

LOS ANGELES TIMES

E22 FRIDAY, MARCH 28, 2008

## AROUND THE GALLERIES

By HOLLY MYERS  
Special to *The Times*Sci-fi meets  
hip-hop culture

"Thinking Cap," one of two sculptures in **Robert Pruitt's** "Two Tears in a Bucket: Considering the Alcubierre Metric" at the Mary Goldman Gallery, consists of a black Malcolm X cap that appears to hover an inch or two above its pedestal, glowing from within with mysterious blue light. Like most of the works in the show, it is simple but memorable, seamlessly conflating multiple associations — namely, black power and science fiction, but also hip-hop, custom car culture, street fashion and consumerism's rabid appropriation of all these things.

This and the other works stem, according to the gallery's press release, from an early fascination with science fiction that led the Houston-based artist, as a child, "to the frightening conclusion that there were no black people in the future other than the few portrayed as evil or criminal." (The title refers to a speculative mathematical concept for faster-than-light space travel — "warp drive" in "Star Trek" terms.)

The show is an unaffected, if occasionally tongue-in-cheek, effort to redress that inequity.

Most of the works are life-sized drawings on brown butcher paper, each depicting a single black figure presented in the manner of an everyday superhero, with popular, traditional and sci-fi accouterments wound so closely together as to be virtually indistinguishable.

"East Texas Marvel," for instance, shows a woman in a block print cape with a '60s-era mini-dress and go-go boots.

Another drawing, "Rage Against the Machine," portrays a woman in what could be 19th century garb, contemporary tennis shoes peeking out beneath her skirts, calmly wielding a sledgehammer.

For all Pruitt's play with signs and symbols, the strength of the work is actually its subtlety. This is sign-play driven not by the anxiety of Postmodernism, as similar work might have been a decade ago, but by the hybridizing instincts of hip-hop culture, which gives these drawings room to be not only racial critiques but also sincere and stately portraits whose presence in the gallery is a force in itself.

**Mary Goldman Gallery**, 932 Chung King Road, Los Angeles, (213) 617-8217, through April 19. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. [www.marygoldman.com](http://www.marygoldman.com).



Mary Goldman Gallery

**ROBERT PRUITT:** "Rage Against the Machine" (2008) depicts a woman in period garb, wearing modern sneakers.

# ARTFORUM

## Robert Pruitt

MARY GOLDMAN GALLERY  
932 Chung King Road, Chinatown  
March 15–April 19



*Silk & Soul*, 2007, Conté on Kraft paper, 71 1/2 x 56 3/4".

Robert Pruitt poetically bridges authentic concern for African–American experience with an intellectual probing of its social and commercial representations (or lack thereof). In this exhibition, he portrays six characters whose clothing, attitude, style, and posture cannot be easily classified by time period, age, or nationality. The large drawings are elegantly rendered with Conté crayon on Kraft paper in a palette of ocher, brown, black, gold, rust, and orange. In *Silk & Soul*, 2007, a woman wearing an African–print minidress and Adidas tennis shoes sits on a spindle–backed chair, arms draped casually around her knees, either unaware of or simply unable to do anything about the vinyl record cover tied around her head and blocking her face. The subject of *Invisible Man*, 2008, is similarly hidden; a paper bag bearing the words PEOPLE’S FREE FOOD PROGRAM completely covers his head. The effect of both is unnerving and alters the power dynamic between portrait and viewer. In denying his subjects the ability to look back, Pruitt simultaneously points to and fractures the illusion between real and rendered, drawing comparisons to habitual associations made based on race, gender, and other constructed categories. Only the subject of *Props*, 2007, gazes directly at viewers, his large, round eyes echoed by an oversize clock hanging like a shiny medallion, or maybe ball and chain, around his neck. The impact of Pruitt’s project is amplified by the current news media, in which race has resurfaced in our national political discourse.

—Annie Buckley



Flash Art, May 2008, Pg. 163

## ROBERT PRUITT

Mary Goldman Gallery,  
Los Angeles



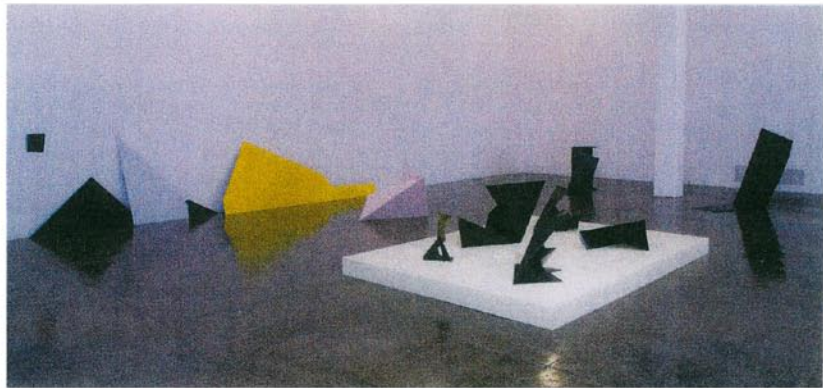
**ROBERT PRUITT**, *East Texas Marvel*, 2008. Crayon on paper, 182 x 152 cm. Courtesy Mary Goldman Gallery, Los Angeles.

In the science-fiction saga *Star Trek*, spaceships travel in spheres of normal space-time, propelled by faster-than-light forces. The “Alcubierre Metric,” a speculative model of quantum physics, promises real FTL travel. Robert Pruitt has been a sci-fi fan since childhood. In one metaphorical quantum leap, he equates black life in America to the Starship Enterprise within culture’s space-time continuum. Few clues allude to Pruitt’s sci-fi bent, except for the portrait of a woman in virtual-reality headgear. Most of the seven drawings, life-size portraits in colorful crayon on butcher paper, seem down-to-earth. One depicts poet Sunni Paterson, a

supporter of New Orleans flood victims. Others are composites of real and historical black activist figures. Masquerading as traditional portraits, they are actually conceptual in nature. A man in a Rasta-style hat holds an axe; he’s meant to evoke Nat Turner, an antebellum-era slave who led a bloody revolt. A woman in a similar pose holds a sledgehammer, but her floor-length gown places her in the Suffragette era. Another man is masked by a paper bag reading *Peoples Free Food Program*, referring to a Black Panther charity. As artistic expression, street fashion appropriates and resists elements of dominant culture. Pruitt’s art does that too, by fusing his loaded motifs with a playful rap sensibility. The result is an exuberant approach that invites viewers to play the game. Two sculptures are also included in the show: a Mrs. Buttersworth bottle as Molotov cocktail — *You Know How We Think (After Ronald Hartgove)*, 2008 — and a Malcolm X *Thinking Cap* (2008). The drawings have more emotional power. Pruitt’s art asks: Where is Black American culture headed? If the best scenario for crossing this cultural ‘final frontier’ is a sci-fi promise, even that assumes the force of an entire universe to move the spaceship along.

**Anne Martens**

## ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS  
MAY/JUNE 2007 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU €8GLENN KAINO + ROBERT PRUITT + KATJA STRUNZ  
SAN ANTONIO

*New Works: 07.1*, Artpace San Antonio's current artist-in-residence exhibition, reads like a case study in disassociation (March 8—May 13, 2007). Curator Debra Singer's grouping of Glenn Kaino, Robert Pruitt, and Katja Strunz is visually unbalanced. Moving through Strunz' metal works into Pruitt's menagerie of objects, photographs, and drawings, and then into Kaino's heady kinetic realm, we are forced to conclude that an aesthetic equilibrium never factored into this curatorial equation. Still, a leitmotif does surface, however tenuously: the notion of temporality. Truncated, protracted or frozen altogether, time, a pliable construction manipulated to individuated ends, lingers just long enough in these three artists' work to legitimize Singer's selections.

Engaged predominantly with questions of materiality, Strunz' practice is immediate and pragmatic. Her work is also less polemical than Kaino's and Pruitt's. *Lazy Corner*, 2007, the centerpiece of Strunz' exhibition, is a wide yet Lilliputian lift that stands a few inches above the floor. Triangular shin-to knee-high sculptures stand atop the platform like metal origami, torched and folded in a repetitive display. Less resolved is *Raum-raeuber (raptor spatii) (Room robber)*, 2007, comprised of two-dimensional forms that rest against the room's perimeter and hang on the walls like an arrangement of diminutive, rough-edged rectangles and trapezoids.

None of Strunz' objects or groupings are exceptionally slick, nor does the work aspire to monumentality. Instead, the works' small scale and mode of display evoke the infamous Stonehenge scene in *This Is Spinal Tap*, 1984. While these works challenge the heft of metal, they also constantly draw attention to its material characteristics: beads along welded seams, torch marks, and rust are clearly visible. This medium-object-display relationship and her open-book craftsmanship make it quite obvious that the artist is referencing the rigidity of the modernist canon and of utopian architecture while riffing on formalist concerns. Strunz traps and folds time,

physically and metaphorically, in a competent but ultimately unchallenging body of work.

Pruitt, too, deals with the suspension of time, but he approaches temporality more obliquely than Strunz, relying less on material concerns. His visual/conceptual remix entitled *Knowing That We God-like*, 2007, collapses past and present tenses. In doing so, he simultaneously draws attention to the virtual erasure of black history in the Americas—the American South in particular—and criminalizes the rampant reduction of phenotype to stereotype, which occurs at every level of society.

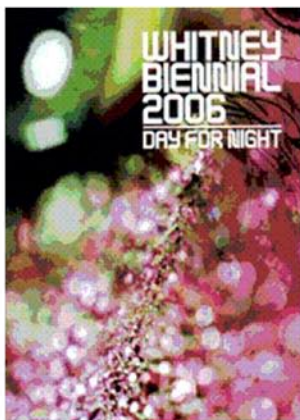
The concepts of racial identity and reclamation are certainly not new to socially or ethically concerned art. Nor are resistance, reference, and empowerment. In this context, the valence of Pruitt's work—its success—is rooted in humor and accessibility. The Houston artist does not comment or lament. Rather, he harnesses the vernacular to construct invented histories, which play out at Artpace in a mélange of totemic constructions. Take, for example, *Waiting for the Mothership*, 2007, an elegant large-scale charcoal-on-paper drawing. In this commanding work, a female figure stands casually, as if waiting for a bus. She wears a trench coat and scarf. An ornamental garb of the type associated with traditional African ceremonies swathes her legs; her feet are bare. In a single gesture, the work speaks of issues past and present: slave ships and the Back to Africa movement, assimilation and resistance, pride and economic disparity. It also engages with the work of other black conceptual artists, such as Maren Hassinger. Most importantly, it articulates without screaming. Pruitt's works are not acts of provocation as much as they are modes of temporal dislocation. They enlist a poetics of juxtaposition to disrupt historical linearity. In so doing, they deify the mundane and demystify the radical.

Kaino's exhibition challenges the perception of time as a constant by alternately truncating and accelerating onscreen action. It is built around the three-channel

video installation *Quarter Mile*, 2007, which orchestrates a simultaneous resolution to three unrelated dramas. While *Quarter Mile* destabilizes time, it enlists a typical cinematic syntax. By contrast, the adjacent kinetic piece, *We Will Breathe Later*, 2007, forestalls linear progression altogether. Three hourglasses spin at a velocity that prevents the movement of their rather loaded contents: sand samples from the Middle East, Texas, and Silicon Valley. Halting time is also central to a series of slit-screen photographs of the Los Angeles artist attempting to fling himself through the air like a bullet—equal parts Bas Jan Ader and Georges Méliès, with a touch of Buster Keaton thrown in to welcome effect. Kaino's work is a fitting dénouement to this collective exploration of temporality precisely because his work continues the dialogue initiated by Strunz and Pruitt without offering conclusions. It harbors material and historical concerns as well as scientific and subjective political realities. It also speaks with such sophistication that, if we were to blink, we might very well miss the point.

—Anjali Gupta

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Robert Pruitt, *Drum*, 2007, steel rods and leather (commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio; photo: Todd Johnson); Katja Strunz, installation view of *Lazy Corner*, 2007, steel sheet and paint (commissioned and produced by Artpace San Antonio; photo: Todd Johnson)



Page 320

**ROBERT A. PRUITT**

Born 1975, Houston, Texas; lives in Houston, Texas

Robert A. Pruitt incorporates America's often unsettled race relations into the aesthetics of desire. His rereading of twentieth-century art, especially the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, in light of African American history and experience offers a commentary on the ongoing struggles of black Americans.

*Low Rider Art* (2004) presents a chrome bicycle wheel from a BMX stunt bike turned upside down on a stool—a “blackening” of Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). Whereas Duchamp's ready-mades brought into question the significance for art of new techniques of mass production, Pruitt suggests there may be an equally trenchant critique to be found in the easiness of it all for his (white) artistic predecessors. His establishment of an alternative critical position with relation to such art historical works demonstrates his self-proclaimed role as mediator between the world of high art and African American culture.

In a series of decorated handguns, Pruitt uncovers the subtext of violence in the relationship between large corporations such as Nike and their African American market. In *Just Do It!* (2004), which consists of a .38 caliber handgun with a small pendant of a basketball player hanging from the trigger guard, he distorts Nike's exhortative slogan as if to encourage whoever is holding the gun to pull the trigger. The gun is embellished with the iconic Nike swoosh and presented in an empty sneaker box, emphasizing how easy it is to acquire both items in the United States. *America's Most Wanted* (2004), a prop gun decorated with rhinestones, references among other things Ice Cube's 1990 album *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted* and points to the contradictions within gangsta rap's idealization of the outlaw—the desire to be both recognized and feared. The sculpture plays up the glamorization of violence while suggesting its fundamental ineffectiveness.

Pruitt follows through on this in *Throw Back* (2005), a Ku Klux Klan robe decorated with dark, hip-hop-inspired puns that deflate the object's historicized status as an icon of terror. “Burn Baby Burn,” the mantra of the 1965 race riots in Watts, is emblazoned in boisterous graffiti lettering across the garment's back like some kind of gleeful reclamation, acknowledging the allure, yet ultimate ineffectuality, of violent protest.

ESM

Pruitt is a member of Otabenga Jones & Associates, also in the 2006 Biennial.