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Myers, Terry R. “Lari Pittman with Terry R. Myers.” Brooklyn Rail (September 2019) pp. 28 – 33 [ill.] [cover]

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ART IN CONVERSATION

LARI PITTMAN *with* *Terry R. Myers*

HAMMER MUSEUM
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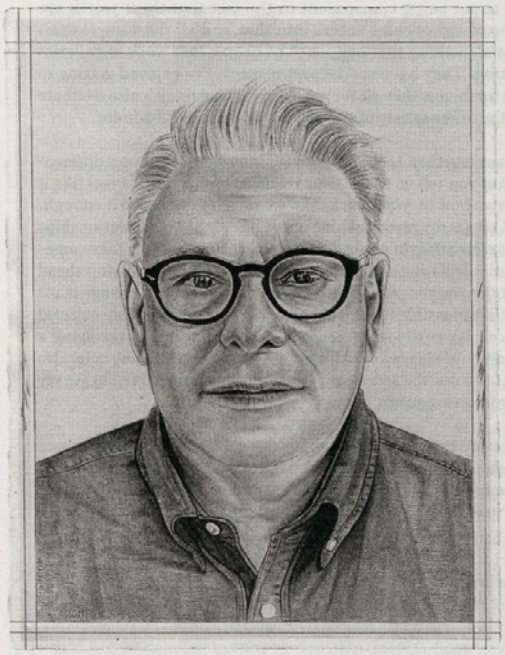
On the occasion of his major retrospective exhibition *Declaration of Independence* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, critic and independent curator Terry R. Myers spoke with artist Lari Pittman in his studio in Los Angeles.



Portrait of Lari Pittman, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

TERRY R. MYERS (RAIL): Let's start with your title: *Declaration of Independence*. Maybe it's the declaration of the independence of the work that it has always had. Or how for you it's about the future. I'd love to hear you talk about it more.

LARI PITTMAN: I was having a really hard time coming up with a title. So I was talking to Roy [Dowell] and he said, "well how about 'Declaration of Independence'?" and it just fit perfectly. I was excited by the title because it reverberates on many levels. On one hand it's explorational, or it's delusional, while on the other hand it might speak of some sort of ethical commitment to the work, a type of stubborn singularity, some sort of vision about the work that I can dislocate myself from but also looking at how the 40 years of work has made its way through the art world more specifically, maybe not the world at large, but you know, how has it travelled, how it has faired, who has responded, who has not. But that aside I still go back to the core of its specificity. Maybe a sense of its own inevitability, I don't know. I make the differentiation between myself and the work.

RAIL: Absolutely. That's key here. That's true for so many people, but I think it's especially true for what you've been up to.

PITTMAN: I certainly think all work is informed by the artist, but I've always been at the service of my work, and that the work comes from me but isn't completely me, or about me. So when I say "Declaration of Independence" it's actually not me making the declaration as Lari but that somehow the work has always had that vanity for itself. Kind of an intellectual envisioning of vanity. And I think it's actually a contractual agreement that I have with the work that I have to keep it independent so that it will not allow me to drink my own Kool-Aid.

RAIL: I like that! Back in 1994, I wrote this about your work: "All paintings have the capacity to provide the structures for their own legacies. Pittman's do more than most to ensure they always remain open and tolerant to change."

PITTMAN: I think that is true of the work. Again, the differentiation between the maker of the work—

RAIL: Right, I'm talking about the paintings here. The paintings do more to ensure that.

PITTMAN: I think they do, and it's because the practice and the project remains conjectural. If I were just formulating and orchestrating these paintings from the fountainhead of the self they would actually not be conjectural they would be conclusionary in nature, a conclusion of some sort of question. I think since the practice is fundamentally conjectural in the best of all possible worlds it keeps the paintings alive and open and mobile in their meaning as well.

RAIL: When I last interviewed you in 1996 we focused on the idea that the work was available, even accommodating, and you said it isn't work that someone could stand in front of it and think, "look how smart I am." Such accommodation was a problem for certain aspects of the art world. Even though there's all sorts of distance in the work, for example paintings sometimes telling the viewer to "get out." It wasn't resistance, but a kind of accommodation in the work.

PITTMAN: I think the accommodation is actually the sociability of the work, and the availability of the work. I'm very proud of the fact that the work is available to a huge range of viewership.

RAIL: Right.

PITTMAN: And that anyone can enter the work somehow and have a relationship and an experience with it. If you want to enter it through the lens of a popular everyday world, you can, and if you want to enter the work through the specific language and history of the art world, you can. So it's accommodating that way, but it's also not diluted and pandering. That's one thing: I don't pander. And maybe the insistence of the work is that it is available and not secretive. It might at times be somewhat encoded, but the encoding of the work isn't meant as a vehicle for its elusiveness.

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RAIL: Absolutely.
PITTMAN: So that the work is not elusive.

RAIL: The encoding functions so specifically in the work and it definitely not about exclusion. That's provocative.
PITTMAN: The paintings are not a restrictive country club.

RAIL: [*Laughs*] Exactly.
PITTMAN: Also, they're paintings. Visual information.

RAIL: But again, I don't want people to think that you're saying these things are due to the imagery or the things that can be named in the paintings. It's really about the materiality, the physicality, the building of them, their architecture, all of the things that maybe could be called formal, but that the decisions you make as a maker, as a producer of objects, with stuff, with material are also fully in that conversation. It's not just that you're seeing this image or character or situation or relationship. Whatever they could be. I'm not denying that that's there too. But there's something in the work that—I'm not even making it a binary. There's a kind of infusion that just comes also from your commitment as the maker to these things, to spend the time, to make them the way they clearly needed to be made, like there are no moments in them where you think "ah, well, he sort of phoned that part in." And again, maybe there's some people for whom that comes off as overwhelming or confusing or whatever, but I always end up with the word "calm."
PITTMAN: It's interesting the way you are phrasing that, I think there's a kind of a cultural assumption that the artist is supposed to provide the service of clarity.

RAIL: Right.
PITTMAN: If I self assign service, it would be that I prefer to show the complexity of experience, and in many cases of that complexity there's painful contradiction, irresolution, and discomfort. But there's also a certain jouissance and a certain celebratory nature in the work. All those things that are maybe parsed out away from each other or seen separately or simultaneously. I'm not a conclusionary painter, and I don't know if I fulfill those social expectations that citizens called "artists" are the ones that are supposed to be clairvoyant or provide clarity or catharsis—I don't. I can't do that. But I can, I enjoy trying to find some sort of visual equivalency and experience of complexity, which I think is shared by a lot of human beings.

RAIL: Absolutely. That makes me think of Bruce Nauman's line "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths." I think his tongue was slightly in cheek about the notion that the artist is a sort of shaman.
PITTMAN: I don't mind assigning myself certain roles in society or being of service. But as I look back over the 40 years, I think that if anything I have tried to be diligent in showing a complexity of human experience but that doesn't necessarily mean there's clarity, but neither does that mean there's chaos in the work. They're actually very formally composed and thought out structurally. And they're not about chaos, and complexity is not about chaos. They are mutually exclusive terms.

RAIL: Exactly. And they're not shut down. The deliberateness and the sense of completeness gives way again to their goal to always remain open.
PITTMAN: I can understand how some people might take issue with some aspects of the hyperbolic nature of the work, the affective aspect of the work, or a certain drama, or melodrama of the work—

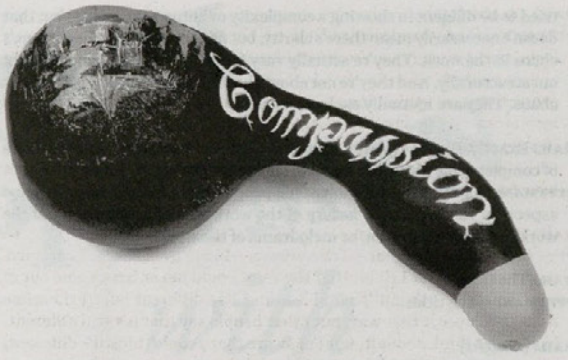
RAIL: The titles.
PITTMAN: —the titles.

RAIL: [*Laughs*]
PITTMAN: The perfumed attitude that sometimes the work takes on, or, you know, a very important aspect to me is a sort of hoarding of a certain embarrassment that can happen in the work. That's not out of the canon of high modernism. But those are all provocations of the work, of a sort. Incentives! Incentives.

RAIL: But also they're fundamentally human.
PITTMAN: It's actually, I don't want to provoke—I'm a good boy, I'm not a bad boy—there are incentives, that I want to incentivize the participation in those human experiences, and that they actually can open up certain understandings.

RAIL: There are a lot of paintings that don't do this. Yours function in front of the viewer so that you are aware of the painting being something that's taking things in itself. The painting has this way of presenting itself like it's seeing things. Sometimes you've made it literal with your use of eyes, the painting looking back at us. But I'm talking more generally. There's this kind of sense of the painting being a place of receivership, like it's received the world and then looking back out. What happens when another person looks back at you is similar to what these paintings do often.
PITTMAN: A couple of things. I became a painter at Cal Arts in the 1970s when there was a way of approaching the making of art just generally. One of the things that still bothers me about painting are the way that painters talk about their work or the way painting is viewed. Of all the practices, painting is the one where the viewer—both the educated and the popular viewer—essentializes or over-essentializes the relationship between the object and the person who made the object. And that, I think, is problematic. I'm very aware of that and actually, yes, I'm making the work but I'm always stepping away from it, disassociating myself from

Lari Pittman, *How Sweet the Day After This and That, Deep Sleep Is Truly Welcomed*, 1988. Acrylic, enamel, and five framed works on paper on wood.
Three panels, 96 x 192 inches overall. Collection of Matthew C. and Iris Lynn Strauss, Rancho Santa Fe, California. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles



Lari Pittman, *Compassion (Memento Mori)*, 1985. Acrylic and oil on gourd. 8 ½ × 18 ½ × 9 in. (21.6 × 47 × 22.9 cm). Collection of Andrew Schwartz, Los Angeles. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

the work as opposed to overly associating myself. I always ask, "What does it look like to people?" not just to me. I ask, "what do you think people actually see here?" This disassociation is elusive if not almost impossible but I insist on it.

RAIL: I don't like to pinpoint moments like your use of antennas and radio towers, but there are motifs that reinforce that to me. They need to be there, they function in the painting, so you do give clues if we want to dig into the iconography. I'm not saying that's wrong to do, it's just not where I go normally. This reminds me of another thing I've always appreciated about you: your willingness to be very clear that you're not particularly concerned about whether you like your work or not.

PITTMAN: That's absolutely true. I don't want to give the wrong impression of what I mean by dissociation, this is not my mind/body split or schizophrenia. It's just simply that whatever the work is attempting to show is already out existing in the world, it's just being somewhat reformatted. When we were going through the model for the exhibition just now, I pointed to my favorite paintings and they are few and far between. I'm very proud of the work, I have a healthy pride.

RAIL: It's clear you know they're good, and that's ok. That's better than ok.

PITTMAN: It's actually not important for me to like them. It's just absolutely not important. It's really wonderfully pleasant when I can say "oh I really like that one." That's almost an extra.

RAIL: It's not that you're against it. It's not the motivation. It can happen sometimes.

PITTMAN: And I'm not looking for it.

RAIL: Right.

PITTMAN: I'm just wonderfully surprised and delighted that there is painting that I could actually bring home and hang in the house. But that's rare.

RAIL: Is there a moment that comes to mind where you had the opportunity to witness an interaction with your work that completely surprised you or a way of seeing it that made you think "wow that never occurred to me"? I'm curious if anything comes to mind. Thinking about this idea of dissociation, of being open, is there ever a moment where you've been at the opening of an exhibition of your work and someone...

PITTMAN: That's interesting. I think it wouldn't be a positive realization, but I remember hearing someone say that they thought the work was very cynical, and that really threw me back.

RAIL: That would throw me, too.

PITTMAN: I know I'm a skeptical person, but that's not the same thing. Skepticism is actually aspirational. So I was surprised that someone saw something in the work or from their subjectivity or their interiority and they were clear that they felt the work was cynical and I was very taken aback, and that's the type of thing that I wouldn't even attempt to say they're wrong, I'm just, I would say, "wow."

RAIL: You would have to accept that given your position.

PITTMAN: Yes. Also I didn't take it lightly. It stayed with me. That was an unusual take but it came from a person who I felt was prepared to look at work on different levels. Thinking of other ones, I don't mind if someone says the work is emotional, but the thing that ticks me off is when someone precedes emotional with "too." Somebody once said that. Of course the work is emotional, but *too* emotional? I'm sorry, that's *too* protestant.

RAIL: [*Laughs*] "Too" in relation to your work is provocative in general.

PITTMAN: Exactly, and if anything it has traffic in the "too."

RAIL: I think about the experiences I've had, and we've talked about this before, where people are saying that they find the work chaotic or so active or so jumbled and to me it's always so calm.

PITTMAN: Can you pinpoint that generationally?

RAIL: Oh that's a good question. You know what, I don't think younger people would say that now. This is back then. This is when you were first emerging in New York. I remember your first solo in New York. I was still living there, you were being introduced to people. Given what was happening in the art world in New York, what painting meant at that point, there was nothing like you.

PITTMAN: I still teach with very young artists. That idea of "t-o-o" is not really—they are aware of it and they are constantly processing this avalanche of everything coming at them, as we all are, but it doesn't have the pejorative associations or even the value judgement—it's just that "t-o-o" is a reality, so why shouldn't that abundance make its way into a painting, or a work of art? Fast forward many many generations and someone like Ryan Trecartin doesn't have a problem with it, he's actually making it into an asset. He sees it as a neutral almost.

Going back to what you were saying about perceptions of the abundance or what could be seen as chaos, I've never been interested in that model of being a painter about—I'm not interested in distillation. When we were going through the model right through the beginning there is that idea of reductivity as a polemic issue for me. It's a philosophical issue. It's almost an ethical issue. That is something that felt old when I was in my 20s and it certainly feels old to people who are now in their 20s.

RAIL: Absolutely. And then let's consider what they must be thinking now about the world it looks like we're handing them. There's abundance, but a lot of it is virtual. And the literal abundance is putting massive problems on their doorstep.

PITTMAN: It's interesting because I think what you're talking about is another thought or action needing to be materialized. That is very real. In the same way, I think what I see in young artists is still this incredible desire to make things. It's not even about quipping that it has nothing to do with being an artist, it's having to do with being a human being, this desire to materialize and physicalize something outside of themselves.

RAIL: With approximately 1,200 undergraduate students in painting classes every semester at SAIC when I was the chair of the painting and drawing department, I found myself always saying, "You're excited by the fact that there's no menu bar at the top with the option of revert to original." You can play and then you can go back.

PITTMAN: That's why I'm excited about the act of physicalizing something or materializing it. I love the irrevocability of it, it is both frightening and exciting. It marks something, it's a physical mark of something as opposed to being a sort of ectoplasmic continuum. That's still something that's exciting to me when I go to a museum when I see all these irrevocable objects as a demarcation of something. Of some idea, a moment, or whatever. That's a demarcation, that's all.

RAIL: Back to those foundations of modernism, there are things in your work doesn't do, for example seriality.

PITTMAN: I would say my bodies of work are projects.

RAIL: Seriality or process. I think of amazing work like, let's say, Jack Whitten, but your relationship to process is not in the same category.

PITTMAN: No, if anything my process might be more artisanal.

RAIL: That's true! There are things that if seen in isolation you'd be like "wow, that's old fashioned." But then they're not allowed to be alone in your work.

PITTMAN: Maybe you're talking about centralization and process. That's what moves the work. The idea of variations and multiple vantage points, and making the same object, comes from my education. I am an artist, I don't even think about being a painter. I just don't have that identity. I'm an artist. I really love meeting painters, artists who make paintings, where that is so much of their identity. I just don't have that.

RAIL: The good ones, have to have that. De Kooning had to identify as a painter, even though he made other things. The other two Los Angeles painters that have impacted painting the most—Ed Ruscha and Laura Owens—have what you have.

PITTMAN: I don't think Laura thinks of herself as a painter.

RAIL: No, I don't think Ed does either. The three of you have impacted painting with a capital "P" by not self-identifying that way.

PITTMAN: And it's not about being evasive.

RAIL: Not at all.

PITTMAN: It's not reactionary, it's not even a position. It's just simply... but also you're talking about three painters who came of age in the West Coast. Maybe that's long gone, but—

RAIL: Well, I was going to ask you: is it worth talking about Los Angeles? That's how I was planning to ask you the question. You've had a lot to say about Los Angeles over the years. Where are you now in your thinking about that?

PITTMAN: The best thing about Los Angeles right now is the incredible critical mass of artists living and working here. And that they didn't go to school here and are coming from all over the world; I think that is amazing, and I realize I can't keep track of them, I can't take roll like I used to be able to do. It's impossible, and that is the best part. Also, I was talking to Philipp Kaiser who is curating an exhibition in Germany on the early years of CalArts. Paintings were included late in the process and almost seemed like an afterthought. So of course I got a little bent out of shape. We have to realize that the Pictures Generation was largely straight, white, and homophobic. Well, that's the old Lari talking.

RAIL: [*Laughs*]

PITTMAN: I guess the other thing that's changed is the queering of the art world and the coloring of the art world, which when I grew up in LA was segregated, and I was one of a handful of openly gay artists. And maybe it remains so compared to other cities that are still segregated, it's still a very segregated city, and the art world remains exclusionary, but at least from my perspective of living and working here my whole adult life these are the two changes that have made it so much better. It's ungainly and unmanageable, this huge concentration of artists and a queering and a coloring of the art world that was not present when I came of age as an artist out of CalArts. That makes me really excited. That's the best part. And that's actually opening up a reconsideration of who I am.

RAIL: And as you just said as someone who has made all of your work here, you are by definition a Los Angeles artist in terms of locale and your education. Maybe that's not going to be so common anymore.

PITTMAN: I can see the liabilities. I think they are not liabilities about LA, I think they are liabilities about the global historical world, but that's a different thing.

RAIL: Do you want to talk about the arrival of the work and you in New York?

PITTMAN: Well, I showed in the mercantile world of the 1990s, and that was exciting. As we're discussing this on the eve of my retrospective, this retrospective is still not going to New York so I don't know what that's about. I'm disappointed by that. But maybe at a later point, in some other life. [*Laughs*] We had some very gracious refusals.

RAIL: It's just gotten so difficult to travel a show in general.

PITTMAN: That is true. I showed regularly in the 1990s in New York.

RAIL: The first appearance of your work was in the 1987 Whitney Biennial, and that was the first one I saw, but I'm talking about your first solo show at Jay Gorney Modern Art in 1992 and the New York art world finally facing a solo show of your work. There was a lot of excitement and I think a lot of people didn't know what to do with it—

PITTMAN: Do you think that's still the case?

RAIL: I don't know. I think it's bigger than just you. It's about LA-ness having dissipated, and it's been interesting having spent what turned out to be 11 years in Chicago while maintaining a little bit of my life in LA. Chicago still holds on to an idea of wanting things to be specific to Chicago. Part of that comes from still trying to be oppositional to New York, there are echoes of that.

PITTMAN: None of that sentiment would come from LA.

RAIL: I know.

PITTMAN: I love living here. I love being an artist here. But I don't have that protectiveness of the city.

RAIL: I irritated plenty of people in Chicago because I just was unwilling to participate in reinforcing that history because I just don't see anything productive in it. That sort of exceptionalism done in an oppositional way.

PITTMAN: Maybe that's something the Bay Area still holds on too.

RAIL: Oh absolutely.

PITTMAN: I think that decentralization is the reality of living here. The city is shrinking in many ways and every area is finding its new core, breaking up into multiple cities, in a good way, but it doesn't have that kind of civic protectiveness. I think it also has to do with being the United States's second largest city, but it's also the least Eurocentric large American city. It is also a city that has one chapter that contains ruthlessness coupled with the exhilaration of hyper capitalism, as opposed to some cities that have had a profound cultural or intellectual period.

RAIL: It's a production town.

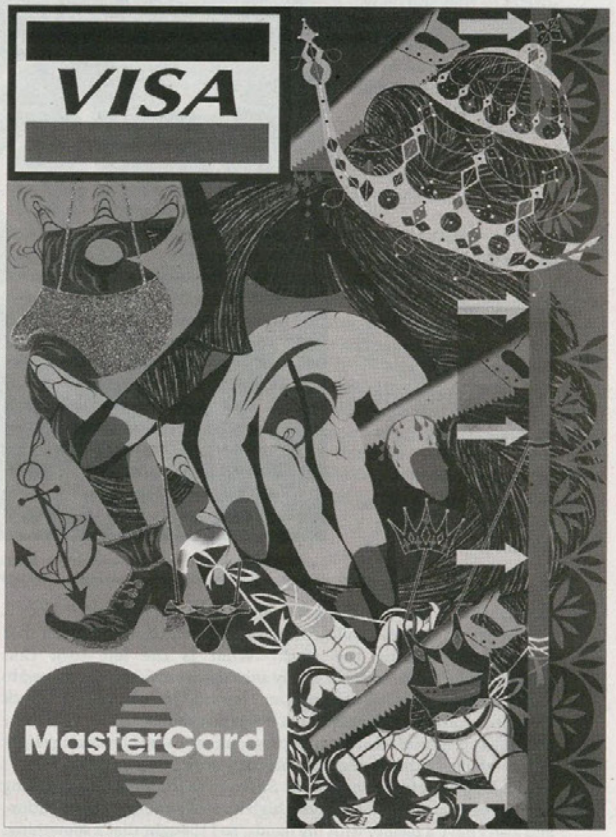
PITTMAN: So I think that—I'm cautious—I love living here. I can't live anywhere else and I think that the work could never have come out of anywhere else. It's still feeling less and less different but at the same time I don't see it that way, but other people say that it's still different. I just don't think about it, but I'm aware that people think it's different, whether it's a fictive idea or not I don't know.

RAIL: I want to shift gears. The exhibition at Gladstone of the paintings of the rooms that I reviewed (see the November 2011, *Rail*), that made such an impression on me, I'm not going to remember all the titles—

PITTMAN: —*Untitled #5* (The Kitchen); *Untitled #8* (The Dining Room), from 2005...—

RAIL: The show struck me. I had been paying attention to your exhibitions and had the luxury of seeing so many of them in the 1990s. These "room" paintings where the first ones I saw where I thought "wow, he's looking back at his work from 1985." I don't know if you literally were, and I'm not trying to create a cliched notion of development, but those paintings in particular seem to be their own kind of retrospective moment.

PITTMAN: Mimicking the idea of progress within my own timeline. And I think that there are periods where the work is more internalized and sometimes the work is more externalized. And I think that I've yet to totally understand why that happens, but yes I look back on things. I'm always really nervous to use the term trauma because it's become a retail term. Everyone is naming and claiming and delineating their trauma, but I guess a big part of my life that reverberates to this day and



Lari Pittman, *Untitled #16 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1993. Acrylic, enamel, and glitter on wood. 84 × 60 1/16 in. (213.4 × 152.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Gift of Peter Norton © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

this last week was reverberated in very unsettling ways was being a victim of gun violence myself. [Ed. note: In the summer of 1985 Pittman was shot and wounded during a burglary attempt at his home.] It's amazing how quickly that resurfaces. I'm taken aback by it. I'm like "woah."

So I think during periods of making work sometimes I will look back on that period. It's a really kind of momentous period of actually taking stock of life, whenever you're pushed to that limit, and I think the best outcome of that was that it completely—maybe going back to the idea of trauma, again reluctant because it's become so retail, so bandied around, because trauma is dead serious—there are also positive things that come out of it. It's not endlessly reverberative negatively. I'd say as I look back on that period is less to the kind of painful aspects of the trauma but more the clarification of my atheism, which is so fundamental to the way I make the work. Maybe that goes back to its internal organization, religion sets up conclusionary thinking and not conjectural thinking. So that was a moment of going back and looking at those paintings. It's less about the forensics of a set of emotions in relation to a set of traumas but it's more about a clarification and enhancement of atheism. In that sense the work touches upon and has been discussed a lot as being socio-culturally receptive, but that receptivity of the socio-cultural and the topical really comes out of a philosophical reorganization that came at that period for me. So sometimes it helps to go back and think, "ok, what exactly happened there?" and that's a forensic that I periodically do. It's not about revisiting the trauma but what came out of that, which is a clarification. That clarification helps me organize my view of the world.

RAIL: It resonates so much with me that you organized that exhibition at Gladstone, so that it was like we walked into a house.

PITTMAN: Yes. Actually that is the space we know the best and regardless of what's been given to you in terms of rooms or an apartment or a kitchen or whatever that somehow you objectify them. So how do I amplify a view of something, and how do we look at domestic space and what happens in domestic space? We're showing three of those paintings at the Hammer, the bedroom, the kitchen, and the dining room.

RAIL: Then also in terms of materials and techniques they made me think of the earlier work, but it hit me that "wow, these things are brand new again."

PITTMAN: Just prior to that I was using a lot of... what were they called?—

RAIL: Clipart?

PITTMAN: Yes. And so the work changes at a certain point. As excited as I was accessing that imagery and then modifying it, I also thought is it driving the work too much? Does it almost set up an inevitability of its making which would mean that I am then curating the work? What is the left turn that I need to bring to the work if it's truly analog in its making, as opposed to only setting up protocols of its making? It wasn't about turning my back on digitally produced templates but it was just simply a growing anxiety about the curatorial role that that programmatic way of working might be foretelling, or that it might be forced to work into someplace where I was no longer useful on some level. So that was the beginning of saying no. I'm really lucky in that I have a high level of hand/eye coordination, and also I have a facility with my hands, so I thought that's something, why don't I see what that's like? That was a big shift that started with those paintings and it wasn't that it was causing me anxiety then but I was projecting into the future that the programmatic could be inevitable and there's still value in serendipity. And also if I would have kept going that way you would be visiting me right now and there would be five assistants here, but since I went back to complete analog painting we're sitting here alone in my studio.

RAIL: I'm being reminded of the power of your self-criticality over all of the years I've known about your examination of your work and your decision making process. Are you still making lists?

PITTMAN: I still do.

RAIL: List of the things you won't do in the next group of works.

PITTMAN: Exactly. Like, for example, this next body of work that I'm going to be doing, I thought OK let me try something again, just setting up a structure so the next paintings your seeing in process here in the studio now are very dark. They're like monochromes. I'm not quite sure yet what they're up to but I'm excited that I'm taken aback by them. To not always rely on levels of high-contrast, full chroma, full-spectrum color or on a type of graphic excitement or something. So I'm not comfortable with those paintings right not but I'm excited by them. So that's in a way my list.

RAIL: I'm remembering during our interview in 1996 our discussion about your decision to put no more text and no more language in your paintings and the way you were thinking about it at that time. These are often monumental decisions, but your clarity or willingness to see them through is what resonates for me.

Lari Pittman, *Transfigurative and Needy*, 1991. Acrylic and enamel on mahogany. 82 x 66 in. (208.3 x 167.6 cm). Collection of Gary and Tracy Mezzatesta. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

PITTMAN: Since I'm here by myself it must remain pleasurable otherwise there's absolutely no reason to do it. It can't be drudgery. I mean so much of our lives are filled with compromise, anxiety, and drudgery. [*Laughs*] So I'm really adamant about preserving this space even though I know it's very luxurious and very privileged, I know that. And I'm very grateful for it. That I can have these rooms to have such a high degree of pleasure in the making of these objects. I thought wow I hope most human beings can try and do the same carving out of some space. Just recently I was reading a little bit of the conversation with Hito Steyerl that was in the *Brooklyn Rail* (see the July-August 2019, *Rail*). Now it's called self-care, another retail term. [*Laughter*] But it is interesting the way she talked about that, so I guess my self-care, to use that new term, is the idea of pleasure in the studio and that pleasure is amplified through the solitary and the making of the work.

RAIL: I would add to that from the perspective of the viewer what keeps that luxury from dipping into indulgence is that the work has made contributions. In an objective way you could say it has, I'm not trying to butter you up. About what it means to participate in the world and what it means to be a productive human being.

PITTMAN: Yes, and I'll go back to pleasure again, pleasure is also teaching at UCLA. I'm 68 and people are always saying they want my job: "Aren't you going to retire?" But I really enjoy it. I really do. Why would I eliminate something that is done with such pleasure, it seems counterintuitive. I'm really aware of the things that give me pleasure and I'll fight—even if it doesn't seem very nice from the outside—I'll fight to retain those areas that bring me pleasure, and teaching still is that. I love driving, I always take Sunset Boulevard, and I love the curves.

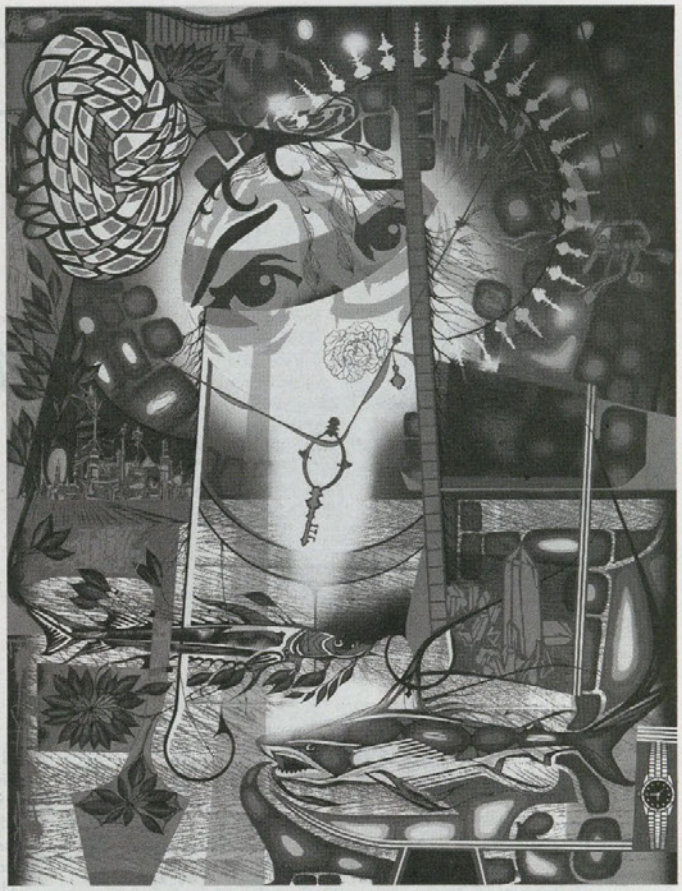
RAIL: And it really is the quickest way. [*Laughs*]

PITTMAN: I just feel excited. I have my windows open, I'm driving fast and winding down the curves and I'm thinking "what did I say to them today?" That's been an exercise that I've done for years.

Another thing that has been pleasurable about teaching relates to some of the students. I think that I've worked with maybe four trans students while they were in graduate school. I worked with Wu Tsang early on. Maybe this is something I've never vocalized, these last couple of years it's really interesting this new conversation about identity, how people are all the same or how they identify, and my new favorite answer is "Kinsey 6," of course no one knows what that is. But yes, Kinsey 6, and how I've had a very complicated and tenuous idea of gender construction, which I think shows in the work. So early on I remember thinking there's sexuality and there's gender and I always saw them as different real estate [*Laughter*] and it was only until recently when dealing with trans artists at UCLA that they are articulating complexities of the performance of gender and sexuality, and I've sensed a really rapid evolution of what trans culture is. So I've said can I just ask a question: "Is there a destination?" You know, that's all I'm saying. And the overwhelming answer is "no" and that makes me really happy. I'm excited by that because actually I identify with that. There is no destination, there is no clarity, and if there were to be a destination are you recommitting to the performance of the binary, and that binary is why I say Kinsey 6. Sometimes someone will say, "how do you identify?" and I'll say, "I am a professional homosexual."

RAIL: [*Laughs*]

PITTMAN: That is a profession. Even that. I'm poking at something, but I guess I still love the mutability of identity as opposed to the clarification of identity and I think it shows in my work and I'm now seeing it in young artists. Going back, when I saw Math Bass's work for the first time I thought "this feels so wonderful, but so different." I felt something new there. I don't know what it was. It was just a really gut feeling. I think the work speaks to a mutability of imagery of meaning, it's not binary, cognitive language, she interrupts and that's actually that's one of the things that I can identify with in her work because I'm not dealing with symbology and I'm not interested in facilitating cognitive language—a binary between the word and the object being shown—after this mutability. So after this moment within my pedagogy that I've come across young artists who are maybe re-articulating this in a different way that I can maybe understand something in the past about that mutability.



Lari Pittman, *Untitled #4*, 2003. Acrylic, oil, and spray paint on gessoed canvas over wood. 102 × 76 in. (259.1 × 193 × 5.1 cm). Private collection. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

RAIL: In the past you've talked about wanting to be in the center.

PITTMAN: Since I've lived with Roy [Dowell] for 45 years, one of the things when we were in our 20s that actually we consciously articulated—and this could be generational but I think this still could resonate and I see it resonating in the trans community—is integration, not assimilation. That was a modality we were not interested in. We want to be ambitious, and we want to be successful. And we want to be fully integrated, but integrated on our terms. I guess generational assimilation is something that makes me twitch, you know? I can only speak for my own experience, that wasn't useful for me. I can understand people with really difficult lives out in the middle of nowhere, what they have to do to survive, I can't judge that. But for myself it wasn't something I was interested in and I was empowered enough to take that position that I could integrate myself and I had the privilege to integrate myself but not assimilate. It was an aggressive stance at the time. So that's at the core at my oblique question of whether there is a destination, and if there's a destination then it gives me pause because of some level of investment into the binary of heterosexuality or how heterosexuality performs gender? So this is all new for all of us. But I'm excited because it's helping me understand myself forensically.

RAIL: Having had similar experiences with students that you're describing, I think back to your "Owl" paintings like *Transformational and Needy* (1990), and *Transubstantial and Needy* (1991). Rereading the things I wrote about them at that time, and the language I used in my attempts to articulate difference. It's not that I changed my mind now but I had a different nuance then. But those owl paintings in particular not only survive such shifts, they're thriving in it.

PITTMAN: It's interesting because when they put out the painting *Like You* from 1995 at The Broad I had to go do some conservation work on it, I said I would like to do it myself. So I was there with the painting and I thought, "Oh my god," there was a kind of hypnotic pansexuality about it, and actually a lot of younger people who are on Instagram have enjoyed that painting and found pleasure in its visual complexity.

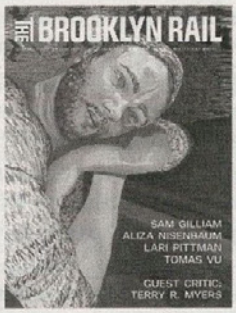
RAIL: Takashi Murakami has been able to continue to have younger and younger people be interested in what he's doing and when you go to the Broad his room is always full of kids taking selfies.

PITTMAN: It's popular for a whole set of new reasons. For example someone said to me, "Oh Lari you always—students are so obsessed with fashion now—you always have your little jacket and your hair is always combed," and so I say, "Thank you." And every year Halloween comes around and they're really into Halloween and they're going to dress up and I say, "you have to understand, I've been in drag my entire life." I've chosen this uniform because it simply makes that aspect of my life that much easier so I can concentrate on other things. So that type of self individuation is not that concerning to me. I'll compromise with a certain uniform that's drag. And then they'll say well how about in the paintings? And I'll say that's not drag, that's reality.

TERRY R. MYERS is a critic and independent curator based in Los Angeles. He is an editor-at-large for the Rail

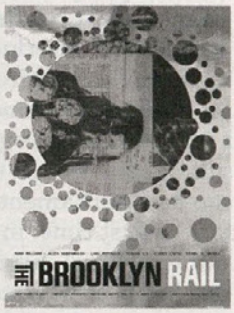
REGEN PROJECTS

Sam Gilliam, *Untitled (detail)*, 2019. Watercolor and acrylic on washi paper, 75 3/4 x 41 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.



Aliza Nisenbaum, *Randy*, 2018. Oil on linen, 32 x 26 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

Lari Pittman, *The Senseless Cycles, Tender and Benign, Bring Great Comfort*, 1988. Acrylic and spray paint on wood, 96 x 64 inches. Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. © Lari Pittman. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Tomas Vu, *Studies for Space Oddity*, 2019. Mixed media, 27 x 19 inches. Courtesy the artist.

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