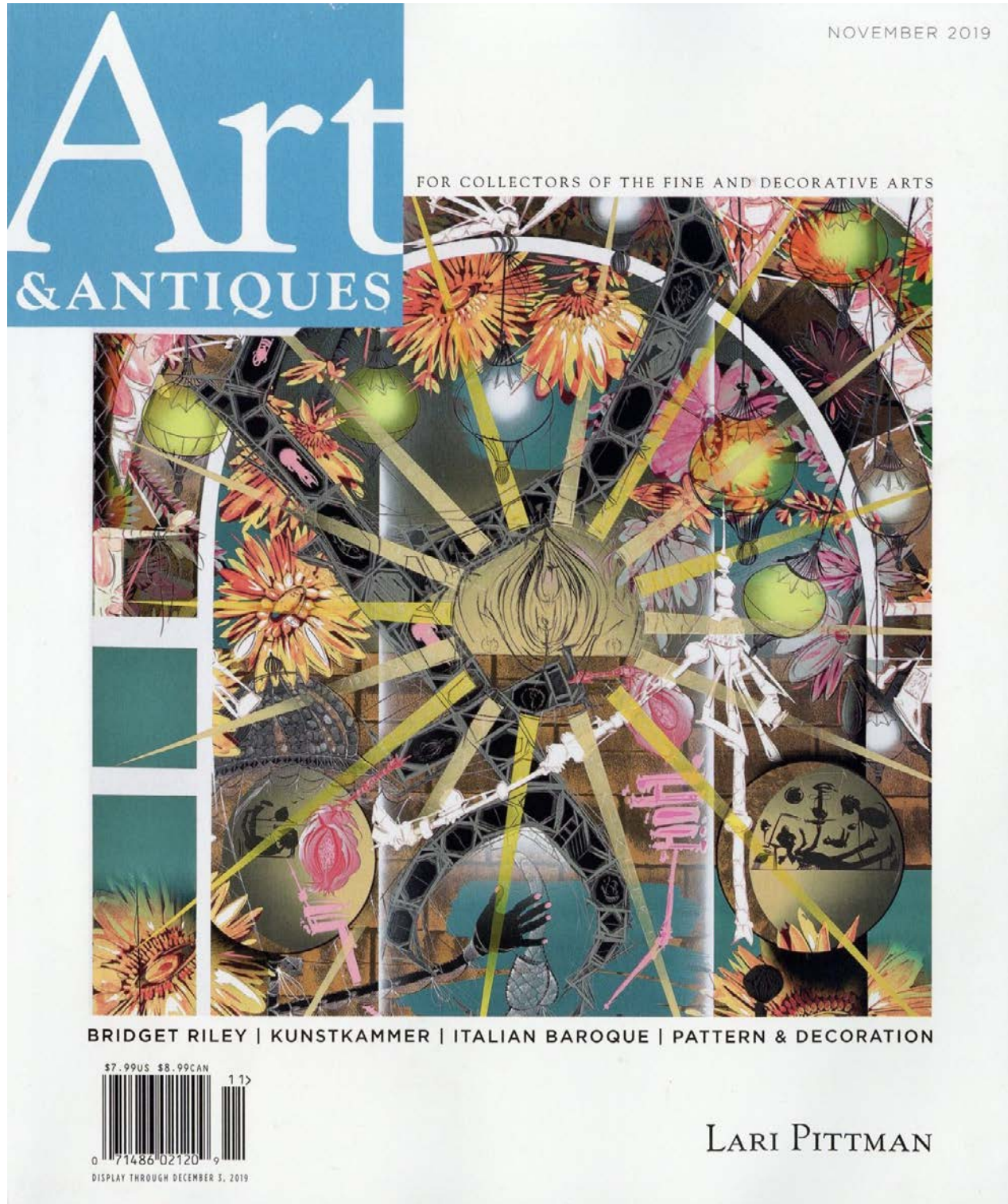


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Dorfman, John. "Controlled Chaos." Art & Antiques Magazine (November 2019) pp. 62 – 69
[ill., cover]



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CONTROLLED CHAOS

LARI PITTMAN IS

having a retrospective, and it's about time. The Los Angeles-based artist has been incredibly productive ever since he started exhibiting in the early '80s, constantly innovating, always refusing to turn past successes into formulae. In 1996, he had a mid-career survey at LACMA, and now, over two decades later, the Hammer is mounting "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence" (through January 5, 2020, and then at the Kistefos Museet in Jevnaker, Norway, from May 24–October 5), the most comprehensive exhibition of his work ever and the first show the Hammer has done in which all of its exhibition spaces are given over to the work of one living artist. Over 80 paintings and 50 works on paper are on view, from the Hammer's own collection as well on loan from collections worldwide.

The only sense in which the word "retrospective" seems not to fit is that Pittman is so artistically dynamic, at age 68, that one hardly thinks in terms of looking

Lari Pittman's kaleidoscopic works open windows on contemporary culture and the art of painting.

backward, and he himself is not in the mode of retrospecting. He commented recently that the title "Declaration of Independence," which he chose, implies him declaring independence from his past work and the work declaring independence from him. Pittman's painting, although it's full of idiosyncratic symbols—isn't autobiographical, and he has insisted that the dense, busy, often crazily colored look of so many of his paintings is not his personal aesthetic. In other words, in creating these works, he has been distilling the experience of being alive in contemporary culture, holding up a mirror to the external and internal chaos of modern life, in all its sorrow and joy—what Pittman likes to call "jouissance" or "the bittersweet."

While his art may appear wild and even psychedelic, Pittman is a very disciplined and rigorous worker who values control and structure. A longtime, revered teacher at the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture as well an artist, he has a labor-intensive studio practice in which he

By John Dorfman

Opposite: Lari Pittman, *Transfigurative and Needy*, 1991, acrylic and enamel on mahogany, 208.3 x 167.6 cm.

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This page, from top: *Maladies and Treatments*, 1983, oil, acrylic, and gold leaf on paper, mounted on mahogany, 135.9 x 274.3 cm.; *Compassion (Memento Mori)*, 1985, acrylic and oil on gourd, 21.6 x 47 x 22.9 cm. Opposite: *Untitled #4*, 2003, acrylic, oil, and spray paint on gessoed canvas over wood, 259.1 x 193 x 5.1 cm.

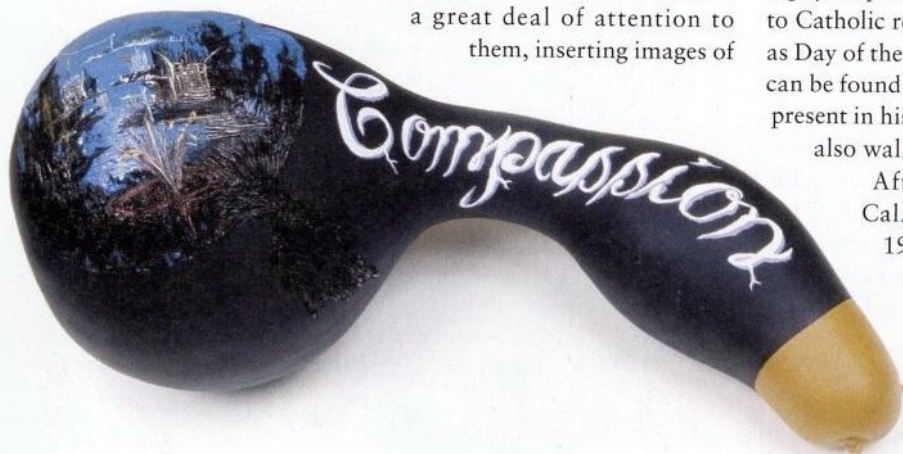
does all the painstaking work himself, painting directly without the help of preliminary sketches. The paintings, usually acrylic on panel supplemented by spray paint and Cel-Vinyl, are rich in finely executed detail and rely on collage-like layering of visual elements. Pittman's panels are epic, even mythic, narratives, in which the actors are owls, silhouettes, jewels, plants, flowers, bolts of textile, houses and cities, sexual organs, the number 69, arrows, candles, and much more.

While studying at CalArts in the '70s, Pittman was strongly influenced by the Pattern and Decoration movement, which has been called the last organized formal "movement" in American art. The P&D artists, bucking the tide of Minimalism, were trying to restore legitimacy to sensuous beauty, ornament, and traditional crafts—areas of aesthetic endeavor that were generally speaking, considered to be female. Textiles were an important part of this project, and Pittman has devoted a great deal of attention to them, inserting images of

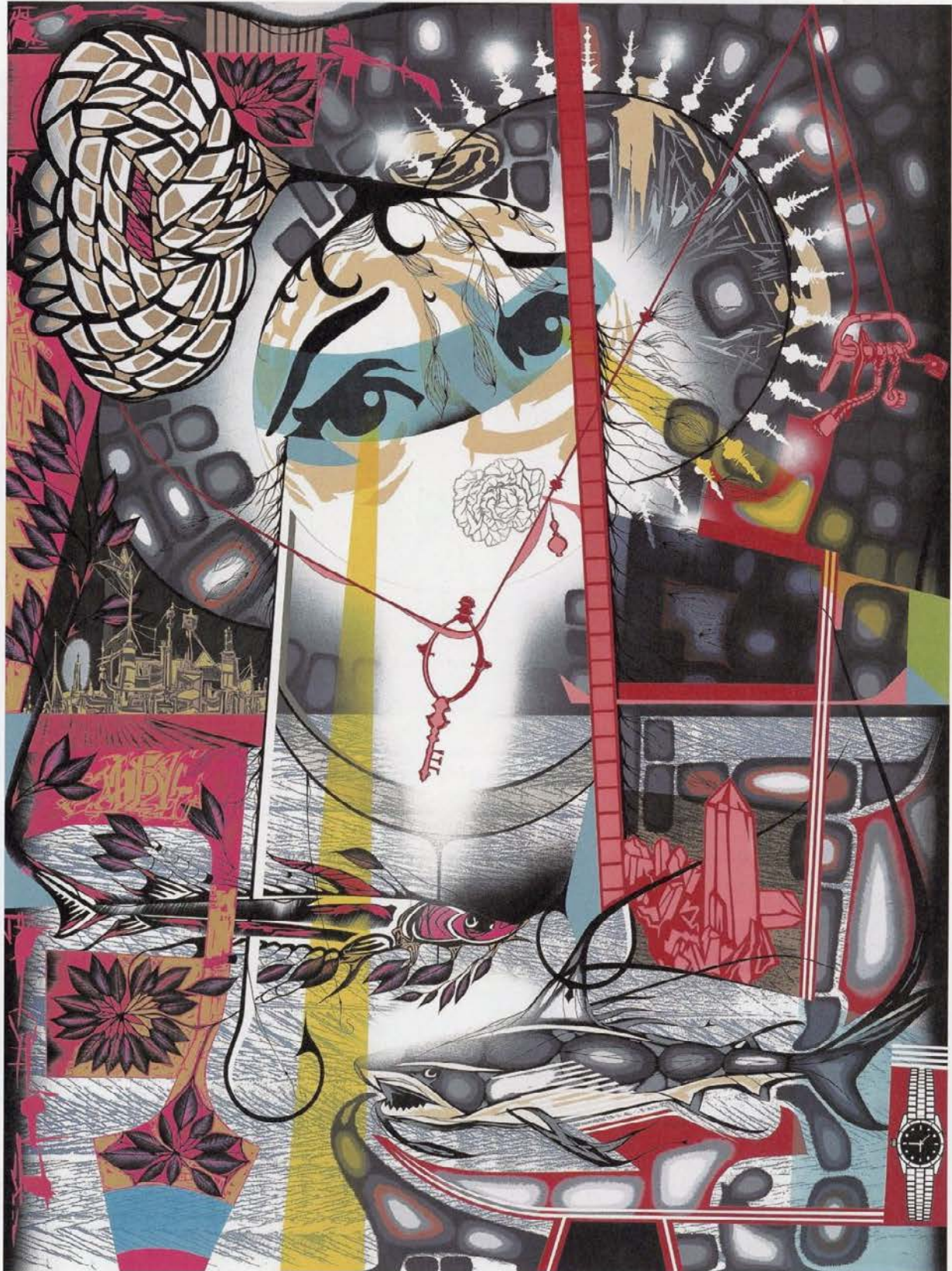
printed cloth into his paintings as compositional elements; in fact, a large, intricate Pittman painting can even resemble a block-printed textile or crazy quilt when seen from a bit of a distance. The artist is well aware of the important (even if often unfairly minimized) role of textiles in modernist history and has cited Sonia Delaunay—a fabric and clothing designer as well as an abstract painter—as one of his inspiring influences. He also collects textiles, and there is a fluid back-and-forth between his collecting and his creativity.

Pittman was born in L.A. but spent six years of his childhood, from 5 to 11, in Colombia, where his mother was from, and he still speaks Spanish fluently. His American-born father worked for a lumber company in Colombia, and while the family lived there, Pittman was tutored by a man who was a painter of religious pictures as well as a gardener. Pittman traces his artistic impulses back to that time, and while he is a proud atheist, religious iconography crops up in his paintings, whose sensibility owes something to Catholic religious folk art. He collects Mexican folk art, such as Day of the Dead figures, retablos and santos, and that imagery can be found scattered through his paintings. Horticulture is also present in his works, not just in the form of flowers and trees but also walled gardens; the connection to design is clear.

After a false start at UCLA, Pittman transferred to CalArts, where he received his Master of Fine Arts in 1976. His teachers were Vija Celmins, Elizabeth Murray, and Miriam Schapiro, the latter one of the leaders of the Pattern and Decoration movement. (At CalArts he also met his life partner, now husband, the artist Roy Dowell, whom he has been with for 45 years.) While the school took painting seriously, Pittman graduated into an



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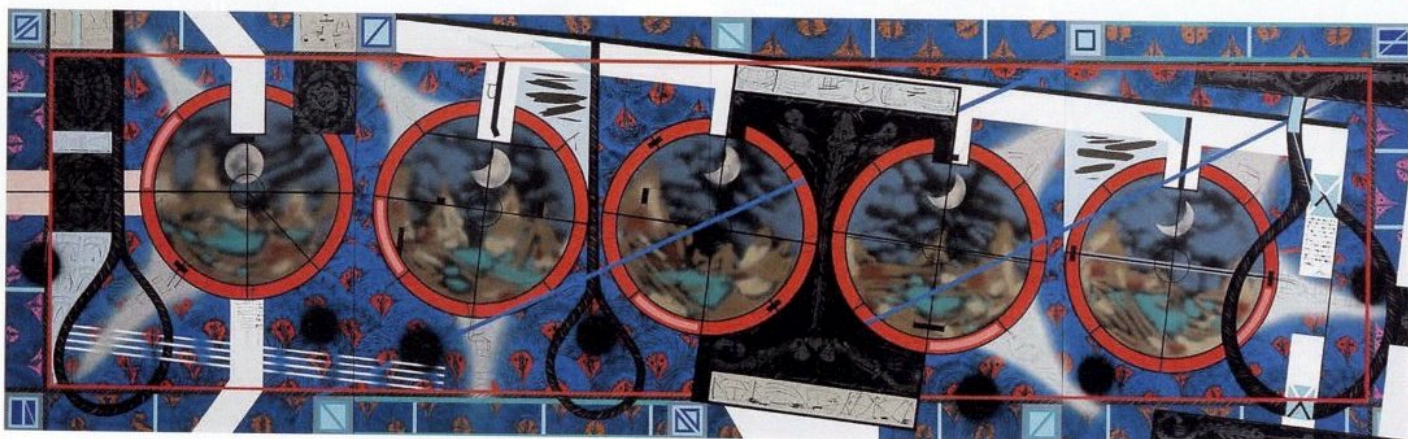


Clockwise from top left: *Untitled #16 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1993, acrylic, enamel, and glitter on wood, 213.4 x 152.6 cm.; *Once a Noun, Now a Verb #5*, 1998, matte oil on mahogany, 121.9 x 91.4 cm.; *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation*, 2013, Cel-Vinyl and spray paint on canvas over wood, 274.3 x 915 cm.

art world in which the medium was seen as all but finished. Minimalism, performance, and conceptual art were dominant. Feeling out of step with the times, Pittman went to work in the interior decorating business, for Angelo Donghia, for about 10 years.

Nonetheless, he kept at his art, and in 1982 he got his first solo show, at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. Things were looking good for his career when, in 1985, he was shot in the stomach during a home-invasion robbery and came close to dying. Recov-

ery was slow, but rather than being defeated, he took the brush with mortality as an impetus to live to the fullest and look to the future. His 1986 painting *An American Place* contained an abstracted pink outline of a gun, juxtaposed with an iconic picket fence painted black instead of white. Another image of violence appears in *Untitled #16 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)* (1993), in which a red-nail-polished thumb is being cut off a disembodied hand by a diminutive hacksaw, as



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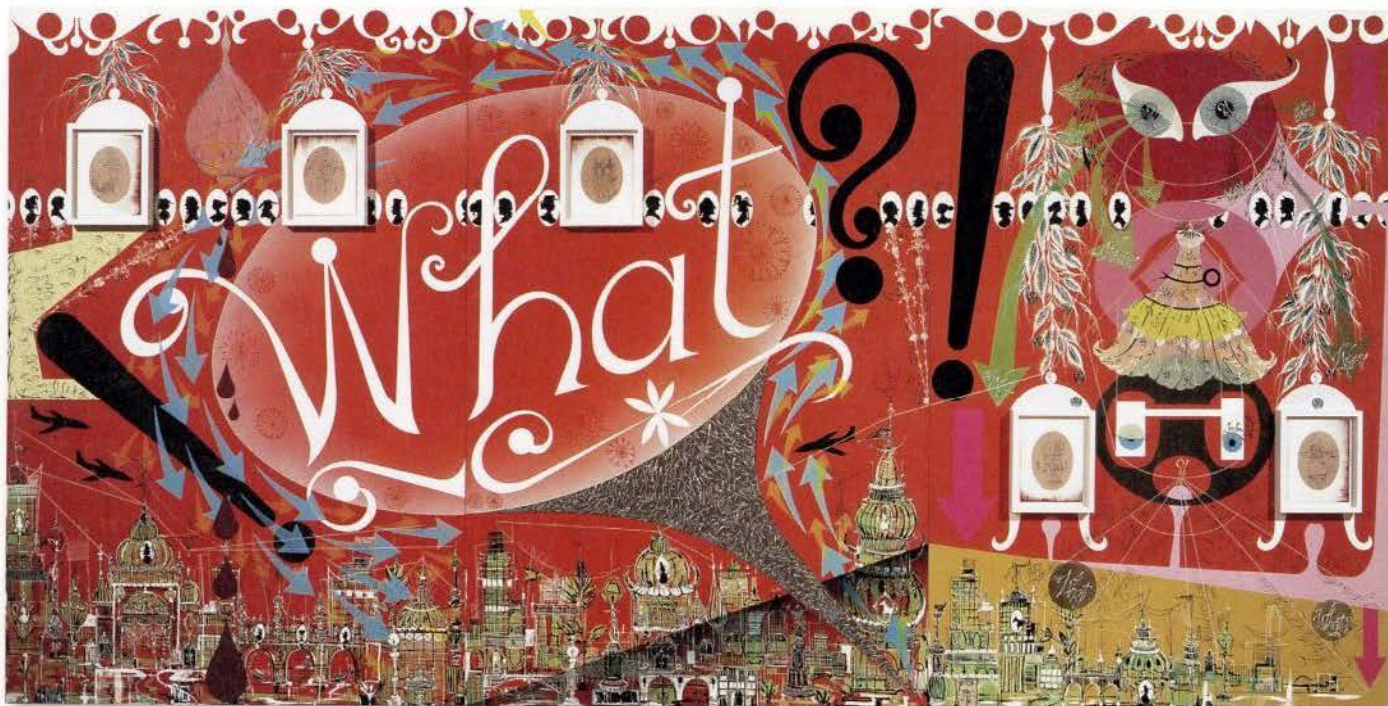
CONTROLLED CHAOS



Untitled #5, 2010, acrylic, Cel-Vinyl, and spray paint on gessoed canvas over wood, 259.1 x 223.5 cm.

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From top: *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, 243.8 x 487.7 x 5.1 cm. overall; *The Senseless Cycles, Tender and Benign, Bring Great Comfort*, 1988, acrylic and spray paint on wood, 243.8 x 162.6 cm.

tiny drops of blood fall. Elsewhere in the picture, other identical saws are visible, set against snippets of Neo-Victorian historicizing illustrations, images of fountain-pen nibs, and decorative patterns that could be wallpaper. "Visa" and "Mastercard" logos are prominently slapped at the top and bottom of the painting, as if giving the imprimatur of the throwaway consumer culture to the whole thing. While there is pain here, even self-mutilation, there is also self-indulgence and sensuality. This is the "bittersweet" quality that Pittman refers to when characterizing his emotional tenor.

Pittman's early mature work made frequent use of typographical elements, from single words including full sentences or even longer texts, rendered either in stylized calligraphy or in ordinary handwriting. *have you seen...* (1991), an artist's book created in collaboration with Dennis Cooper and Jonathan Hammer, presents a tantalizing, crudely lettered mini-short-story, seemingly about a failed gay relationship, as the left-hand page of an open book. The right side is the painted image, with "What is my reason to live?" written in ornamental lettering, superimposed over images of silhouetted figures lying prostrate as though dead. The number "69" dominates the upper third of the painting,

dripping what looks like green blood. A 1988 painting, *How Sweet the Day After This and That, Deep Sleep Is Truly Welcomed*, splashes the exclamation "What?!" across a complex composition full of ornate buildings, wall-mounted curio boxes, silhouettes, jet airliners, and a stylized owl with huge, human-looking eyes. Pittman's later paintings tend to have less text and focus on purely graphic elements to tell their stories.

His recent paintings tend to be a little simpler in composition, less cluttered with tiny rebus-like symbols. Their painted surfaces are smoother, as if to underscore the degree to which disparate or contradictory aspects of life blend seamlessly together in our experience. *Dining Room* (2005) is like a classic still life of blue-and-white jars and a bowl with fruits on a table, with an old-fashioned curved sword laid alongside them. But the blue of the ceramic wares bleeds out and away to the edges of the painting, filling it with light in a way that suggests the abstracted space of Surrealism. Cactuses sprout from the bowl, and what look like tongues of flame spurt out to lick the various objects. The iconographic program here may be more limited than in the '80s and '90s paintings, but that is more than made up for with the spatial and chromatic complexity. Here, Pittman



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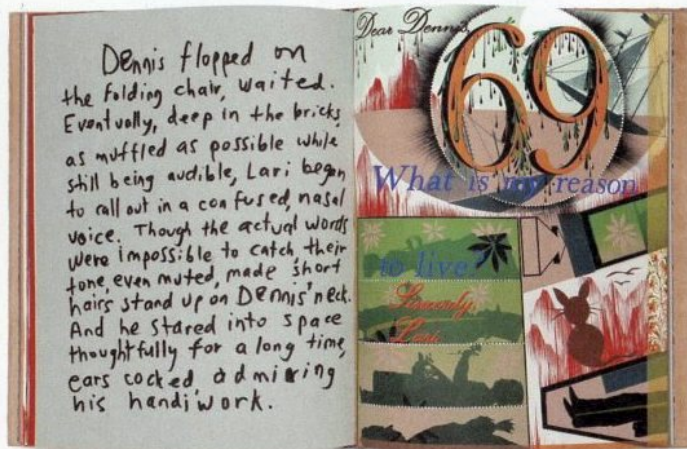
seems to delight in pure painting.

Untitled #4 (2003) has a pair of soulful eyes, reminiscent of those in the cover painting for *The Great Gatsby*, presiding over a congeries of collectible objects such as a necklace with a jewel pendant, raw mineral crystals fresh from the mine, and a Rolex watch. A toothy shark swims across the bottom of the painting, interpenetrating with stylized fish forms from Northwest Coast Native American art. In *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation* (2013), Pittman returns to his textile roots, with an ominous twist. The long, horizontal painting places a recurring round gunsight with crosshairs against the blue, patterned background, with nooses as bookends. Coziness and death keep close company.

In their density and busy structure and use of personal symbols, numbers, and objects as stand-ins for people and emotions, Pittman's works recall Marsden Hartley's early "German paintings." The aesthetics are completely different, and the comparison may be somewhat ahistorical, but Pittman, the art teacher, has a keen sense of art history. In his paintings he



pays homage to his predecessors, such as Delaunay, Remedios Varo, and even Goya. Pittman's work is about the craziness of life in today's politicized consumer culture, but it is also about collecting, the nature of objects and our feelings about them, and the nature of art and representation itself. 📖



Clockwise from top left: *Untitled #8 (The Dining Room)*, 2005, Cel-Vinyl, acrylic, and alkyd on gessoed canvas over wood, 218.4 x 259.1 cm.; *Dennis Cooper, Jonathan Hammer, and Lari Pittman, have you seen...*, 1991, artist book with leather cover inlaid and onlaid with sharkskin, stingray skin, plastic, and paper, tooled in gold, silver, and palladium, full suede doublures, 47 x 38.1 x 1.9 cm.; *Lari Pittman, This Wholesomeness, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless*, 1990, acrylic and enamel on mahogany, two panels, 325.1 x 243.8 x 5.1 cm. overall.