



TASTE WILL OUT

Lari Pittman's avant-garde traditionalism BY DOUG HARVEY





NOAH WEBB



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HERE'S SOMETHING DEEPLY macho about Lari Pittman's paintings. On the surface, they swagger abrasively enough—aggressively pushing his audience's formalist taste buttons while flaunting all kinds of impolite topics, including personal and political violence, explicit sexuality, and rampant capitalism. High-testosterone stuff. On the surface, though, these energies are contained and channeled by an intricate aesthetic and symbolic decorum that is elegant, flamboyant, and ingratiating. Yet the longer you look, the more the layers of manner fall away, and

grandiose, heroic, nonverbal, pre-symbolic, existential gesture comes into focus. Lari Pittman—the last Abstract Expressionist.

Strangely, for the past two decades, Pittman has been the poster boy for the *opposite* of Abstract Expressionism. His meticulously crafted, symbol- and picture-saturated canvases have embraced the major *bêtes noires* of AbEx: pictorial storytelling, spatial illusion, decoration, and kitsch. Born (and raised—apart from a sojourn in his maternal homeland of Colombia) in Los Angeles, Pittman attended UCLA and CalArts in the 1970s but burst onto the art world's global consciousness in the early '90s

with the inclusion of his deep, dense pictographic compositions in MOCA's 1992 exhibit *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* and the 1993 Whitney Biennial. That same year, he was hired with tenure at UCLA, where he has been grooming generations of young painters ever since.

Since then, Pittman has maintained a high art world profile—the subject of handsome monographs and Art21 profiles, biennale appearances, and regular museum surveys (including last summer's "A Decorated Chronology," at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis)—while the rationale behind his significance has shifted from queer identity to revisionist championing of excluded formalisms to post-9/11 elegiacism to his unlikely current position as synthetic virtuoso of his own hermetic painting language—a painter's painter art star.

Pittman's visual art is almost as much a form of literary pastiche as it is a tightrope walk of aesthetic perversion, with his vocabulary and content (informed by his exposure to feminism at CalArts and his decade as an operative for interior designer Angelo Donghia) mutating over the years from abstract domestic surrealism through variations of claustrophobic Victoriana, plastic dystopian cyberpunk, and operatic noir to a vaguely Eastern European, vaguely *völkisch*, vaguely modernist

LARI PITTMAN AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES



amalgam that includes fragments of all that came before. What were once jumbled puzzles of crisp, computer-generated clip art and Visa-card logos became layered veils of Kafkaesque set pieces draped over a contemporary military-industrial infrastructure.

In spite of this increasing geographical and historical indeterminacy, Pittman has been habitually characterized as an L.A. Artist, a categorical designation with which—like most categorical designations—the artist has never been comfortable. “Since I have always worked with complete centrality of identity,” he recently declared, “I can’t third-person myself as to what constitutes being a Los Angeles artist.” Surely, though there’s something of L.A.’s sprawling, symbol-laden, hyperlinked landscape in Pittman’s similarly structured visual syntax. “I do have a strong visceral, physical, and dreamlike relationship with my city, my home, my garden, and my friends,” Pittman concedes. “I know the entire city by memory and I never use my car’s GPS. My daily life is analog space and time, and I love the deeply social act of driving—fast!” For better or worse, the most tangible manifestation of this alleged regionalism has been his decision to stay in L.A. and make it his base of operations. Locally, the benefits have been enormous.

Pittman’s most recent exhibition at his home-base gallery,

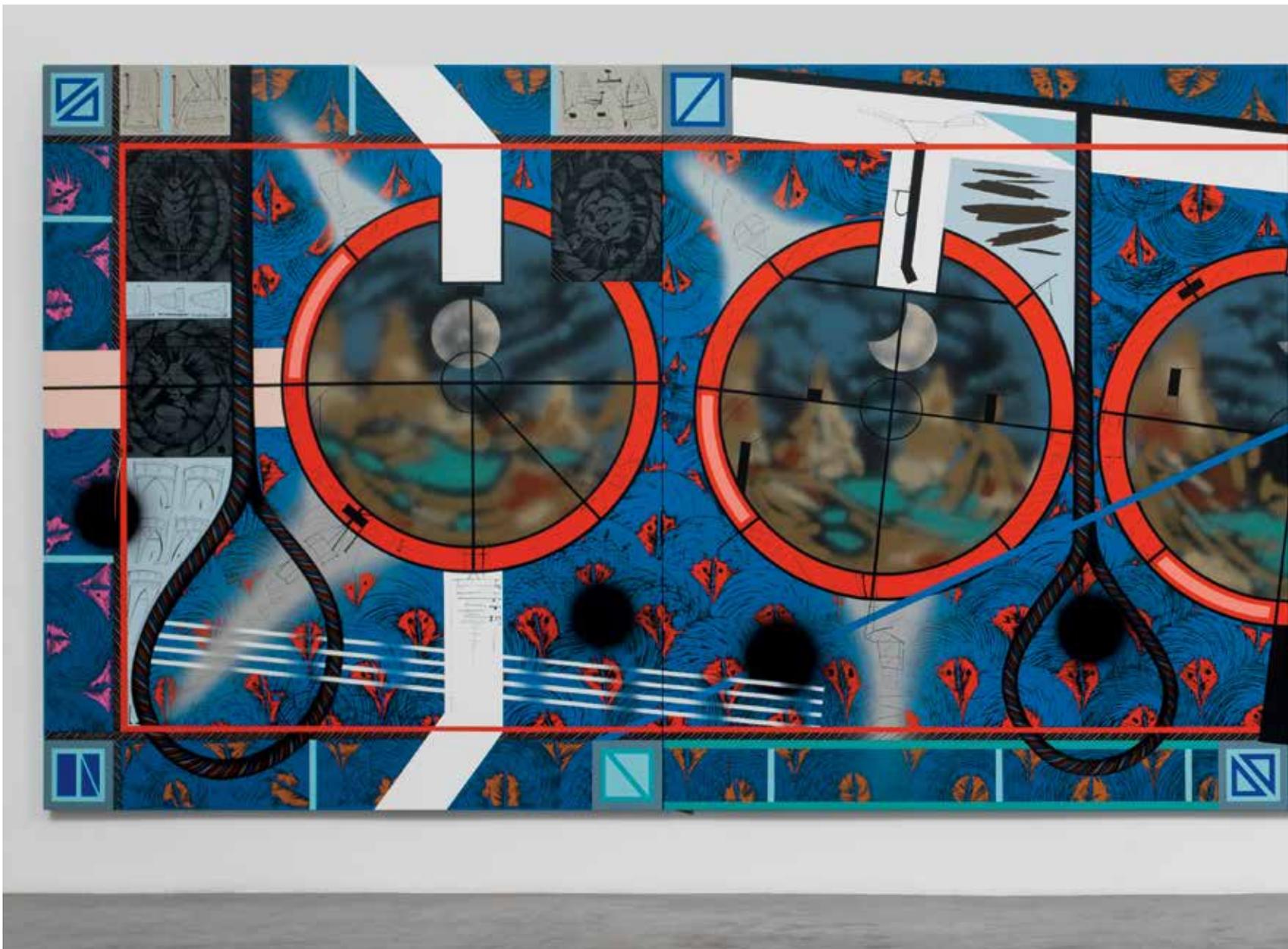
Regen Projects, “From a Late Western Impaerium,” included the largest paintings he’s ever made: three 9-by-30-foot multi-panel compositions referred to as Flying Carpets and referencing the titular tapestries in their overall design—and in their function as escape hatches to a less easily rationalized realm. Within their decorative borders, Pittman’s iconography has grown even more indeterminate, with near-identical clusters of lines coalescing here into a handgun, there into an assortment of what... kitchenware? Office supplies? Sex toys? Laboratory instruments?

All of the above? This pictorial ambiguity isn’t exactly new to Pittman’s work (it could, in fact, be described as one of his trademarks), but it has recently achieved a centrality and permeation that infects even the most clearly delineated images with an inescapable existential anxiety and political fluidity. Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just glad to see the collapse of the symbolic orders of late capitalism?

One of these three enormous rectangles—the green one, *Flying Carpet with Magic Mirrors for a Distorted Nation* (all 2013)—was dominated by a relatively intelligible image: a half dozen fluorescent-lime hand mirrors framing anachronistic (Civil War-era?) faces, all looking away from the viewer, as if you had just opened a museum storage drawer only to see the reflections

Flying Carpet with Petri Dishes for a Disturbed Nation, 2013. Cel-vinyl, spray enamel on canvas over wood panel, 9 x 30 ft.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Pittman with his collection of retablos in his Los Angeles studio kitchen, 2011.



Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation, 2013. Cel-vinyl, spray enamel on canvas over wood panel, 9 x 30 ft.

OPPOSITE, BELOW: *Needlepoint Sampler with Patches (#1) Depicting Daily Life of a Late Western Impaerium*, 2013. Cel-vinyl and spray enamel on canvas, 9 x 7½ ft.

of a throng of shameful ghosts crowding behind you. The red one—*Flying Carpet with Petri Dishes for a Disturbed Nation*—was bracingly symmetrical, with a double-barreled set of gigantic white cylinder sections loaded with molecular buckshot and disintegrating duck decoys. Ready for war.

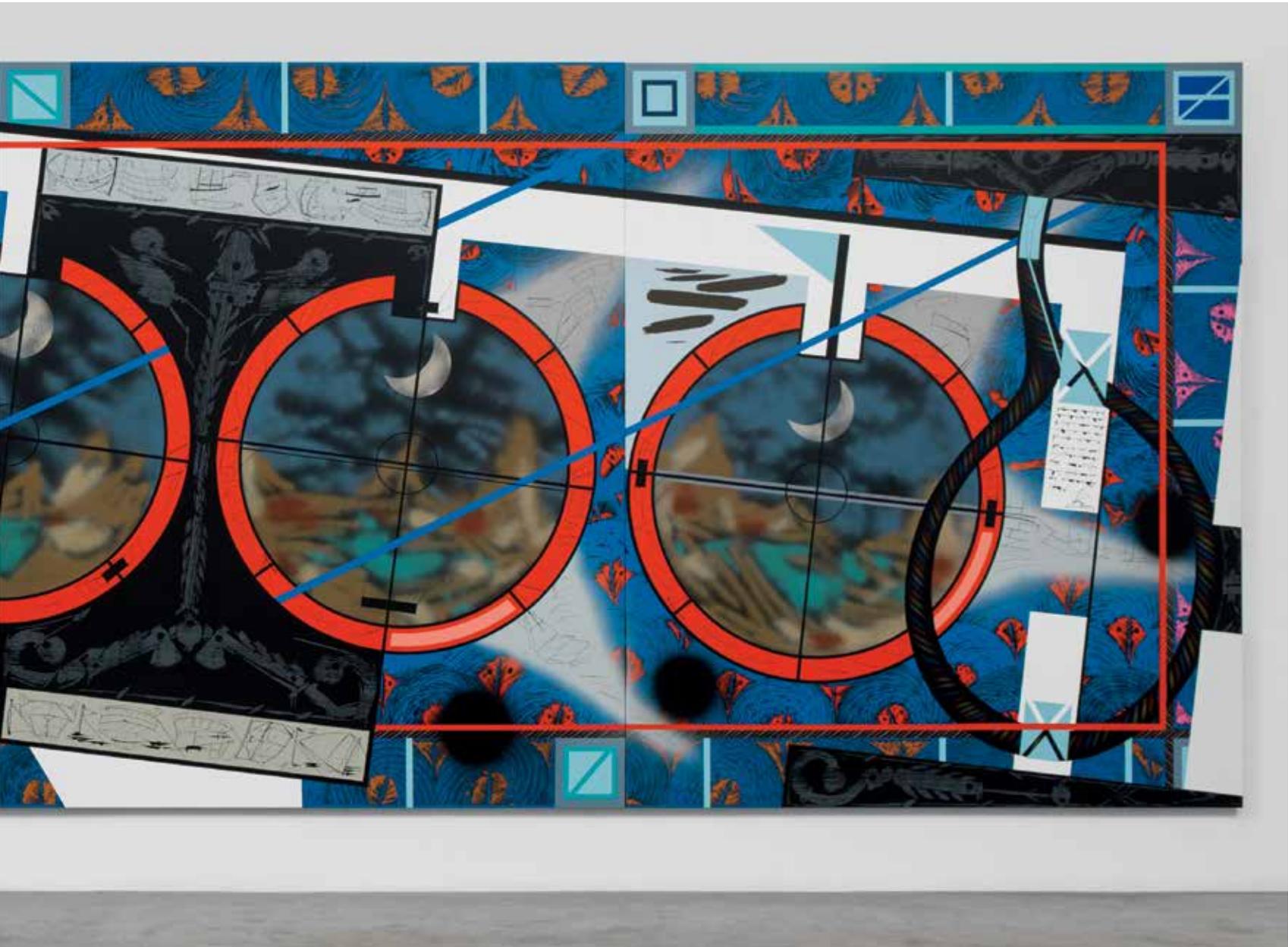
The blue one—*Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon over a Violent Nation*—was my favorite, the one that most successfully ensnared the crumbling semiotics of militaristic nationalism. I make out a blurry American landscape scene—possibly of Native American genocide—filtered through the portholes of a sinking ship, which reads simultaneously as a riflescope and as an overhead view of an engineer’s drafting table. Among other things. As Leonard Cohen has pointed out, “There is no decent place to stand in a massacre.”

The rest of the Regen show consisted of two smaller paintings and nine grids of up to a dozen elaborate works on paper. Several of these groupings were almost entirely emptied of recognizable imagery and haunted by a presciently nostalgic retro-futurism, as if looking back on our present culture with a sad, irony-drenched fondness from a post-apocalyptic future—I kept thinking they would make awesome dust-jacket designs for the recent dystopian sci-fi of Margaret Atwood or Doris Lessing. And was reminded of Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2*: “You’re already dead, Silberman. Everybody dies. You know I believe it, so don’t fuck with me!”

The quantity of ambitious objets d’art here is already impressive, but in 2013 Pittman also had new work in the St. Louis show, solo shows in France and Athens, and a follow-up show,

“Curiosities from a Late Western Impaerium,” which opens at the Gladstone Gallery in Brussels on March 12 (“60 to 75 works on paper in groupings of 4, 8, or 12 to create ‘cabinets’ showing brain scans, dead architecture, engineered food, manifestos, needlepoints, city planning, and more!” the artist exclaims). What flips this output into the Holy shit! category is the fact that Pittman prides himself on physically performing all of his painting himself, a rarity in this era of global market saturation schedules and industrialized studio production. Perhaps reluctant to indict his lazy, duplicitous colleagues, Pittman’s take is cagey. “I love reading the *New York Times*’ fashion critic Cathy Horyn’s yearly and incredibly intelligent defense of haute couture as the parade of runway shows debuts every season,” he confides. “She insists that because of its apparently inherent uselessness, it gains an immense freedom in advancing its polemical power. There is a lot of room for contestation here, but I go with her!” What does that have to do with turpentine and the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction? “As much as I delight in retail culture and its command over the dissemination of the multiple,” Pittman explains, “my intellect and my skills are better served by making sequential, one-of-a-kind paintings without assistance and assistants.”

Huh. Pittman is less diplomatic about other aspects of the contemporary art world, particularly as regards the quality of life for the actual content providers. “All artists’ identities seem to have changed—or, rather, been bullied and traumatized”—he opines, “by the advent of art fairs, hyper-speculation, art



flipping, art dumping, and the demise of the gallery as a destination site to experience art, the narrative of programming, and the continuity and coherency of production.”

What is this, New York in the late '40s? I smell a Red! As Red as you can be and also maintain an exotic cactus garden. But this brings us back to our central thesis—that Lari Pittman spelled backward is Willem de Kooning. Having apprenticed for his entire teenage years at the Gidding & Zonen commercial art and decorating firm (followed nightly by hours of rigorous training at the Rotterdam Academy), de Kooning had to strip away layer after layer of refined semiotic filigree to arrive at a formalist vocabulary—impeccable compositional design, emphatic surfaces, subtle but forceful color, with content always trembling between abstraction, landscape, and figuration—that he felt was beyond compromise. Sound familiar?

Apart from the stripping away. Nevertheless, Pittman’s work is grounded and permeated by a sincere and intimate familiarity with the immediate, improvisational, hardwired, preverbal, *pre-agricultural* language of visual art—the very retinality that retarded followers of Duchamp (blessed be his name) banished from the theater of operations. But if everything is Art, why not make paintings? “People love paintings—to look at them, to discuss them, to argue about them, to write about them, to curate them, to sell them, to profit from them, to steal them, to hoard them, to advance socially because of them, and most importantly to continue making them,” barks Pittman, commandingly. “Sounds like a stiff corpse to me!” MP

