

IN THE
STUDIO



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ON THE SCENE,
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TO PROVOKE, BUT
HIS AESTHETIC OF EXCESS
LOOKS MORE VITAL
THAN EVER

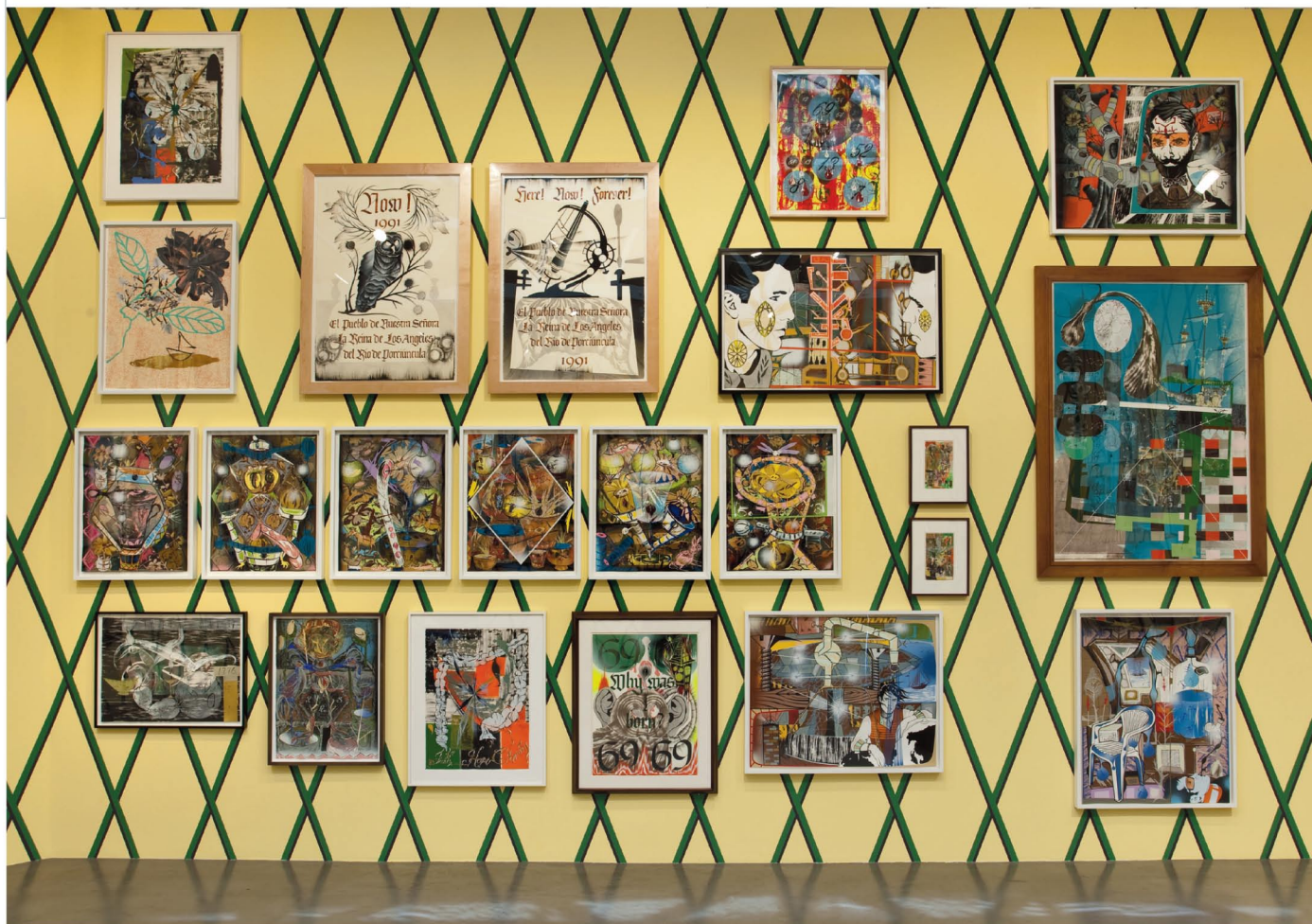
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH WEBB

LARI PITTMAN





Lari Pittman, who says he is "incredibly protective" of his time in the studio, in front of one of the paintings in progress for his current show at Gladstone Gallery, New York. Opposite, tables throughout the space are heaped with pigment in bottles, spray paint cans, stencils, and brushes.



Right: An installation view of Pittman's "Orangerie," at Regen Projects last fall. Below: *Untitled #5*, 2010, from the same show. "I have always used a very formal structuring of the event in a space," he says.

LARI PITTMAN'S STUDIO occupies a nondescript two-story building on a busy boulevard in Atwater, just east of Los Angeles's tony Los Feliz neighborhood. It's the sort of cinder-block shell that may have once housed doctors' offices or an auto-body shop. Now, however, the ground floor is unmistakably the domain of a painter. Its three voluminous rooms are flooded with sunlight coming through an expanse of frosted glass at the front and an open garage door in the rear; a half dozen folding tables are loaded with brushes and bottled pigments arrayed in tidy rows; and canvases in progress are centered on each wall. There is one chair, a ladder, and a radio sometimes tuned to talk shows for background noise, but nothing else to distract.

Pittman, 59, works alone, and he makes sure he picks up a brush nearly every day, no matter what else is on the calendar. "I know artists my age who just complain about making work," he says, "but I still gain such pleasure from it, and I guess I am incredibly protective of that."

He developed the habit early. For a decade after earning his MFA from CalArts in 1976, he worked full-time for the interior designer Angelo Donghia while honing his elaborate, more-is-more painting style in off-hours. Starting in 1983 he had annual solo shows at Rosamund Felsen, in Los Angeles, and contributed to numerous group shows, but he kept his day job. In the mid 1980s he switched to teaching, first in Santa Barbara, then Irvine, finally settling at UCLA, where he was hired with tenure in 1993. "I guess they liked that I had the design résumé and, in my early 40s, had already been showing in New York and Europe," he says. In the '90s he settled on his current U.S. gallery representation, changing to Regen Projects in Los Angeles and soon thereafter moving from Jay Gorney to Barbara Gladstone in New York, while also having solo outings at Jablonka,

in Cologne, and White Cube, in London, among others.

Pittman discusses his work with the patient self-assurance of someone who has been explaining it to collectors, dealers, and critics for a long time. But his confidence, it would seem, is innate. It is what allowed Pittman to come out as a teenager, long before it was common to do so. And it's what gave him the resolve to pursue painting at CalArts in the 1970s when virtually everyone else was turning away from the medium. At times his particular brand of painting—which has »



always borrowed in equal measure from decoration and high art—has appeared positively visionary, it was so far beyond the mainstream. Now, as a younger generation of painters has come under his influence, he appears less an outsider and more an artist just slightly ahead of his time.

It is possible to look back through Pittman's output and see general trends. But it is difficult to separate out distinct periods. Just when did his figures start to layer and almost merge, losing the collagelike feel of some earlier work? And when did compositions overtly grappling with sex and repression give way to lush compositions rooted in emotion rather than narrative? Certain motifs, such as the balloon-like heads and disembodied dancing legs, have recurred for decades, while others might develop in a few series, then disappear only to reemerge years later. In Pittman's view, it is all of a piece. "For me, painting is a continuous practice," he says. "It is a language you build up over time."

In fact, when preparing for a new show, he begins by thinking of loose themes that both distinguish the new paintings and connect them to previous bodies of work.

Right: *The Veneer of Order*, from a 1985 series grappling with American history and the pretense of equality. **Below:** *Spiritual and Needy*, 1991.



For the exhibition currently at Gladstone Gallery, in New York, on view through October 22, Pittman spent six months exploring the tradition of memento mori and the iconography of the orangery. The latter theme connects the current corpus to his presentation last fall at Regen Projects, in L.A., in which many of the pictures were hung on a wall crisscrossed with a painted lattice, so that viewers felt as if they were looking at the works inside a garden pavilion. Many of this year's pieces—about a dozen large canvases and one 24-part grid of smaller works on paper—have a lattice of diagonal lines painted across their own surfaces. We are now alone inside the structure, Pittman explains, looking at the outside world through a permeable wall.

"I have always used a very formal structuring of the event in a space," Pittman says. "In these works it is a sort of proscenium." Indeed all his paintings have the feel of theatrical presentations. They likewise embrace the exuberance of propaganda and commercial art while forgoing the simplistic commercialism of Pop. Rather than a rational narrative, a Pittman painting delivers a heady mix of allusions and chains of references. This is particularly true of his more recent output. One large canvas in the studio, for instance, contains a pair of figures—a woman and a bird—executed in a style reminiscent of Pennsylvania Dutch furniture painting, plus two swaddled babies whose smooth ovoid outlines make them look like a cross between Russian nesting dolls and astronauts. In Pittman's telling it portrays a genealogy of unions between protagonists that culminates in the still life with fruit and fish at the bottom of the picture. Turning to a piece on a nearby wall, he continues, "Here the baby is being born of this flower." Looking at these works triggers an intellectual dance in the imagination at the same time that the perfectly calibrated color contrasts and intertwined decorative devices engage and delight the eye on a purely formal level.

One group of paintings for the Gladstone show riffs on fado, pavane, *saudade*, and *saeta*—four Portuguese and Spanish musical styles that correlate roughly to the blues and memorial compositions. "I'm looking at how types of music fit in with the larger theme of memento mori," Pittman explains. Each picture in this group incorporates the name of a musical style with empty vessels and »





Pittman with his collection of *retablos* in the studio kitchen that he shares with his partner, Roy Dowell. “Ever since we were young, we both have been acquirers,” he says.

flowers or fruits—symbols from the still life tradition. These elements are arrayed in repetitive patterns to evoke musical rhythms. The whole is rendered in Pittman’s signature juxtaposition of muted and highly keyed colors that somehow resolves clashing hues into a cohesive whole.

Pittman uses forms from decorative art not merely as structural devices to tie together his complex imagery but as subject matter alluding to traditional notions of women’s work and homosexuality. Along with the wallpaper patterns, decorated jugs, and 19th-century silhouette portraits, there is also overtly sexual iconography: testicles and anuses. Through the 1980s and ’90s Pittman expressly depicted gay subjects, even if he never felt reconciled to the “gay artist” label. “I know artists of color who have that same problem, the moniker that goes first before artist,” he says. “I feel very central culturally and don’t understand why people want to marginalize me in that way.” During the naughts he moved away from overt portrayal to suggestion through subjects, such as domesticity, that embody a gay sensibility. “The work is less *about* being gay, and now it simply *is*,” Pittman says. “I still ask people, ‘Do you think a straight man could do that work?’ and I am happy to hear a resounding ‘No.’”

Pittman seems overdue for a museum retrospective—the last was in 1996, a show organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that traveled to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Corcoran, in Washington—but nearly 30 years after his first solo gallery outing, he is busier than ever creating new work. Next spring he’ll have pieces at Gerhardsen Gerner, in Berlin, and at Frieze 2012 he’ll be exhibited at Thomas Dane, his new London representative after more than a decade with Greengrassi.

To keep up with demand, Pittman paints for a few hours in the morning before heading to class. It helps that

his studio is something of a home away from home. He shares the building with his partner, the artist Roy Dowell, whom he met 36 years ago when both were students at CalArts. They live together in La Crescenta, where they pursue their common interest in gardening. They bought a six-acre lot there in 1997 and originally stayed in the house already on the grounds, which was designed by Richard Neutra in 1952 for his secretary; last year they moved into a new, larger one, designed by Michael Maltzan, that they had constructed on the site. At the Atwater building, Dowell, who teaches at Otis College of Art and Design, works in a portion of the upstairs, which also contains a guest apartment comfortably outfitted with midcentury furniture and an eclectic array of artwork. “Back here I just did a hanging of Sister Corita works from the 1960s and ’70s,” says Pittman, indicating the guest bedroom. Collecting is another joint passion. In the kitchen space is a wall filled with Latin American *retablos* and an alcove that displays a selection of Oaxacan pottery from the 1930s and ’40s.

Pittman comes by his interest in Hispanic art through his mother. Although he was born at Glendale Hospital, just blocks from his current studio, he lived in Colombia, her homeland, until he was 11. To help maintain his connection with Latin culture, he and Dowell have a place in Mexico, complete with a shared studio space where Pittman paints small works on paper he can easily transport back and forth. In part so that he can spend more time there, he hopes to cut back his load at the university in a few years. But he doesn’t want to quit teaching completely—“I get a lot out of working with young artists,” he says, “I think it keeps my work relevant”—any more than he would give up his studio. “I just love being in the studio,” he says. “It is such a privilege.” ☐