

# REGEN PROJECTS

## artUS

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*Lari Pittman* BY LANCE CARLSON

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*Lari Pittman*



Admitting frailty as a viewer is especially hard for a critic, and yet there is always a normal tendency to try reflexively to make sense of the work in an exhibition on one's own terms. This inclination may be one of the foremost issues in appreciating contemporary art, as viewers try to piece the work together logically. Much is lost as arts consumers attempt to impose rational explanatory models on works that may not be amenable to straightforward analysis. Lari Pittman's latest exhibition at Regen Projects is just such a case, presenting an opportunity to wrestle with moving-target narratives while exploring a range of personal and cultural theses that resist easy consumption.

Pittman has been producing paintings in Los Angeles for over two decades. As his career has evolved, his accomplishments have been noticed precisely because the artist has never veered from his preferred format of painting, and all the more so given his early CalArts pedigree, which might lead one to assume that he would have at least ventured into overtly conceptual projects. Yet this mode of practice has held Pittman's attention even in the wake of academic distrust of unadulterated painting over the last three decades and the seemingly dominant hiatus in formal concerns that has occurred at the same time.

At the most obvious level, Pittman offers his audience sheer visual over-stimulation. His current show consists of six large works (each around six by eight feet), all containing Pittman's signature hues; electric greens and pale pinks collide at every turn with soft browns and flat color-rich fields that are often described as types of wallpaper. Characteristically, Pittman serves up exquisitely painted and detailed silhouettes, symbols, and pattern areas. By means of what looks like airbrushing or masking off areas to yield







hard-edged lines, the artist creates figures and near-abstract forms that appear, in the most affirmative sense, slick. The painted surfaces bear little trace of brushstrokes or other clues as to the method of application, contributing to their overall appearance as jarringly decorative or ornamental. Gossamer, web-like organic tendrils unfurl throughout most of the imagery, sometimes culminating in phallic forms or shapes that suggest other bodily structures or functions.

Generally the paintings contain at least one dominant humanoid shape, yet these beings exist as monstrous kachina-like constructs or totems; the central figures dominate each frame, and most of them are rendered in such a manner as to appear wrathful creatures, often wielding scabbards or other sharp weapons. There are large, adult-scaled characters brimming with rage or revolt, all arraigned in counterpoint to his ubiquitous Victorian-looking notations and refined bric-a-brac from another time and place. Much of this contrapuntal imagery is set against funky abstract backdrops that occasionally include blocky buildings or other structures. Throughout, Pittman splits the visual frame into a number of grids; the result is often a grating sense of multiplicity not only in relation to divergent realities and emotions, but also assorted moments in time. In the past Pittman has referred to this strategy as an attempt to convey a sense of simultaneity, or the assertion that many coincident events or truths may be operating at any one point. For the viewer it can be somewhat confusing, although bringing an open mind to the arrangement certainly helps to lessen the unease.

The baroque intricacy of Pittman's imagery has provoked occasional grumbling about his work. The paintings are indeed jam-packed, making it exceedingly difficult to digest all the surplus layers and their congested symbolism. The relationships between the disparate elements seem elusive even after intense study, and while there are occasionally relatively direct clues, it is more productive to embrace these paintings thematically, drawing on their reoccurring motifs and materials rather than attempting to discover a single, isolated statement buried deep beneath the surface. In some respects, the paintings epitomize a stream of consciousness, and one gains much by simply allowing them to "be," to accept the opposing subject matter rather than trying to impose a linear account upon it. Ultimately, the imagery resonates, themes emerge, and the paintings become transformed into snapshots of our lives at this moment in time, full of conflict, desire, beauty, anxiety, and randomness—which is, after all, how life is experienced. For anyone living in Los Angeles, they also document the city's car-crash environment, with its competing emotions and multitudinous and often conflicting lifestyles.

As with past efforts, Pittman's elegant infusion of Victorian tropes with period furniture styles occupies center stage in these new paintings. When paired with his buoyant hues and the featureless application of paint, the result is a thematic overlay of often gender-bending proportions. Pittman's inclusion of "apropos" images and sensitive renderings also trumpets an oversized, inflated sense of the prim and proper; they are downright prissy in some obvious respects. Yet Pittman sets the meanings of these motifs adrift, intuitively drawing on strategies rooted in identity (or queer) theory by suggesting that the consequence of such symbolism is fluid. The implication is that fixed identity, like the logical weight one might wish to add to the imagery, demands probing at every turn. Herein Pittman disputes all notion of a cast-iron self or significance. Over time his investigations have advanced themselves, and because of that persistence his displacement of masculinity/femininity and sexual norms has evolved into a finely honed stratagem of disruption.

In the end, Pittman poses a provocative array of questions on a number of planes. It might be asserted that he has kept the same conversation going far too long, but that assertion only takes wing if his questioning had begun to yield finished results. While dialogue with Pittman's oeuvre must continue, given the social backdrop in which we all operate it seems doubtful that the artist will exhaust his raw material in the immediate future.

