



ROB PRUITT

Rob Wants to Make People Happy; He Aims to Please

07 February - 23 March 2026

Reception Saturday 07 February, 3-6PM

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Innocence! Hugs! Joy! Smiles! Blood! Bile! Starvation! Has there been an artist in a tighter stranglehold of love and tenderness by his admirers? How irredeemably wrong these fans are about Rob Pruitt. Yes, the artist who forced the same audience to its knees to suck up hazardously cheap cocaine; the same artist who made *Red, Black, Green, Red White and Blue* has suddenly emerged as a cloying sycophant to the wealthy and famous? If you're a cynic—which I am not—you'd suspect a late-breaking vie for approval and praise—a sort of penance for past aesthetic wrongdoings. While I'm no cynic when it comes to real art, perhaps my belief in the mutability of the human personality is less sacrosanct. Or, my belief that the kindest and most tender of us are those who have found higher means of sublimating their fear, dread and hatred into edifices greater than themselves—like good art. The charitability and warmth that subtend Pruitt's spirit are made possible by the extraordinary amount of fear, dread and hatred with which he enchants his radically unassuming work. Of course, I'm discussing his infamous *Panda* works, where I believe he has played one of his most pernicious tricks on his audience. Everything you think you know about the pandas is wrong.

The *Pandas*—and pandas—are a target for an excessive, confusing and paradoxical mix of extreme human emotions, which is the real reason why they are popular. I've read every piece of press, every essay written on the subject and *jouissance* was never mentioned—this was so unlikely to me that I called Rob to make sure I wasn't missing some foundational text on the work. He told me that he wasn't sure if anyone who's written on the work has ever read Lacan. From the various pull-quotes assembled in Pruitt's monograph, *Pop Touched Me*, everyone seems to be convinced that they *understand* the panda—namely, as an adorable, heartwarming subject that makes them and their spouses happy in their bedrooms. In Rob's defense, I believe this is right where he wants his audience—like those art worlders laid prostrate at his feet, mistakenly interpreting this debasement as enjoyment—a quote from the same rather cloying book describes Pruitt with a giant wad of *tin*foil, awestruck by how cheap the cocaine inside of it was. Now, I admit I was twelve years old when the *Cocaine Buffet* took place, but a couple years later even I, a card-carrying garbage head, would have turned down foil-coke.

Rob Pruitt is the victim as well as the beneficiary of this serious misinterpretation in the critique of his work. This essay is about the *Panda* not as a two-dimensional pet for big box heirs, but as a *target* for a person's most extreme feelings—be they passionate love or the most abject violence—or, a longing or a craving that no amount of either physical closeness or abuse can solve. Like the narcotic-of-choice for the addict, the *Panda*—and



pandas—have become a pure symbol for the thing we most want to cuddle with, smother, subjugate, smash, and annihilate.

Have you ever looked for an image of a dead panda? What about a sick one, or an emaciated one? The paucity of these images is astonishing, especially given the hecatomb of pandas left in the wake of industrialization and the requisite defoliation of their bamboo-lush habitats. Like most genocides—few non-domestic animals have been humanized to the extreme that pandas have—the perpetrators know too well that a single image has—and can, and will—shift popular opinion so forcefully that the crime against humanity—against *life*—in question will end, and the perpetrators brought to justice. Weirdly enough, the images of sick and dead pandas I was able to find were mostly neglected zoo captives. Like you, I don't really want—*really don't want*—to see a pile of panda corpses, but I—like you—know that this *must* exist, *has* existed, many times over, on this planet, for generations.

I am the father of a four year old girl, and I live in Washington DC, and I love visiting Bao Li and Qing Bao at the National Zoo. I love these animals and, like most DC households with children, we love having an abundance of Panda-related souvenirs brought home from the Zoo. When the animals were recalled by the Chinese last year—flown by air, in big crates, an astonishing act of animal cruelty—we were sad, and somewhat worried for our city in the event they were gone forever. When new, younger animals were sent in exchange—using the same company-sponsored spectacle of inhumanity for transportation—we felt joy which I put in italics because I am talking about an excess of feeling, a combination of insoluble human urges that creates an allure that confounds me, makes me feel outside of my body. I felt longing, probably from the sheer rarity of these preternaturally adorable creatures, made possible by the thousands of their starved, shot, crushed relatives; I felt guilt for enjoying their company so much at such great expense to their lives and their species; the most forbidden of these emotions, I admit, was a hunger, a lust one might feel when a newborn puppy is placed in your hands—I am aware of your, the puppy's, vulnerability, and—inversely—of my power to crush you. When you're speeding down the freeway and skip the usual exits of *happiness, warmth, friendship, adorability*, things start to become paradoxical. The result, when you just fucking think about something for a little bit longer than what's expected of you, can be horrifying, thrilling, or both.

The monograph we've discussed almost exclusively includes quotes from powerful people—arbiters of capital, taste, influence—which, to me, feels like another stroke of Pruitt's pernicious artistic sleight of hand. The problem with the *Pandas* is that powerful people are immune to their most scary aspect, which is *familiarity*. A powerful person can freely draw as much of that forbidden French joy from a Panda canvas; the rest of us, who are still yoked with the exact same emotional weight, must see ourselves in the reflection of those watery mammalian eyes of that hungry, oafish, lovable, mostly-exterminated bear.



Pruitt, the great wielder of fear and dread in art, has imbricated a new layer of cruelty into his *Panda* edifice with this show and this book: the use of artificial intelligence in the creation of the compositions. I don't know how the machines will think when they grow up—they'll have matured significantly from the time I write this to when it's published—but I don't expect them—or *IT*—to be able to conjure the primordial swirl of feelings that the *Pandas*—and pandas—elicit in me or even my precocious four-year-old. In this case, AI, that rapacious creditor, has been fed the seminal works of various high-achievers of art history and contemporary art—that is, most beloved by the rich and powerful—to be mutated crudely into Panda scenes. The same way humans can covertly eradicate its most vulnerable and lovable living teddy bears for real estate development—and, germanely, data center campuses—the machine intelligence can just as innocently chew up our cultural inheritance and vomit it out as puerile fables about *Pandas* in the forest, *Pandas* in the city, et cetera. In a coup de grace that feels on par with his most infamous trespasses with Jack Early in the 90s, Pruitt's pandas, in this brand-new and bone-chilling context, seem to be whispering *as you are now, so once was I; As I am now, so you shall be.*