

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Tyler Green, 'A Forgotten Decade: How the art of the 1980s tackled politics', *Modern Painters*, May 2012

# A Forgotten Decade

How the art of the 1980s tackled politics

FOR THE MOST PART, the 1980s have been overlooked in American museum exhibitions. The cutoff date for the recent "Pacific Standard Time" series in Southern California was 1980. Major shows like "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) have also focused on work made prior to that year. One important exception was curator Dan Cameron's 2004 "East Village USA" at the New Museum in New York.

Enter curator Helen Molesworth, whose new show, "This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s," takes a swing at defining the major motivations of that decade's artists. On view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago through June 3, the exhibition will travel to the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, as well as the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, where Molesworth is the chief curator. The catalogue, published by Yale University Press, makes plain that the show is likely to become a landmark in our understanding of the Reagan era. Molesworth argues that American art in the 1980s was first and foremost about addressing personal and political crises—AIDS above all—using techniques and strategies honed by feminism.

In order to demonstrate Molesworth's conception of how clearly the art of the 1980s breaks with the art of previous decades, here's a quick bit of history: The Abstract Expressionist generation (mostly men) dominated the 1940s and '50s. It was followed by Pop and Minimalism (almost entirely men) in New York, and then by

figuration, assemblage, Conceptualism, and a different sort of Minimalism in California. Remarkably little of this art was explicitly political.

A number of recent exhibitions, however, have revealed that a strong desire to confront the sociocultural issues of the day was bubbling up among those most excluded from the post–World War II art scene: women. Shows such as the aforementioned "WACK!," the Brooklyn Museum's "Global Feminisms" in 2007, "State of Mind" at the Orange County Museum of Art and the Berkeley Art Museum last year, and "Under the Big Black Sun" at MOCA (also in 2011), documented how artists motivated by feminism helped inaugurate a pluralist era in America and how they insisted on making the political personal. (One side effect: The shows also render it incomprehensible that a minor sculptor such as Sarah Sze or third-generation Conceptualists such as Allora and Calzadilla could represent the United States at the Venice Biennale before feminist and Conceptual pioneer Martha Rosler, an oversight that demonstrates just how radical the history that Molesworth presents truly is.)

As Molesworth points out, the feminist movement of the '70s laid much of the groundwork for the artists—women and men—who wanted to address the issues of the '80s. Following the outbreak of AIDS, for example, gay and straight artists both seized on techniques developed by their predecessors. "The gay rights movement takes so much from the feminist

**Gran Fury**  
*Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, 1989. Full-color poster, 12 x 3 ft.

## KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.



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movement,” says Molesworth. “And because so much literature was written by gay men, you then had other men slowly beginning to figure out the ramifications of this critique. Their receptivity to the texts and the work filters into their art.”

Molesworth rejects the conventional blue-chip history of 1980s art. Jeff Koons is represented here by work he made before he moved to the Upper East Side, and established heroes such as Richard Diebenkorn, Richard Serra, and Robert Rauschenberg are completely absent from the show in favor of a history dominated by the activism of artists rather than the acquisitiveness of the collector class. And this urgent art remains moving: In *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, 1989, Gran Fury shows us a man kissing a man, a woman locking lips with a woman, and an interracial couple embracing. In *Untitled*, 1989–93, Doris Salcedo pierced plaster-coated dress shirts to remind us of the Colombian men snatched from their beds and killed in retribution for their role in the labor struggles that plagued that nation's banana plantations.

One of the most striking thematic links between the art of the 1980s and today is torture. Back then, the United States supported brutally oppressive regimes throughout South and Central America, most notably in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. “This Will Have Been” includes Leon Golub's pivotal painting *Interrogation II*, 1981, which features four uniformed, soldier-like figures surrounding a naked, bound, hooded figure. Each of the men is presented in a way that suggests he's about to do something despicable to the captive. Golub's painting addresses the geopolitics of its time via what is arguably the most prevalent technique of its time: appropriation. Each of the figures in *Interrogation II* was cribbed from *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Along with Bruce Nauman's two momentous 1981 torture masterpieces—*South American Triangle* and *Diamond Africa with Chair Turned D.E.A.D.*, both oddly absent from the exhibition—Golub's works are a significant consideration of America's



complicity in human rights abuses.

As I reviewed Molesworth's catalogue, I realized how timely her thesis remains. In many ways, the art of the '80s has far more in common with the art of today than it does with the art that preceded it. Rather than post-Conceptual, post-Minimal, poststructural, postmodern, Neo-Expressionist, neo-post, or post-neo, perhaps that decade will be viewed by critics and art historians in the future as the start of something new.

After all, in some ways, we're still living in the 1980s: Contemporary art is investigating many of the same issues—AIDS, gay liberation, torture, megawealth. And the Smithsonian's decision to remove the work of David Wojnarowicz from the 2010 National Portrait Gallery exhibition “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture” was frighteningly analogous to the Corcoran Gallery of Art's removal of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in 1989. In that context, Lari Pittman's masterly *The Vener of Order*, 1985, emerges as a critical statement on

the unfinished struggle for civil rights in America. Pittman's canvas, made at the height of the AIDS crisis, demands a level playing field for gay men and reminds us that our nation was “conceived and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” That message, clearly spelled out in the painting, is no less immediate and urgent now, as gay men and women fight for an end to discrimination in marriage, employment, and housing. Informed by the pattern-and-decoration painting of the '70s, Suzanne Lacy's public confrontationalism, and Rauschenberg's pioneering push to make his sexual orientation a subject of his work—as in the great 1981 combine *Honorarium (Spread)*—Pittman's painting asserts itself as one of the most important artworks of the decade.

In 1988, the Guerrilla Girls said that one of “the advantages of being a woman artist” was “seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.” Nearly a quarter century later, Molesworth shows us just how nuanced that statement could be. MP

**Lari Pittman**  
*The Vener of Order*, 1985.  
Oil and acrylic  
on mahogany  
panel, 80 x 82 in.