

Surface Tension

In his kaleidoscopic paintings, **LARI PITTMAN** revels in the complex beauty of the apparent and the unseen *by* RACHEL KUSHNER / *portrait by* PAUL JASMIN

There's an anecdote about Los Angeles-based artist Lari Pittman being asked to set the table as a child, and he proceeded to decorate all the dishes with objects from his mother's jewelry box, clipping earrings to the edges of plates and so forth. Another time, he dressed his pet chicken, Jaime, for an airplane flight in a complete outfit sewn by female relatives, which included a hat (that unfortunately wouldn't stay on Jaime's head). These are stories Pittman has recounted in interviews to provide a window into a very early instinctual relationship with decoration and artifice. Yet Pittman, whose vivid, large-scale paintings are covered in flourishes and reticulations of design, is an artist who intellectualizes beauty and adornment rather than fetishizes it. Surface, for Pittman, has the breadth and density of deeply coded terrain. "I don't have a cultural mistrust of the surface," he says. "A reflective, sensational surface is still a conduit for meaning."

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Untitled #2, 2010, acrylic, Cel-Vinyl and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over panel, 102 x 88 inches.





A monumental figure in the history of L.A. art—albeit one not closely tied to any particular movement or school—Pittman has been developing his idiosyncratic, meta-visionary style for the last three decades.

The morning I meet with him to see his new body of work, on view this month at Regen Projects—along with a career-spanning survey of his works on paper—he and his partner of 35 years, painter Roy Dowell, have just returned from a week at their second home, in San Miguel de Allende.

“I like the pace of life there,” Pittman says in the lounge area of his studio, against a wall of Mexican *retablos* (small devotional folk paintings) he has been collecting for years. “Lunch is from 2 to 4, then there is a siesta, and at 6, a *passeggiata*, which, like in Italy, means everyone out in the streets. Then people work late, and dinner is at 10 or 10:30.”

There is a quick reverie on the way locals use language. “Instead of *café*,” he says, “you say *cafecito*. There’s something that pulls me toward a culture that can negotiate great social meaning, and humanity, within the use of the diminutive.”

Pittman and Dowell have been going to Mexico since the late ’70s, and although there are many Anglo expatriates in San Miguel de Allende, Pittman is a local in sensibility, due to his own richly hybrid background. Of Colombian and Italian descent, he was born in L.A., but when he was five, his family moved back to his mother’s native Colombia, to Cali and then to Tumaco.

A certain comfort with contradiction comes through in Pittman’s character—he is

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kind, relaxed and generous but also humming with a precise intensity. In his paintings, he cultivates tensions between imagery that is stark and dazzling, layered and ambiguous, vernacular and lofty, viscerally explicit and refined. The most striking contradiction about Pittman is perhaps that his work exudes a resplendent, almost rapturous optimism right alongside something like unvarnished despair.

His new paintings are guided by a set of brackets or sensibilities, as he alternately calls them: spring and fall; the notion of secular religious paintings; and poetic terminologies for semiabstract forms of longing. He offers *tristesse* as an example. “Also *pavane...fado...* and *saeta*, which is a type of very emotional, passionate gypsy song. *Saudade*—a beautiful word, Portuguese—is a kind of induced sentimentality and longing, a nostalgia for events of the past.”

Lastly, and perhaps relating to *saudade*, Pittman says he was thinking as he worked of what the world might have looked like before cognitive language was established. He recalls a primal memory of his own infancy, lying on green carpet and looking up at a small pleated lampshade glowing with light. This is a perfect example of the kind of tension driving his work: the world of seen

Untitled #1, 2010, acrylic, Cel-Vinyl and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over panel, 88 x 102 inches.



Untitled #3, 2010, acrylic, Cel-Vinyl and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over panel, 102 x 88 inches.

Untitled #4, 2010, acrylic, Cel-Vinyl and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over panel, 102 x 88 inches.

things, but seen as an elemental experience of deep psycho-analytic formation.

Pittman works on an entire group of paintings simultaneously, without the help of assistants, despite the fact that his surfaces speak of countless hours of labor. Even more surprising, given the fullness of his canvases and the jostling of his subjects, there is not a single knickknack, photo, sketch or doodle in Pittman's work area.

Knowing that Pittman and Dowell's L.A. property has both a Richard Neutra house and another recently designed by Michael Maltzan, that they are committed collectors of exotic cacti and objets de vertu and that Pittman worked as an interior designer for a decade after CalArts grad school, I mistakenly assumed lifestyle would be integrated into the facture of his art. I simply figured the familiar imagery in his paintings—teapots, Russian Easter eggs and other objects—would have abundant referents in the studio. But there's no source material anywhere—nothing but white walls, paintings, paint and brushes. He works directly on the canvas, and whatever ends up there has been processed through his own memories, moods and calculations. "I love that the world is cluttered and filled with objects," he says, almost apologetically. "I love objects. But everything I include in my paintings is sprayed with what I'd call a unifying eau de toilette. It gets subsumed into a meta-aesthetic. Nothing is actually coming from outside."

In the new paintings, hands, feet, joyously clanging bells and stylized cocoon babies held lovingly in the beaks of bird parents are rendered translucent as onion skin. Fluid lines hint at volume, as equally translucent images shine through from underneath. Yet what we see clearly is in fact a coded lexicon

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of unseen elements. Surface, in Pittman's work, is almost a ruse, covering complexities of feeling and mannered codes that may be, in part, generational.

He came of age within a repressive midcentury morality, when to be a gay man meant communicating within "the code of orientalism—the code of kismet," he says.

"This is something that is disapproved of now, in the sense that it's seen as degrading, opportunistic...touristic. And yet it's like an Esperanto to me, in my work. It's what my people spoke in 1950."

We pause in front of a painting of bejeweled hands radiating symmetrically out of a spinning roulette wheel, the two on top passing over pink flowers whose color presses through from underneath like gorgeous, petaled stigmata.

"They are trying to grab on to sensation," Pittman says, which perfectly encapsulates the themes braided through these paintings: the splendid but fragile moment of a changing season, a pre-language realm, the sadness of life lost irretrievably to time and, in the end, the viewer's experience of looking at one of these intricate and beguiling paintings.

RACHEL KUSHNER is author of *Telex from Cuba*, a fiction finalist for the 2008 National Book Award.

