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## Review: Lari Pittman at CAM is eye candy and much more

In [Visual Arts](#)

By [Sarah Hermes Griesbach](#), special to the Beacon

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*A Decorated Chronology* is the accurate but meager title given to Lari Pittman's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum. It is a survey of Pittman's work, yes, but it is also a survey of a half century of visual culture and to call it "decorated" seems a massive understatement. Pittman's paintings are the very essence of decoration.



Lari Pittman, *Seance*, 2011. Acrylic, Cel-Vinyl, and aerosol lacquer on gessoed canvas over panel, 88 x 102 inches. Courtesy the artist; Gladstone Gallery, New York; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

### The basics

**Where:** 3750 Washington Blvd., 63108

**When:** Through Aug. 11

**Hours:** Wednesdays 11-6, Thursdays 11-9, Friday 11-9, Saturday 10-5, Sunday 10-5

**Cost:** Free

**Information:** [camstl.org](http://camstl.org)

The interwoven visual motifs Pittman constructs offer aesthetic and intellectual delights arranged in pleasing balance. On each canvas, Pittman manages to coherently hold together a smorgasbord

of figurative images with the electric energy of their arrangement and well-integrated connecting lines.

That Pittman comes out of formal art training which included a strong background in applied arts is instantly clear. His lovely streetlamps, absurd birds, poodles in party hats, 18<sup>th</sup> century socialites silhouetted in profile and flying scimitars are universally pleasing like various kinds of type face, with an Edwardian Script figure set against a background painted in Futura Font. The surprising style combinations create pitch perfect visual harmonies.

His delicious tableau, *How Sweet the Day After This and That, Deep Sleep is Truly Welcomed*, was completed in 1988, but eerily predicts the aesthetic desires of our moment today. The late 1960s color combinations (pink, red and orange; dulled green and gold; celadon blue with light brown) are more typical of a 2013 color palate than the late 1980s. The same is true of the lavish owl motif and the elegant curled lines of the frilly Venice-like dream scene across the base of the painting. Every aspect of the elaborate presentation seems to have been carefully designed to feature all of the best selling design elements of Right Now.

During the exhibition preview Pittman described his painting practice in ways that seem totally counter intuitive. He emphasized the lack of control that he exerts over his paintings. He reported that his painted expressions of life provide opportunities for carelessness and randomness that he would not wish to allow into his daily reality. I was not the only recipient of this comment to furl my eyebrows in confusion. Careless? Random? Pittman's paintings are among the most edited appearing compositions I have encountered.

A short video documentary of the artist, posted online by PBS *Art 21* (<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/lari-pittman>), shows the artist engaged in the production of his exquisite paintings. Watching him in the act answered my question of how he creates such perfect lines. I was sure there had to be a mechanical element to his painting, some trick to keep fine lines flawless. But this is not the case. The video footage shows him casually applying perfectly placed marks and swirls. He talks while he works as the video progresses, as if it is second nature to compose the complex configurations of figure and design that make each of his paintings appear perfectly planned.

Pittman connects the ethereal imagery within his work to divergent source material. He references the hyperbolic violence depicted within Latin American devotional "retablo" paintings and the heightened sensations found within magical realism. There is sooo much there. And though the canvases are full to brimming with many separate yet integrated visual programs, the effect is never too much.

The extravagance of textures and images creates story possibility as deep and dynamic as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. They contain humor, pathos, sarcasm, wit, ... desire, frustration, contentedness. The stories are narrated through Pittman's rich imagination, but it is the viewer who takes these wild rumpus tableaux and derives a personal tale.