

decades, and his facility with his medium is readily apparent. Every picture is picked out, in high contrast, by neon-hued highlights against a black ground. At my most ungenerous, I might say that there is a touch of Bob Ross or velvet-painting-kitsch about some of his work; his techniques are effective, though formulaic. At his best, though, Yarber soars with virtuosic, confident brushwork, as in *Vista* (2018) in which a man gazes out over an orange harbor while a female sprite appears to dance in the air before him. In a couple of the new paintings, Yarber loosens up with more provisional gestures and mists of sprayed acrylic, and, perhaps because of their scale (they are 11 feet wide), they fail to pack the punch of the tighter, earlier work.

What draws me to Yarber's painting, both new and old, is largely nostalgia; it seems to belong to another time—though a time still fraught with its own set of buzzing anxieties. That is by no means to the work's detriment; whoever says great art is timeless is full of platitudinous shit. Art can (and maybe even must?) be anchored to the moment of its conception and still telegraph across time. Datedness does not equal obsolescence. Yarber's work has probably always existed in an elsewhere: the elsewhere of cinema, of science fiction, of fever dreams. Today, we feel more than ever the work's remoteness from reality, but retreat gladly into its darkness.

## Nikita Gale at Commonwealth & Council

September 22–  
November 3, 2018

A screeching sound pulsates on an electric guitar. The music in artist Nikita Gale's video *Descent* (2018) resembles the first thrums of a warm-up—the way an instrument seems to clear its throat and announce itself before the song begins. Through a cacophony of distortion, echo, and feedback, the artist's voiceover recites a quiet, matter-of-fact story about the fraught nature of her own last name and the politics of naming. She discloses a secret even those close to her do not know: Gale is a commonly used middle name on her mother's side of her family and not her legal surname. She is Nikita Gale [name redacted]. A loud bleep drowns out her last name whenever she utters it.

Gale's erasure of her last name is a gesture of patrilineal refusal, a technique of evading association with a father whose contact is infrequent and unwelcome. A surname signifies a code, a means of identification in order to update an administrative file. If naming represents order, casting off a name is then a form of resistance, and in a sense, of hiding, or disappearing and slipping through the cracks. She posits a new mode of expression in not simply adapting her own name, but in refusing to make this self-given name her legal

name. While naming is highly personal, in the end, it is all garbled bureaucratic verbiage anyways. While in her video Gale speaks both at length and out loud, she mixes her voice with raucous sound; there is a contradiction in her work between positions of noise and of silence. Where making noise is so often the typical course of resistance—free speech, picketing, even screaming or crying out—here Gale insists on the power of silence.

Likewise, the surrounding sculptural forms in the exhibition—metal grates, steel screens, cement, foam, and terrycloth structures—allude to silencing, dissent, resistance, and themes of impenetrability. Household objects used for sound blackout surface in Gale's sculptures. Tangled bath towels, cement, twisted foam—familiar objects often affixed to walls to drown out noise—dangle off *Descent Movement I* and *II* (2018). These odd pieces recall both a laundry line in their verticality and a fenced off, private location. Though not restricting, one feels enclosed within this field of grey and metallic objects. Surrounded by pieces that meditate on the idea of sound and its amplification or muffling, the work becomes a sharp study in opacity.

Nearby *Descent Screen* (2018) is a metal barrier that bisects the sculptural works on one side of the room and the blaring video on the other. The group of sculptures in this outlined zone have a tendency to droop, to lean—a choreography of metal bars and jutting microphone stands, encircled in a space that is at

once a stage with life-size speakers, a prison cell with bent bars, and an alley of hanging laundry lines. Most striking are the foam earplugs patterned into the holes on a metal bar grate, a Morse code rendered with the material accoutrement of silence. Jammed into this grate, these plugs allude to the messages, names, and rules that the artist refuses both to abide by and to hear. The earplug is a way to drown out that noise, to turn toward one's innermost reflection and thoughts.

Gale performs an unusual feat in amplifying silence, dwelling in places where it seems there is no noise at all. In her video, she considers her abandoned last name, asking "what difference does it make to know that something has been dropped if you never knew it was there to begin with?" Her disinterest and her deliberate deafness speak to the oppressive weight not simply of her name and the patrilineal system of naming, but to the weight of history. Using sound dampening objects in her sculptural works, she endeavors to drown out the stories and the pain of the past, her own name among them. The loud video bleep rings again, another redaction, another use of powerful silence.

## Lari Pittman at Regen Projects

September 15–  
October 25, 2018

Western History is the story of great men, or rather, rich and powerful men, who often turn

out to be not so great. Their supposedly noble exploits are well-documented throughout millennia of art history—commissioned portraits, altarpieces, and distinguished busts. But alongside, or perhaps underneath, this dominant strain of visual propaganda, there is a more nuanced and contested chronicle based on material culture, much of it created by women—objects, tools, folk art, and textiles. This is the conceit behind Lari Pittman's latest show at Regen Projects, *Portraits of Textiles & Portraits of Humans*, which uses pattern and decoration to tell stories of violence, corruption, inequality, and social tumult.

Each of the large (approximately 6 × 7 foot) canvases in the show is named for a specific fabric—*Crushed Linen Velvet*, *Damask*, *Glazed Chintz*—and features a repeating pattern made up of floral motifs, geometric designs, and stylized objects loaded with connotations (bags of money, nooses, clamps) that form ambiguous but suggestive narratives. In *Portrait of a Textile (Brocade)* (all works 2018) for instance, a series of black axes float atop an angry red background of flowers, alluding to the violent overthrow of a polite social order. The diagonal composition intensifies this sense of turmoil. A tiled arrangement of cartoonish purple portraits are covered by large sickles in *Portrait of a Textile (Reversible Jacquard)*, alluding not only to the hope (and brutality) of proletariat Marxist revolution, but also to the dangers of the totalitarianism that followed. *Portrait of a Textile (Art-Deco Toile de*

*Jouy*) contrasts golden keys with sickly black flowers—*fleurs du mal* as opposed to the stately *fleur-de-lis*—on a blue and green ground. Beneath the gilded veneer of luxury, lineage, and legacy, the dark side of inbreeding and nepotism reveals itself.

Pittman's patterns are not perfectly repeatable. Remarkably, all are created by hand, with no computer or even preparatory sketches to aid him. That process enlivens the compositions, leaving small but noticeable discrepancies that keep our eyes moving. Pittman employs spray enamel and vinyl-based acrylic, taping and stenciling to produce a surprising range of effects that recall the revolutionary—in form and content—designs of Stepanova as much as the mid-century textiles of Alexander Girard. The seductive, high-keyed color scheme and dancing patterns mask the grim subject matter, allowing it to creep almost subliminally into our consciousness. These refined aesthetic tropes disguise a challenge to the very order they represent.

Paired with each fabric archetype is a much smaller human portrait, linked to the larger canvas through color scheme and decorative elements. Instead of specific names as with the textiles, these are identified solely by Ancient Greek words: *Pathos*, *Ethos*, *Logos*, *Kairos*, terms associated, respectively, with the rhetorical appeals of emotion, ethics, logic, and opportunity or decorum. Compared with the dynamic, monumental scenes hanging beside them, the intimacy of these images comes off as



Nikita Gale, *DESCENT MOVEMENT I* (2018).  
Steel, cement, foam, towels, 66 x 40 x 7  
inches. Image courtesy of the artist  
and Commonwealth & Council.