

S. MAGAZINE - SUMMER '96

A R T

# Art about Life

LARI PITTMAN



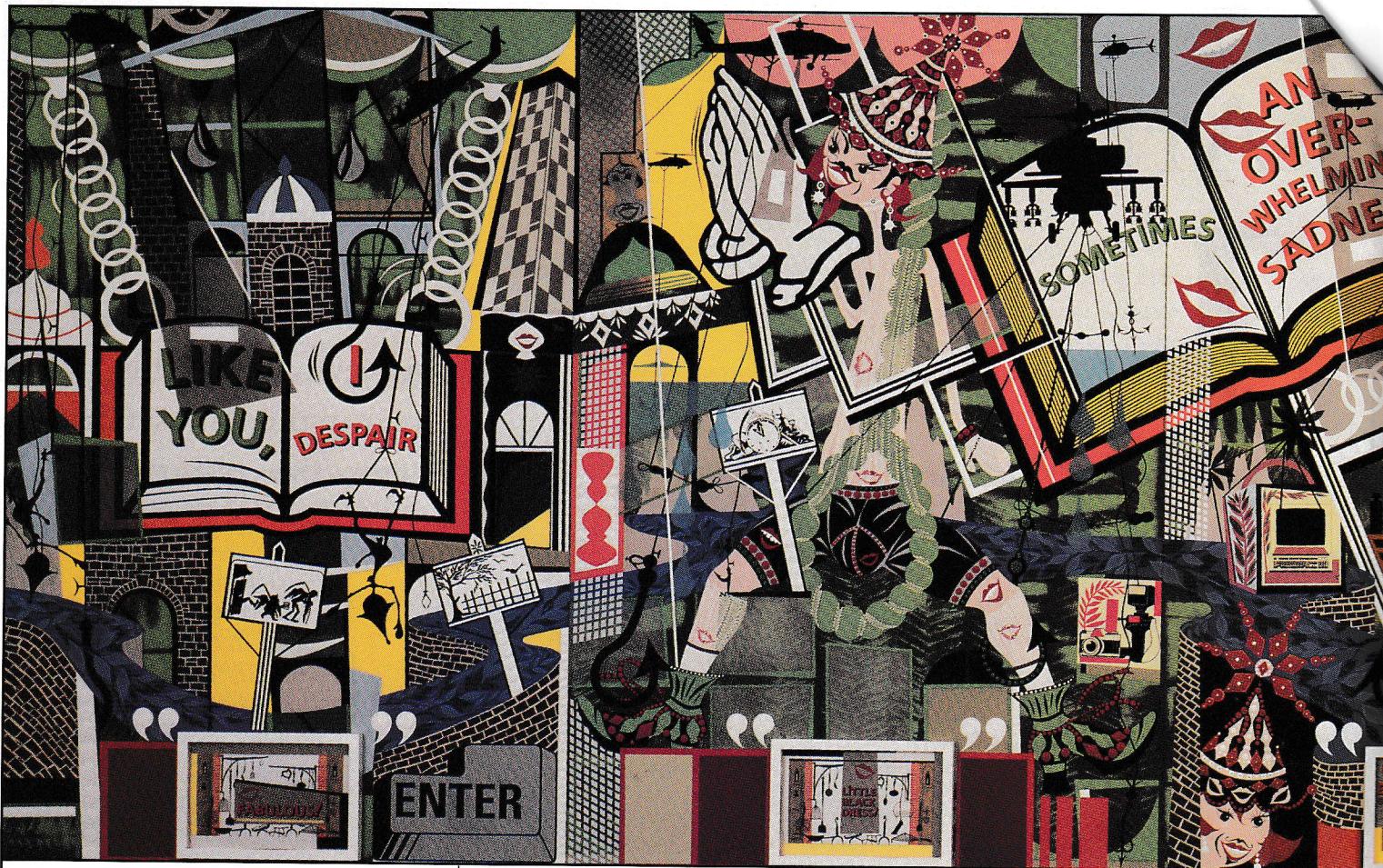
TRAFFIC IS GRIDLOCKED AT TEN in the morning, grilled *carnitas* spice the air and, from Victor's Bridal Shop, the recorded melody of the wedding march floats above pedestrians on their way to work. On this cheeky stretch of Broadway in downtown Los Angeles, in the studio he has rented for fourteen years, Lari Llorente-Rosasco Pittman generates paintings as cacophonous and conflicted, as seductive and dangerous as the surrounding urban life. Pittman, who greets me at the door, explains his

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

**Lari Pittman's** highly decorated paeans to the powers of love, life and work are the subject of a mid-career survey on view this year in three museums across the country.

affection for the unfashionable eastside barrio. "I see the urban center as the hope of culture in America. I'm interested in complexity—and when people of such diversity are called upon to live in such proximity, they have to refine some skills of negotiation," which he adds with a wry chuckle, "if you live in Montana, you obviously don't have to do."

Art critic Dave Hickey wrote that Pittman's paintings have an "aura of exotic toughness—like a wild orchid sprung up through a crack in the pavement . . . the language of the street bubbling just beneath the sleek artifice." For example, Pittman's sincere concerns wrapped in his trademark grandiosity, were manifested in an epic eight-by-twenty-six-foot painting he made last year, which looks like Guernica as painted by RuPaul. In the searing tones of lime and pink, cherry and blue (so typical of Pittman's style), the canvas is layered with images of the cityscape and river, helicopters, praying hands and bouncy sexual beings, with patterns, arabesques and several open books offering the Burma Shave-style admonition: Like you/I despair/Sometimes/An overwhelming sadness/A deep funky-



funk/But/Go Girl! Grab it by the tail! "I'm making a painting for God's sake," Pittman explains, "and I will do anything to seduce and cajole people into engaging with the work."

Pittman is himself quite a seductive presence. The 44-year-old artist is short and dark, with a mass of thick, wavy hair and brown eyes that rarely drop their guarded self-consciousness. Completely forthcoming, yet simultaneously aware of his, and your, every move, he is the very contradiction depicted in his paintings. Dressed in jeans and an immaculately pressed tan shirt, he graciously arranges simple chairs around a glass-topped table piled with magazines and urgent faxes. Settling down to chat, he insists, "My art is about life. It's not art about art." He knows that this separates him from most of his peers in the hermetic world of contemporary art. But he has felt like an outsider for a long time.

Pittman was raised in Tumaco, an island in the state of Nariño, Colombia. Although his father was born in the United States, his mother was born in Tumaco, her parents having immigrated there from Italy and Spain. The Latin influences drive his insistent, throbbing, operatic art and yet, woven through all the drama, there emerges an Emersonian morality that is purely North American. Howard Fox, curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibit, calls him "one of the most engrossing American painters of his generation."

After a decade of paradise on a tropical island, Pittman's father, who was in the lumber business, moved the family to the L.A. suburb of Whittier. Pittman, sent to parochial schools, found this to be a nasty shock. "The first day of class I got an F on a spelling test. I was mortified. That fear of being misunderstood, and just because of a linguistic problem, was very disturbing. I was

obsessed with correcting any perception that I was stupid. My father and I studied for two weeks for the next spelling test and I got an A."

To further pursue his lifelong interest in painting, he enrolled in the art department at UCLA, transferring after three years to the private California Institute of the Arts. After graduating with a master's degree in fine art, he took a job as a salesman in the showroom of interior design genius Angelo Donghia. "I don't look down on design," says Pittman, "as has been the case historically in the modern art world." He stayed for ten years, working forty hours a week, and at the same time building a respectable career as an artist. One of his first conquests was the perspicacious L.A. art dealer Rosamund Felsen, who recognized his aesthetic independence and agreed to represent him. (He is now represented by Regen Projects in L.A. and Jay Gorney Gallery in New York.)



Into these palmy days came a life-shattering month in 1985. At one in the morning on the third of July, Pittman heard a noise at the window of his Silver Lake apartment. He went to shout at the intruder, who shot through the screen door, hitting him in the stomach. Rushed to Hollywood Presbyterian hospital, his life was saved. During his three-week hospital stay, he was visited daily by his brother Oscar, a successful producer of TV commercials. Two years older, married, athletic, Oscar was the flip side of his younger brother, but the two were very close. Toward the end of Pittman's recovery, in a freak coincidence, Oscar was brought to the hospital with a burst aorta. He died three days later. "I have such memories of him," Pittman says. "As I grow older and uglier, I remember him as beautiful and young."

Deastated, the artist suffered a breakdown. "It was a complete philosophical

reorganization," he says. "For some people, an incident like this might make them turn to God. For me, it cemented my atheism. Even though I grew up in a strong Catholic trajectory, my father was an atheist. I look at the universe and I see randomness, happenstance, serendipity. Those are the points that I relate to, as opposed to order, intersections and interlockings. That incident seemed so crazy, it radicalized me and propelled me to get to work. Since I prefer to live in a Godless, chaotic world, the reason for making art is organization of meaning.

"After that incident, I wanted the work to be a vehicle for a voice that was secular, urban, urbane, educated, gay, liberal, Latino and Anglo. The work became a vehicle for a complexity that is really a part of any human existence. It's just that most people don't act on it."

His decorations left the realm of so-called good taste and began to burst

with silhouetted figures in colonial dress, coffins, sailing ships, schematics of innards and elaborate vegetation, exotic representations of scintillating distant cities, explicit sexuality and texts extolling virtues, creeds and truisms. They were flagrantly out of the closet. As Pittman explains it, "I wanted to shed a timidity and reservation. I thought, What should I be scared about? I thought, Reveal yourself in the work. Show your capacity to be insightful and shallow, your capacity for intellect and for interior decoration, your capacity to be muscular and fey."

The machinations of the art world took note and, in 1987, his new work was included in the prestigious Whitney Biennial. His pictures were being exhibited across Europe and the U.S. and, more importantly, they were selling. He quit his job but took the occasional teaching position. In 1993, *Continued on page 78*

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## Art about Life

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based on his exhibition record, he was offered a full-time, tenured position in the art department at UCLA, becoming the first openly gay Latino professor.

Both the dualism and the complexity of his art is traceable, Pittman thinks, to his Latin roots. "If there is a component in me that is Latino, it's that I perceive time as a possibility of simultaneous events. Within a painting, there can be celebratory moments alongside moments of despair and death. Something joyous and morbid can occupy the same territory. That sentiment I trace to my maternal family. People always say my work is surrealistic, but I wonder, isn't that from a Puritan point of view? The issue of simultaneity of seemingly contradictory events is disturbing to people because it makes them think there is no hierarchy. The work is profound and shallow, dead serious and completely silly, very decorated and highly modern."

If so, the paintings are much like Pittman himself. "You are talking about the psychology of the maker and the object being made. I was a very gregarious child. I love being with people, I hate being alone. When young, I was geared to entertain adults and make them laugh. So there is a theatricality in the work. I derive a lot of pleasure when I hear people enjoy the work."

Lari Pittman's retrospective is on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, from June 23 through September 8; the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston from October through January 1997; and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from February through April.

**Hunter Drohojowska-Philp**, writes regularly for *Architectural Digest* and the *Los Angeles Times* and other publications. She is completing a biography of artist Georgia O'Keeffe for Alfred A. Knopf. She wrote the profile of Manolo Mestre in the premier issue of *Si!*

## Letters

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Latina. While I also subscribe to other magazines (like *Hispanic*), I find that yours is just so much more sophisticated and stylish. While sometimes I worry whether there are enough of us to sustain a magazine like yours, I think that the demographics of the '90s will support you. *Estamos avanzando*, and I hope your magazine is a great success!

**Patricia Orozco Palagi**  
*San Diego, California*

I just received the second edition of your magazine and am extremely pleased to see that the first issue was not a fluke. At first I thought, "this is too good to be true: a magazine for Hispanics/Latinos/Chicanos/Tejanos/Cubanos, etc. that speaks to our intelligence, our passion, our pride as foreigners in what is to most, our mother country. As an advertising executive for a Hispanic marketing agency, I have educated others on the market, explaining not only the differences but also the similarities between "them and us." We have described this duality as a people rich in culture, tradition and pride who seek the "best of both worlds." Your magazine is the epitome of this. I wish that I could give everyone who seeks to understand the market a copy of your magazine!

Your editorial staff has done a tremendous job of capturing the essence of a complex culture. You should be held up as an example to our Hispanic youth of today who so desperately are searching for role models.

**Becky Arreaga**  
*San Antonio, Texas*

*Si!* magazine is a breath of fresh air that clears your head like a Santana wind clearing out the smog. We are a nation in info overload. Do we need another magazine? In this case, we say yes to *Si!* *Si* is short for simpatico.

Let your good taste and good sense continue a well-charted and successful course. My finger lingers on the last page. I don't want it to end. A soft samba and a re-read will have to hold me over until the next issue. *Jah! Si es la vida.*

**Tony Florez**  
*Boise, Idaho*

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