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OPPOSITE Pittman's *Untitled #4 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1994. LEFT Pittman in his L.A. studio.

FROM PICKET SIGNS TO CREEPING VINES

Lari Pittman's dense imagery explores love, violence, beauty, and everything else

BY LINDA YABLONSKY

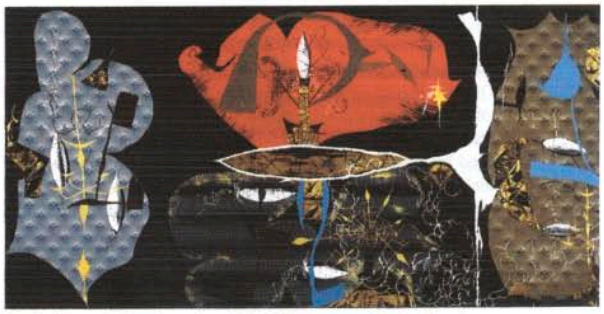
SUDDENLY LARI PITTMAN IS ALL THE RAGE. The Los Angeles–based painter's "drag" esthetic, with its sexually provocative, decorative flamboyance and its dark, inner-demon heart, has emerged as a major strain of contemporary painting. Indeed, in work by younger artists who range from Chris Ofili, Lane Twichell, and Assume Vivid Astro Focus to Christian Holstad, Justin Faunce, Benjamin Edwards, and even Kara Walker, the fastidious Pittman style is almost literally busting out all over.

"Personally, I'm delighted," Pittman, 53, says. "For the longest time my work occupied a strange kind of eccentric space, and the younger artists have not only helped to contextualize it but also to mainstream it. I can see myself in them."

It was not always so. In the early 1990s, Pittman's garish, buoyantly congested, mural-size paintings bore a distant relation to the optical fantasies of Carroll Dunham and Philip Taaffe, but his were largely distasteful to an art world that still favored more reductive or conceptual art.

For a series of allegorical paintings, titled "A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation" (1992–94), Pittman employed a kind of macho fussiness to shower his surfaces with picket signs, puppets, and prescription bottles, balancing braided nooses and creeping vines with Visa and MasterCard logos and plenty of exposed body parts, particularly the ones that ejaculate or defecate. In this artist's scabrously sophisticated universe, even human waste can look chic.

His latest work is, if anything, even more histrionic and surreal. Mundane domestic items situated in otherworldly landscapes are colored sunset orange, chocolate brown, midnight blue, or shrimp pink. They suggest imaginary scenes from chest-heaving melodramas that read simultaneously as comic and threatening, arcane and futuristic: scissors embedded in a tree trunk; an ancient ax about to fall on two tethered love birds; Delftware vessels landing like spaceships in a forest within sight of Mount Fuji. Pittman calls the style "painting on top of painting."



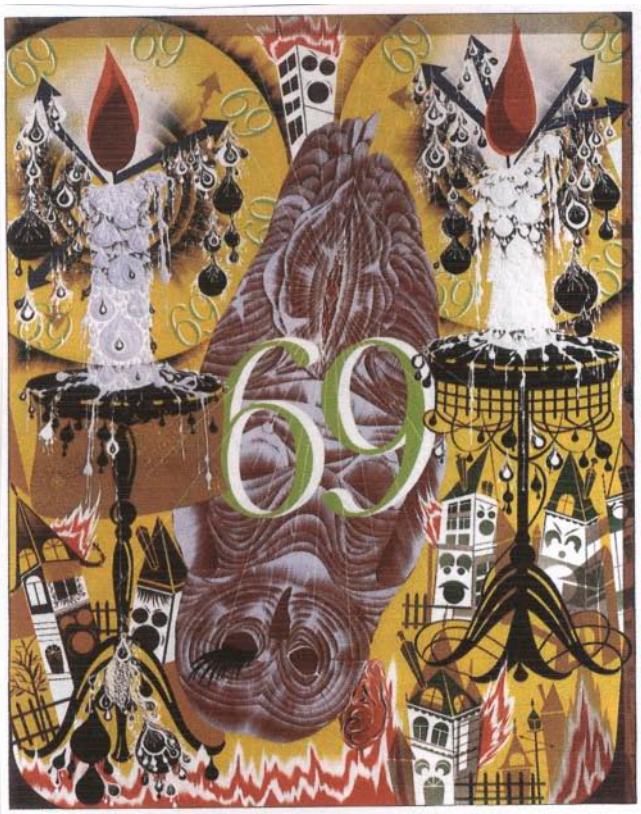
Maladies and Treatments, 1983. Pittman says he feels compelled to estheticize his dark or sad works.

Among the modest-size, untitled canvases exhibited last fall at greengrassi gallery in London, there was one especially demented love scene between two chairs: a plain, straight-backed wooden type festooned with pink ribbons, and a Victorian-

Linda Yablonsky is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

TOP: IRENE BEHRMANN HIRBETT; ALL OTHER IMAGES COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES


GIRL,
CUM'N
GIT IT!
MasterCard
VISA



The anger underlying *Transfigurative and Needy*, 1991, reflects the aftermath of a 1985 robbery attempt in which Pittman was shot in the stomach.

style boudoir number bleeding from a wound beneath the antique knife in its upholstered, plaid back.

"It's never the buildup or the denouement you're seeing," Pittman says of his pictorial strategy. "At any given time, the only representation I'm advancing in a painting is the climax—the ripest moment that representation can have. And that's always been important to my work."

To experience Pittman's iconography, imagine a gathering of James Rosenquist,

In the catalogue for the 2004 SITE Santa Fe biennial, "Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque," curator Robert Storr associated Pittman's pictorial roots with "1940s commercial art that, in contrast to the hard-sell graphics favored by classic Pop, tend toward the faux-elegance of fifth-hand Rococo, fourthhand colonial American, thirdhand genteel Victorian, and secondhand Golden Book–style semi-abstract cartooning."

And that barely lifts the veil. To experience the Pittman iconography is to imagine James Rosenquist and Stuart Davis sitting down with Florine Stettheimer, Gustav Klimt, and Hieronymus Bosch while being constantly interrupted by Lenny Bruce—and, of course, Pittman himself.

"I think the self-consciousness of the esthetic is a way of insisting that a valid primary experience takes place in the highly artificial," Pittman says in his professorial way. (He has been teaching art at U.C.L.A. for 15 years.) As an example, he cites the 1964 romantic musical film, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*.

Think Pedro Almodóvar or Luchino Visconti, he advises. Better yet, think Quentin Tarantino. An undercurrent of anger and violence has been visible in Pittman's pictures since the night in 1985 when a burglar attempting a robbery shot him several times in the stomach. "I'm lucky to be alive," he says. "I was in critical condition for quite a while."

Pittman says the shooting deepened his already hard-line atheism and his "sense of the chaos of the universe." Cutting a slightly stocky figure ("I used to be quite skinny" he says), Pittman has a youthful, unlined face, a shock of slicked-back brown hair threaded with gray, and a penchant for opinions as assertive as his paintings.

It was the trauma of the shooting, he says, that made him willing to "embarrass" himself, "throw caution to the winds" as an artist. Indeed, it was then that his work shifted from a postmodern flirtation with decorative abstraction to an embrace of information overload that was both savage and tender, and totally lacking in irony. "From then till now, I have been working from a personal and cultural urgency that really hasn't abated," Pittman says, acknowledging as well the anxieties of the post-9/11 world. "I just made it my business to react like any citizen—and it all came out in the work. The brutality of life, the existential dilemma, that is the fountainhead from which the work has sprung."

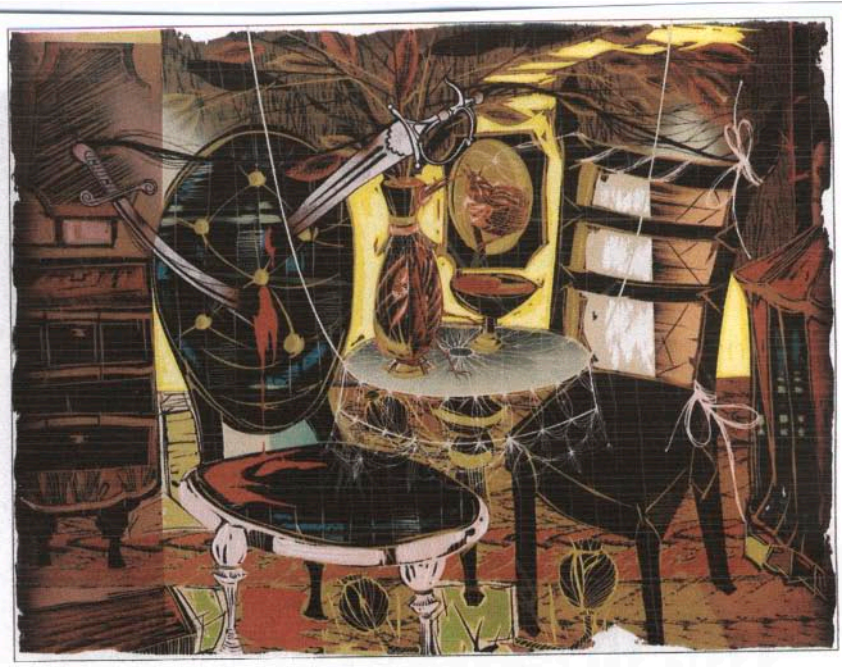
Lane Twichell uses an equally hot palette to make elaborately patterned, abstract paintings out of cut-up, fluorescent paper embedded in thick coats of resin, and he is quick to express admiration for Pittman. "How does one make a content-rich painting about a really greedy, tacky, selfish, young, mean, and yet stupidly sincere nation?" he asks. "Lari Pittman is one pretty good solution."

Pittman is actually the product of several cultures. He has been drawing since he was a child growing up in Tumaco, Colombia, his mother's hometown, where his Anglo-German father was in the lumber business. His parents returned to Los Angeles, Pittman's birthplace, when he was ten. Even then he wanted to be an artist, and he says it was almost a given that he would go on to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) to earn both undergraduate and master's degrees. That is also where he met Roy Dowell, a painter with whom he has shared his life ever since.

At CalArts, his teachers were Elizabeth Murray, Vija Celmins, and Miriam Schapiro—object-oriented artists who introduced him to a craft-conscious feminism that he found appealing. "They were painting from the point of view of being women," he says. "And I thought, Wow, that's amazing and powerful. How can I do that as a gay person?"

This was in the mid-1970s, when representational painting was nearly buried by Minimalist and Conceptual practices. "I had looked at painting as something totally degraded, no longer male in a way, and that was exciting," Pittman recalls, "because no one was paying any attention to it. So I thought: I can fix it up. It's the sort of opportunism you feel when you see a tear-down piece of property. Even now, if the content of my work is dark or profoundly sad, I feel compelled to estheticize it—fix it up."

After graduation, Pittman began a ten-year stint in the Los Angeles showroom of Angelo Donghia, the New York interior



In Untitled #1, 2004, Pittman introduces the surreal in an image of passion and romance between two chairs.

designer. Donghia advanced a pattern-on-pattern decorating style in the 1960s that anticipated Robert Kushner's Pattern and Decoration movement of the following decade. "Those ten years were an invaluable experience," Pittman says. "I learned about business, about people in relation to their domiciles, about the idea of fetishizing an interior—in other words, about both the frivolity and scholarliness of 'taste.'"

He includes what he calls "the class structuring of color" in those lessons. "Pink is a color that can occupy multiple social territories and genders," he explains, "from kitsch to the sublime, but taupe remains a bourgeois signal for refinement. So I learned about the politics of color at Donghia and then used it promiscuously in my work."

In 1982, Pittman had his first solo painting show with Rosamund Felsen in L.A., just as painting emerged from its Post-Minimal doldrums in an explosion of Neo-Expressionist figuration. But that was primarily a New York phenomenon. The audience for Pittman's poster-flat, more abstract style was smaller, and perhaps also circumscribed by his decision to stay in Los Angeles when California artists were rarely taken seriously by either the market or the critical establishment.

"I had wonderful supporters in Manhattan," Pittman says, "but I realized that the paintings I wanted to make weren't the types of paintings that were being made there." His work, he

Stuart Davis, Florine Stettheimer, Gustav Klimt, Hieronymus Bosch...and Lenny Bruce

explains, was "more lateral, more opposed to the hierarchical, and that was what was interesting about CalArts. It was the first non-hippie art school in America to embrace popular culture, media, and fashion as its mandate."

But Pittman also departed from the abject, performance-driven video and installation art of his friends Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, and not just because he was more interested in painting. "I'm not interested in weirdness," Pittman says. "I'm interested in integration, not cynicism."

In fact, Pittman's work, which can certainly be sinister, found its way onto the national stage only after its inclusion in Paul Schimmel's 1992 exhibition for the Museum of Contemporary Art "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s." The show, which included work by Kelley and McCarthy, as well as Nancy Rubins, Jim Shaw, Liz Larner, and Raymond Pettibon, proved there was a psychologically charged, and disturbing, conceptual counterpoint to the light-and-space esthetic of a previous generation of West Coast artists.

Two years later, Pittman had his first solo show in New York, with Jay Gorney. In 1993, curator Klaus Kertess, attracted by "the extravagance of his imagination and the odd synthesis of his Latino heritage with his being gay," featured Pittman's "Decorated Chronology" paintings in the Whitney Biennial. The L.A. County Museum organized his first retrospective in 1996, assuring his idiosyncratic art a significant place in the contemporary canon.

He is currently represented by Regen Projects in Los Angeles and Barbara Gladstone in New York, where he will open a new show in November. (Recent prices range from $50,000 to $120,000—$250,000 for very large canvases; drawings go for $15,000 to $25,000.)

As a couple, Pittman and Dowell are enthusiastic collectors of modern and contemporary art, as well as ceramics and folk art from Latin America and Africa. "We've been acquisitors since we were really young," Pittman says. Objects of all kinds fill their Richard Neutra–designed house at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, as well as their separate studios in a two-story, gray stucco box on a commercial strip of Los Feliz, where Old Hollywood moguls first built large estates.

Several long shelves opposite the kitchen in Pittman's studio are lined with 18th- and 19th-century depictions of saints—figures of Santa Rita de Cascia, "the patron saint of impossible relationships"; St. Ignatius Loyola, "the intellectual saint"; and St. John the Baptist, "the patron saint of architecture." During a recent rotation of the collection in their home, Pittman and Dowell hung two 1953 Warhol drawings of a dachshund (they own a real dachshund), a 1954 Yayoi Kusama floral watercolor, a 1980s Alighiero e Boetti tapestry, two incised magnolia leaves by Ana Mendieta, and a 1977 Alfred Jensen oil.

Both Pittman and Dowell are also avid gardeners. Pittman says the painting Storr included in SITE Santa Fe, featuring gardening tools and two writhing, upside-down trees, was inspired partly by the existential horrors of the seasons. "As a gardener, I'm appalled at nature," he says, laughing. "The garden is never done. It's basically forestalling death. Gardening doesn't bring any comfort. Yet it does bring incredible enjoyment." ■