

# REGEN PROJECTS

Ollman, Leah. "Lari Pittman in the Studio." *Art in America* (October 2019) pp. 70 – 79 [ill., cover]

## Art in America

International Review Since 1913

# Art in America

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# LARI PITTMAN

in the  
**STUDIO**

*Interview by Leah Ollman  
Studio photography  
by Evan Strang*

**WHEN YOU ARE FACED WITH THE FULL-**frontal blitz of a Lari Pittman painting, one of many possible impulses is to take inventory. Among the recognizable images, you might find an owl, an egg, and several directional arrows; the number 69, an overturned vase and a row of Victorian-style silhouettes; a noose, a ship, a spiny cactus, textile patterns, bottles

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Lari Pittman: *Capricho #4*, 2015, Cel-Vinyl and spray paint on gessoed canvas over wood, 96 by 86 inches.

labeled SEMEN and MYRRH, gemstones and blossoms, a bulbous gourd, a gaping vulva, a picket fence. Making a mental list is a first navigational step into optically and emotionally dense terrain; it's a way at least to acknowledge the panoply of dots, if not connect them.

Pittman packs his planes with crisply rendered shapes and symbols that coexist in an exhilarating, sometimes alarming state of acrobatic suspension. Simultaneity is the operative term, collage the prevailing sensibility. History and sexuality, memory and experience, philosophy and poetry, humor and rage share the stage in exquisite imbalance, the whole a manifesto against reductionism and an endorsement,

instead, of what he described to me as the "encumbered, tethered, tied-in, chaperoned." Mannered and ornate, somehow both contained and overflowing, the work resists abbreviation. As the eyes read and map, the body (often encompassed by the paintings' large scale) registers the tone of cool urgency and violent beauty with a not unpleasant shudder.

Examples on paper, panel, and canvas over wood, representing nearly forty years of the Los Angeles-based artist's work, are featured in "Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," organized at the Hammer Museum by chief curator Connie Butler. Several large, hand-made books are also included in the show, which

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surveys a prolific career largely through the presentation of such tightly conceived, lavishly yet pointedly titled series as “Beloved and Despised” (1989–90), “A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation” (1992–94), and “Grisaille, Ethics & Knots (Paintings with Cataplasms).” 2016, a rare venture into photogramlike monochrome. Pittman conceived the recent series “Nuevos Caprichos” (2016–17), as a “date” between Goya and Emily Dickinson. A gallery within a gallery – like a “gift box,” Pittman says – replicates “Orangerie,” a mini-retrospective of works on paper hung on walls painted with a trellis pattern, his 2010 installation at LA’s Regen Projects. “Curiosities from a Late Western Impaerium” (2014), an ensemble of seventy individually framed pieces installed in a grid, is shown for the first time in its entirety. Pittman’s riff on a cabinet of curiosities, it chronicles a fictive collection sorted into wry and biting categories – “Failed Manifestos,” for one, and “Needlepoints with Antidepressants,” for another.

Pittman was born in 1952 in Glendale, California. The family moved to his mother’s native Colombia when he was five, returning to Los Angeles in 1963. He earned his BFA (1974) and MFA (1976) from the California Institute

of the Arts, and has exhibited extensively in the United States and Europe ever since. His work was featured in the landmark show, “Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s” (1992) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Documenta X (1997); the Venice Biennale (2003), and four Whitney Biennials (1987, 1993, 1995, 1997). He has been a professor at UCLA since 1993.

Pittman’s studio stands like a modernist sanctuary among the big-box stores and fast-food franchises on a busy boulevard in Atwater Village, just north of downtown LA. Artist Roy Dowell, Pittman’s partner of forty-six years, has his studio on the second floor, where they also share an office. On a late-summer morning, a scale model of the Hammer’s galleries dominated the largest of a succession of orderly workspaces downstairs. Pittman guided me through the retrospective-in-miniature, and also briefly identified what hung on the surrounding studio walls: a series of paintings in progress (scheduled for a spring 2020 show at Lechmann Maupin in New York), keyed to an unusually muted palette of dull brick and washed-out gray, and a recent series of drawings inspired by his love of textiles designed during the Russian Revolution. In one sprightly pattern, titled

A maquette of Pittman’s current Hammer Museum exhibition “Declaration of Independence,” in his Los Angeles studio.

Photo: Evan Strang

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"Textile for a Wedding Dress," hatchets alternate with pieces of fruit.

In the next room, a large prepared but still empty panel was in ready position, resting flat on sawhorses. Pittman had set a table nearby, where we sat for conversation, with crisp linen napkins and a welcoming spread of blueberries, grapes, madeleines, and coffee cake. In manner, Pittman comes across as a faithful mirror of his paintings: expansive yet precise, effusive but highly deliberate. Knowing laughter threads through his speech as through much of his work.

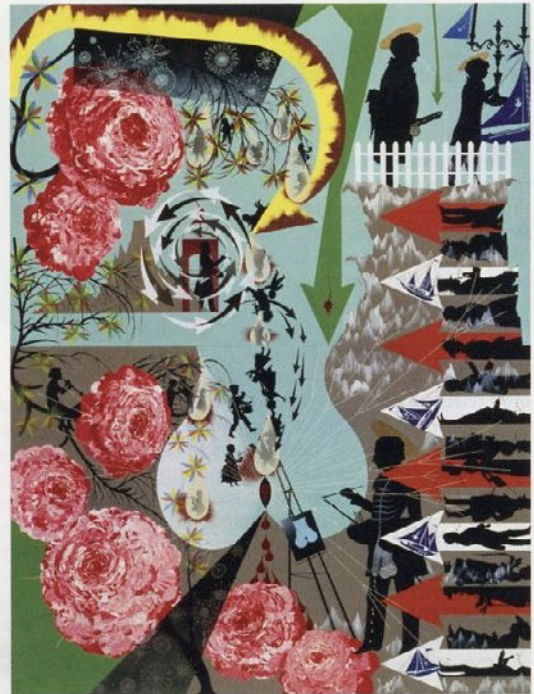
**LEAH OLLMAN** With all the visual complexity of your paintings, it's confounding to imagine that you start work on them without a sketch. Can you talk about other ways that you prepare to begin a piece?

**LARI PITTMAN** I guess it comes out of having gone to CalArts in the '70s. Using the word "Conceptual" sounds so retail now, but usually I sit down and identify a premise. I've always titled a show right at the beginning, the whole show, and I'll write out titles for different paintings. That produces very specific imagery. Setting up this linguistic template or structure right at the beginning would be what you would call, in a sense, the preparatory drawing.

I'll also make a list of notes to avoid repeating myself: don't do this anymore, don't do that anymore. I'll actually post it in my studio to monitor myself for redundancy. With the grisaille paintings, for example,

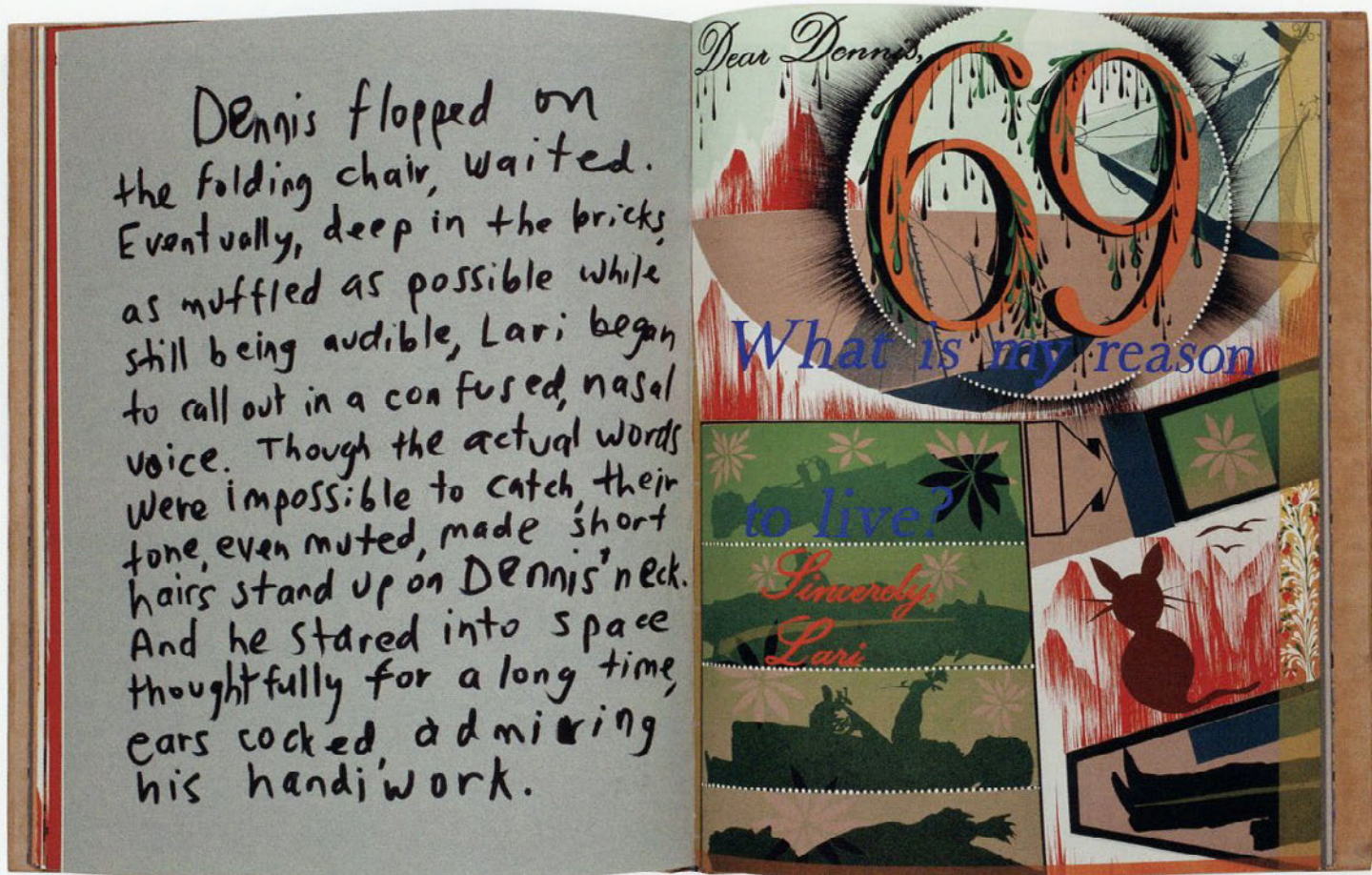
Above, view of Pittman's installation *Orangerie*, 2010: at Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

Right, *This Expedition, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless*, 1989, acrylic and enamel on mahogany, two panels, 128 by 96 inches.

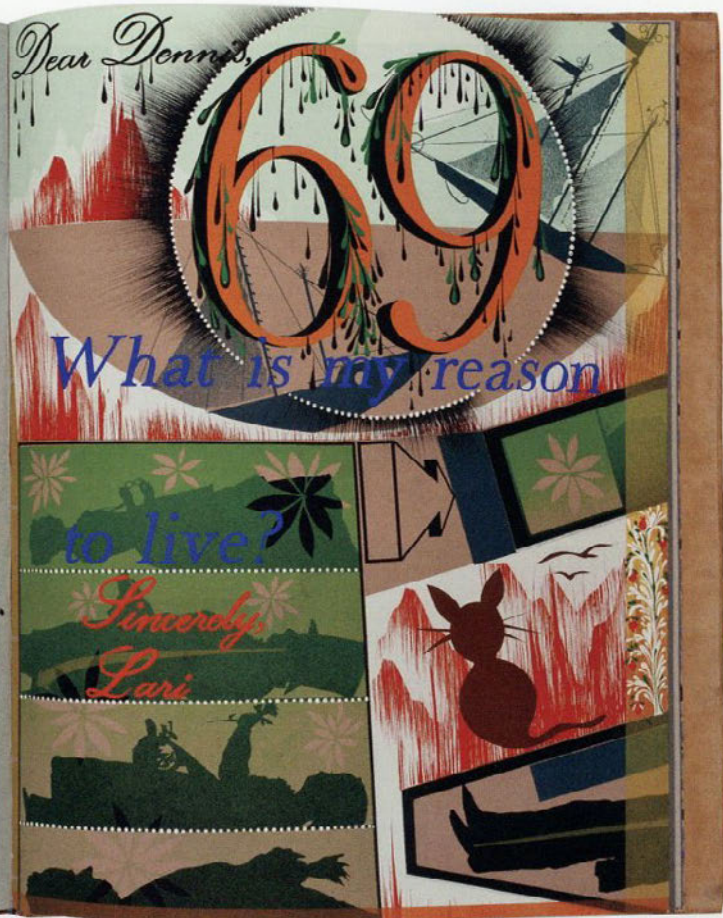


This Expedition: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.

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Dennis flopped on the folding chair, waited. Eventually, deep in the bricks, as muffled as possible while still being audible, Lari began to call out in a confused, nasal voice. Though the actual words were impossible to catch, their tone, even muted, made short hairs stand up on Dennis' neck. And he stared into space thoughtfully for a long time, ears cocked, admiring his handiwork.



there was a note to not rely on high-contrast dynamics or full-spectrum color.

**OLLMAN** It's interesting that you start with language. I know that qualities like scent and sound are also something you consider from the start. What about time? How does that come into play?

**PITTMAN** We always talk about sociocultural context as creating the narrative around the work, but it's also language. An old friend of mine, Paolo Colombo, a curator in Europe, pointed out that some of the misunderstanding of the work is because a lot of it comes out of Spanish and not exclusively out of English. I'm fluent in Spanish. That's the language I spoke with my mother (and with my father, English). In Spanish, there's a much broader range for articulating temporalities. You use the subjunctive more, the pluperfect, the past subjunctive, the future subjunctive, the future conditional. We don't do that as much in English. Capitalism really enforces a structure of dividing time into discrete parts – eight hours, eight hours, eight hours. I'm interested in different temporalities in the work. Also, in Spanish and in a lot of Romance languages, you can use exaggeration and hyperbole in daily conversation and it's not seen as suspect.

**OLLMAN** As it is, you feel, in English?

**PITTMAN** Yes, definitely. It might seem too florid, too mannered. Just suspect. If you speak a Romance lan-

Dennis Cooper, Jonathan Hammer, and Lari Pittman: *have you seen . . .*, 1991, artist's book, 18½ by 15 by ¾ inches closed.

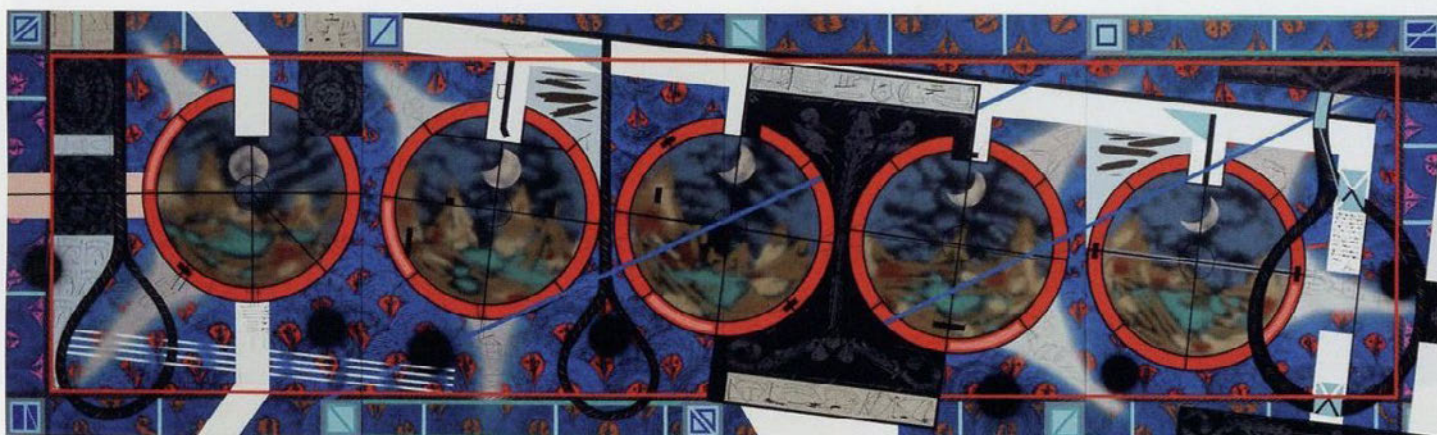
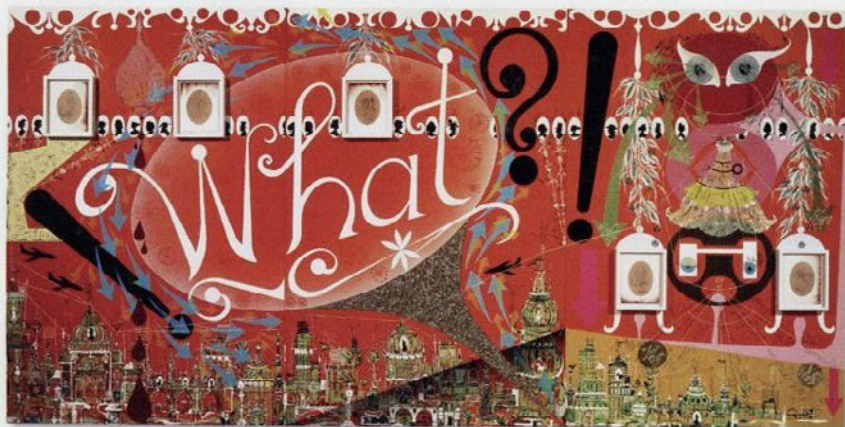
guage, you can see that daily poetics are incorporated into the language, and people don't twitch. Metaphor is used a lot more. I'm such a hybrid. I think that's why I really love those hyper-romantic, hyperbolic titles. If a painting can not only look a certain way but provide all these varied experiences, it might seem that it's alive to you. You have to keep painting alive. When I started out in my twenties, painting needed CPR. It has to be given CPR continuously. That's its beauty. Mortality is built in.

**OLLMAN** When you're painting, is the process adaptive, each move a response to the conditions created by the previous action? How do you proceed without a visual schematic?

**PITTMAN** That's where the formalist in me has to establish himself very early in the process. I have to identify what I call the architecture of the event – some sort of overarching containment of the event, of the ephemera, of the volatility or the operatic nature of the painting – its stage. I'm in trouble with a painting if I don't do that in the first ten percent, and I know it. But if I do that, it sets in motion a series of calls and responses. I've entered into a contractual agreement with the work, but I'm not illustrating the contract. The contract is a necessary distancing device to keep the work rigorous.

**OLLMAN** There are a lot of those distancing devices at play in your work. You use the word manage a lot, and protocol. That's a language of regulation and control,

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rules and systems, which might seem at odds with the uninhibited exuberance in your work.

**PITTMAN** Those words are very true. They're not necessarily libelous or negative. I am controlled in the making, by those agreed-upon rules for myself, but I don't impose them on the viewers or on the actual object. My works are never about chaos. To me the world is very chaotic; I don't have to make my life or my work that way.

I think a large part of the way the work looks and behaves – its multiple temporalities, its polymorphousness – comes from applying a philosophical lens. There's a certain point where the sociocultural gets bumped up into something a bit better, which is philosophy. But we're so addicted to the sociocultural lens, and the forensics of the personal narrative. It's an easy way out. That line of thought is always insisting on the verification of the work and its topical usefulness, its societal usefulness. To ask a human being "are you useful?" is really insulting.

**OLLMAN** I came across this great passage from Elizabeth Bishop recently, and I thought of your aversion to usefulness: "What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration."

**PITTMAN** Beautiful.

**OLLMAN** The Hammer retrospective is organized in a very linear way, chronologically. While that's very conventional and practical, I wonder if there are other formats that might correspond more to the way the work itself operates, in terms of nonlinearity and simultaneity.

**PITTMAN** Actually, in working with Connie, I tend to be the more formal one. For example, I tend to stress the formal hanging of the work more. Maybe that comes from having internalized comments over the years that the work can be a little too abundant, a little overwhelming. I've taken that seriously. So all my installations tend to be very clean. I think it's a way of accommodating those responses.

Also, the blunt reality of a retrospective is that we're trying to make a case for the work. Is it worth looking at? Some people really do not like it, and some people really like it. It's taken me a while to appreciate that there is no consensus. That kills the work. The formal, chronological aspect is making a case, and I don't shy away from that.

**OLLMAN** So you do actually manage some elements of the viewer's experience, by creating very orderly displays.

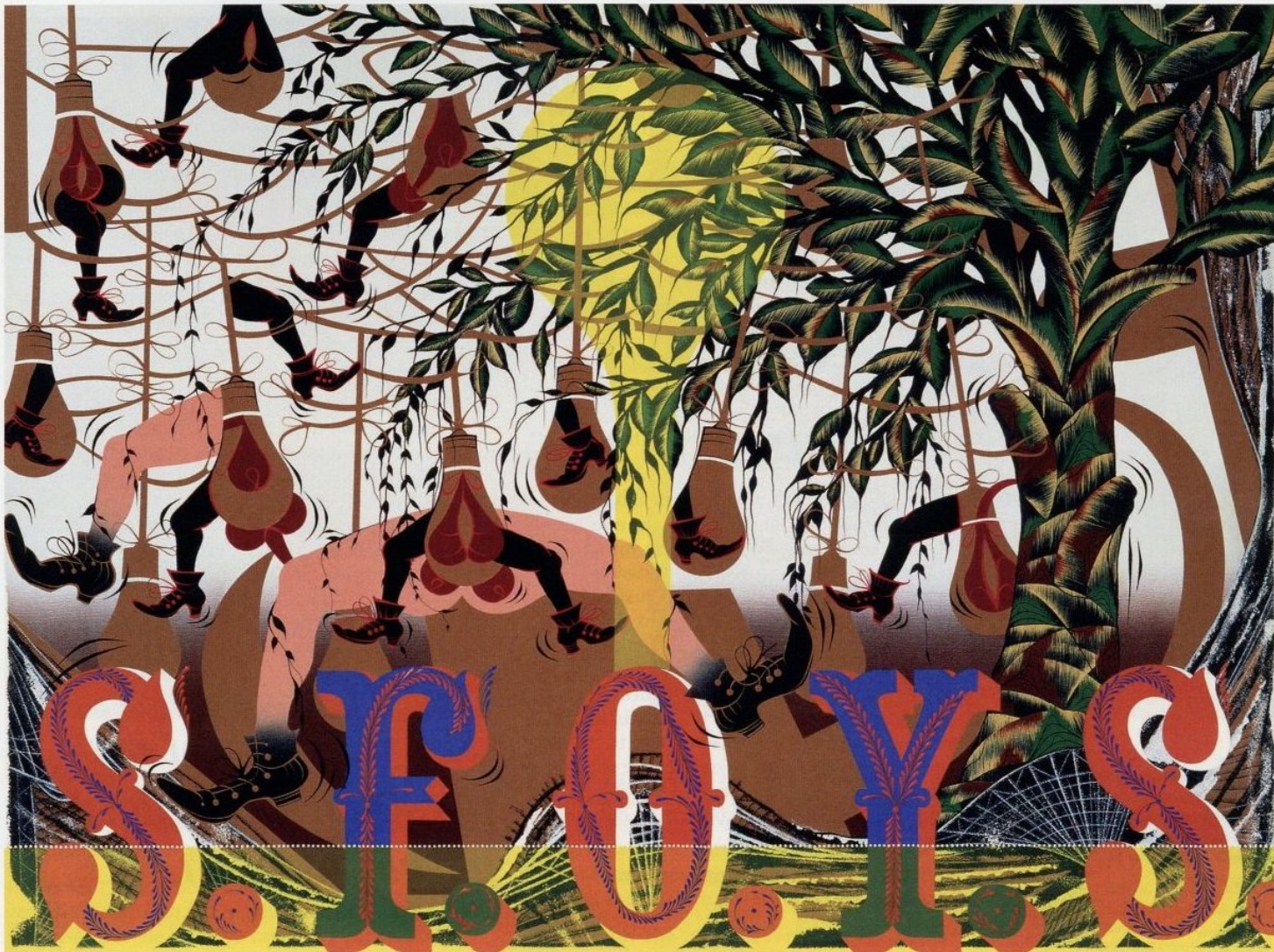
**Top left, *How Sweet the Day After This and That, Deep Sleep Is Truly Welcomed, 1988.*** acrylic, enamel, and five framed works on paper on wood, three panels, 96 by 192 inches.

**Top right, *Transcendental and Needy, 1990.*** acrylic and enamel on mahogany, 66 by 82 inches.

**Above, *Flying Carpet with a Waning Moon Over a Violent Nation, 2013.*** Cel-Vinyl and spray paint on canvas over wood, 108 by 360¼ inches.



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**PITTMAN** Yeah, I still love a clean, modernist installation. I love modernist lighting, where you're not just lighting objects, but the corners of the room. I'm also a homemaker, a really avid homemaker.

**OLLMAN** What does it mean to be an avid homemaker?

**PITTMAN** Roy and I have had many homes together over the many, many years. We're midcentury homosexuals. I hate to say it so clinically, but the home still is the safest place for us. There's always that stereotype: why do homosexuals decorate their homes? Well, it's out of desperation. I don't know if that's still there, but the home is really huge to us and we've always tried to make it as beautiful as possible.

**OLLMAN** When you finished at CalArts, you spent ten years working in interior design. What exactly did you do, and was there reciprocity between that day job and your painting?

**PITTMAN** I worked for Donghia Associates. Angelo Donghia was one of the first branded superstar decorators, so it was very much a Hollywood/music clientele.

After leaving graduate school, I just did not want to teach. I wasn't ready to do that. I didn't feel I had a voice. So I thought, I'll jump into a job. I absolutely loved it. I was helping other decorators put together people's homes: furniture, textiles, decorative objects, plumbing fixtures. I learned a lot. I learned about people. I'm a bit of a voyeur. I am absolutely fixated on human nature, on observations of human nature.

I sometimes think I got my MBA there. I learned about money. And all along I would be working on shows at Rosamund Felsen Gallery. The first painting in the retrospective [*Birthplace* (1984)] is actually painted on gold-flecked cork paper I got from my job. There are a couple paintings where I used wallpaper scraps and textile scraps in the making of the work, collaging them.

One of my strongest memories from those years is of how patterning and color were so relentlessly gendered. It really struck me, how strong that was in the mercantile world. I'd show somebody a textile or something, and a common answer would be, no, that's too feminine, or it's too masculine. Always within the framework of gender construction binaries. That was a big learning curve

*Untitled #11 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation)*, 1993, acrylic and enamel on wood, 36 by 48 inches.

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for me. I'd just never thought of color that way.

**OLLMAN** Did that new awareness affect your work?

**PITTMAN** Well, I came to that job already predisposed to liking it. I was swimming in waters I already knew. My main teachers at CalArts were Elizabeth Murray, Vija Celmins, and Miriam Schapiro. The feminist art movement was huge – very powerful and influential. It's not that we were dismantling the modernist timeline under the feminist program. We were just saying, let's look at other things. And lo and behold, when you look at other things, you also reveal who made those other things, and it was usually women.

**OLLMAN** You did start teaching after the decade in interior design, and have been at UCLA for more than twenty-five years. Your studies at CalArts helped bring out the feminist in you. What are you hoping to bring out in your students?

**PITTMAN** I try to show them that their work should be informed by pleasure, first and foremost, or else why do it? My god, there's plenty of drudgery you can tap into in the real world. I do stress the professional aspect very strongly as well. Not to be self-delusional, to be critical. I have a really strong work ethic. I'm very disciplined. I always ask them, do you think this is something for you? It's pretty boring and lonely, especially a painting practice, because it requires long stretches in the studio, day in and day out, day in and day out. There's a certain kind of sweet tedium to it.

I don't know really why I do it myself. I have some ideas. By nature, I'm a restless person, and making paintings seems the best fit for my conjectural outlook. It's a good match.

**OLLMAN** You spend your time creating propositions.

**PITTMAN** I realize how luxurious that is. It's never escaped me. I don't take for granted the privilege of it. I know I'm very lucky.

**OLLMAN** As much as you dislike the idea that the work ought to bear some sort of societal usefulness, what you do has purpose, in a private way, for sure, and maybe also beyond.

**PITTMAN** Since I'm not religious – I'm an atheist – it is a viable and real and validating way of creating meaning.

**OLLMAN** As you were planning the retrospective, shaping its narrative, were there any surprises along the way? Through lines that you didn't expect to see from the start?

**PITTMAN** I don't know if artists have that many ideas. I think most artists circle around a handful, over and over again. Sometimes just the visual behavior changes. I can sense some of the things I keep circling around – the portrayal of gender complexity in the work. That strain is there very strongly. Historically, I've talked more about sexuality. We didn't have the terms before. Now we have terms that aren't as stuck in binaries. That's something that's been revealed to me in the exhibition. There's a bittersweet nature to the work, but at the same time, there's a lot of jouissance in it.

*“The work is not my personal aesthetic, and never has been.”*

*Curiosities from a Late Western Imperium, 2014, Cel-Vinyl and spray enamel on gessoed paper, 70 parts, 20 by 16 inches each.*



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**OLLMAN** That's a great word for the energy in the paintings, which get called a lot of different things – extravagant, grandiose, efflorescent, gregarious, cacophonous, riotous.

**PITTMAN** There is no equivalent in English. It's a very different word in French. It means full of life. Bittersweet is the best you can do in English, but in reality the best word is in Portuguese, which is *saudade*. That is a great word, because it deals with the intersection of the past and future subjunctive, and emotions. It's almost an untranslatable term. Sometimes you do have to use words in other languages. It's not about snobbery.

**OLLMAN** We keep coming back to language. When you distinguish the demands of a painting from your own demands, it sounds so much like the way novelists discuss characters; the characters are fictive creations, but they enact their own fates. It's a kind of engaged disassociation.

**PITTMAN** If there's one thing that troubled me when I was really young, it was that of all the practices, painting is the one where the viewer invests heavily in the essentialization of the relationship between the maker of the object and the object made. That really bugged me. I wanted a physical object to have its own consciousness, somehow, or for it to be a little more collaborative. I try to set up very quickly at the beginning of the making of a painting some sort of inner logic, so that it's that inner logic that makes the painting and completes it, not necessarily me. It's that disassociation

which also allows me not to always like my work. Also, the work is not my personal aesthetic, and never has been, in the same way that a novelist can create the most heinous creature without being a heinous person. But there's something about painting that really facilitates and exacerbates that real essentialization.

**OLLMAN** The aesthetic is not your aesthetic – and the work can be destabilizing even to you.

**PITTMAN** In the same way that there are strong protocols, or rules, it's still informed by pleasure. There's also the capacity for self-abandonment, and I think that's just as big a part of the making of the work. I even say it to myself: throw yourself away in it, Lari, just throw yourself away in it. I've always felt, since I was very young, I have everything to gain and nothing to lose through that self-abandonment. I think that's maybe the other takeaway of the exhibition that I'm very proud of. I don't look over my shoulder. ●

LEAH OLLMAN is a writer based in Southern California and a regular contributor to the Los Angeles Times.

## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Lari Pittman: Declaration of Independence," at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, through Jan. 5, 2020. The show will subsequently appear at the Kistefos Museet, Jevnaker, Norway, May 24–Oct. 5, 2020.

Left, *Portrait of a Textile (Brocade)*, 2018, Cel-Vinyl and spray enamel on canvas over wood 81 by 70 inches.

Right, *Grisaille, Ethics & Knots (painting with cataplasms #1)*, 2016, oil, Cel-Vinyl, and spray lacquer on gessoed canvas over wood, 96 by 86 inches.