



LARI PITTMAN
MOOD BOOKS



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LARI PITTMAN MOOD BOOKS

Los Angeles-based artist Lari Pittman (b. 1952) is known for his exuberant, colorful, and graphically complex paintings. “Lari Pittman: Mood Books” presents six new monumental illustrated books, each opening to more than four feet in width, containing a total of 65 paintings by the artist. They draw from a variety of aesthetic traditions, ranging from decorative art and design to advertising and folk art. Combined with Pittman’s brilliant draftsmanship and acidic color, the books and their images advance an astute and acerbic social commentary embedded in narratives rich with real and invented mythologies.

Pittman’s books are enhanced by a dramatic installation conceived by award-winning Los Angeles architect Michael Maltzan. Grand, sculptural pedestals hold the books open so that viewers can enjoy a direct, unimpeded visual experience. Page openings are changed periodically, and a large touch-screen monitor makes it possible to view all the paintings and text in sequential order.

Kevin Salatino, the Hannah and Russel Kully Director of the Art Collections at The Huntington, spoke with Lari Pittman about the works in this exhibition.

Kevin Salatino: Are these the first books you’ve made?

Lari Pittman: No. In 1992, I collaborated with the writer Dennis Cooper on three unique books. We engaged in a back-and-forth process in which Dennis generated text and I made paintings on paper. Jonathan Hammer designed and bound the books in elaborate and unexpected materials. Those three books are dark, scary, and beautiful.

Kevin Salatino: What was your inspiration for making your Mood Books?

Lari Pittman: As a lifelong painter, I envy and admire artists who make sculptures and objects, so I decided to make books as sculpture, or as *objets de vertu* even. I needed a psychological reprieve from painting a group of existential and quite violent paintings titled “Nuevos Caprichos” for an exhibition in New York. Making these books served as an antidote, attempting something more carefree and unencumbered.

Kevin Salatino: Are they a series or serial in nature?

Lari Pittman: No.

Kevin Salatino: Is there a theme that runs through all six books?

Lari Pittman: The impetus was more personally motivational than thematic. I wanted to return to a primary part of my identity as an artist that simply commands: “Make something up!” The point was to make art as an initiative, and not as a response or a verification of a text *a priori*. As a result, each book is very different.

Kevin Salatino: Your titles, which incorporate words like “divinations,” “apparitions,” and “occurrences,” are cryptic and visionary, even perhaps apocalyptic. Without attempting to “explain” their mysteries, can you speak to their invented mythologies?

Lari Pittman: By their very nature, “divinations,” “apparitions,” and “occurrences during a full moon,” are difficult to substantiate or prove. It was these experiential prompts that opened up the possibilities for the painted pages for each of the books. Those words served as categories to generate imagery that could provoke belief in the purely fictive.

Kevin Salatino: Why did you make the poet Emily Dickinson the subject of one of the books, and what dictated your choice of excerpts from her poems?



Lari Pittman: The painting of the previously mentioned “Nuevos Caprichos” was an attempt to synthetically collage Dickinson’s most brutally secular poems about pain and death onto the possibility of making new *caprichos* by channeling Spanish romantic painter Francisco Goya. It was the first line of each of those cage-rattling poems that became the text for each of the pages of the book, *10 Divinations by Emily Dickinson in Greens and Blues*.

Kevin Salatino: In *12 Tableaux in which the Avant-Garde and the Folkloric Kissed*, the early 20th-century Russian artist Natalia Goncharova, who effectively merged the modern with the traditional in her work, is the presiding spirit. Is she of particular interest to you, and, if so, why?

Lari Pittman: Goncharova, who was inspired by the cultural mandates of the early, heady days of the Russian Revolution, was possibly the most insistent visual artist to try to make the folkloric and the avant-garde “kiss in public.” Within her paintings, and in stage and costume design, she made these historical and polemical enemies and their respective aesthetic agendas visually hold hands. Her agenda of politicized, visual hybridity made sense to me 100 years later.

Kevin Salatino: Your work is famously dense and layered, demanding a commitment from the viewer, who is invited to read (often literally) their visual texts. Does this make your work especially amenable to the form of the book? Are the Mood Books a logical progression of your work?

Lari Pittman: Pass.

Kevin Salatino: While we’re accustomed from convention to think of books as sized to the measure of one’s hands, radical dimensions in either direction—both outsized and miniaturized—have always been a part of the making of books. Like doll houses, which force us to think about scale, proportion, and our place in the world, tiny and gargantuan books privilege the physical over the normally cerebral act of reading. Are your books playing with size as a way of addressing issues like these?

Lari Pittman: Artists’ books are not an endangered species. They are in fact thriving and multiplying. I wanted to make them physically experiential as well as have their attendant and specific moods. Perhaps they are distant relatives of one-of-a-kind illustrated manuscripts and prayer books. My books are secular and about relativism of experience, but with a shared desire to induce reverie and contemplation, as did those antecedents.

Kevin Salatino: Can you talk a little about the architect Michael Maltzan, who designed the installation in which your books appear? In what way is this exhibition a collaboration between you and Maltzan?

Lari Pittman: Michael Maltzan designed a psychologically and socially complex house for me and my husband, the artist Roy Dowell. So, yes, this is a collaboration...between two artists. I greatly admire his work and his re-envisioning of a cosmopolitan Los Angeles. I invited him to my studio to see the books and to propose working together. There was no hesitation on Michael’s part. The project quickly took off. I think that the fanciful mood of the books is further perfumed by his sculptural and architectural activation of the gallery space, and vice versa!

The artist would like to give special thanks to Amy Fortunato, Lana Johnson, Mehr Khanpour, Charlene Matthews, Gee-ghid Tse, Isha Welsh, and Lorraine Wild.

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Cover: Lari Pittman, from *12 Verified Occurrences During a Full Moon*, 2015, acrylic and lacquer spray over gessoed, heavy-weight paper board, 27 × 25 × 4.5 inches. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of the artist and Regen projects, Los Angeles.

Center: Lari Pittman, from *9 Apparitions During Times of Anxiety and Distress*, 2015, acrylic and lacquer spray over gessoed, heavy-weight paper board, 27 × 25 × 4.5 inches. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of the artist and Regen projects, Los Angeles.

Back cover: Lari Pittman, from *12 Tableaux in Which the Avant-garde and the Folkloric Kissed*, 2015, acrylic and lacquer spray over gessoed, heavy-weight paper board, 27 × 25 × 4.5 inches. © Lari Pittman, courtesy of the artist and Regen projects, Los Angeles.