

REGEN PROJECTS

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Lari Pittman, *Grand Tour*, 2011, acrylic, Cel-Vinyl, and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over wood panel, 102 x 88".

SAINT LOUIS

Lari Pittman

CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM ST. LOUIS

"A Decorated Chronology," curated by Kelly Shindler at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, was a welcome (if modest) survey of works by the illustrious and prolific painter Lari Pittman. The show came on the heels of the artist's solo presentation at Le Consortium in Dijon, France, this past spring and was his first solo museum exhibition in the US since a 1996 midcareer survey organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Though the twenty-eight paintings and twenty-four works on paper included here were primarily from the past decade, a few carefully selected earlier pieces showcased shifts in tone and process over time, and the exhibition's title,

taken from the series "A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation," 1992–94, signaled that Pittman's particular form of resistance would assume a central role.

Since graduating from Cal Arts in 1976, Pittman—long a fixture of Los Angeles—has been making paintings that center on social and sexual politics, addressed in vertigo-inducing, layered compositions punctuated by brilliant colors, calligraphic text, and an abiding interest in ornament and surface. Like his classmate Mike Kelley, he turned to craft early on as a strategy of defiance, pushing against the gendered sidelining of that tradition. *Thanksgiving*, 1985 (the earliest painting in the show), and a selection of can-

vases from the '90s stake out the territory for which Pittman became well known: joyfully queer symbolism and candid references to AIDS cunningly woven around text evoking the American promise of equal rights for all. Infamous for drawing from an astonishing array of styles and subjects (carnival signage, commercial graphics, midcentury interior design and abstraction, LA funk, etc.) and folding them all into his own mannered aesthetic, Pittman marshaled hyberbolic embellishment in opposition to the status quo at a time when the first wave of identity politics was hitting the art world.

By the early 2000s, in a direct response to events post-9/11, Pittman's tableaux had become especially dark and atmospheric, their graphics less burlesque. Several untitled works from 2003 and 2004 depict threatening conglomerations of war helmets, desolate landscapes, and swaying scimitars or axes. But the violence is more sublimated in Pittman's domestic scenes from the following year, such as *Untitled #4 (In the Patio)*, 2005, in which marionette figures surrounded by spiky cacti concoct an exquisite private tension. In his paintings from 2005 onward, vases, china, sconces, and jugs start to proliferate again, and a delicate vulnerability seems to surface. *Untitled #8*, 2010, is a Japonisme-style ode to Matisse, with a diagonal grid of interwoven flowers and stylized cranes with feathery tendrils—a relatively restrained wallpaper-like composition. And each of the two dozen works on paper arranged in a grid for *Orangerie*, 2011, is overlaid with a white latticework pattern, so that viewing the piece is akin to peering through a garden trellis to witness scenes that are by turns humorous, grim, beautiful, and salacious.

Seen in the context of Pittman's more baroque mash-ups of the 1980s and '90s, these recent works have a noticeably refined, even wistful sensibility, with gentler, more rococo flourishes. Though still continuing his crusade of profusion, Pittman seems to be letting the more militant aspects of his project give way to a seeping sense of calming introspection, a quality often discussed in relation to his work made before the mid-'80s. But an inward turn, or a domestication of his wild aesthetic, would only be fitting for a painter devoted to the power of decoration—which is as much a matter of making oneself at home as it is an artistic pursuit.

—Ivy Cooper