

Los Angeles

LARI PITTMAN

Rosamund Felsen

IMAGINE loud, impastoed landscapes. Combine those vistas with the spiky decorative motifs of '50s wallpaper. Add squares of flat color. Throw in a few organs and intestines. And you have a Pittman painting.

This may sound like a recipe for disaster, but, in fact, Pittman is making some of the most stimulating pictures around. In his last exhibition he used elements, such as gold leaf and calligraphic flourishes in black paint, that could only be called decorator chic, but the subtext of his work, with its amoeba imagery, suggested evolution itself. His most recent work is even more ambitious, and free of the ironic distance he employed in the past.

In these new paintings Pittman looks at the origins of the United States and its symbolic status, in the past and present, as a land of hope for new arrivals. He contrasts this country's optimistic beginnings with the reality of conditions today. This is not to say the pictures are didactic. The ideas eddy beneath the unique seductive surfaces of his paintings. Only *The Veneer of Order*, which incorporates an updated script based on the Gettysburg Address, feels strained. Pittman handles the other paintings with the subtlety of a poet.

Each work, in oil and acrylic on wood panel, bears a painting within a painting. The thickly laid oil painting within is a vista of a city, with sprinkles of lights in the distance—a dreamlike image of a promised land. In *The New Republic*, a city with bright turquoise skies and water is placed lopsided in the center of the painting and surrounded by a large gray intestine and chaotic explosions of black. Pittman wants to capture the complexity of the present, combining the myths of our education, our acculturated beliefs, with the maelstrom of current events.

Extending from the top of *Plymouth Rock* is a genealogy chart in black, white and pink set against an ocher ground. (Pittman uses ochers and flat brown with genuine affection.) Instead of names on the nation's family tree, the words "faith" or "love" appear. Yin-yang teardrops contain visions of cities, one city appearing to fall through the bottom of the tear onto sharp spires below, the other rendered upside down. Written in script over the spires is "ca. 1620," the year the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.

These are intentional paintings, questioning our personal and political history, asking us to consider some very sweet, old-

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Yin-yang teardrops contain visions of cities in Lari Pittman's *Plymouth Rock*, 1985, oil and acrylic on panel, 80 by 82 inches.

fashioned values—which seem romantic and naive in the contemporary world. But Pittman appreciates these values and has embodied them in objects he calls "Memento Mori." Six gourds, painted a silky black, each bear one of the turquoise vistas and a single word in script: "forgiveness," "faith," "charity," "compassion," "kindness," "hope." They are fashioned after souvenirs, but instead of recalling a trip they remind you of the transitory nature of life. Each of his works functions as a contemporary *vanitas*. With their tactile surfaces and complicated compositions, they hook the viewer. Once hooked, we begin to realize that the artist is essentially speculating on the human condition, on our fragile, precarious lives.

—Hunter Drohojowska

PRESENCE

—Laband Art Gallery, Loyola Marymount University

"PRESENCE: Abstract Visions from Six Artists" affirmed what is unmistakably a rising trend on both coasts and in between. In presenting work by three painters and three sculptors that contrasts dramatically with the aggressive, often shrill figuration

currently dominant, the show not only pointed out that abstract painting is regaining prominence but revealed that it can assert meaningfulness in terms well beyond the formal. At the same time—and duality seemed to be as inherent in the work as in the concept of the exhibition—it revealed how crucial precise formal relations are for these artists, no less than they once were for Mondrian, whose search and spirit were both recalled here.

The work in this exhibition was not spiritual but, rather, transcendent. In it, the energy of physical substance seemed to reform itself in intangible and imponderable ways, creating what curator Pamela Hammond most fittingly called *presence*.

These artists share a concern for communicating an inner state with subtlety and understatement that enriches and gladdens. Michael Cochran expresses it through bronzes that are small in scale but immense in eloquence. In *Mukti*, named for a Sanskrit word meaning "liberation" or "freedom," the surface of an impeccably crafted and provocatively tilted ovoid seems to dissolve as its dark coloration changes alchemically to a golden gleam, rising to terminate in a twisted, obliquely angled rod. Cochran's work rarefies the atmosphere of its surroundings. So does Eileen