the Gavin Brown's Enterprise/Maccarone press release as a "joyful moment of flat, ridiculous glitter," "Pattern and Degradation" worked an angle of relentless expectation-lowering that utterly outstripped the interest and psychological complexity of the objects it contained. Pitched as a fascinating dialectical feedback loop between working hard and hardly working, the show managed to achieve a weird sort of strident nonchalance, as practiced as any courtier's and frosted with a thick layer of consumerist abjection. Operating in wondrous symbiosis with the dogged, horror vacui-driven production of the show's physical contents, this strategy of pervasive conceptual indifference is one that Pruitt seems to deploy without either effort or thought—and one that, more than any single thing he's ever made, constitutes the locus of his true art.

—Jeffrey Kastner