

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Pollack, Gina. 'Lari Pittman: Finding beauty in the grotesque'. *KCRW Blank Slate* Online. 22 September 2017



Lari Pittman: Finding beauty in the grotesque



Lari Pittman in his studio. Photo: Gina Pollack

Lari Pittman is not an easy painter. While some artists are minimalists, Pittman is a maximalist. Every inch of his large canvases is covered in images.

His frenetic, complex pieces are well known in Los Angeles. Pittman's work has been shown at every major museum in the city, he's on the board at MOCA and the Hammer, and he's been teaching the next generation of artists at UCLA since the late 90's.

His paintings have everything—Visa credit cards and glittery shoes, bulging tree roots and large intestines. He uses imagery from science, comic books, advertising and verses from American poetry, throwing all of it onto the canvas.

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Like You, 1995. Courtesy Regen Projects

And because of that, it's impossible to fully comprehend Pittman's images. Curator Lisa Phillips wrote of his work: The densely layered images are so tightly wound that they can make the viewer feel anxious, overwhelmed, and off balance. Even he is sometimes appalled by how ugly and off-putting his work can be.

But that's Pittman's intention. He wants the act of viewing to be a challenge, and he believes that beauty includes the darker corners of life that we might find repulsive or uncomfortable.

Even the colors he uses might repulse his viewers. Art critic Wayne Koestenbaum said he uses colors most painters would find too garish or kitschy for fine art: peppermint pink, pine green, raincoat yellow, mulch brown. He uses a paint called cartoon color, which was originally used for cell animation.

"I'm not color phobic" Pittman says. "Some people are."

That color is in many ways, a rebellion against classic modern painting, with its sparse canvases, simple lines, and subtle shades of grey.

Take his painting *Caprichos #7*, from his series *Nuevos Caprichos*. The Spanish title comes from Pittman's own heritage— his mother is Colombian.

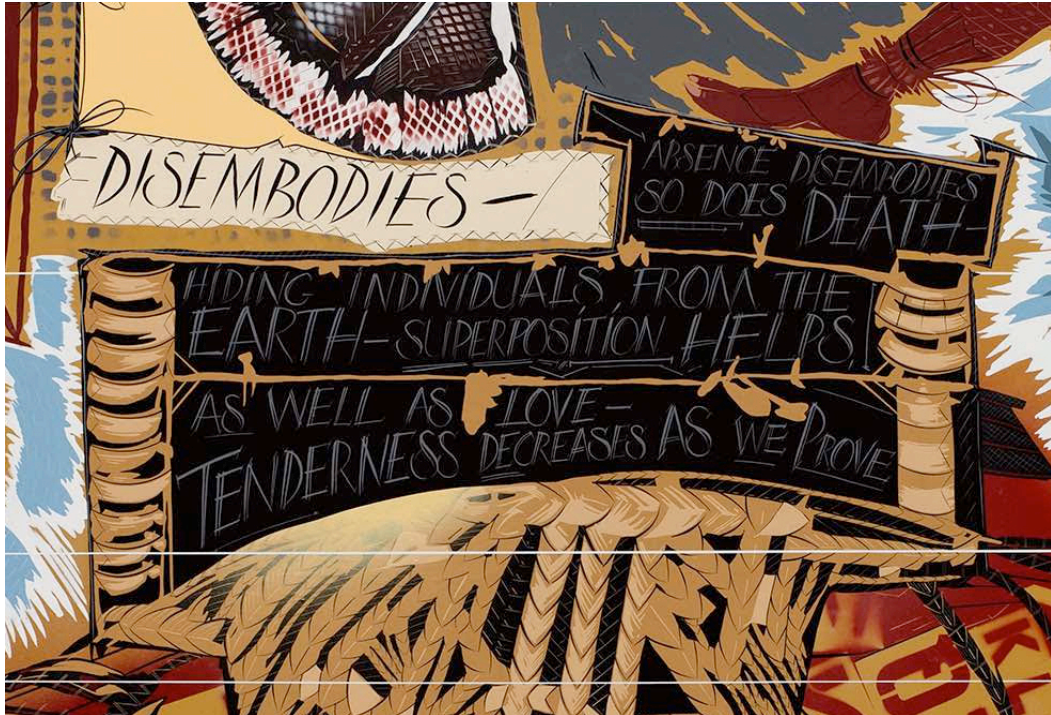
Pittman was inspired by the 19th century Spanish painter Francisco Goya, who is known for his dark and violent imagery. This skeletal figure is being tortured by another figure in the painting, who seems to be celebrating. Pittman's own fascination with violence comes from an experience he had with violent crime in 1985. Pittman was shot in the abdomen by an intruder and nearly lost his life. Many of his paintings deal with dark and violent themes.

Pittman was also inspired by the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who he saw as a kindred spirit of Goya. The poem also deals with death and humanity's flaws.

"I always thought Emily Dickinson was a highly educated American woman," Pittman said. "She was clearly an atheist, a proto-feminist and probably a lesbian."

Pittman said he identifies with her somewhat; he's also gay, a feminist and an atheist.

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Detail from "Capricho #7," Photo: Gina Pollack



Detail from "Capricho #7," Photo: Gina Pollack

And a lot of Pittman's imagery is overtly sexual, although there has been debate about whether or not the handle of the electric guitar (pictured above) is phallic.

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There is one other body part in the full painting. See if you can spot it in the full image below....



“Capricho #7,” © Lari Pittman, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

In some ways, Pittman’s images resemble our modern lives and the things we do everyday, like driving across Los Angeles. Looking at his paintings is akin to experiencing the barrage of images and colors we consume in the modern world, from the internet, billboards, social media, advertising, and from street scenes framed by our windshields. It can be overwhelming or anxiety-provoking but Pittman says that’s real life.

<https://curious.kcrw.com/2017/09/lari-pittman-finding-beauty-in-the-ugly>

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