



Rob Pruitt x Lizzi Bougatsos

Help Me Lift You Up

Cur. Baptiste Pinteaux

May 24 — July 13, 2024

Opening May 26, 2 — 6pm

AIR DE PARIS

Rob and Lizzi met over twenty years ago. Since then, thanks to the friendship, the tenderness and the curiosity they have for one another, they never lost sight of each other. They both still live in New York, where I met with them last winter.

In his studio in Prospect Park, Rob is followed everywhere by his dog Gilda; a melancholic giant and a tiny genius, the two of them make for a charming odd couple, and their image alone attests to Rob's sense of irony and his candour as an artist.

Lizzi has recently moved to a studio on the other side of the river, on the seventh floor of a Financial District high-rise. She welcomed us amidst an array of found objects, each of which carries a memory or a story. Though she knows some of them better than others – a dress once worn by Yoko Ono, Ivan Julian's piano – it seems as if they were all made for her. Her studio is nowhere near high up enough to see the sky, but she knows when the sun hits the building next door and reflect its light back at her.

Similarly, this exhibition is about two people who have found the best angle and the perfect distance to look at each other, and who, whether through skill or divine attention, have found ways to shine light back and forth at one another and be illuminated in return.

INTERVIEW

Rob Pruitt and Lizzi Bougatos in conversation with Baptiste Pinteaux

BP: I'm going to start recording. I'll start from the beginning, and I'll probably ask you some questions I know the answers to already, but it'll be easier to edit the interview that way. I'll pretend I'm hearing your stories for the first time. So, first of all, could you tell me how you two met?

RP: Is this a question you know the answer to?

BP: Actually, no!

RP: Well, I don't either. [Laughs]

LB: I know my answer

RP: Then you should start. I have my own memory, but most of the time, when I'm answering a question in an interview, someone will say to me, "That's not true at all!" So I always end up feeling terrible and worrying that people will think I'm a liar.

LB: Well, I get mixed up between dreams and reality all the time, and I make up these crazy scenarios... But anyway: I met you through Benjamin Sturgill. He was obsessed with your practice. Amy Gartrell was also around.

RP: She turns 50 this weekend.

LB: I know! You were still living with Jonathan [Horowitz] in this pink loft on Grand Street and Hester, and you had objects and furniture that were quite extraordinary. You had this bed that was a car.

RP: That was Jonathan's, actually, but I had a storybook bed. It looked like a little toy that had been blown up into a life-size version. Like a bed in a dollhouse, but 500 times the size!

LB: Like Margiela's doll's clothing. You also had an enormous Evian bottle, like a seven-foot-tall Evian bottle.

RB: That was made for a beverage center or a party or something. I still have this habit today, whenever I see something good on the street, I just can't resist dragging it home. I'm such a scavenger that way...

LB: I used to do the same when I lived in Fort Greene. I furnished my whole house with objects from the stoops and everything was so beautiful. But I really have to fight that urge now.

RP: Because you're a real adult!

LB: I just moved in a smaller place and I can't afford to bring anything else up. [Laughs]

BP: So, you two met more than twenty years ago, but this exhibition is actually the first time you're working together?

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RP: When Jonathan and I moved to the Catskills right after the 9/11, we bought a big old falling-down house that we painted all-black, inside and out. Then we invited all of our friends to come do projects there, and Lizzy came.

LB: I did an Angelblood performance with Rita [Ackerman].

RP: You played music up a tree. It was so incredible. Hauntingly beautiful.

LB: I think we also made a flag and some merch. And I did many of your flea markets.

RP: Right.

LB: I think the first one was at the Gavin Brown booth at the Frieze Art Fair in London.

RP: That was the most glamorous one, probably. [Laughs]

LB: That was amazing! I got my hair cut by that artist from Herald Street. But was I also involved in your Yoko Ono Grapefruit project? Or was I just obsessed with that? You know, I am a big fan of her, and I vaguely remember being invited to execute one of the ideas, but it's probably just another dream I had...

RP: It was kind of a week-long party setting up the show. I had a lot of people help me install, so I don't remember all that clearly, but I'm going to choose to believe that you were there.

LB: I was definitely involved... [Laughs]

RP: So when Florence asked me to do this show, I thought it would be a great occasion to bring Lizzi with me.

BP: Why now, then?

RP: Well, I just loved Lizzi's last show at Tramps, but it wasn't just that. I mean, there's something about her that's hard to put into words... I don't want to sound weird or creepy... Sometimes I'm too self-censoring because I just don't want people to get the wrong idea. [Laughs]

LB: Don't worry. [Laughs]

RP: Thank you. Well, when I was little, my sister had all of these dolls and she didn't like to play with them, so I would bring them all to my room, and I just loved playing with them. And there's something about Lizzy... Let's say that some days, if I'm not having a good day, I'll think: "Oh, I hate being myself. I wish I could be somebody else, like Lizzy. She and her life just seem so fun!" She is a great performer on stage, and her show was so good at Tramps, and we have a lot of the same ideas, but the way she executes the ideas is so much better and more romantic than the way I execute the same ideas. And so and so. Part of why I asked her to join me was just out of envy: I just wanted to be close to her, because I'm so inspired by her personally and, you know, artistically, which is like... professionally. That's basically it. You're always looking for ways to keep yourself excited, and I just had a feeling that it would be fun and beneficial for the project and for me.

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BP: I was thinking the same thing...

RP: Sorry to interrupt you, but I also had this feeling that Lizzi would get along with Florence [Bonnefous] who is very punk, you know, and that it would make it fun for all of us. Like opening a window and letting some fresh air in.

BP: Right. I like how clear and straightforward you are. Lizzi, your work was initially meant to be shown in a project room inside of Rob's exhibition, but we tore down the walls and took things in another direction. You didn't produce any work together, but I liked how you worked thinking of each other, so in the end, some pieces are difficult to assign to one or the other of you.

LB: I still don't have a complete grasp of it. I think that I'll need to see the finished show to really understand it, but it definitely feels like, even if we didn't roll up our sleeves and make things together, actually we somehow did.

RP: Another feeling that I have is that I sometimes think about how lucky musicians are when they're making music in a studio and they get to work with a producer. They're still making their own work, but it's under the guidance of this other entity. And it's been fun for me to work with you. I don't usually work that way, but it has been fun this time to have a producer, which would be you.

BP: I had fun too. Really. And I like your idea of a producer. To me, too often curating just means smoothing the edges to produce an even, consistent aesthetic. I liked how we tried to find meeting points between three different sensibilities – meeting points, but not compromises. I like the elegance of the show, but also its unbalanced character. It's like your tires or your hotdogs, Rob. Some things don't always fit together.

LB: Right. It just doesn't have to.

BP: Some of your marbles, I just installed right on the floor of the gallery. I was also thinking of Lizzi's monochromes, and suddenly they appeared to me as a kind of twisted answer to modernist works. I know it's really not the starting point of any of your work, but you know, they somehow seemed to me to be a kind of pastiche, parody, sentimental remake... Do you ever think of your work as sarcastic sometimes, as ironic?

LB: That's interesting. I really don't, but I think of Rob's pieces as sarcastic sometimes, or ironic, yes. You know, like the Americana references and all the homages, the Marilyn paintings... I also see a sarcasm in painting the cats and then putting them in the bag.

BP: You did that too.

LB: It's like a put-on. But I feel his sarcasm is moving: it has this lightness of, you know, death and rebirth.

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RP: You know, I've been lucky enough to be asked to be in shows for a while now, and that interpretation always comes up. But I have to confess that's never the way I think about it. Like honestly, with the cats, I happen to have a dog right now, and I was thinking about the way cats just sit and lick their own fur for hours. It makes me think of painters applying strokes of paint to a canvas. I just love cats.

LB: So do you ever get frustrated that people don't get you?

RP: It used to upset me, but I think I've left that behind. Sometimes I worry that maybe I left it behind in a bad way though! [Laughs] Like I just don't take as many chances as I used to when I was younger. I feel sometimes I just do things that are safer and more boring. Anyway, I always thought I wanted to make my work more boring with each year of my life so that by the time I'm 80, I'll just be like Agnes Martin or Robert Ryman, or something.

LB: I love that. [Laughs]

RP: I know that their work isn't really boring, but they are so focused that it is kind of disturbing... But Lizzi, you also have a brain working in a way that's like out of this world. You know that, right? I don't know anybody like you.

LB: My friends always say that about me.

BP: You're not 80 yet, and Agnes Martin is still a long way off from both of you, but there will be a grid in the show.

RP: Yeah, a red and white tablecloth like the ones that we all know from picnics and Italian restaurants. But this one will be real handmade and crappy – but beautiful! Hopefully. And I think that's a good example of the kind of philosophy we share, that even if something is like found, or mass produced, it can be deeply personal, and you can do things to make it even more personal.

LB: Absolutely. To me everything is personal in the way that I think that objects sort of carry a certain type of energy that represents a feeling or an emotion or a memory that is gone. Like those perfumes I find in my friend's refrigerator. And this feeling-in-object is hard to get at. I've always had this desire, maybe it comes with the fleetingness of performances and of, you know, moments that you can't hold on to anymore.

RP: Sorry, but do people do that? I know people used to keep film in the refrigerator back when they used film cameras.

LB: Well, my friend does. And I remember opening the refrigerator when I lived in Williamsburg and having the satisfaction of seeing nail polish next to film canisters, and I was just thinking, you know, like... I'm a real artist... [Laughs]

RP: That's funny.

LB: Yeah: the essentials. But that's sort of me and you, the pop and the...

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RP: The...

LB: The feminine, I guess.

RP: To go back to your first question, well, this isn't how we met, but this is an early memory of Lizzi. I think it happened in Soho. I was walking down the street and she was walking down the street. We collided and she was so excited to tell me that she just had a breakthrough in the studio and that she was making "negative sandwiches."

LB: I had just had this show at American Fine Arts, Co. and Colin [de Land] didn't like it. So he said to me, "Lizzi, what have you done!? You have to do another one."

BP: Right after?

LB: Yes, he was very strange. And I was making those photographs in the dark room at night when I ran into Rob on the street and he said to me, "Oh, you're making negative sandwiches."

RP: Oh, was it me who said that?

LB: You told me that that's what Man Ray called his work, yeah. And I've carried that memory around with me for like 20 years!

BP: That's so funny. You two have candid minds, and I feel sometimes there's something almost childlike about you, but in the best sense of the term: I mean a playfulness and a hypersensitivity.

LP: You're right. Sometimes people just want to ask for your help. I like our title by the way.

RP: I like it too. And I'm happy that it wasn't my idea, because I was able to let it just sort of wash over me: it was very easy just to say "yes." I love it, it just appealed to other things that I just generally like. Like those kinds of unexpected truisms. You know, how nowadays normal people love to hang those plaques on the wall that say...

LB: "Raise me up."

RP: "Every day is a new beautiful thing." You know, like all these positive aphorisms. The title related to all that in a way that wasn't horrible. Do you know what I mean?

LB: Yeah. It wasn't like that British one.

RP: Oh, "mind the gap?"

LB: No, no, like...

RP: Oh, "stay calm and carry on" or something...

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LB: "Keep calm and carry on with the crown?"

RP: People go so crazy over these kinds of things, and it's always just so baffling to me. But yours had that kind of a similar equation, but it was actually much more poetic and... and not annoying! I just thought, I can sign off on that because it feels real to me. I can believe it, like, I can get behind it.

LB: Right. I would like to say it to a friend, or have someone say it to me.

BP: Well... [Laughs]

ROB PRUITT

Born in 1964 in Washington, USA
Lives and works in New York, USA

Rob Pruitt translates personal experience into broader political statements, using a visual language that is both eclectic and ironic. His works often strive to achieve a sense of spectacle while retaining a sense of social, cultural or artistic critique. He is perhaps best for his large-scale canvases featuring pandas rendered in black and white glitter. Pruitt describes his own work as populist, and has said that his pieces are “basically blown-up versions of dining table craft projects.” He continues, “I’ve really enjoyed letting the world know that not everything is so mystified or so regulated to expertise—that you can make something really beautiful with a little ingenuity and some supplies from Michael’s.”

He has been the subject of several individual exhibitions at major international institutions such as Kunsthalle, Zürich (2017); Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit (2015); Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2012); Guggenheim Museum (2010); Tate Modern (2009); Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati (2001). He has also participated in numerous group shows at Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2020); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (2018); Museum of the City of New York (2017); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2017); Palais de Tokyo (2010); Fondation François Pinault, Punta Della Dogana & Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2009); MoMA PS1 (2006); Museum of Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C (2000).

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Aishti Collection, Beirut, Lebanon
De La Cruz Collection, Miami, US
Hoggard Wagner Art Collection, New York, US
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, US
Pinault Collection, Venice, Italy and Paris, France
Rubell Family Collection, Miami, US
Syz Collection, Geneva, Switzerland
The Andy Monument, Union Square, New York, US
The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, US
Taguchi Art Collection, Kanagawa, Japan

LIZZI BOUGATSOS

Born in 1974 in New York, USA

Lives and works in New York, USA

Lizzi Bougatsos is an internationally recognized experimental musician, lyricist and visual artist who lives and works in Brooklyn.

Her work has been exhibited at institutions such as The Sao Paulo Biennale, Hauser & Wirth, American Fine Arts Co., TRAMPS, The Breeder - Greece, Museo d'arts Contemporanea di Roma, Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst - Oslo, Norway, White Columns, Performance Space NY, The Whitney Museum of American Art. From May 18 to September 15, she will be a part of the duo show "Never the same song" alongside Lonnie Holley at the Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg.

Selected performances include "Concert for Yoko Ono, Washington and the World" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and "I am here, Where are you: On Vocal Performance" at the Bergen Kunsthall and in 2014, an adaptation of John Cage's 4'33 in conjunction with "John Cage: There Will Never Be Silence" at the Museum of Modern Art. Bougatsos collaborated with artists such as Lonnie Holley, Kim Gordon, Rita Ackermann, Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda's Ashram singers at Knockdown Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Bougatsos and her band Gang Gang Dance, spanning two decades now, led the 8/8/08 BOADRUM, a collaboration with the legendary band BOREDOMS where she sang with 88 drummers. Bougatsos is also the second half of punk noise outfit I.U.D. with Sadie Laska.



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