



## Pittman, Lari (b. 1952)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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California artist Lari Pittman creates visually beautiful and exciting paintings that depict the anxiety attendant on being a gay male in America. They confront the perils and dangers that threaten homosexuality even as they resolutely affirm homosexual love.

Lari Pittman was born in Glendale, California on February 19, 1952. Pittman's mother is Catholic, of Spanish and Italian ancestry, and hails from Colombia. His father is an American Presbyterian of German and English heritage. This mix of divergent national, ethnic, religious, and cultural sensibilities has given Pittman's art a rich diversity.

Pittman spent much of his childhood in the Colombian cities of Cali and Tumace, where his father worked in the lumber industry. An effeminate child, he loved playing with his mother's jewelry. His desire to decorate with baubles received parental support and has deeply influenced his subsequent art. His continued obsession with decoration is apparent in his image and symbol-packed paintings. His use of decorative motifs may be regarded as a rebellion against the strictures of modernism.

In 1963, the Pittman family returned to Los Angeles. After studying painting at University of California, Los Angeles from 1970 to 1973, Pittman transferred to the California Institute of Arts. He graduated with an MFA in 1976.

Pittman held his first solo exhibition in 1982 to mixed reactions. His early works, full of obscure references, are purposely made to be difficult for the viewer to decipher. In these works, which are mostly abstract though with representational elements, Pittman often uses very personal symbols, full of meaning for him but not necessarily for the viewer.

For example, *From Venom to Serum* (1982), a large canvas divided into two sections that converse with each other, considers the complex relationship between good and evil and between cause and effect, but in an elusive way. Meaning is implied, but not clearly articulated.

In 1985, Pittman changed his style as the result of suffering a near fatal attack. One night, he discovered a burglar in his home. When he attempted to scare off the man, he was shot in the stomach. The injury resulted in a colostomy and a long period of recovery.

After this harrowing, near death experience, Pittman decided to stop being evasive about his homosexuality and about the thematics of his work. He has since sought to erase the distinction between the private and the public as a means of gay activism. His later works, while as suggestive and complex as the earlier ones, are less abstract and more intent on conveying thematic points of view.

Pittman's post-1985 imagery is much more open and readable than his earlier imagery. In *This Wholesomeness, Beloved and Despised, Continues Regardless* (1990), for example, he creates a complex narrative through the use of accessible images. At the center of this canvas is a gay couple making love.

However, the decorative elements in the painting are both celebratory and ominous, ranging from an inscribed "69" (a motif he uses in several works) to a noose and a menacing figure wielding a knife. Thus, the work's narrative structure celebrates gay relationships, but also acknowledges the homophobic conditions in which they are experienced. The painting makes an affecting statement about the persistence and perseverance of gay love even in the face of hatred and persecution.

Pittman associates the idea of drop-dead beauty with a gay aesthetic, and he has brought this perspective into his paintings. He typically uses alkyd, an oil-based paint that fills over brush mark grooves, thereby creating a smooth, flawless surface that adds to the beauty of the painting. His work is characterized by vivid colors and a dizzying array of images that create the impression of movement and dance.

Pittman's paintings consider American identity and history, often incorporating motifs from folk art and popular culture, as in *An American Place* (1986). Such motifs give his work a cartoon-like quality, with every space packed with imagery and action.

The 1988 painting *Where Suffering and Redemption Will Sprout from the Same Vine (7344 A.D.)* is representative of Pittman's later work. It is an acrylic on wood, like many of Pittman's works, and has a slightly wet, slightly lacquered look that acrylic paints produce when layered over wood. In the painting, the artist makes references to his heritage by evoking traditions of Christian art with themes of martyrdom and the transcendence of the Holy Ghost.

About 1990, Pittman began incorporating misleadingly cheerful or directly confrontational slogans into his paintings via credit-card logos, hair-salon signage, and simple computer graphics.

The series *A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation* (1992-1995) consists of heavily layered paintings that incorporate a wide range of styles. In the series, Pittman explores the cycle of life and death, intermingling images of eroticism and violence. He includes a phallic candle dripping fluid, as well as other obvious references to semen.

The emphasis that Pittman places on queerness has led some critics to describe him as the prince of queer agit-prop art. He has been attacked for being too political because he has dared to address the difficulties of life as a gay man in paintings that grab attention.

Indeed, Pittman may be justly regarded as our foremost painter of gay pride. As Jody Zellen has written, "Pittman paints with such elegance and determination that no matter what the subject--loss, death, sex, or desire--each painting is a celebration. A celebration of the act of painting and of survival, both of which are such integral aspects of Pittman's life that they have become the subject of his paintings."

Critics have labeled Pittman one of the most influential artists of his generation. He has been featured in several of the Whitney Museum's prestigious Biennial exhibitions, and his paintings are held in the collections of many museums in the United States and abroad.

The respect that Pittman has earned as an artist is reflected in his position as Professor of Fine Arts at UCLA. He lives in Los Angeles with his longtime companion, fellow artist Roy Dowell, with whom he sometimes collaborates.

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### **About the Author**

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