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ARTFORUM

MUCH TOO MUCH

MICHAEL NED HOLTE ON THE ART OF LARI PITTMAN

Lari Pittman, *Plymouth Rock*, 1985, oil and acrylic on wood, 80 × 82".

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Above: **Lari Pittman, *Colonial Power*, 1985,** oil and acrylic on wood, 80 × 82".

Above, right: **Lari Pittman, *The New Republic*, 1985,** oil and acrylic on wood, 80 × 82".

EVERY AMERICAN surely knows that Plymouth Rock marks the site where the *Mayflower* landed in 1620 before the Pilgrims it held founded the Plymouth Colony. It is likely that fewer Americans know that this historically significant rock was not identified as such until 1741, or that in 1774 the rock broke in half during an attempt to move it. Plymouth Rock is an allegory, one as American as apple pie and Manifest Destiny. ("Allegory," Craig Owens once observed, "is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete.") *Plymouth Rock* is also the title of a 1985 painting by Lari Pittman, and, like the ruinous, mythologized object with which it shares a name, it, too, is an allegory.

Pittman's *Plymouth Rock* intimates landscape, but it's also a field of signs. The date—CA. 1620—rendered across the painting's front in a scraggly, spermatic script, is large and grotesque, anchoring the bottom of the picture. Above it, two barely touching blue-and-brown impasto shapes form a yin-yang, with primordial indications of earth and sky, while also calling to mind punctuation marks or a 6 and 9—a pair of numbers that appear frequently and flirtatiously in the artist's later paintings. The nesting shapes also conjure the odd, misshapen landforms found in early maps of the New World or evoke the supercontinent of Pangaea rent in half—or, more to the point, the 1774 cleaving of Plymouth Rock. In allegory, Owens notes, "the works of man are reabsorbed into the landscape; ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay, a progressive distancing from origin." An abject allegory, circa 1620: This, Pittman insinuates, is America's primal scene.

Tending always toward networks of paintings, Pittman joins *Plymouth Rock*, formally and thematically, to *Colonial Power* and *The New Republic*, both 1985, the latter image festooned with a garland of entrails; the abject motifs and cartouche-like land-

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Above: **Lari Pittman, *Nationalism*, 1984**, oil and acrylic on fabric on mahogany, 44 × 72 × 6¼".

Left: **Lari Pittman, *Untitled #16 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1993**, acrylic, enamel, and glitter on wood, 84 × 60".

Below: **Lari Pittman, *Untitled #30 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1994**, acrylic, enamel, and glitter on wood, two panels, overall 6' 11" × 13' 4".

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Left: **View of "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," 2019–20**, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Wall, from left: *The Senseless Cycles, Tender and Benign, Bring Great Comfort*, 1988; *Reason to Rebuild*, 1986; *Out of the Frost*, 1986; *An American Place*, 1986. Table: *Memento Mori* works, 1985. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Right: **Lari Pittman, *Thanksgiving*, 1985**, oil and acrylic on panel, 80 × 82".

In their scale, ambition, and sheer exuberance, Pittman's paintings inevitably evoke AbEx, that American painterly tradition, even as they queer it, embellishing its grand gestures with so many signs and so much sass.

scape vignettes of this trio were in turn anticipated by *Nationalism*, 1984, a sprawling configuration of harlequin diamonds, billowing pennons, vessels, and inscrutable glyphs, and extended by *Thanksgiving*, 1985, with a pink impasto erection centered among its pinwheel of forms and the slogan LIFE / LIBERTY / PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS annotating it in gooey text. (Actual images of Pilgrims make an appearance later, in 1994's *Untitled #30 [A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation]*, which features a sedan—or is it a clown car?—loaded with cheery Puritans.) America is everywhere in Pittman's paintings, so it's no surprise that his current exhibition at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, is titled "Declaration of Independence." The show, organized by Connie Butler with Vanessa Arizmendi, is Pittman's first major retrospective in nearly a quarter century and the largest solo presentation in the museum's history. It is a dense and demanding visual experience, vulgar and virtuosic in nearly equal measure, qualities that could also describe most of the individual works that compose it.

LET'S GET THIS OUT OF THE WAY: Pittman's paintings are divisive, disagreeable to many viewers. This is surely true of the work of almost any artist, certainly any artist who matters, but for some reason Pittman's paintings—even the mere mention of them—induce visceral responses, occasionally in the artist himself. "I am fully aware that when I look at the work that I am, at times, appalled by it," the artist observed in 2011. "How junky it is and how jerry-rigged it is and," he continues, "how . . . how . . . how ugly it can look." Even in the LA art community, where Pittman looms large as an artist and an influential teacher (he has served on the faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles, since 1993, there is a sense that most viewers have made up their minds about Pittman; they are either already swayed by his mixture of mind-boggling technical command and heroically scaled improvisations, or they are turned off by the determinedly over-the-top results. To his credit, Pittman hasn't been afraid to arm his detractors. On the occasion of his 1996 survey at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he offered a list of his insecurities about the work in the show's catalogue: "It's too gushy, too sentimentalized, too decorated, too shallow." To which I might add one more possibility: It's too much.

I should also admit up front that I have wrestled with Pittman's paintings since my first encounter with his work, in that 1996 exhibition, a year after my arrival in LA; I have been consistently and simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the ways in which they fail to conform to my expectations of what a painting should do or be at a given moment and by their sheer visual overload. They are always too much—much too much—each painting a collision of heterodox elements drawn from the artist's expansive visual vocabulary: folk art, clip art, murals, retablos, Victorian silhouettes, Soviet textiles, Cold War flowcharts, language, furniture, bas-relief objects, Pittman's own framed drawings, and so much more. I will confess to my own weariness working through the densely installed retrospective, even over multiple visits. Each painting could take hours to decode, if one had the patience or the stamina.

Then again, these are paintings that refuse to be less than too much. In their scale, ambition, and sheer exuberance, they inevitably evoke AbEx, that American painterly tradition, even as they queer it, embellishing its grand gestures with so many signs and so much sass. These are emphatically American paintings, and America is the land of excess—McMansions, pumpkin-spice frappuccinos, and Donald J. Trump—as much as it's the land of freedom or democracy or opportunity or any other platitudinous thing. These American paintings are not, however, melting-pot paintings, boiling their subjects down to some inoffensive, evenly assimilated stew; rather, they are cornucopian paintings, their variegated bounty spilling beyond containment and sprawling across the table of the picture plane. They model democracy, raucously.

In short, America is everywhere in Lari Pittman's work, so it's curious that his "Declaration of Independence" isn't traveling to any other venues in the

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Right: **Lari Pittman, *An American Place*, 1986**, oil and acrylic on mahogany, two panels, overall 6' 8" × 13' 8".

Below: **Lari Pittman, *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon over a Violent Nation*, 2013**, Cel-Vinyl and spray paint on canvas on wood, 9' × 30' ¼".

United States. (It is, however, landing at the Kistefos Museum in Jevnaker, Norway, this spring.) Curious, in particular, that it isn't traveling to that venerable museum of American art, the Whitney, though two of the institution's paintings are included in the exhibition and Pittman has appeared in four of its Biennials of American art. Curious, too, because the Whitney is quite surely a museum deeply invested in the (American) Pop tradition, from Florine Stettheimer (cited frequently by Pittman) to Stuart Davis to Andy Warhol to Robert Indiana, and in the lineage of queer (American) art, from Paul Cadmus, Charles Demuth, and Marsden Hartley to Indiana and Warhol (again) to his peer David Wojnarowicz: A DNA test of Pittman's paintings reveals all of these artists in their genetic coding.

But perhaps these are paintings best seen and understood in situ, framed by the hodgepodge context of LA. Pittman appeared in Paul Schimmel's 1992 exhibition "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, a show important not only for defining a generation of artists, but also for its horrifying prescience in mapping the city's cultural and psychic terrain. An emphatically regional exhibition in its framing, "Helter Skelter" nevertheless also posited LA as a metonym for the country at large, messy in its pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness: a body always already unsettling.

Mourning hangs heavily in Pittman's work, consistently articulating the brutality of this American culture and the way in which grief disrupts and detains it. Pittman's oft-cited personal experience of gun violence in 1985—two bullets tore up his insides during an attempted robbery—brings the allegory home. In *An American Place*, 1986, an epic horizontal panel realized a year after the shooting and a long convalescence, a gun—abstracted in form but incontrovertibly legible as a weapon—hovers over a black picket fence and below a row of square, Albersesque black-and-white targets. The painting is imprinted with a constellation of body parts or their approximations: a dozen eggs (testicles or ova, either signaling pure potential); a lumpy, meaty form that recalls a heart; and a flatly rendered (though thickly painted) yellow valentine, which also serves as a vessel into which the firearm discharges its load. The subject of gun violence returns in more recent paintings, including the thirty-foot-wide *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon over a Violent Nation*, 2013, with its row of five gunsights interspersed with dangling nooses. I am tempted to call this mural-like work, which is more than twice as wide as *An American Place*, a sequel, but it is, more sadly, a reboot, an allegorical repetition.

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Lari Pittman, *Spiritual and Needy*, 1991, acrylic and enamel on mahogany, 82 × 66". From the series "Needy," 1991–92.

Pittman's paintings are intensely *organized*; they are beings, or at least ask us to address them as such, even if they are complicated ones, like Frankensteinian monsters.

SEX AND VIOLENCE are familiar American bedfellows, often found nesting, or sixty-nining, in Pittman's work. What makes their canoodling compelling, in his case, is the way in which his paintings act as bodies. Littered with parts—eyes, ears, hearts, manicured hands, spines, intestines, leaky assholes, radiant vaginas, spurting dicks—these paintings are intensely *organized*; they are beings, or at least ask us to address them as such, even if they are complicated ones, like Frankensteinian monsters. (Signs of science and the laboratory abound in his work.)

F-ME! shouts an inflamed butthole in *Spiritual and Needy*, 1991, with its disembodied bottom neighboring an oversize thermometer that takes the temperature of the room. The painting, from the "Needy" series, 1991–92, looks hot and feverish, but in the final analysis it gives me the chills. If this painting is literally begging to be penetrated by the viewer, Pittman curiously puts everything on the surface, offering a hyperbolic retort to the AbEx investment in Greenbergian flatness. The F- inevitably stands for "fuck," but in its coyly abbreviated state could also mean "fill" or "finish"—or any number of other things related to sex and/or meaning making. The ME, presumably, is the painting, which is a proxy for the body, if not necessarily the *artist's* body. (A little sign above the fireplace reads SINCERELY, LARI—inevitably a trap. Or is it?) In any event, the viewer has a job to do.

Pittman's paintings are bodies, but they are also texts, in the poststructuralist sense, their complex assemblies demanding to be read, and an encounter with them is likely to discomfort and unsettle assumptions, particularly with regard to "good" taste. They are rhetorical objects (which you already knew by reading their increasingly wordy titles) that are also bodies, and in both guises they are, if we follow the work of Barthes, interested in the business of bliss. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973, Barthes articulates a "text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language." Yet where, then, in Pittman's hectic, clotted surfaces, is there room for the viewer? The works are full of holes, yet there is nothing to penetrate. "There is no mechanism in the work to congratulate anyone's intelligence," the artist has stated in his own defense. But bliss is less concerned with intelligence than its disruption.

If these paintings are bodies, they are not only individual bodies but also social bodies—standing in for communities, nations, affinity groups, or other collective networks. Like it or not, Pittman has long been recognized and categorized as a gay artist, and he has often been saddled with the responsibility of that

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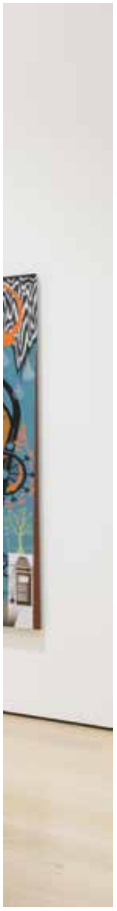
Far left: **View of "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," 2019–20**, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. From left: *Once a Noun, Now a Verb #5*, 1998; *Untitled #15 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1993; *Untitled #32 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*; 1994; *Untitled #1*, 2000. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Left: **View of "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," 2019–20**, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Foreground, from left: *This Wholesomeness, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless*, 1990; *This Expedition, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless*, 1989. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Opposite page, bottom: **View of "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," 2019–20**, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. From left: *Transfigurative and Needy*, 1991; *Ennobled and Needy*, 1992; *Ameliorative and Needy*, 1991; *Transubstantial and Needy*, 1991. All from the series "Needy," 1991–92. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Right: **View of "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," 2019–20**, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Wall, from left: *Flying Carpet with Petri Dishes for a Disturbed Nation*, 2013; *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon over a Violent Nation*, 2013. Tables: *A History of Human Nature*, 2017. Photo: Jeff McLane.



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representation. His "Needy" paintings, which are among his most striking and strident works, are impossible to read without edging close to the context of AIDS and, along with it, to the complex task of desiring and mourning simultaneously. These canvases take up both tasks at once—sixty-nining them—loudly, flamboyantly, outrageously. In *Transfigurative and Needy*, 1991, an owl with an outsize vagina dangles upside down, emblazoned with a lime-green 69. It is flanked by two candles, each dripping lasciviously and framed by a clock whose numbers each read—you guessed it—69. Oversexed owls (with prominent human genitals) and candles (cocks, vigilant) feature heavily in these works, which have been described by at least one critic as self-portraits. If so, it is surely the mythologized self, performing in shrieking owl drag.

Far from a shy or retiring interlocutor, Pittman's own oft-recounted biography frequently follows alongside, or even frames, his work. Born in suburban Glendale, California, he spent his formative childhood years living in his mother's native Colombia and was raised in a bilingual household. His paintings are likewise marked by heterogeneity, with cultural differences recognized and embraced but not necessarily reconciled. Reconsidering the sprawling corpus assembled at the Hammer, I am struck, circa 2020, by how significantly immigration figures in Pittman's work, with the original sin of the colonizing pilgrims of Plymouth as a proxy for everyone betting on America and all its vast promise, despite its many messy contradictions.

Though he is recognized as an important LA artist, Pittman has never precisely fit into the categorical imperatives of whatever that might mean. Even in the libidinally charged crowd of "Helter Skelter," his oversexed owl paintings stand out, queerly. As a young painting student, Pittman left UCLA for CalArts at the suggestion of his teacher, the painter Lee Mullican, and eventually received his BFA and MFA degrees from the fledgling art school in 1974 and 1976, respectively. Pittman belonged to none of the school's well-known and often dogmatic "camps"—neither to its mythologized "mafia," with student members like Jack Goldstein and David Salle, who have always been clearly identified as acolytes of John Baldessari, nor to its Feminist Art Program, founded by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, in which he could not officially participate. Still, he sat in on the Feminist Art Program's classes and worked closely, in particular, with Schapiro, as well as with Baldessari and with visiting faculty such as Elizabeth Murray. His closest peers at CalArts included the gay male painters Tom Knechtel and Roy Dowell, the latter of whom became Pittman's longtime partner. There is a queer history of CalArts that continues into the present, significant if necessarily "minor," much of it yet to be written or accounted for, and Pittman is central to its beginnings.

It's curious and illuminating that his retrospective coincided more or less neatly with the historical survey "With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985" at LA MOCA; and it's useful to think about that movement (or tendency, as it's more broadly defined at MOCA), emergent in the 1970s, as the significant context and precedent for Pittman's loaded surfaces, especially given his rapport with Schapiro, one of P&D's founding members. Like the artists in "With Pleasure," Pittman has long embraced the possibilities of P&D while refusing the high-minded orthodoxies of Conceptual art—in practice as well as in theory. Notably, he worked for the Donghia interior-design studio for a decade after finishing grad school.

Yet when held up next to Pittman's exuberant panels, many of the pieces in "With Pleasure" look quite tame, even reactionary in comparison. (Indeed, many of my favorite works in "With Pleasure" are by artists not previously associated with P&D properly speaking—Ree Morton, Al Loving, and Howardina Pindell among them.) Pittman embraces many of the motifs and strategies of this movement, but only as one volume of the larger visual encyclopedia he pulls from, always commingling vocabularies and building toward rhetorical, allegorical ends. The results are more abject, more demanding, more precarious: Frankensteinian monsters of paintings. They are too much, but we can see ourselves in their surfaces because they are our monsters. □

"Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence" is on view through January 5.

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