

REGEN PROJECTS

Sollins, Marybeth ed., "Lari Pittman," *Art: 21 4 Art In The Twenty-First Century*, 2007

Lari Pittman



ABOVE

Untitled #8 (The Dining Room), 2005
Cel vinyl, acrylic, and alkyd on gessoed
canvas over panel, 86 x 102 inches

OPPOSITE

Untitled #3 (In the Garden), 2005
Cel vinyl, acrylic, and alkyd on gessoed
canvas over panel, 102 x 86 inches

The micromanaging of aesthetics and beauty both in the work and in the way my partner and I conduct our life comes actually from acknowledging something a little sad. I think that we both conflate the managed state of beauty and aesthetics as a zone that allows safety. For us, then, the manic articulation of our surroundings is actually a form of creating a safe zone. I equate the managed aesthetics of my work and the construction of my personal life with creating an area of safety. So beauty is not an additive. The preoccupation with aesthetics is not just on the downtime: it's ideological, political, and conceptual. Of course it's about pleasure, but it's not about divertissement. It's not an aside, not a sidebar. It's actually about safety. I don't know how I could really explain it, but beauty and personal safety are strangely conflated in my mind. Maybe it's anti-chaos. The last two bodies of work and the body I'm working on now really do address more directly the construction of a personal life and what that entails—what actually occupies it and what, literally, it looks like. That's what precipitated the titling of the last paintings in terms of rooms of the house—*The Dining Room*, *The Living*

Room, *In the Garden* (all 2005). The titles of these paintings indicate on a political level the importance of residential space that is different from public space in terms of aesthetics and safety. For me, public space is intrinsically male and heterosexual. And residential space, which is the armature that I chose to make the paintings about and through, is a more polymorphous space that allows, historically, for more polymorphous identity. That's why residential space becomes amplified, for me, with ideological resonance and, then, worthy of some sort of representation and depiction in the paintings. So it was important to make a painting about a dining room, a living room, the garden, and infuse that with as much power as the banking world or law. . . . I've never lived a stripped down life. I don't think I could. So regardless of fortune or misfortune, I would devise some sort of bubble or protection for myself. I mean in that sense it's a really keen sense of survival, and a voracious one really. So, regardless of what situation I find myself in, I think that I would use aesthetics as a weapon for self-protection. The embellished Lari, the embellished work, is the real work.

Lari Pittman

Untitled, 2003

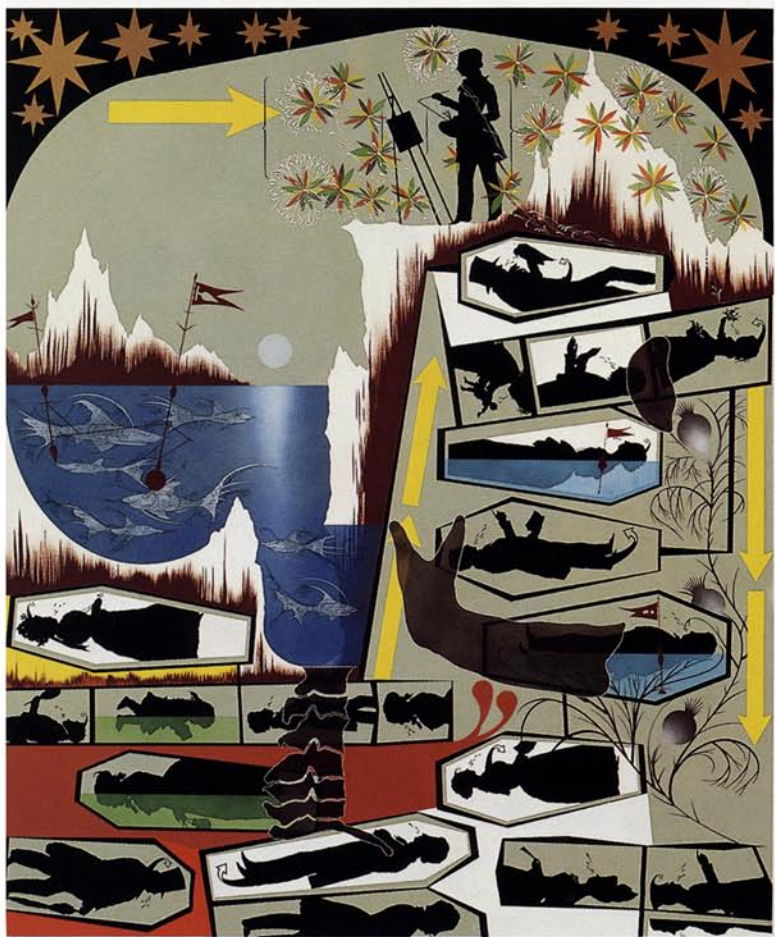
Matte oil, aerosol lacquer, and
cel vinyl on gessoed canvas over
wood panel, 76 x 102 inches

For me, craft has always been an ideological component in the work because it's about a type of focus and social comportment that usually isn't expected of a male. There's a dutifulness that historically has been referenced or attributed to females, so I've always seen my devotion to craft as a type of protest. In the applied arts, that attention to detail in craft by males is more permissible. But this kind of fussiness, lavishing this type of almost picky detail on a very big painting, just isn't always attributed to what men do. For me, from very early on, that attention to really fine craft was a way of temporarily transgenering. I like that feeling. I don't know if I can explain that, but maybe it's an enculturated transgenering—not some sort of essentialist idea of gender. In other words, I feel very liberated and free when I'm working, being dutiful and attentive to the object.

I know the work looks visually micro-managed, and maybe it is. In the chaos of what I'm showing you, there is actually a rationalism of structure underlying everything. But a big part of the making of the painting is me thinking on my feet and making decisions on the spot about how to bring this representation to some fruition. I don't always know the outcome.

I don't necessarily view the making of the painting as a sequence of solving problems. I see it more as a sequence of responses. So, for me, there's the big gesture. Okay. I did it. Now what am I going to do with it? I don't necessarily see it as a problem, but more as a challenge. How do I enhance the meaning? How do I perfume it? So it's more of a call and response. I'm always allergic to problem-solving because I just think it's so Puritan. And maybe that's a cultural thing for me. I've come to understand and internalize the spectator's appraisal of the work. And one of the things that I'm ambivalent about, but don't totally discard, is the fact that the work might seem a lot more constructed and pre-planned than it actually is.





Lari Pittman

LEFT

This Landscape, beloved and despised, continues regardless, 1989
Acrylic and enamel on mahogany panel,
72 x 60 inches
Private collection

RIGHT

This Wholesomeness, beloved and despised, continues regardless, 1990
Acrylic and enamel on wood panel,
128 x 96 inches
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

OPPOSITE

Attendant, 2006
Cel vinyl and aerosol enamel on gessoed
canvas over panel, 102 x 86 inches
Private collection, Oslo

I started to use silhouettes in a body of work in the late 1980s. The use of the silhouettes in those very early paintings was not about discussing something specific or about autobiography or personal experience. They were simply being used as surrogates to discuss social conventions, human behavior, encoded behavior. The idea of code is always really important in the work, and surrogates can help you advance this idea. So although, visually, the work appears to have a very strong declarative

voice, what is actually being advanced in the paintings is a subtext or a code. When you're looking at the work, you're looking at something visually declarative, but it requires a subtextual reading or a capacity or predisposition for reading code. That's why I used the Victorian silhouettes. It was just a great conceptual armature to be able to filter social code through. I like that the work is visually very declarative and available to everybody. But watch out! There's a code, and you'd better know it.



The cues for the basic color palette and figuration in *Attendant* (2006) come from a very small Mexican *retablo*, a devotional painting on tin, dating from the mid- to late nineteenth century. It depicts a flagellated Christ. As an atheist, I am attracted to religious art because it usually represents a hyperbolic moment like the suffering or martyrdom of a saint or, in this *retablo*, a dramatic moment in the life of Christ and a shocking image of a tortured physical body. So I look at this religious image through a secular lens.

I reconfigured the central image but I had to refer to the *retablo* because I've rarely done figurative work. Before I could just look at nature and invent; here I needed an actual cue for figuration. I've always taken from *retablos*, but it's been more about a kind of decorative, applied arts painting technique by which one embellishes the surface that I've been doing for over twenty years. This was the first time I sampled so directly. When you look at the painting there's an element that constantly connects one thing to the next,

becoming a vehicle for transit. The bridge is spanning the painting and brings together the lower part with the other part. The connections aren't just conceptual but also physical. The lei that goes around the neck connects to the gourds. The hands connect to the long pole being rammed into the earth. There are a lot of ties, ribbons, bows stuck on to the figure. So even though things might appear disconnected, I'm showing you literal moments of connection all through the painting. And that happens in all the paintings.



Lari Pittman

OPPOSITE

Untitled #32 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation), 1994
Acrylic, enamel, and glitter on panel,
84 x 60 inches
Private collection

ABOVE

Untitled #30 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation), 1994
Acrylic, enamel, and glitter on two wood
panels, 83 x 160 inches
Private collection

I think that, when you understand a Latino or ethnic sensibility, being simultaneously happy and sad is not a problem. Nor is it fundamentally contradictory. And so there's a bitter-sweetness in the work, which I trace back to that identity base. There is also the idea that the sequence of time in the work is multiple, a kind of late Surrealism which is fully declassified in some ways in art making. I think that the Surrealist component can still be traced to that. The paintings show the viewer many temporalities. There's climate and there's time. Sometimes there's even an indication in some of the paintings that the top half of the painting might be at night and the bottom half in daylight. I think that, in southern California (whose only history has been hyper-capitalism) hyper-capitalism foregrounds this idea of episodic time: "This is the eight hours for work; this is the eight hours to sleep. And this is the eight hours

for waking leisure." Capitalism really enforces compartmentalized, sequential time. As I look back on my formative years, I didn't grow up in that sense of time. You have to take this in a broader sense. Latino time is profoundly bittersweet because of its simultaneity. Even oppositional events can occupy the same spatial moment, the same time moment, and not really be contradictory. They're just there, side by side. And I think that simultaneity of time and imagery exists in the paintings. If you have a bittersweet cultural context, it allows you to entertain the possibility of the 'gorgeousness' of personal suffering. You can actually fetishize it and make it beautiful. Suffering and beauty are not antithetical, but actually complementary. It isn't about morbidity. It's actually a cultural mindset that is predisposed to aestheticizing even pain and suffering. It's not seen as decadent. It's just about a duality of things.

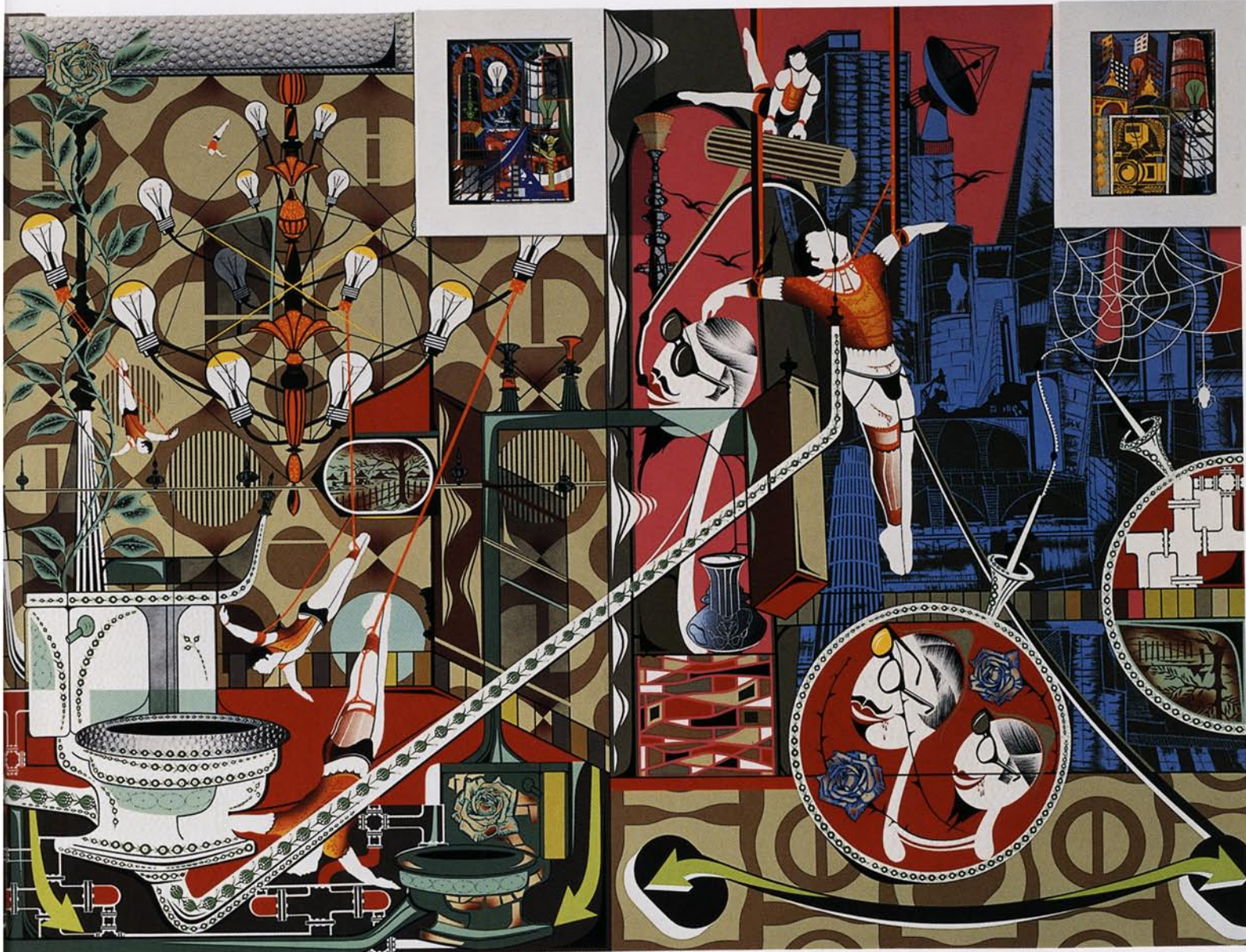


Lari Pittman

Once A Noun, Now A Verb #1, 1997
 Flat oil on mahogany panels with attached
 framed work on paper and three attached
 framed works on panel, 95 x 256 inches
 Norton Family Foundation

I think one of the relationships that would be essential for you to have with the work is that, when you stand in front of it (and I'm telling you it's a completely fabricated, highly mannerized moment), you either go with it or you resent it. This is not a simulation of anything; it is a highly artificialized moment of representation. The painting has always been relentless about that. In the same way that you have to have that type of negotiation when as a contemporary viewer

you go to an opera, there has to be a complete understanding and accepting of the whole mannerist endeavor or else you're just not going to enjoy it. All the paintings set up this intense mannerism. Everything is hyperbolized and highly decorated. And the decoration is decorated. I guess it's trying to insist on the possibility of a primary experience, but within the confines of something very artificial. The work doesn't shy away from that. It's not about naturalism on any level.



More than anything, I was accorded complete centrality as a young boy—but as a young kind of feminine boy that was given complete and uncensored expression. Whatever kind of predilection or whim I would exhibit there was just simply no raised eyebrow. I think that might have set the stage. . . . I don't know if there were specific memories that, as I look back on them, might have indicated that I would become an artist. But that precondition of allowing me as a young

boy to express a fey side was given full rein and never ever commented on. I think that the decorative aspect of the work comes systemically, organically, naturally, to me because it was really allowed to bloom and blossom and wasn't curtailed or curbed when I was a child. You don't understand the implications of those situations when you're a child. Only in retrospect do you acknowledge perhaps how pivotal or how powerful they were as signifiers.



Lari Pittman

OPPOSITE

Miraculous and Needy, 1991
Acrylic and enamel on mahogany panel,
82 x 66 inches
Private collection, Los Angeles

ABOVE

Untitled #1 (The Living Room), 2005
Cel vinyl, acrylic, and alkyd on gessoed
canvas over panel, 86 x 102 inches

The remembrance of death—memento mori—is a big part of the work. And, again, it's bittersweet because you want to commemorate death but you are consumed with the mandate of aesthetics. So you have to fuse within the object the mandate to address life and death, and then the formal mandate to address aesthetics and connoisseurship. They must be fused together in the object.

In all of the paintings, and especially the ones that I showed in New York at the end of 2005, there really is a form of poltergeist or animism inhabiting the scene. Many times it's coming from an inanimate object, or sometimes it's centralized within an animate object. But I'm more interested in that poltergeist being an inanimate object. I understand it to be

a really theatrical moment, and it kind of makes me cringe sometimes when it nears itself to science fiction a bit or is sometimes seen that way. I try to suppress it a little bit by it never being too spectacular, just mildly—not overwhelmingly—present. I know that the work has a brutal side to it. There's even a strong implied violence to it, an internalized violence. It's not a personal one, really; it's a social violence. And I still want it somehow not just to be a document of will alone or power alone that somehow has to be mediated through its appearance. I invest a lot in the power of something looking one way but implying another. I'm not interested in brute force. I'm interested in the brute force of high tea. And maybe that's what I might identify with more.