Fields of Relation: An Interview with Adam Pendleton
BerlinArtLink, April 28, 2026
Carolina Sculti

BERLINARTLINK

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by Carolina Sculti // Apr. 28, 2026

Adam Pendleton's exhibition 'Can I Be?,' currently on view at the Langen Foundation, brings together painting, drawing, sculpture and video in a spatially driven exploration of abstraction, language and history. Central to Pendleton's practice is his concept of "Black Dada," first articulated in his 2008 manifesto, which proposes a framework for thinking through the relationship between Blackness, abstraction and the historical avant-garde.

The exhibition is set within the Langen Foundation, a museum built on a former NATO missile base near Neuss and designed by Japanese architect Tadao Ando. Characterized by a synthesis of Japanese architectural tradition and modernism, Ando's use of concrete, light and site-specificity shapes the conditions under which Pendleton's work is encountered. In this setting, Pendleton foregrounds "Black Dada" across image, text and space, using abstraction to fragment and reconfigure forms, situating meaning as relational rather than fixed.

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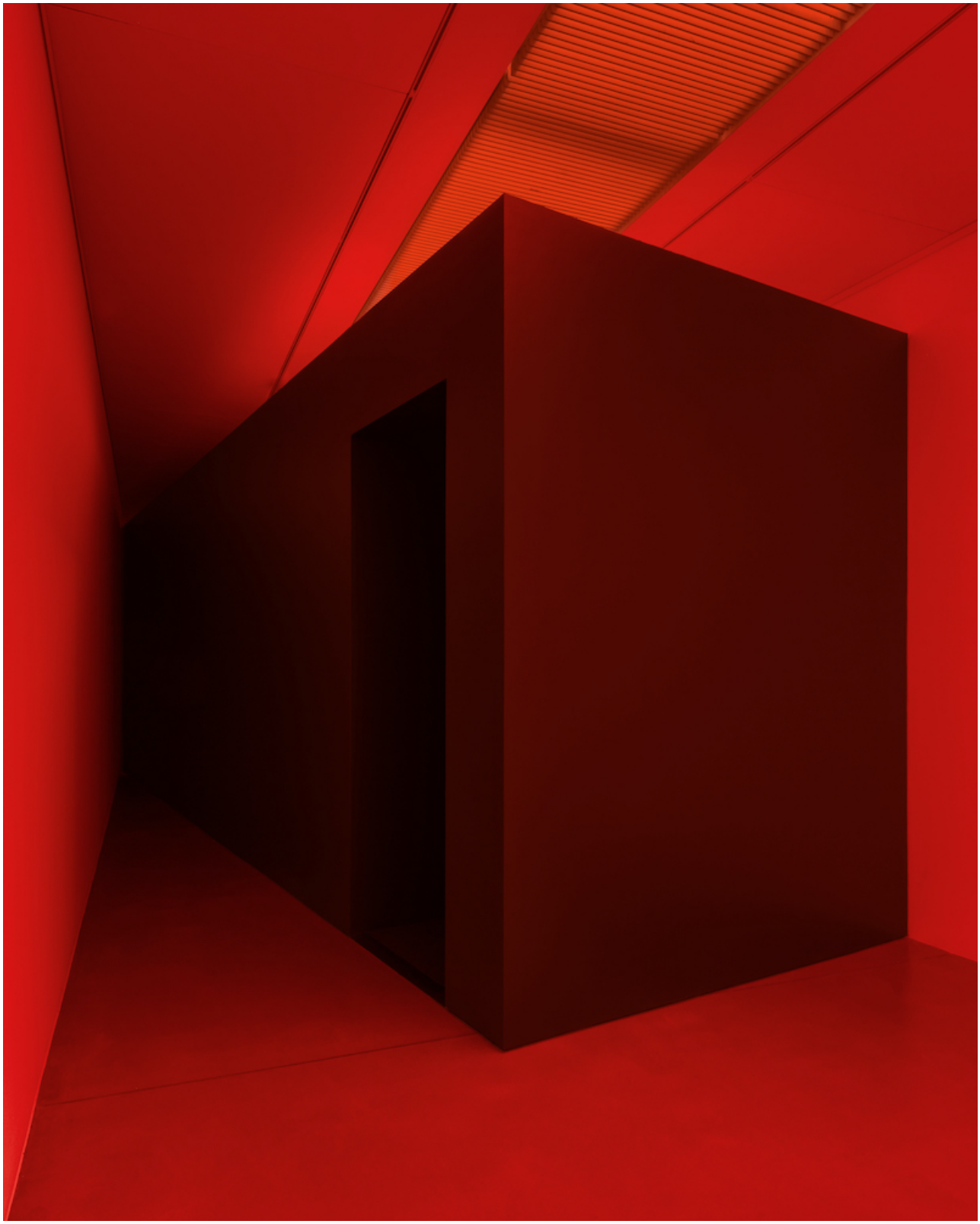

Adam Pendleton: 'Can I Be?,' Langen Foundation, Neuss // Photo by Roman März

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Carolina Sculti: Your 'Black Dada manifesto' has been foundational to your work. Could you share how you came to write it and how your relationship to it has evolved over the years?

Adam Pendleton: I wrote the Black Dada manifesto in 2008 as a way to give language to a set of intuitions that were already structuring my work. It was less a declaration than a proposition—a way to conflate Blackness and abstraction, to propose a relationship between the two as mutually generative forces.

To date, it remains a point of orientation, but not a limit. It is a concept that, both theoretically and formally, allows for movement, for contradiction, for hope.

CS: You open your show at Langen Foundation with a monumental black pavilion containing your video work 'Toy Soldier'–can you talk about the decision to open with this work and what drew you to the Robert E. Lee Monument as a site to consider and breakdown (literally) in the video?

AP: The decision to open with 'Toy Soldier (Notes on Robert E. Lee, Richmond, Virginia/Strobe)' was about establishing a threshold—both spatial and psychological. The pavilion creates a condition of entry, a kind of pause, before the viewer moves into the rest of the exhibition.

The Robert E. Lee monument is a site where history becomes material—where ideology is given form. In the video, I wanted to confront and destabilize that form. The work does not resolve the monument; it breaks it down through light, sound and time, allowing it to be seen differently and tracing how its capacity as a symbol has shifted over time.

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Adam Pendleton: 'Toy Soldier (Notes on Robert E. Lee, Richmond, Virginia/Strobe),' 2021–22, installation view 'Can I Be?,' Langen Foundation, Neuss // Photo by Roman März

CS: Can you tell us about how your work interacts with Tadao Ando's architecture at the Langen Foundation? What role does scale play in this show and what works have you selected to address different scales that are at work?

AP: Tadao Ando's architecture is precise, but it is also porous—light, proportion and movement are always in play. The work enters into that system rather than opposing it.

Scale is central to this dialogue. There are moments of compression—drawings that ask for close looking—and moments of expansion, where painting or video meets the body directly. The exhibition moves between these registers, allowing scale to function as a way of thinking, not just a physical condition.

CS: What is the meaning of the title 'Can I Be?' for you and how does it relate to the ways in which different architectures and forms can hold being and remembrance within themselves?

AP: The title is both a question and a structure. It suggests an articulation of becoming that is not fixed in advance.

Across the exhibition, different architectures—of space, of language, of form—hold and shape that question. They do not answer it. Instead, they create conditions where being and remembrance can emerge as something provisional, constructed in relation to what surrounds us.

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Adam Pendleton: 'Can I Be?,' Langen Foundation, Neuss // Photo by Roman März

CS: Dada and Black Dada challenge conventional sense-making. How do you guide viewers to engage with your work without feeling the need to extract a single meaning?

AP: I don't think of the work as requiring a single meaning. It's more about establishing a field of relations—between gesture and structure, history and perception. The viewer is not asked to decode the work, but to spend time with it. Meaning, if it emerges, takes shape over time. The work resists closure—it remains open.

Adam Pendleton's Work Demands Deep Thought
The New York Times, April 24, 2025
Pierre-Antoine Louis

The New York Times

In the Heart of Washington, Adam Pendleton's Work Demands Deep Thought

The new show at the Hirshhorn Museum, "Adam Pendleton: Love, Queen," plumbs the past, the idea of presence and the possibilities of what painting could be.

By Pierre-Antoine Louis
Reporting from Washington

April 24, 2025

This article is part of our Museums special section about how artists and institutions are adapting to changing times.

Adam Pendleton's Work Demands Deep Thought
The New York Times, April 24, 2025
Pierre-Antoine Louis

When Adam Pendleton begins preparing for an exhibition, his first step is always the same: build a model of the space.

Pendleton, who lives and works in New York, has employed this process for years, as he has prepared for shows in New York, London and Los Angeles. He finds that it allows him to visualize and refine his approach before and during installation.

His first solo exhibition in Washington, D.C., "Adam Pendleton: Love, Queen," at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden was no exception. It opened April 4 and runs through Jan. 3, 2027.

Pendleton, 41, had a very clear vision for the show from the start.

He noted that, to him, the unique thing about art was its ability to function both within a particular moment and outside of it, offering a timeless reflection.

"What I want this work to do is to actually make people more conscious of how they spend their time and what they're doing with it," Pendleton said in an interview at the museum in March, as preparations for the show were underway. "And so I hope the exhibition is an opportunity to slow down and actually just, if only for a moment, exists outside of the dynamics or the pressures of any given moment."

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Pendleton's "Untitled (Days)" series on the walls of the Hirshhorn Museum. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Evelyn C. Hankins, the Hirshhorn's head curator, and the organizer of "Love, Queen," explained that the show — a major retrospective — was years in the making.

She recalled that she and Pendleton started talking about the show in early 2022. Since then, she said that she visited his studio in New York every few months.

"Every time I'd go to the studio, there were these little scaled images of the paintings moving around," Hankins explained in an interview at the museum. "I think he spent so much time looking at the model, thinking about the building and what he wanted to do in here."

The show comes at a big moment for the institution, during its 50th anniversary year (it was founded in 1974). Aptly, "Love, Queen" speaks very directly to the Hirshhorn, taking inspiration from both the museum's architecture and its location, right on the National Mall.

"For us, this project is very much part of our mission, which is about reflecting the art of our time, and Adam does that in his painting practice especially," the Hirshhorn's director, Melissa Chiu, said in an interview.

Pendleton explained that "the exhibition is a kind of a retrospective of the way in which I thought and moved through the discipline of painting for about 20 years."

He said the show presented an argument about what painting can be — exploring its possibilities within the context of the 21st century, while also reflecting on its history and role in the early 20th century.

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Pendleton's painting "WE ARE NOT," part of an ongoing series. Adam Pendleton. Photo by Andy Romer

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"Love, Queen" features 35 of Pendleton's paintings, displayed in the museum's second-floor inner-ring galleries. The paintings represent five different bodies of work: Some of the canvases are from three of Pendleton's ongoing series — "Black Dada," "Days" and "WE ARE NOT" — while others are from two new series, "Composition" and "Movement."

Through "Black Dada" — the name of Pendleton's evolving conceptual framework, as well as the title of one series of paintings — Pendleton explores the relationship between Blackness and abstraction.

His process begins on paper, where he builds compositions through paint, ink and watercolor, often incorporating stenciled text and geometric shapes. These works are then photographed and transformed through screen printing, blurring the lines between painting, drawing and photography. The final works reflect his belief in paintings as a powerful force.

"I think that's unique, because particularly in contemporary life, or just in general, we're always thinking, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts. But are we present?" Pendleton said while walking through the circular space on the second floor of the Hirshhorn where his works were being hung. "Painting is, for me, a way to be my most present self. I hope that aspect of the act of painting, the act of making, of doing, is not necessarily understood by the viewer, but felt."

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Pendleton's painting "Black Dada (A/A)." Adam Pendleton. Photo by Andy Romer

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A centerpiece of the exhibition is "Resurrection City Revisited (Who Owns Geometry Anyway?)," a nine-minute video installation exploring Resurrection City — an encampment erected on the National Mall in the spring and summer of 1968 as part of the Poor People's Campaign.

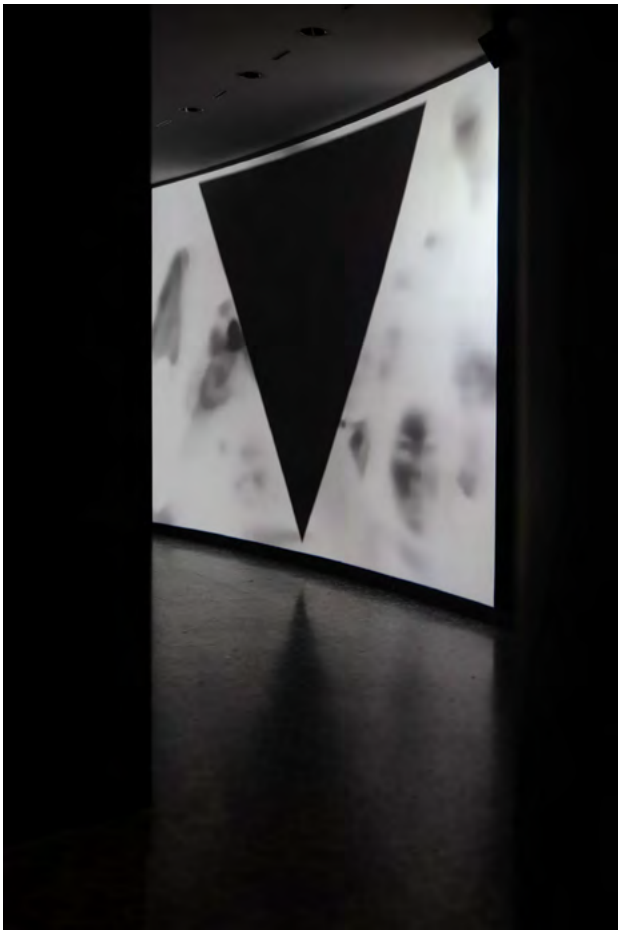
Planned by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and carried forward by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy after King's assassination, the campaign brought together thousands of people in a call for economic justice across racial lines.

A scene from the nine-minute video installation "Resurrection City Revisited (Who Owns Geometry Anyway?)" about an encampment erected on the National Mall in 1968 as part of the Poor People's Campaign. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Pendleton became interested in Resurrection City after encountering photographs by Jill Freedman who, after King's assassination, took up residence in a plywood shantytown erected in Washington by the Poor People's Campaign, documenting the encampment's structures and daily life.

Pendleton said that, "in those photos, there's these lush blacks, these muted whites, but also there were the primary structures that existed within the context of the encampment."

He added, "I became interested in them because I'm obsessed with triangles, circles, squares." Pendleton studied Freedman's photographs for about four years before deciding to engage with them artistically.



Another scene from "Resurrection City Revisited (Who Owns Geometry Anyway?)".
Erin Schaff/The New York Times

"I've been mining Resurrection City as an example of a radical avant-garde," Pendleton said of the encampment on the Mall. "If I had to define the avant-garde, it's this drive to move forward — intelligently, willfully, joyfully. And that's really what Resurrection City is."

The video's score, composed by the multi-instrumentalist Hahn Rowe, weaves together a reading by the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka with rich orchestration of brass, woodwinds and drums.

Pendleton is not just revisiting a historical moment, he is navigating a visual space where art stands on its own. "It's a feeling you can't find anywhere else," he said. "This idea of deep looking and letting something resonate in an unexpected way."

This concept extends into his video installation. Like each of his paintings, the video is designed to offer a rich viewing experience, in which the visitor discovers something new each time they revisit it.

"It drives you to look and think deeply, so that things are actually seen, felt and heard," Pendleton explained. "And I think that's what really resonates — how the video functions in relation to the paintings."

Throughout "Love, Queen," Pendleton extends his exploration of the relationship between history and form. His large-scale paintings — layered with bold strokes and fragmented text — defy singular interpretation, instead prompting viewers to actively construct meaning.

"I think that's one of the really beautiful things about painting," Pendleton reflected. "It marks time in a very human and humanistic way. And that's why it has spoken so deeply to us as human beings for so long, because it articulates something very specific about our humanistic potential."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section F, Page 40 of the New York edition with the headline: Art That Demands Deep Thought

Adam Pendleton Holds Our Attention
The New York Times T Magazine, June 7, 2024
Nicole Acheampong

The New York Times Style Magazine

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Adam Pendleton Holds Our Attention

The artist discusses his work routine, selling paintings as a teenager and the first piece that made him cry.

The artist Adam Pendleton in his studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. Eric Chakeen

By Nicole Acheampong
June 7, 2024

Nostalgia, says the artist Adam Pendleton, "isn't really my vibe." We're sitting across from each other at his studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, neither of us wearing shoes — a condition for entry. His assistants pad around softly. The space is pristine and discreet. The only exception is the room in the back where Pendleton, 40, paints; there, inks have drizzled onto strips of rosin paper covering the floor, and the counters are crowded with bottles of spray paint and exhibition maquettes. Even still, the shelves are neatly labeled:
"brushes large," "brushes small." Perhaps Pendleton's reluctance to look sentimentally at the past isn't all that surprising; he seems to favor a stripped-down view in both his practice and his surroundings.

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He calls his artistic philosophy Black Dada, a term that melds his interest in the avant-garde with his ongoing theories of Blackness. It's also the name of one of his longest running and best-known bodies of work; begun in 2008, it features abstract paintings and drawings, mostly in black monochrome, depicting letters from the titular phrase and strokes of ink and gesso. The project "does not give me a clear sense of purpose per se, because it's not about clarity, but it does give me a direction," he says — a structure through which he can think about why he paints the things he does. In "An Abstraction," his current solo exhibition of 25 new drawings and paintings at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, the "Black Dada" pieces on view there are a departure from previous iterations, incorporating vivid blues and reds, a crisp green and a yolky yellow.

"I think what emerges in [the show's] paintings is the feeling of a visual vocabulary," he says. "Working with it — but also working to abandon it. Which is to say, using it, but always trying to find something new." That balance between engagement and abandonment in favor of the new aligns with his resistance to nostalgia: Look back, but stay detached. When he put together a manifesto for Black Dada in 2008, he wrote, "History is in fact an incomplete cube shirking linearity."

"I'm trying to incorporate as many kinds of marks as possible," Pendleton says of his artworks. He uses ink, watercolor and spray paints, among other materials. Eric Chakeen

The word "shirking" comes to mind at certain points in our conversation; Pendleton is warmly, playfully evasive. He won't tell me much about the first artwork he made as a teen. But he does tell me that his mother, a former schoolteacher, played him Miles Davis back then. These days, he'll still listen to "In a Silent Way," Davis's 1969 album — but only every so often. Born in Richmond, Va., he left home young. First at 16 to study art in the medieval Italian town of Pietrasanta. And then again at around 18, when he moved to New York, soon making a name for himself with his work "The Revival," presented at the 2007 Performa biennial.

In that approximately hourlong performance, Pendleton dips into the role of a preacher, whooping freely about the love of the Lord and sermonizing on the joys of gay life with the backing of a 30-person gospel choir — a far cry from the restrained, nonnarrative pieces he's known for now. Yet even then, the artist switched between registers, at points reciting lines of experimental poetry. "The overall tone of the piece was hard to read. Mr. Pendleton clearly meant to keep reactions off balance, hold easy sentimentality at bay," the critic Holland Cotter wrote in his review of the biennial. Pendleton's new works at Pace hold visitors at a distance, too. They're set off by large black walls that were built for the site. You're not allowed to touch them, and they jut out at irregular angles, interrupting the flow of movement. Pendleton talks about wanting to slow things down with his art. He's aiming for poetry, which he defines as "that which is elusive and overwhelming. Meaning you can't quite put your finger on it. But it sustains attention. And creates the conditions for and of engagement."

Though the artist is ambivalent about recounting his adolescent years, those early experiences seem to be at the heart of how he wants time to work in his pieces now. Back when he was in Pietrasanta, he'd take short trips to Florence, submerging himself in "a flood of tourists and people, old sculptures and paintings," he says. "I just remember time feeling sort of twisted." Encountering centuries-old artworks, registering how long they've sustained the attention of so many people, staggered his mind. Telling me about it now, Pendleton seems awed all over again, transported by memory despite himself.

Below, he answers T's Artist's Questionnaire.

What's your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I try to sleep a minimum of six hours. Seven is the sweet spot. And I like getting up earlyish, around 5:45 or 6 a.m. My mind is going for sure [by then]. And then I'm usually getting out of bed to jot down a thought.

My days change a lot. I remember an artist who shall remain nameless said, "You don't wait for inspiration — you just work." And that's been really important and sustaining. The best days are the clear [ones] where there's really nothing on your calendar and you can work [the whole time]. I really like Sundays and Mondays. I like the quietness of Sunday. And then on Mondays, you can tackle things, address things and push [them] along.

Drawings from the artist's ongoing "Untitled (Days)" body of work. Eric Chakeen

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

On average, probably over six. It might not be painting all day. It might be reading. It might be reviewing what I painted or studying a model for an upcoming exhibition.

But I don't really think about "work" and "not work," which is confusing to a lot of people I know. I just have a "do what needs to get done" attitude. I'm always thinking about it. I can 't help it. If I open my eyes, I'm thinking about the world on a visual level.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I painted a picture of the house I grew up in, or something like that. I think my parents still have it. I probably started seriously painting around 14 or 15.

Are there any works that you would do over in a different way now?

There was a museum show, I think it was in 2017, that I wish I could do again. It was such a lesson for me because I didn't have enough time to get it right. I've been guarding against that ever since. So I work, I work, I work, I work — until I can't.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

The worst studio was not having a studio at all. For some reason, I thought I could do it all in my apartment when I was living in Midtown East — which I wouldn't recommend to anyone. And then it finally dawned on me: "This is not working." Space is a luxury, and it can really change everything.

More of Pendleton's initial impressions on paper. These were made using stencils and spray paint. Eric Chakeen

Painted covers for a special edition of "Adam Pendleton. Blackness, White and Light" (2024), the catalog for his recent exhibition at the Mumok in Vienna. Eric Chakeen

What's the first work you ever sold? And for how much?

I sold a group of works when I was a teenager to the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. My dad is a gregarious person. I think he was talking around town, saying, "Oh, you know, my son makes paintings." He showed them to one person, and they showed them to someone else and then *that* someone else was curating the collection at the Federal Reserve and was like, "These are actually pretty good." They sold for maybe $2,500. I didn 't have a bank account, so someone else had to get the check.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

Hanging paper. Or even before that, sometimes paintings begin with notes: "What if I did this? What if I did that?" Or instructions: "I'm *going* to do this. I'm *going* to do that." And then I execute. But sometimes you realize those ideas do not translate to the visual space. So you just sort of *start*.

And how do you know when you're done?

When I feel like things are coming together but are also on the edge of coming apart.

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A maquette for an exhibition in the "possible future," as Pendleton puts it. Eric Chakeen

How many assistants do you have?

About a dozen. In so many ways, the studio is a collaborative space. But the painting part is very solo.

Have you assisted other artists before?

I haven't. I've collaborated with other artists. Well, in the sense that I had to do what they told me to do. I participated in a piece Joan Jonas did at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, reading Dante. In my mind, I said, "This is her work. I'm an instrument. I'm a happy instrument. And I will do whatever she asks me to do" — which is, of course, different than collaboration. And yet, it was a collaboration! We have to be open to all different ways of working, to have a deeper and truer sense of things in ourselves.

What music do you play when you're making art?

I've been playing Duval Timothy recently, his album "Meeting With the Judas Tree." Adrianne Lenker's new album, "Bright Future." Abel Selaocoe, an incredible cellist and vocalist — if I need to really get into it, I'll put him on. And I've been listening to Wild Up and Christopher Rountree's "Julius Eastman Volume 1: Femenine," which was introduced to me by a music supervisor that I was working with [on] a different project.

I know you've been engaging with Julius Eastman's music for a while. [Pendleton's "Untitled (Who We Are)," started in 2018, is partially inspired by Eastman's circa 1980 piano composition "Crazy Nigger"; the abstract silk-screen paintings feature the song's title and other phrases riffing on the musician's themes.] When did you first encounter it?

Around 2000. I got jazzed up about the language, like "Crazy Nigger." "What?" Just the titles, like "Gay Guerrilla" [which was released around the same time]. "What does that mean?" And then you listen to the music and it doesn't make any more sense, which I love.

which I love.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When I moved to New York, around when I was 18, and people would ask, "Oh, what do you do?" [I started saying] "I'm an artist." But you know, I don't go around saying it all the time.

Adam Pendleton's "Black Dada Drawing (L)" (2024). © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of Pace Gallery

Adam Pendleton's "Black Dada Drawing (A)" (2024). © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of Pace Gallery

Do you have a favorite procrastination technique?

I have proofs of the paintings that I'm working on; they replicate what the finished works will look like once the screen-printing process is complete. And I'll spend hours going through those. Which isn't actually procrastination.

What's the weirdest object in your studio?

Object …? [*Silently looks around.*]

This isn't a space with much clutter.

It's probably been removed. [*Laughs.*] I'm definitely the one in here saying, "What is this?"

What do you usually wear when you work?

Very old, thread-worn Issey Miyake pants and a T-shirt.

How often do you talk to other artists?

I like doing two-person shows. I just did one with [the sculptor] Arlene Shechet in Madrid. And I did one with Pope.L [in 2019 at Eva Presenhuber gallery in Zurich]. I like having structured dialogue with artists and thinking through the work together in space.

What do you bulk buy with the most frequency?

Nuts. Cashews, pecans, walnuts.

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What would you say is your worst habit?

Although I get up early, I don't pop out of bed. I'm slow to [rise]. That's my worst habit. I keep trying. I just want to pop out! But I'm not a popper outer.

What embarrasses you?

Just knowing I could do better.

Has that always been your main source of embarrassment?

I would say so.

Do you exercise?

Four days a week. I do some weight lifting and some biking. I try to get a minimum of 7,000 steps a day.

What are you reading right now?

I'm reading a lot about the work of [the sculptor] David Smith. I'm deeply interested in how he dealt with and thought through space.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

["Whirlirama," 1970] the Sam Gilliam painting that's on view at the Met right now, is off the hook. And so is [Jackson Pollock's] "Autumn Rhythm Number 30" (1950), which is also at the Met. That was the first artwork that made me cry.

Adam Pendleton: “Nina Simone permite pensar en Estados Unidos como un lugar complejo e inclusivo, más que simple y excluyente”
ICON Design en *EL PAÍS*, April 9, 2024
Ianko López

EL PAIS Culture

ART >

Adam Pendleton: ‘Nina Simone allows us to think of my country’s culture as a complex and inclusive place, rather than a simple and exclusionary one’

Abstract at a time of a figurative boom, an activist but not overtly political, the American artist is exhibiting his black and white canvases at the Madrid headquarters of the Pedro Cera gallery

Adam Pendleton at the Pedro Cera gallery in Madrid.
MATTHEW SEPTIMUS

IANKO LÓPEZ

APR 09, 2024 - 19:05 CEST

“I don’t usually think about what’s trendy,” says Adam Pendleton. The 40-year-old from Richmond in the U.S. is not an easy artist, in any sense. He staunchly extols practices as demanding as conceptual and abstraction in the face of the current boom in figurative painting, led by some of the most successful African-American artists in the market, with Kehinde Wiley or Kara Walker among the finest exponents. Perhaps in that same orbit he would obtain more lucrative results, but that is not what interests him. “I just don’t think of my work in those terms,” he says in the spacious showroom of the Madrid headquarters of the Pedro Cera gallery, where he is staging an exhibition together with his compatriot, sculptor Arlene Sechet (*Adam Pendleton X Arlene Sechet*, through April 13).

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His artistic roots are in the historical avant-gardes of more than a century ago and his themes, treated in a complex and occasionally somewhat elusive manner, are an amalgam in which identity and the individual as a political subject converge, but also culture and collective memory. “My goal is to create a space for my work, and for that permanent faith in it is required,” he says. “Not a rigid faith, but one that is open to experimentation.”

Pendleton’s paintings and drawings rarely abandon black and white. Photo: Matthew Septimus.

His contribution to the Madrid show is paintings and drawings that rarely abandon black and white, and when they do it is to introduce notes of intense but subtle tones, which serve to underline even more the restrictiveness of his formal universe, and which dialogue harmoniously with Sechet’s colorful and dynamic sculptures. It has often been suggested that the black and white of his images are an abstract reflection of the confrontation between these colors in purely racial terms. But, in conversation, he prefers not to encourage interpretations of political symbolism and instead claims purely formal motives. “I simply use the materials and colors needed at any given moment,” he explains. “Color can be amazing, but I think the

look becomes more profound when there is no such interference.”

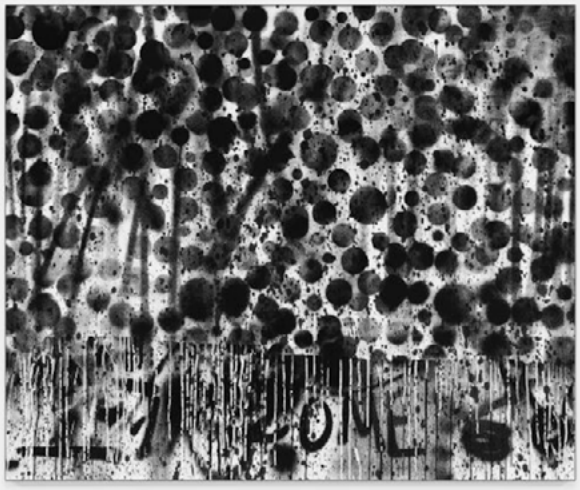
The same is true when the political situation in the United States, marked by the new rise of Donald Trump, comes up. “Can I ask why you’re asking me that?” he inquires, softening the defensive reaction with a laugh.

— Because from outside the U.S. there is a certain fascination with the figure of Trump, which is mixed with a sense of dread. Asking American intellectuals like you about this is an attempt to understand him.

— Ah okay. I want to acknowledge reality and its situations, but not be distracted by them. I think in the end it’s important to focus on the work, because that can be a very relevant way to position yourself as an individual. I guess I ask myself: ‘Do I want to represent America?’ I’m not really interested in that. If I was, I’d be a politician instead of an artist.

— Returning then to the work, how do you explain the use of black in it?

— Painting is a very material space, and that’s a decision I don’t take lightly. Black is the union of all colors. There is something essential in it, something very deep.



On of Adam Pendleton’s works on display at the Pedro Cera gallery in Madrid.

Depth is something Pendleton returns to again and again. While the culture of spectacle, which has shown itself to be omnipresent in the visual arts as well, rather seems to advise superficial and flashy approaches to any given question, he pursues very different ends: “I look for the possibilities of a deep gaze, a deep experience, and deep thought. I’ve always been fascinated by how certain art manages to hold people’s attention over time, how for hundreds of years we can be looking at the same paintings or listening to the same music. So I see myself

more as an artist contributing to a very long history.”

This has not prevented Pendleton from forging a career of precocious and brilliant success. At 18, just out of high school, he traveled to Pietrasanta in northern Italy (famous for its quarry where Michelangelo sought the marble for his sculptures) to follow an artistic residency program; at 26 he staged a large installation in a group exhibition at the PS1 space at New York’s MoMA; and at 28 he became the youngest artist on the payroll of the powerful multinational gallery Pace. Shortly before that he had given shape to his most ambitious project: his own artistic movement, called Black Dada, a name taken from a 1964 poem by the writer Amiri Baraka, a pillar of Afro-American culture. Although the exact formulation of the meaning of Black Dada is rather enigmatic, it has been defined as mining the interrelations between blackness, avant-garde, and abstraction. “Things are not always clear and perfect, there are also incongruous ideas,” Pendleton says. “And that’s fine, because there has to be conflict and generative chaos, which I think is very important in art.”

A work by Adam Pendleton.

In 2021 he presented perhaps his most ambitious exhibition to date, *Who Is Queen?* a kind of total work in the form of an installation that incorporated references to the history of modern art and architecture and texts of diverse origins in drawings, paintings, sculptures, and videos, and where his identity as an African-American gay man was reflected in

complex and multiform ways. The title itself held a mysterious quality that suggested all manner of interpretations. “It touches on this idea of the relationship between how you want to be interpreted and understood, and how that relates to how you’re actually interpreted and understood, because often the two don’t coincide,” he explains. “It refers back to how the word queen is used in queer spaces. It’s a title that is a question, so it was about meditating on those ideas, about representation, and how it relates to abstraction. Because we all exist in an abstract state. And as an artist I feel driven by notions of abstract thinking and composition as well.” He would return to this idea with a major solo exhibition at the Mumok Museum in Vienna, *Blackness, White and Light*, which closed in January.

As an activist, he transcends his work: last year he teamed up with Sotheby’s, tennis player Venus Williams and a group of artists including Rashid Johnson, Julie Mehretu, and Ellen Gallagher — “there’s nothing like the generosity of artists,” he says — to organize an auction that would allow them to acquire singer Nina Simone’s birthplace and preserve it as a material vestige of American culture. “Nina Simone represents something of crucial importance, which allows us to think of my country’s culture as a complex and inclusive place, rather than a simple and exclusionary one,” he says. “We must be custodians of our present and our future.”

artnet news

Conceptual Artist Adam Pendleton on Bringing ‘Black Dada’ to Austria in a Major Museum Show

A studio visit with the New York-based artist on the occasion of his exhibition at the Mumok, Vienna.

Hanno Hauenstein (https://news.artnet.com/about/hanno-hauenstein-37598), November 23, 2023

Adam Pendleton Photo: Matthew Placek, Courtesy the artist

On October 9, as an unfolding escalation in Israel-Palestine reverberated across the globe, I found myself in front of Adam Pendleton’s studio in Wallabout, Brooklyn, a mere stone’s throw from the New York Harbor. On entering the workspace filled with soft light, minimalist furniture, and an aroma of freshly cut flowers and pungent acrylic spray paint, the world briefly appeared organized, clear, and free from the constant need to check the ever-worsening, chaotic news.

Pendleton sat upright behind a white lacquered desk in the backroom office. His words were measured and deliberate as he explained the working hypothesis behind his art, “Black Dada.” (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/adam-pendletons-black-dada-

reader-1103051) In his view, this term encapsulates the relationship between blackness, abstraction and avant-garde art. “It was initially a kind of conceptual position that I function from as an artist,” he said. It also encompasses theoretical outlooks that have shaped his practice, including those of philosopher Fred Moten, queer theorist Judith Butler, and filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. All are represented in a small, organized library, in a side room of the artist’s studio.

But what does Black Dada actually do? Pendleton emphasized its role in approaching language, exhibition making, painting, and drawing. He spoke of it as dynamic force that extends to categorization, but one that also blurs temporal lines between past, present, and future. “As a concept, Black Dada is generative, even generous. It opens up the same freedom and flexibility for the viewer as it does for me as an artist,” he explained. Using spray paint and screen printing, Pendleton creates works that often merge language and image, challenging the ways in which it shapes or distorts our self-perception.

Installation view Adam Pendleton. “Blackness, White, and Light.” Photo: Klaus Pichler, © mumok

His monumental solo exhibition at the Mumok (https://www.mumok.at/de/events/adam-pendleton-blackness-white-and-light), a preeminent museum in Vienna, “Blackness, White, and Light” (until January 7, 2024), is a prime example of this. In the exhibition’s luminous atrium, the artist’s large-scale paintings are provided with ample breathing space, allowing visitors to fully immerse themselves. “The idea was that everything is integrated,” the artist said. “The experience of the exhibition itself is akin to what one could see when standing in front of the paintings or the drawings.”

Observing those works in detail, there is an immediate sense of tension between proximity and distance, of black and white, of cold abstraction and concrete poetry. Echoes of modern art history emanate. Influences of artists like Cy Twombly, Jack Whitten, and Ed Clark seem evident, as does an experimental directness recalling the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat, or a geometric sensibility in the vein of Agnes Martin or Ann Truitt. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, who sought to externalize the internal, Pendleton encapsulates what he finds on the outside: a corner, a word, or a sentence. His works feel like minimalist reflections of everyday life, stripped down to the essentials.

At 39, the artist has amassed a significant body of work, which spans drawing, painting, sculpture, and film. In addition to the current exhibition at the Mumok, Pendleton has recently opened shows at the Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis, as well as the Tegnerforbundet Drawing Center in Oslo, and is now actively gearing up for upcoming gallery displays, including one slated for Max

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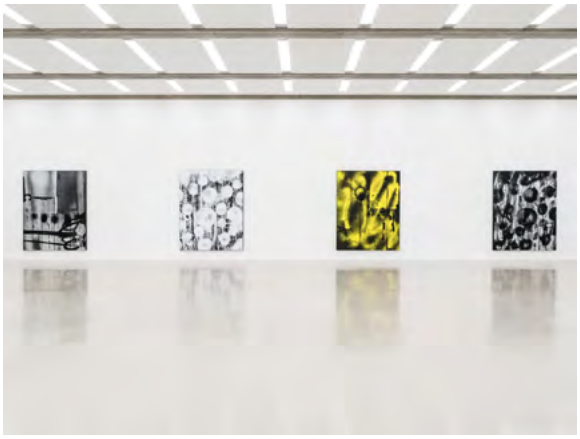
Hetzler’s London gallery. At a recent solo exhibition at MoMA, called “Who Is Queen?” (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-adam-pendleton-on-taking-over-momas-atrium-2008702) (2021), he explored the possibility of a life beyond labels. The show was often interpreted as a response to his artistic engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement and it also provided a pivotal moment in his career: a massive, grid-like installation towering nearly 18 meters (60 feet) served as a framework for his characteristic black and white paintings. Pendleton relishes in grandeur.



Installation view Adam Pendleton. “Blackness, White, and Light.” Photo: Klaus Pichler, © mumok

Some of his paintings and drawings isolate words or letters from original contexts. In some there is simply a letter, like or cropped off syllable, “BLA.” A striking painting prominently displayed at the Mumok, repeatedly states: “WE ARE NOT.” This persistent negative leaves the viewer wondering what is encapsulated both in the “not,” but it also hangs a question mark over who Pendleton may mean by “we.” Are these references to the Black community, forced to resist white impositions? Or is it an allusion to a queer disavowal of normative expectations? Is it rather to bring to focus an inherent incongruity of the artistic “we” with the expectations held by others? Pendleton remained elusive. “I find it interesting to ask, ‘Who is the We?’,” he noted, “but the paintings don’t seek to answer that. The idea is to position ideas around representation through negation.”

For the artist, abstraction is a vehicle for experimentation. In addition to his art, he has created several anthologies that include interviews with familiar luminaries, including the filmmaker Yvonne Rainer or queer theorist Jack Halberstalm. These discussions offer insights into Pendleton’s own process as well as broader perspectives that can inform a reading of the work.

At the pulsating core of the Mumok show are a number of the artist’s films, which exemplify the ethics behind Black Dada. They show eerily lit dance sequences, a starkly aestheticized and almost grotesquely decelerated black-and-white depiction of a figure in a swimming pool, as well as several interviews. Among the latter are intimate conversations with Black civil rights activist Ruby Nell Sales, and choreographer Kyle Abraham, for instance. Personal narratives seemingly weave into a political tapestry. Vulnerability, community, and struggle are recurring themes. “I was struck by a simple question from Ruby Nell Sales,” Pendleton recalled. “‘Where does it hurt?’. I found that this was such a tender and profound question to ask of an individual, but also of us as a collective. I think what she meant was the relationship to America. But I like to think of it as a universal question.”

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Adam Pendleton
Black Dada (A/D), (2022–23) © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of the artist

Identity is another lingering theme, but Pendleton deflected any focus on it when pressed on the subject and firmly denies that a heightened sensitivity to identity-related questions has influenced his art making. His pieces, he asserted, are an authentic reflection of the material. His creative expression would be compromised if he followed expectations—be it of his audiences or of the art market.

In the Mumok show, his films are displayed within maze-like structures that are strikingly angular—shapes reminiscent of Le Corbusier. They create a stark contrast within the white cube setting, and mimick the use of geometric elements in Pendleton’s paintings. A separate room features drawings, which include words, drops, subtle dabs, and splashes. His “Untitled (Days)” series (2021–ongoing) incorporates remnants of paper sheets stenciled with circular and line forms. They seem to trace visual positions with a focus on graphic motifs. “You could call it a discursive index,” Pendleton said. “Both vague and explicit at the same time.” He described the dynamic between painting and drawing as ever-changing. In painting, he suggested, elements come together in a more distinct way and at a slower pace. Drawing, on the other hand, is quicker, even though Pendleton acknowledged that lines can blur: “I often find myself drawing while painting.”

Asked whether it would be fair to say that he is currently moving away from words and more towards abstraction, he said: “A little bit, but it is much more ‘both-and’ instead of ‘either-or.’” His answer not only explains an art practice, but it might also be useful to keep in one’s mind amid the political debates swirling in recent weeks. While he might be reluctant to admit it, the artist’s engagement with politics excels beyond the canvas or his studio. His recent involvement in raising nearly $6 million to preserve musician Nina Simone’s childhood home (https://news.artnet.com/market/the-push-to-preserve-nina-simones-childhood-home-just-got-a-6-million-boost-thanks-to-venus-williams-and-adam-pendleton-2307161) shows his profound commitment to social causes. Emphasizing his interest in community building, he replied simply and clearly: “If you can do something, do it.”

In the Studio: Adam Pendleton, New York
Collectors Agenda, June, 2023
Alexandra Markl

In the Studio

Adam Pendleton, New York

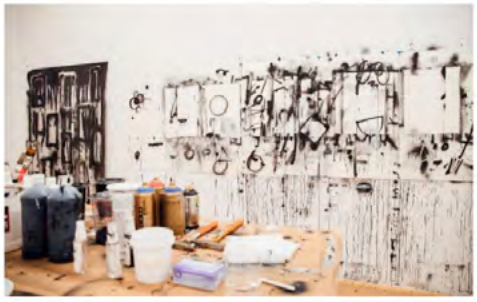
»My work doesn't have a political agenda, doesn't propose policy solutions, but it does acknowledge a political reality.«

Adam Pendleton's mainly black and white works encompass different media; be it painting, drawing, installation, sculpture or video. They tie into his practice of Black Dada, a visual project he started in 2008, in which he is investigating the correlations between Blackness, abstraction and avantgarde. Hereby, Pendleton eschews preconceived expectations and perspectives by using deconstruction and abstraction to find new ways of visual expression.

Adam, Vienna is the stage of your first important solo show in Europe. As an American, how does it feel for you to present your work at an European institution?
I've had solo shows in Europe before, at galleries and public institutions, but this exhibition at mumok is special. It's the biggest presentation of new work I've ever had, for one thing. But also Vienna has such a long history of artistic innovation. It's interesting to ponder that legacy.

An important part of your working practice are your Black Dada paintings. Black Dada, as you have defined it, explores relationships between Blackness, abstraction and the avant-garde. Can you elaborate?
The phrase originally comes from Amiri Baraka's 1964 poem ***Black Dada Nihilismus***. With his poetry he was creating a space for art to be something other than literal or expressionistic, just like European Dada had done fifty years earlier. Black Dada is a visual space for experimentation, for seeing things from different angles simultaneously — including, but not only, Blackness.

In the Studio: Adam Pendleton, New York
Collectors Agenda, June, 2023
Alexandra Markl



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In the Studio: Adam Pendleton, New York
Collectors Agenda, June, 2023
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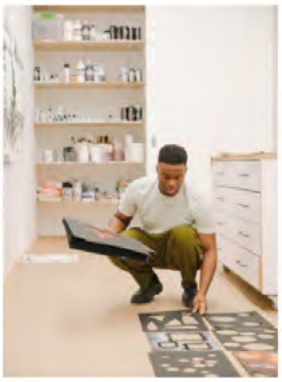
Is the artist someone who discusses actual issues, by using a more formal or abstract point of view?
My paintings are abstract, so obviously their point of view is primarily formal, even when they include language. But all paintings, I would argue, embody multiple positions, some of which are beyond the artist's intention or even understanding. My work doesn't have a political agenda, doesn't propose policy solutions, but it does acknowledge a political reality. And that reality includes the many ways language both serves us and fails us.

Language is an important part of your practice, as in your paintings depicting the lettering WE ARE NOT. Where does this idea of affirmation through negation come from?
Let's look at that question from a few different angles. First, the rhetorical space of these paintings isn't *either/or*. It's *both/and*. The *we* in the paintings is inclusive. It encompasses the spectator, the artist, the paintings themselves, and the world outside. That's not to say it's a cozy and harmonious *we*. And that brings us to the word *not*. The *not* is a refusal, obviously, but it's also a clarification. We're not this. We're not that. We're something else, something variable, something that might change from one moment to the next. So it's productive to keep asking, "Okay then, what are we? Who are we?"



You call yourself an abstract artist – is abstraction for you a tool to show our complicated world?
One of the appeals of abstraction is its open-endedness. This makes it particularly useful for capturing the way we all experience the world today — the psychic compression of everything happening simultaneously. So, yes, the visual complexity in the paintings is also representational, in a sense.

In the Studio: Adam Pendleton, New York
Collectors Agenda, June, 2023
Alexandra Markl

How important are the surroundings in which your works are shown? Do you take them into consideration when preparing an exhibition?
For every exhibition, I use what's at my disposal. Which is not just what happens inside my studio – there's also the context in which the work is experienced. Some artists, especially painters, don't really concern themselves with the container in which their work is shown, aside from basic considerations like lighting. But the architectures within my work always inform the structures of my exhibitions. For example, the second floor at mumok, with its accumulations of works and its jagged sightlines, is a literalization of the space of my paintings. The spectator looking at these compositions is also moving through them. And, going back to the compositional logic of ***we***, the viewer is included in the works, is physically implicated in them. And that experience activates something, gives the viewer the critical instruments they need to approach the work on their own terms.

Adam Pendleton, Still from *Toy Soldier (Notes on Robert E. Lee, Richmond, Virginia/Strobe)*, 2021–2022 Video (black and white, sound), 6 minutes 55 seconds © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber

Adam Pendleton, *So We Moved: A Portrait of Jack Halberstam*, 2021, Video (black and white, sound), 30 min, 59 sec © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of the artist

In the Studio: Adam Pendleton, New York
Collectors Agenda, June, 2023
Alexandra Markl

An exhibition title like *Blackness, White and Light* can be read in different ways: on a literal level of course, it describes the basic elements of your work. But is it trying to express other ideas, too?
The exhibition expresses itself, so instead of talking about what the title means, let's talk about what it does. What do those three elements have to do with each other? What is the relationship between A and B, or B and C, or A and C? What if we juxtapose A and C against B, or B and C against A? These differences are productive, from a linguistic standpoint. The independent meaning of each element emerges from those differences. So maybe the elements are not so independent after all?

Installation views *Adam Pendleton, Blackness, White, and Light*, mumok, 2023; Photo: Klaus Pichler, © mumok

Adam Pendleton, *Untitled (Anthology)*, 2017–23, Silkscreen ink on Mylar, 48 parts, Each 96.5 x 73.7 cm, © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of the artist

Adam Pendleton, *Black Dada (A/D)*, 2022–23, Silkscreen ink on canvas, two joined panels, 243.8 x 193 cm, © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of the artist

Installation views *Adam Pendleton, Blackness, White, and Light*, mumok, 2023; Photo: Klaus Pichler, © mumok

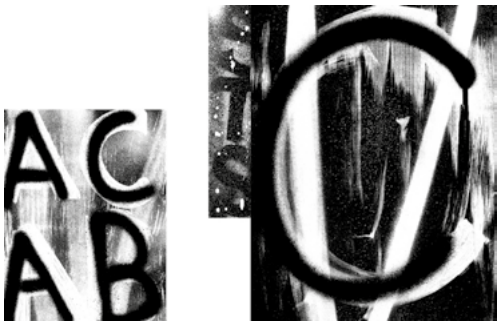
sermon with a full choir by appropriating language from experimental poetry, political speech, and traditional gospel songs. Yet, the duplicating device stands as a possible metaphor and accomplice for a work such as this, in that it enables the rapid recontextualization and repetition of words otherwise located on the pages of books in Pendleton's extensive library.

Curator Adrienne Edwards argued in her 2015 *Art in America* essay **"Blackness in Abstraction" (https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/blackness-in-abstraction-3-63053/)** that Pendleton employs reproductive technologies—Adobe Illustrator, silkscreen, as well as a Xerox—to emphasize "blackness as material, method and mode, insisting on blackness as a multiplicity." In keeping with this ability to move from the material to the conceptual and back again, Pendleton is known for a photocopied compilation of writings by Hugo Ball, Amiri Baraka, W.E.B. Du Bois, Sun Ra, Adrian Piper, and Gertrude Stein, among others, that he published in 2017 with Koenig Books as *The Black Dada Reader*. These texts evince Pendleton's larger Black Dada methodology, which combines influences from both Ball's 1916 Dada Manifesto and "Black Dada Nihilism," a 1964 poem by Baraka (then LeRoi Jones). Pendleton's Black Dada is on the one hand a return to the politically charged nonsense of the Zurich Dadaists and, on the other, an exploration of the term *Black* as an "open-ended signifier," as he has said. Black Dada is at once revolutionary and archival, allowing Pendleton to reflect on anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and decolonial political movements, including Black Lives Matter and Occupy, along with philosophical and literary writings. The photocopier has an obvious practical role in this undertaking, particularly given that Pendleton first produced the reader for personal use. Yet the device stands as an allegorical presence too—indicating Pendleton's commitment to a nonlinear mode of historiography that allows for repetition, nesting, and transposition, among other transformations and dilations.

View of Adam Pendleton, *As Heavy As Sculpture*, 2020, in "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America" at the New Museum, 2021.

Critical Eye: Publishing Amid The Museum's Ruins
Art in America, September 23, 2021
Lucy Ives

The year 2021 is turning out to be significant for Pendleton. His installation *As Heavy as Sculpture* (2020–21) appeared in the lobby of the New Museum from February to June as part of the exhibition "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," curated by the late Okwui Enwezor. A montage of black-and-white imagery and text covering the walls, *As Heavy as Sculpture* layered reproductions of photographs of political events in Africa, masks, and sculptures, with iterations of language drawn from Black Lives Matter protests, including the acronym ACAB (for All Cops Are Bastards, also represented numerically as 1312). In September, DAP released an artist's book by Pendleton related to the installation. Titled *Adam Pendleton: As Heavy as Sculpture*, the volume permits sustained, close consideration of the words, letters, numbers, and images Pendleton selected and sometimes partly painted over for the installation, encouraging a mode of reading in which one considers what cannot be seen as much as what is visible. Also published in September, by **DABA (https://www.artnews.com/t/daba/)** and Koenig Books, was *Adam Pendleton: Pasts, Futures, and Aftermaths*, a revisitation of the format of *The Black Dada Reader*, with a new selection of texts, including writings by Sara Ahmed, Clarice Lispector, and Malcolm X, among others. For his solo exhibition at the **Museum of Modern Art (https://www.artnews.com/t/museum-of-modern-art/)**, which opened in September, Pendleton published another anthological reader, *Adam Pendleton: Who Is Queen?*, which functions as the show's catalogue.



Spread from *Adam Pendleton: As Heavy As Sculpture*, DAP, 2021.

That Pendleton is publishing two new critical anthologies this fall points to a need to reframe the experience of viewing art, one that is particularly urgent in light of current anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements, as well as efforts to reform the labor and collecting practices of museums, along with the composition of their boards of directors. Pendleton's readers are, in effect, new narratives of the history of art, bibliographies and syllabi, personal records of research and learning, spiritual autobiographies, and guides to contemporary politics. Like *As Heavy as Sculpture*, they generate original, inter-media, transdisciplinary modes of reading; in *Who Is Queen?*, for example, one reads the poet Simone White with and against curator Kynaston McShine with and against critic Lauren Berlant with and against composer Julius Eastman, to name but a few of the figures present. All of Pendleton's selections appear as photocopied texts —"poor images," in Hito Steyerl's sense—and he has added various marks and writings. The collections show us Pendleton as an editor and publisher, in a fairly straightforward sense: DABA is, indeed, his own press, through which he recently republished concrete poet Norman H. Pritchard's remarkable 1971 book *EECCHHOOEESS*. They also remind us of the radical sort of influence a publisher can have, not just on content but on the very outlines of a given discipline. Pendleton believes that you cannot really understand painting unless you understand improvisation, and you cannot really understand improvisation without a thorough knowledge of poetry and music. Nor will you comprehend lyricism unless you comprehend the intersections of political struggle and love.

Critical Eye: Publishing Amid The Museum's Ruins
Art in America, September 23, 2021
Lucy Ives

View of "Adam Pendleton: Who Is Queen?" at the Museum of Modern Art, 2021.
COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

This is not mere argumentation; this is an attempt to reengineer the ways in which published writing is associated with the experience of viewing art. Similarly, the physical work Pendleton creates is designed not merely to exist within but to affect the feeling and meaning of the institution housing it. As curator Stuart Comer notes in the preface to *Who Is Queen?*, the exhibition at MoMA "recalibrates the museum, from a rigid frame designed to regulate official accounts of history into an open, generative, and polyphonic device." Pendleton has constructed an architectural installation in MoMA's atrium, with three five-story wooden scaffold towers painted black. The towers mimic balloon frame construction, a method for building homes popular in the US from the 1880s to 1930s; it was simpler and faster than timber frame construction, which required knowledge of complex joinery techniques. These physical frames evoke larger questions regarding housing availability in the US, as well as ad hoc forms of architecture associated with protest: Resurrection City, for example, constructed on the National Mall in 1968 during the Poor People's Campaign, as well as the encampments of the Occupy movement and plywood boards transformed with spray paint by Black Lives Matter protesters. One might also see a link to the design experiments and architecture of modernism, from El Lissitzky's 1923 *Proun Room* to Le Corbusier's grid-like structures. Pendleton employs the towers as supports for a variety of artworks and devices, including paintings, graphic and textile works, sculptures, screens for moving images, and speakers for a sound piece, as well as a site for events. The exhibition is a powerful Gesamtkunstwerk, or all-embracing art form, with Pendleton signaling to viewers in many different registers and media.

Pendleton has transformed the space at the heart of one of the most influential institutions in the world, calling to mind a related watershed essay. In "On the Museum's Ruins" (1980), critic Douglas Crimp describes Robert Rauschenberg's painting practice as "insisting upon the radically different kinds of picture surfaces upon which different kinds of data can be accumulated and organized," and points to its affiliation with "discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation," as opposed to historical continuity. In Crimp's reading, Rauschenberg's photographic layering, via silkscreen, of canonical artworks—"Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Rubens's *Venus at Her Toilet*"—is emblematic of a new logic of pictures in an era of near-instant reproducibility and dissemination: singular physical art objects lose their value and qualities as such, and become instead "'moments' of art."

Crimp's discussion of a movement from emphasis on discrete objects to emphasis on flashes of time seems quite relevant to Pendleton's practice. But while Rauschenberg explored numerous disciplines and media, beginning his career as a choreographer before turning to assemblage and graphic work, Pendleton is determined to combine an equally multifarious résumé into a single piece, as "Who Is Queen?" makes manifest. There is a larger gambit here to dispense with specialized audiences—readers of poetry, appreciators of sound art, and so on—in order to create a new sort of public, one for whom experiencing multiple artistic disciplines at once is illuminating and desirable. Pendleton seems to believe that we need as many points of access to our history as possible, so he aims to reform not just objects and space, but the very sensory and temporal conditions under which we consume art and other media.

Spread from *Adam Pendleton: Past, Futures, and Aftermaths*, DABA and Koenig Books, 2021.

How does Pendleton generate these revised sensory and temporal conditions? A simple answer is: research. As suggested above, these conditions have much to do with that queen of his studio, the copy machine, along with his library of books, and the surfaces and features of the studio itself. It takes a relatively short time to remove a book from a shelf, and a few more moments to then sit and find a page, to stand and go to a copier to reproduce it. Yet, in Pendleton's practice, these everyday acts of study and reflection, which are also acts of love, traverse much broader expanses of time and space. They recur as moments of viewing and listening in galleries, with pages altered,

blown up, and reframed; with pieces of language excerpted and recopied; with new interventions and participants added. Pendleton's research is amplified by institutions and yet it reframes the location it occupies. His installations resonate with a larger, always-unfinished collection of texts, images, and performances the artist continually mines for republication.

Thus, publication might be a useful way to think about all the work Pendleton makes, and using a term with an industrial history reminds us of the role technology plays in this undertaking. Of the title of his MoMA installation, Pendleton has said,

> *Queen* is a kind of Afro-optimism balanced by a kind of Afro-pessimism, and it's also a kind of queer theory. *Queen* is all about being queer, really, the perpetually misunderstood position. It's about this memory of someone saying to me, years ago, when I thought I had done away with such things, 'Oh, you're such a queen.' It really came out of this feeling or this sense of vulnerability, when someone thinks that they can name you or claim you as something, even if at any given moment it's not what you might have wanted to be.

With his new books and his work in the museum, Pendleton makes public myriad texts, contexts, histories, and presents, seeking to outpace and overwhelm others' limiting claims. He helps us look at space (and the contemporary world) through books and then look at books and their pages in a new light. This comparative gesture, the gesture of the publisher, comes with an important difference: traditional authorship has receded, replaced by an alternate and far more vulnerable practice, a practice that remains as open as a dance floor, even as it is contested, haunted, many-voiced, thick with marks. For, as Pendleton has said: "I am both in control and not."

Adam Pendleton Celebrates Poetry, Wildness and Black Resistance
Frieze, September 22, 2021
Terence Trouillot

FRIEZE

Adam Pendleton Celebrates Poetry, Wildness and Black Resistance

The artist's monumental new installation at MoMA is his most complete and ambitious project yet

BY **TERENCE TROUILLOT** IN **FEATURES**, **PROFILES** | 22 SEP 21

'Poetry is exploring ideas with intention, not direction,' Adam Pendleton tells me as he walks me through the build of his latest exhibition, 'Who Is Queen?' – a large-scale installation featuring sound collage, video, painting and sculpture – six weeks ahead of its opening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). Pendleton often speaks in absolutes that are, at times, quite opaque yet irresistibly intriguing. This sentence, however, struck me as a perfect metonym for the artist's practice – which spans bookmaking, drawing, painting, performance, sculpture and video – a dynamic mélange of expressive gestures and experimentalism grounded in research and executed with laser precision and focus. The phrase also helps explain, perhaps, who he is: not only as an artist, but as a person. It even gives insight into his diction: Pendleton speaks slowly, judiciously, with a cadence that is both considered and lyrical. 'I see paintings as documents of marks,' he tells me during my visit to his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on a grey summer day, 'like bruises and scratches. They represent an understanding of how we are living through these inflictions – the poetics of being.'

Pendleton's tone is often serious: his work deals with important social issues, looking at the nexus of race and politics within the history of art. At the same time, he is unapologetically married to his craft. He works exhaustively, with one eye constantly on the next project: 'I don't know what to do when I'm not working, so I'm always looking for something to do. I eat and work. I don't really know what to do outside of making art.' He tells me this with a smile, followed by his guttural laughter: 'This is all pleasure to me.' Beyond his gravitas, Pendleton is charming, jovial and lighthearted. Much like his work, he is difficult to pigeonhole. As he is quick to point out: 'I don't think we speak in one tenor or tone: we all have this sense of multiplicity.'

Adam Pendleton, *So We Moved: A Portrait of Jack Halberstam*, 2021, video stills. Courtesy: the artist

Adam Pendleton Celebrates Poetry, Wildness and Black Resistance
Frieze, September 22, 2021
Terence Trouillot

Multiplicity is at the core of Pendleton's thinking about art and life. But his medium of choice is language, in all its permutations – be it text, sound, image, movement or space. His work straddles the liminal expanse where language both begins and ceases to function, all through the lens of a Black ontology.

At MoMA, the sound component of 'Who Is Queen?' layers a recording of Amiri Baraka reading a selection of poems – among them 'Not a White Shadow but Black People Will Be Victorious (For Black Arthur Blythe)' – originally delivered at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1980, over Hahn Rowe's composition 'Yellow Smile' (1994) and phone recordings of a 2014 solidarity protest in New York, following the police murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson. In its construction, the piece is inspired by pianist Glenn Gould's Solitude Trilogy, a series of three-hour radio documentaries produced for the Canadian Broadcast Company between 1967 and 1977. Gould's documentaries employed what he dubbed the 'contrapuntal' method: a technique borrowed from music in which independent melodies are played simultaneously. In *Solitude Trilogy*, however, independent voices are layered over each other; the result being a polyphony of monologues reflecting on Canada's most remote areas. As Pendleton describes it, Gould 'layered these voices to create a total work, a total form'.

In 'Who Is Queen?', the contrapuntal action is also attributed to interplay between the different components of the exhibition: singular works – representative of different voices in harmony and, perhaps at that time, in discordance with each other – are brought together to form a whole. Here, Pendleton conceives of exhibition as musical and visual score, while also disavowing the idea of Blackness (and Black resistance) as a homogenous entity.

As Heavy as Sculpture, 2021, installation view, 'Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America', New Museum, New York. Courtesy: the artist

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In 2000, after graduating early from high school, Pendleton left his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, to study art in Pietrasanta, Italy, with the aspiration of becoming an artist. In 2002, at the age of 18, after many months of sending slides of his work to New York galleries, he moved to Brooklyn. Around that time, Pendleton began paintings that incorporated text, using words as a visual form of abstraction in a way that has come to characterize his works on canvas. Soon afterwards, dealer Kazuko Miyamoto – an assistant to Sol LeWitt at the time – included Pendleton's work in a group show at Gallery Onetwentyeight in New York. (LeWitt purchased Pendleton's painting by exchanging it for one of his own pieces.) Over the course of a string of US solo shows, he came to draw increasingly from African American poetry and literature in his text-based works, imbuing run-of-the-mill phrases from Toni Morrison, for instance, with what Ken Johnson, in a 2005 review for *The New York Times*, described as 'romantic urgency'. Then, in 2007, he presented Revival – a large-scale performance comprising a 30-person gospel choir, jazz pianist Jason Moran and Pendleton as a secular preacher – commissioned by Performa. Pendleton's abstract, lyrical sermon included fragments from political speeches by Jesse Jackson and Larry Kramer, among others. Emotional and powerful, Revival was his first foray into performance and brought him international attention, while also solidifying a process deeply entrenched in the research of Blackness, social movements and the poetics of resistance.

I first met Pendleton in 2017, following the release of his book *Black Dada Reader*, an anthology bringing together conceptual and political texts from the European avant-garde and the Black arts movement of the 1960s. The publication grew out of an in-studio document that Pendleton used to conceptualize his own ideas around 'Black dada' – a notion borrowed from Baraka's poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus', published in *The Dead Lecturer* (1964). In 2008, Pendleton wrote a manifesto called 'Black Dada' and produced a suite of paintings that featured different letters from the eponymous phrase over LeWitt's cubes ('Black Dada', 2008–ongoing).

Adam Pendleton, *Untitled (THEY WILL LOVE US ALL OF US QUEENS)*, 2021, silkscreen ink on canvas, 3 × 2.2 m. Courtesy: the artist

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But it wasn't until 2012, after starting a two-year artist residency at MoMA, that he came to further flesh out his ideas. In the museum's archive, Pendleton researched the artist-led magazine *Avalanche* (1970–76) and, in 2014, presented 'Supposium' with poet Joan Retallack: a convening partly inspired by Plato's *Symposium* (c.370 BCE), which invited Anne Carson, Sandi Hilal, Peter Krapp and Fred Moten, along with Pendleton and Retallack, to participate in playful thought experiments beginning with the word 'suppose'. He also amassed a collection of texts that would later form Black Dada Reader: a theoretical juxtaposition of ideas that dislodges our linear understanding of art history, finding a through-line between the European avant-garde and Black radical thought. For Pendleton, Black dada is 'a way to talk about the future while talking about the past'.[1]

In 2017, Pendleton began discussions with Stuart Comer, MoMA's chief curator of media and performance, about creating an installation that would take up the museum's Marron Atrium. At his studio in late July, the artist showed me an exquisite maquette, detailing a floor-to-ceiling scaffold made from charcoal-painted wood and featuring eight speakers, a dual projector and screen, light sculptures, paintings and one textile work inspired by Malcom X's 1964 speech 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. He played me the sound component on a Bluetooth speaker. Rowe's dizzying melody filled the room while Baraka's voice slowly amplified – his tenor a remarkable baritone that reverberated as he delivered each line with great gusto. Behind him, the shouts from protestors – the call and response 'Whose streets? Our streets!' – transported me to the summer of 2020, when millions took to the streets across the globe in response to the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and many more.

'Who Is Queen?', 2021, exhibition view, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Courtesy: the artist

I imagine Pendleton's polyvocal soundscape expanding across MoMA's cavernous atrium, reaching the halls of the galleries that surround it. I hope it does. Pendleton later tells me that the piece is algorithmically programmed to layer the tracks differently as the recordings loop, creating a unique composition each time. The work will also incorporate conversations between writers, thinkers and musicians – including Joshua Chambers-Letson, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jack Halberstam, Michael Hardt, Susan Howe, Matana Roberts, Ruby Sales, Lynne Tillman and Simone White – throughout the run of the exhibition.

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Pendleton started painting at a very young age in the basement of his family home and the medium and its process remain at the core of his artmaking. Developing an obsession with a particular word or phrase – such as 'we are not' in *Untitled (WE ARE NOT)*(2020–21) – Pendleton spray paints the phrase ad nauseum in various iterations until, from the sheer act of repetition, the words begin to lose meaning, holding space for something purely abstract and almost unrecognizable as text. 'I guess I am drawn to these fields of illegibility,' he explains. He then takes high-resolution photographs of the spray-paint originals and manipulates them on Photoshop before printing the image on large canvases, primed with black gesso. Pendleton likes to refer to this moment as a 'translation'. The works are inspired in part by Glenn Ligon's text paintings and Martin Barré's spray-paint tableaux, but they evoke a unique tension and harmony between the media of drawing, photography and painting.

In the studio, I took a moment to ask Pendleton about the significance of the exhibition's title. 'I had this language in my mind in the form of a question,' he replies. 'In some way, the question is turned towards me, but also towards all of us at the same time. Very much at the heart of this exhibition is this tension between the individual and the collective and how that space is negotiated and articulated. How we live, essentially.' As always with Pendleton's use of language, the phrase is meant to retain and lose its meaning. However, the word 'queen' has a particular charge: both as a colloquialism for a queer man and as feminist counterpoint to the patriarchy. 'Who Is Queen?' is a question about who is powerful and who is powerless.

Adam Pendleton, *So We Moved: A Portrait of Jack Halberstam*, 2021, video stills.
Courtesy: the artist

Over the course of our conversation, the artist refers to Halberstam's introduction to The *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013) by Moten and Stefano Harney. In it, Halberstam describes the journey of Max, the child protagonist of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), who leaves his home and family to live on an island filled with frightening beasts. Halberstam likens the 'wild beyond' to the undercommons: a space for Black, Indigenous and queer folk that goes beyond the existing (oppressive) structures of society. For Pendleton, Halberstam's 'theories of the wild [act] as a kind of mechanism to rethink social, political and visual formations – trying to maintain a radical dimension of queerness – to queer something, to make strange'. Perhaps Pendleton is coyly asking: 'Who is the queen of the wild?'

Halberstam appears in the video component of 'Who Is Queen?', filmed in a way reminiscent of Pendleton's video portraits of Yvonne Rainer (Just Back from Los Angeles, 2016–17) and Ishmael Houston-Jones (Ishmael in the Garden, 2018). Another film captures images of the Robert E. Lee statue in Pendleton's hometown of Richmond caked in graffiti. As I make my way through the MoMA atrium where 'Who Is Queen?' is being installed, I am aware of how precarious the structures look, how high they are and how much I want to climb them, move through the nooks and crannies. The space is indeed wild, an environ of great solemnity, but also desolate and eerie – an 'un/place' as Halberstam observes in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), 'where the people who are left outside of domesticity reside [...] an anticommunity of wildness.'

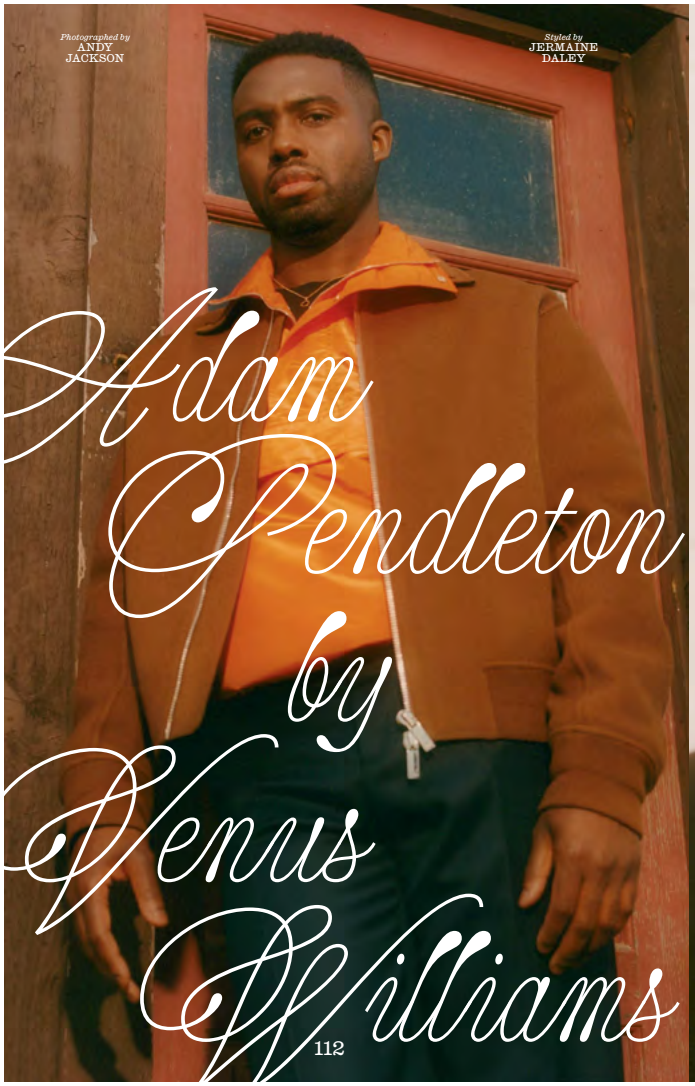
'Who Is Queen?', his solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, runs until 30 January 2022.

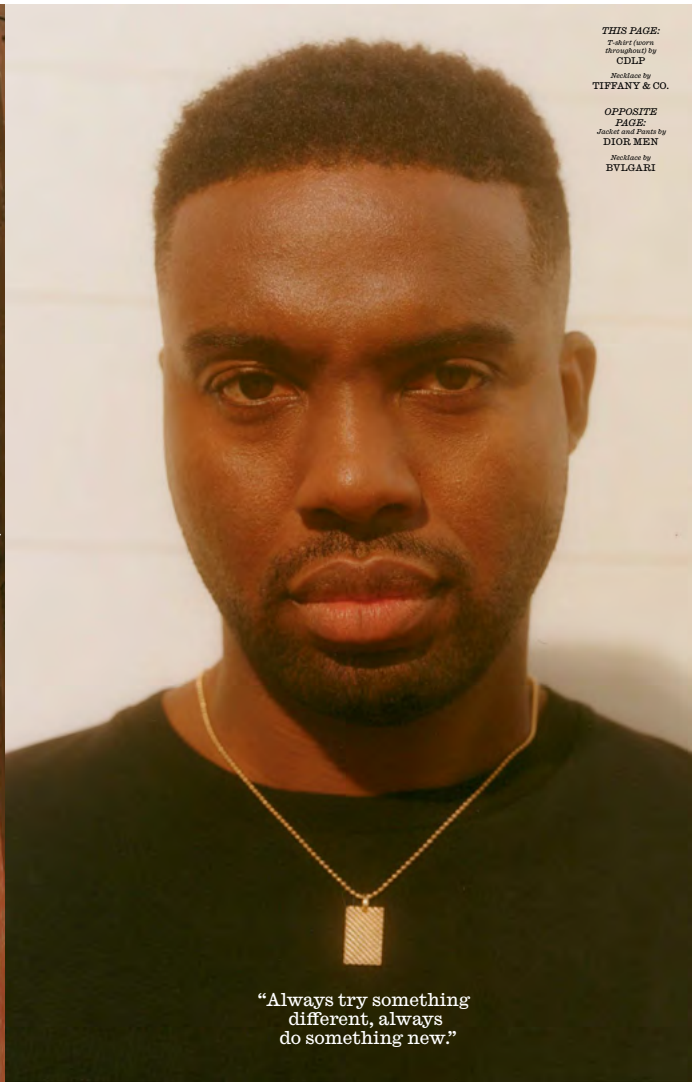
This article first appeared in frieze *issue 222 with the headline 'Adam Pendleton'.*

1 Artist's statement for the exhibition 'Our Ideas', 2018, Pace Gallery, London, UK

Main image: Adam Pendleton, Summer 2020 #1, *2020, silkscreen ink on Mylar, 97 × 74 cm each. Courtesy: the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles*

Adam Pendleton and Venus Williams on When Passion Becomes Profession
Interview Magazine, June 28, 2021
Venus Williams





Adam Pendleton and Venus Williams on When Passion Becomes Profession
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ADAM PENDLETON

No contemporary artist embodies the spirit of Walt Whitman's declaration "I contain multitudes" more potently than Adam Pendleton. Across his bold, compressed, densely piled surfaces spill words, fragments, rally cries, commands, defiant chants, civic demands, graffiti, broken poetic syllables, and blown-apart letters, all competing in a visual-linguistic cacophony that feels like a snapshot of our loud nation in the present tense. The 37-year-old, New York–based artist is a prodigious talent whose multidisciplinary corpus ranges from performance to photography, but he is particularly celebrated for his graphic, black-and-white screen-print paintings, sometimes covering entire walls, collaged and layered with so much visual complexity that they often take on the dimensionality of sculpture. In the past two decades, Pendleton has built a career that bridges so many seemingly incompatible realms—formalism with political activism, the visceral energy of abstract painting with hyper-tuned socio-historic concerns, the living messages of grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter inside the institutional structure of galleries and museums. The artist seems almost single-handedly to be redefining the role of the artist for our current age.

This past spring, Pendleton's alchemy filled the lobby of New York's New Museum with paintings of protest language and images of masks stamped directly on the walls. This summer, he joined forces with the British architect and sculptor David Adjaye for a show at Pace Gallery in Hong Kong (Pendleton has been a longtime practitioner of dynamic artist collaborations). And this fall, in the atrium of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Pendleton is creating a solo exhibition entitled *Who Is Queen?*, which will include some of his biggest and most political paintings to date. Pendleton, who splits his time between his house in upstate New York and his home in Brooklyn, is a man on the move, and his projects extend to causes such as helping (along with a few of his fellow artists) to preserve Nina Simone's childhood home in Tryon, North Carolina. But even on the go, he is always thinking about art.

In 2014, Venus Williams bought one of Pendleton's paintings to add to her prominent art collection. In honor of his upcoming MoMA show, Pendleton spoke to the tennis legend about the power of words, the promise of Black Lives Matter, and why it doesn't feel like work if it's a passion.

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"Untitled (We Are Not)," 2020.

ADAM PENDLETON

VENUS WILLIAMS: One of the parts of your career I find most interesting was how young you were when you started out. You were just 16 when you went off to Italy to study art. I connect with that because I started my career early, too. I was 14 when I played my first pro match, so I totally relate to being young and wanting to be taken seriously. What was it like starting so early?

ADAM PENDLETON: I do think that's something we share, that sense of our professional lives starting at such an early age, when other people are still very much involved in the process of self-discovery. Somehow, I found what I wanted to do with my life—or it found me. It's hard to say how that happens. I finished high school two years early and, like you said, went off to Italy. I was 18 when I was in New York and beginning to show my work in galleries. I did my first show at a gallery, Yvon Lambert in New York, when I was 20 or 21. I had to be coy about my age because I was always hearing people refer to artists who were in their 30s as "young artists." I thought to myself, "Well, if that's a young artist, then what am I?" I thought I should keep quiet about my actual age and just go about my business. Looking back, I feel fortunate to have been so clear about what I wanted to do, not only professionally, but with my life, because it's much more than just a profession. It's a guiding light, a guiding path. It gives clarity and purpose to everything that I do.

WILLIAMS: I relate to that, too. I don't think I was meant to be doing anything else. What were your early influences? I read that your mother told you as a kid, "When you buy a book, you're not really spending money."

PENDLETON: I think it all starts with the parents, doesn't it? And it's funny that a small thing that someone says can shape your entire life. My mom planted that seed about books in my head. Maybe what she meant is that you're acquiring so much more than money when you pick up a book and learn about something. I would absolutely attribute my love of language and my love of books to my mother and growing up in a house where we talked about literature and writers, ranging from Toni Morrison to Adrienne Rich. That, absolutely, gave me a way into the visual arts. And something that has carried on through the many years I've been making art is the tension between text and image, and how these distinctions can become conflated.

WILLIAMS: It's interesting that the roots of visual art comes through words and language.

PENDLETON: Absolutely. Language is an oral tool, but it's also a visual tool. It's what I would call an organizing principle, but it also points to the complexity of the world we encounter on a daily basis. We're always trying to make sense of the world around us through language, even if it's an impossibility. What I particularly like about language is the tension between representation and abstraction. Sometimes when you're reading something, it can just look like a mark or a line, and that grounds the reader as a site of engagement.

WILLIAMS: How did that love of language carry over into your early years as an artist in New York? Did you know what you were doing right away?

PENDLETON: It's a question I could ask you about being 14 and playing your first pro match. I think one of the gifts of being young is that you don't even realize that you're taking a risk. Do you know what I mean? You just seem to say, "Yes, of course I'm going to do this." It's only later in life that these kinds of decisions become much more complicated.

WILLIAMS: That's the great thing about youth: You can take a risk without thinking too hard about it. And it really is a blessing.

PENDLETON: It's an absolute gift. As an artist, I try to retain that idea of risk, while also giving it shape and structure. Every day when I go into the studio and start on a work of art, I'm taking a risk. I'm willingly throwing myself intellectually, emotionally, into the unknown.

WILLIAMS: Growing up, my dad used to say, "Always try something different, always do something new." That's a risk.

PENDLETON: Exactly.

WILLIAMS: Over the past year, there's been a lot of positive momentum in the Black Lives Matter movement. How has that impacted your work?

PENDLETON: What's really struck me is the durability of the Black Lives Matter movement. I think when that language took hold of the public consciousness, in 2012, there was this feeling that perhaps it was fleeting, that it would come and it would go. I actually adopted that language or brought that language into the space of my work very carefully, I will say, because as an artist, I don't respond to the news. I try to make sense of the world at a much slower and more deliberate pace. But there was something urgent about that language and I wanted to slow things down and really make sure people were listening to all that Black Lives Matter implies. I'm really gratified that the ideas, issues, and concerns to which that language gave voice in our contemporary moment have proved to be so durable, and that people are still contending on a social level, on a political level, and also on an emotional level with what that language proposes about how we should be thinking about American history and society as we live it and confront it every day.

WILLIAMS: When Black Lives Matter really started to gain momentum during quarantine, I, too, wanted to understand what it meant. A lot of people told me, "Venus, you should say something." And I said, "I want to absorb it myself first. I don't want it to be a trend or simply marking it as an Instagrammable moment." I relate to having the need to gather your own feelings first, before you are able to create something that matters.

PENDLETON: One of the reasons I think art can be so useful at certain moments, especially in a political sense or context, is that art slows things down. We look at the same paintings or listen to the same music not just for a year or two, but for hundreds of years. People still travel all over the world to see specific paintings. That durability fascinates me. And I think for things to change for Black people around the world, it ultimately has to be a test of time.

WILLIAMS: Your work is a part of the collections of major institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate in London, and you've been vocal about how the need to incorporate Black artists in museums is long overdue. Now, finally, Black artists are getting their due. But it's still overwhelmingly white work. What is your role as a Black artist within that context?

PENDLETON: It's really complicated. There have been moments in modern and contemporary art where culture has really turned its attention to Black artists—take Sam Gilliam or Adrian Piper or David Hammons or Alma Thomas or Howardena Pindell or Lorraine O'Grady. But what they didn't enjoy was the sustained attention that someone like, say, Gerhard Richter has enjoyed over the many decades that he's been an artist. My hope is that we're not on the cusp or the wave of another fleeting moment where people recognize what Black people have to contribute to visual culture, but that we're really turning the page and that it will be a sustained engagement. That our contributions will

> "*Art isn't* necessarily about making *sense*. It involves the willingness to be *misunderstood*."

not just become a part of the narrative, but that they will change the narrative.

WILLIAMS: That's very powerful. I've had an opportunity to see so many amazing works by Black artists and I love being a part of it, not as an artist, but as an observer, living it and absorbing it.

PENDLETON: I know you're a collector because you have one of my works! Are you collecting art these days?

WILLIAMS: I am. The title of the work I have of yours is, "A Woman on the Train Asks Angela Davis for an Autograph." Can you talk about where that title comes from?

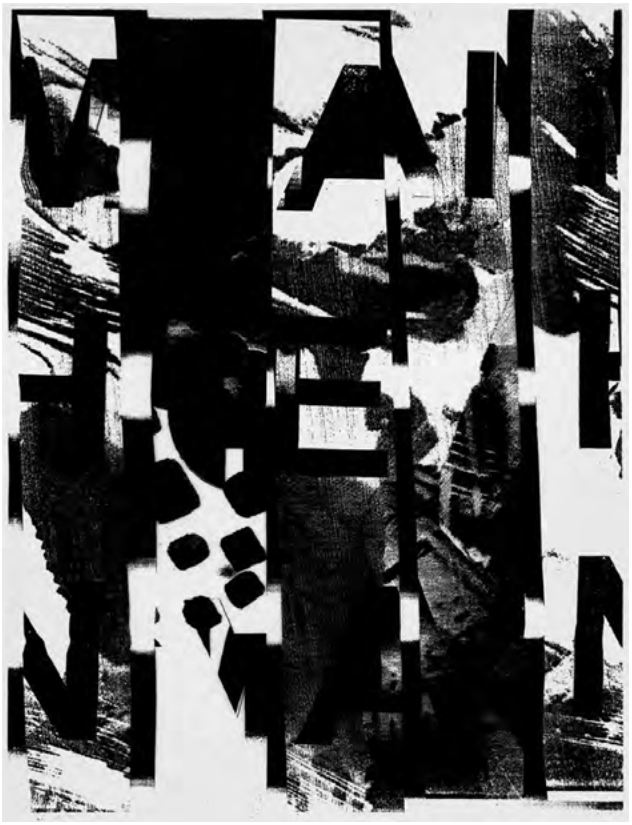
PENDLETON: It's a line from a poem titled "Albany" by the writer Ron Silliman. It's from a book where he wrote a poem for every letter in the alphabet. Albany is A. His poetry is unusual in the sense that he almost uses it as a conceptual device to collect and assemble language. He'll put a lot of sentences together that would, at first glance, not necessarily make any immediate sense. This sentence was one of them: "A woman on the train asks Angela Davis for an autograph." It might seem like an odd title when you see the visual reality of my piece, but I like nonsense. Art isn't necessarily about making sense. It involves the willingness to be misunderstood. I think we all need to be more willing to be misunderstood.

WILLIAMS: If we're willing to be misunderstood, it means we're willing to be true to who we are, even if someone doesn't get it. I like that. You have a major show coming up at MoMA in the fall, which I really hope I get to see. It's called *Who Is Queen?* That's another great title.

PENDLETON: Every day, all I think about is, "Who is queen?" I think that goes back to this idea of how we move through the world and how we're understood. That's some of what the title speaks to. "Queen" can be a name for a queer person, an effeminate queer man. People will say, "Oh, he's such a queen." I remember someone said that to me at a particular moment in my life when I thought I had done away with such things, when no one would say something like that to me. So there's a tension between what we want to embrace and what we want to refuse at any given moment, what we want to name, what we want to claim, who we want to be, who we don't want to be—all of these declarations that we're forced to make in the world at any given moment. But a queen, of course, if we take it out of this particular context, also symbolizes power and authority. I liked that duality. For this show, I'm really thinking of it as an occupation of moments, a structure within a structure. I'm showing works I've done over the years and some new works as well, including the largest paintings that I've done to date.

WILLIAMS: What's your creative process like?

PENDLETON: I'm a compulsive note-taker. I'm always writing down visual ideas. These things I write down, or take photographs of, often find their way into a work. My work life is very ordinary. I'm a 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. kind of person. I get up and go to work like anybody else, I probably just stay longer. I never wait for inspiration. You have to claim it. You can't wait for anything.



"a woman on the train asks angela davis for an autograph," 2014.

WILLIAMS: Are you a collector yourself?

PENDLETON: Oh, yes. I buy all kinds of things. I can't help myself, Venus. I'm sure you know how it is. Once you start, you just can't stop. In terms of art, from Mel Edwards to Stanley Whitney, when I see it, I try to buy it. I have some photographs by Lorraine O'Grady. And that's really just the tip of the iceberg. I also recently got a piece by Richard Tuttle.

WILLIAMS: Do you enjoy putting on exhibitions all over the world?

PENDLETON: I do enjoy it! I love going to other cities, be it Seoul or London or Hong Kong or, maybe my favorite city outside of New York, Paris. And of course, Paris has great food. If you're ever in Paris, go to a restaurant called, yam'Tcha. It's probably one of the best meals you're ever going to have, with unparalleled culinary creativity. I also like more traditional places that have been around for a really long time, like Zuni in San Francisco. I think food is an art form, and it's something that I really love celebrating and engaging with, alongside my husband.

WILLIAMS: It sounds like food is your happy place.

PENDLETON: It adds much joy. I'm really hoping that when we come out of this pandemic, that we don't lose so many of our restaurants, because they're such important cultural spaces where so many memories are made. They're incredibly important.

WILLIAMS: Okay, here's my last question: What do you do for fun?

PENDLETON: I'm very focused on my work, and work is what I do for fun. Outside of that, I like quiet places and quiet spaces. I love leaving the city and going to upstate New York to cleanse my palate, so to speak.

WILLIAMS: Are you and your husband similar in that way?

PENDLETON: I would say we're similar. He wasn't as enthused in the beginning about spending more time outside of the city. But now, I think he would spend more time outside of the city than I would. He would deny that, though, Venus. But I'm work and family, that's who I am.

WILLIAMS: Work, when you love it, doesn't feel like work. It brings you joy. ●

Grooming: LAILA HAYANI *using* V76 BY VAUGHN *at* FORWARD ARTISTS.

In the Studio with Adam Pendleton
Robb Report, November, 2020
Julie Belcove

Robb Report

November 2020
By Julie Belcove

In the Studio with Adam Pendleton
Robb Report, November, 2020
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ART

IN THE STUDIO WITH ADAM PENDLETON

The conceptual artist known for his "Black Dada" manifesto discusses his latest paintings, adaptability and the beauty of mistakes.

Photography by GIONCARLO VALENTINE

Back in March, as New York City began to empty, conceptual artist Adam Pendleton left Brooklyn for Germantown, N.Y., his longtime Hudson Valley retreat, which, he says wryly, "I value for its lack of going-on-ness." He commandeered an empty room for a studio and spent a few weeks adjusting to the new reality. "Then I just found a different rhythm," he says. "We're a very adaptable species."

Hunkered down there and occasionally zipping back to Brooklyn, the 36-year-old finished more than half of the pieces slated for his first show at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, opening November 7, which will include a video, paintings and silk-screen collages on Mylar. The paintings share both his signature motif of spray-painted text and the title *Untitled (WE ARE NOT)*. Those three words appear on every canvas, but they're frequently off-kilter—out of order, overlapping or cut off. The idea, Pendleton says via Zoom from Germantown, is to "complicate theories and notions of representation." Words, he says, are where abstraction and representation meet.

The phrase "we are not" comes from the "Black Dada" essay that Pendleton wrote in 2008 and that continues to inform much of his work. In the text, which examines Blackness and the avant-garde, he lists traits that "we are not," including "naïve" and "exclusive."

"Defining yourself by *not* what people say you are—it's really up to the viewer to fill in that space," he says. But while those viewers are oft inclined to read his commitment to a sparse palette of black, white and gray as a political statement, Pendleton insists it is "not connected to race."

Pendleton's go-to painting method involves brushing on pigment and spray-painting words, which he then photographs, layers and prints onto the canvas. "I love that I can't always control how much paint comes out, so I end up with these drips and splatters, these beautiful mistakes," he says. "These errors are what make the image worth looking at."

Pendleton's art-world breakthrough came in 2007, when, at the age of 23, he preached a charged sermon, backed by a gospel choir, at the Performa Biennial. A few years later, he joined the blue-chip Pace Gallery, becoming its youngest artist at the time. Text has been integral to his art from the beginning. In addition to painting, he was an avid playwright growing up in Richmond, Va., the son of a primary-school teacher and a contractor who moonlighted as a musician. Eventually, he says, "the visual world kind of scooped up or partnered the language. Now it's very much one and the same."

That partnership is apparent not only in his paintings and drawings but also in his ongoing series of video portraits, for which he pens the scripts, though he feels at liberty to depart from them. The latest, *What Is Your Name? Kyle Abraham, A Portrait*, 2018–19, will be on view at Kordansky. The captivating 19-minute piece deconstructs documentary-style interviews with double entendre and repetition, bordering on interrogation, to pry open the mind of the noted choreographer and dancer, while fragmented frames capture Abraham's grace, power and artistry. "There's something, for better or worse, that makes people always mention race when there's a Black body involved," Abraham says in the film. "You've never heard of Trisha Brown being referred to as a *white* choreographer," he adds, while acknowledging that he does "feel a bit of pride" at being described as a Black one.

After the Kordansky show, Pendleton will pivot to his upcoming exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which was postponed during the lockdown to next September. He began the expansive piece, *Who Is Queen?*, about a decade ago, but he is loath to call it finished. "I wouldn't be worth my salt if I didn't keep working on it," he says.

He also has a passion project in Tryon, North Carolina: the preservation of singer Nina Simone's childhood home. In 2017, Pendleton teamed with fellow Black artists Rashid Johnson, Ellen Gallagher and Julie Mehretu to buy the dilapidated three-room house and save it from demolition. They have since partnered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and others to restore it.

Simone was also a civil-rights activist, and Pendleton, who has made works proclaiming, "Black Lives Matter," contributed compelling opinion pieces to both *ArtNews* and *The New York Times* at the height of the BLM protests in June. "I'm really trying to think critically," he says, "about the past we have inhabited, the present we do inhabit and the futures we might inhabit." **Julie Belcove**

OPPOSITE: **Adam Pendleton with *Untitled (WE ARE NOT)*, 2020, in his Brooklyn studio.** ABOVE: **Pendleton at work in his studio.**

Elements of Adam Pendleton's Creative Lexicon
Hyperallergic, September 24, 2020
Hrag Vartanian

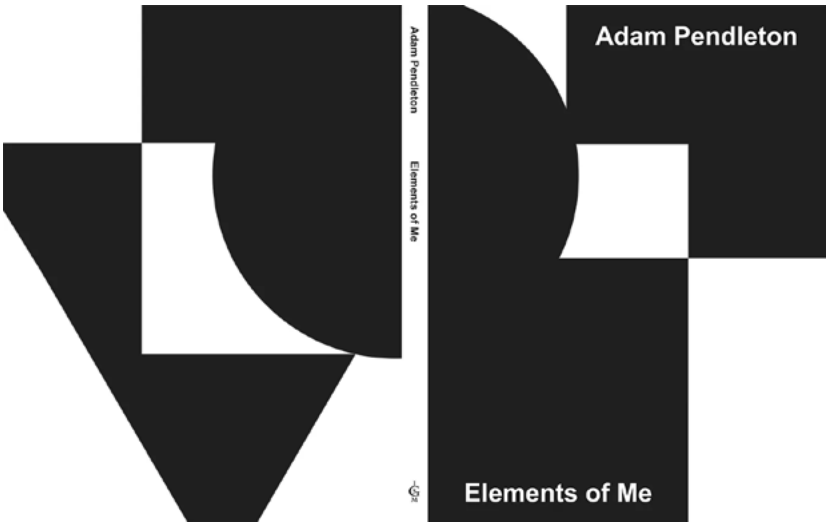
HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Elements of Adam Pendleton's Creative Lexicon

An excerpt from his limited edition artist book that accompanies his exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

by Hrag Vartanian
September 24, 2020



The cover of Adam Pendleton's Artist Book for the Isabella Steward Gardner Museum (images courtesy the artist and the Isabella Gardner Steward Museum)

Artist Adam Pendleton's book for his current ***Systems of Display*** exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, which is curated by Pieranna Cavalchini, is a window into his creative lexicon. Using the stark images that he's famous for, the book caught our eye, and Pendleton was kind enough to share a few pages with Hyperallergic readers, along with this short introduction:

Elements of Adam Pendleton's Creative Lexicon
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Hrag Vartanian

> *Elements of Me* is an artist's book accompanying Adam Pendleton's solo exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. The exhibition, a room-sized installation, assembles silkscreen works on Mylar, works from *System of Display* (a series of silk-screened plexiglass-and-mirror display boxes), and geometric, hard-edged, black-and-white wall paintings.
>
> The book and exhibition exist in conversation with the museum itself. The Gardner Museum, largely the vision of its founder, a late 19th-century American collector, is filled with thousands of artworks and decorative objects, arranged by Gardner into dense constellations whose logic is not always clear. Pendleton's installation, in deep black and bright white, is inspired by the museum's various modes and mechanisms of display and is both oppositional and complimentary.
>
> On the book page, the three basic shapes composing the wall paintings in the installation appear as blank, unprinted regions over the source materials for Pendleton's artworks. Concealed or masked in this way, the drawings, paintings, and photocopies refuse straightforward legibility, asking questions about the history of visual display and the status of foreground and background.

The exhibition has been extended and will close on November 15, 2020. The museum has instituted social distancing guidelines and timed tickets for visitors, which you can **read about on its website**. The limited-edition artist book is available through the **museum's website**.

Elements of Adam Pendleton's Creative Lexicon
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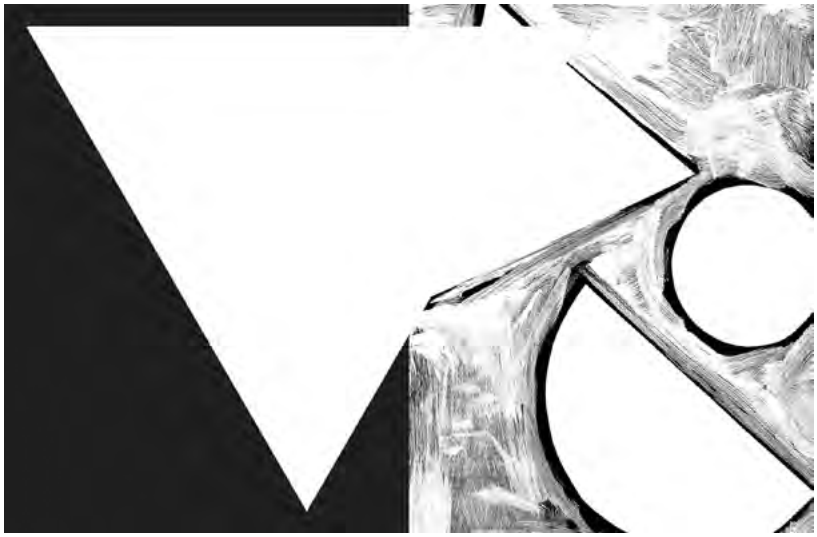

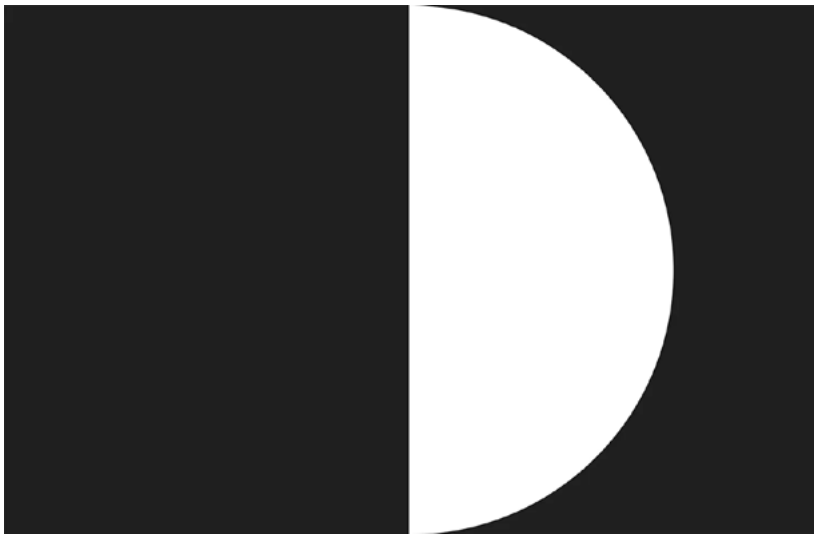

At the Gardner, Adam Pendleton puts the art world's sins in black and white
Art Review, August 6, 2020
Murray Whyte

ART REVIEW

At the Gardner, Adam Pendleton puts the art world's sins in black and white

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff, Updated August 6, 2020, 3:29 p.m.

Installation view of "Adam Pendleton: Elements of Me" at the Gardner Museum. STEWART CLEMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN/COURTESY ADAM PENDLETON

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In April, when the pandemic was new, Adam Pendleton looked out the window of the Hudson Valley house he shares with his husband and kept seeing in his mind's eye three words floating over the budding leaves and patchy fields turning brown to green: SEE THE SIN. For Pendleton, a Black artist whose work serves up sly challenges to the exclusions of art history, it was less a moment of clairvoyance than a perpetual simmering, destined to boil over sooner or later.

By the time he wrote about it for ARTNews, with his story published June 4, the pandemic's early, anxious novelty — and the sunny illusion that we were all, somehow, in this together — had given way to calamity. A week before, on May 26, the country erupted in mass protest, its long, bleak history of racial terror given a digital rallying point, shared on social media millions of times with the on-camera killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Truth emerged, for all to see: Whatever we were in, it was divided, as ever, on racial and economic lines.

For Pendleton, abstract rumination was consumed by urgent, stark fury. "I realized I wanted to ask 'Whose life *doesn't* matter?' " he wrote. "But then: When you have to ask, it's probably too late."

SEE THE SIN, for Pendleton, was no longer just a notion, hovering in his mind over a bucolic valley. The anguish of America's foundational sin — bondage, and the deep, generational racism bred deep in its bones — was spilling into streets all over America. In his rural retreat, Pendleton swiped those three words in black ink on white paper with quivering fury.

That work isn't part of "Elements of Me," Pendleton's pocket-size show at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The show is from the time before — opened in February, suspended a few weeks later by the pandemic, and reopened now, into a new world. But "SEE THE SIN" would settle in comfortably here, explicit about a subject Pendleton's work has treated implicitly for much of his career.

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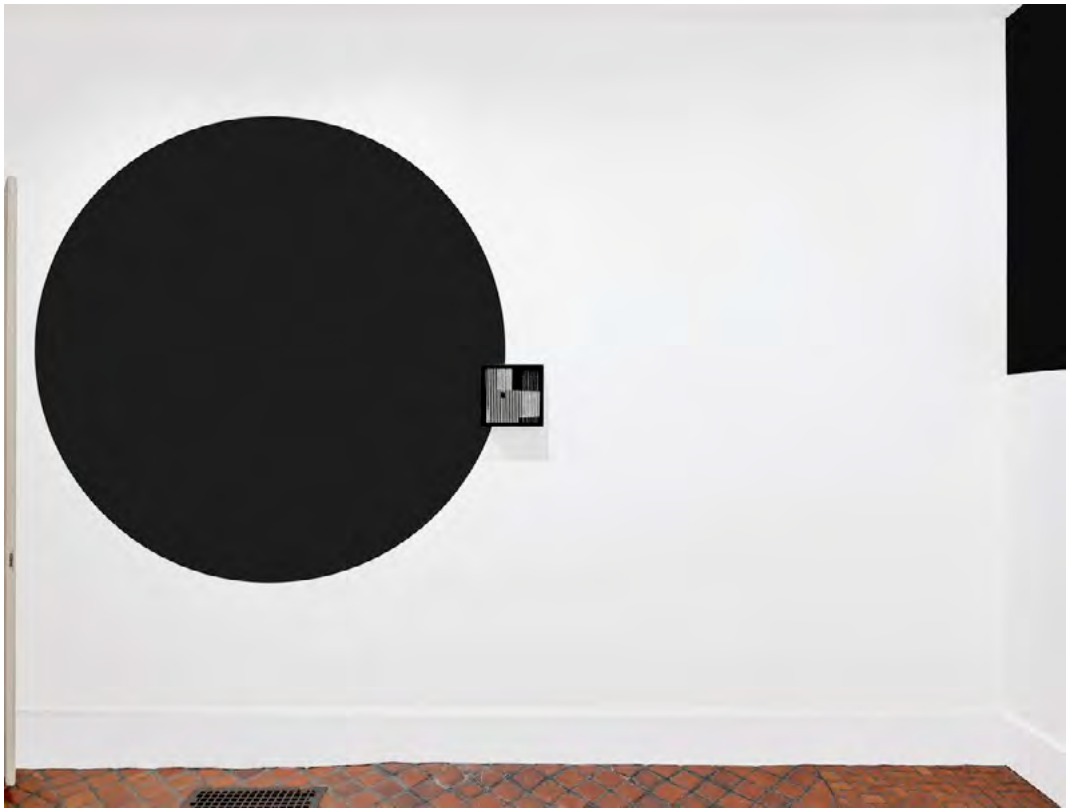
I saw the show, and met the artist, in the winter. I found it wry and provocative, a history lesson from an alternate universe. Pendleton, in person, was taciturn and demure, an artist who preferred to let his work speak as it might, rather than boxing it in with too much guidance or explanation. Now it's August, and so much has happened. Walking through the Gardner *palazzo* this week, with its neoclassical vaults and expanses of Italianate tile — hallmarks of a Euro-centric ruling order here, the generational bulwark that kept official culture blithely insulated from the messy world outside its doors — I was sure Pendleton would now have more to say.

But the work still speaks for itself, and at a higher key than before. The show, with its sharp black geometric forms inscribed on white walls, its small etched mirrors in boxes, its rough and gestural works on paper, is mysterious. But it's also so very clear. Amid the dark hallways of the Gardner palace, it glows white-hot, a beacon. It jars, seduces, and slyly condemns.



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A view of "Adam Pendleton: Elements of Me" at the Gardner. STEWART CLEMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN/ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

Pendleton, in his mid-30s, is on the younger end of a generation of Black artists digging at the footings of the country's ruling order and its narrow view of cultural history — I think right away of Leslie Hewitt and Theaster Gates. The fact that Pendleton aims his critique at Surrealism and Abstraction, using its own language against it, says a lot. He calls much of his work "Black Dada," after the movement of early-20th century European absurdists (headlined by Marcel Duchamp and André Breton) who seeded generations of creative subversives, particularly in the United States. Dada was an exclusive club, to be sure. None of its members, as you might guess, were Black. Few of the movement's progeny on this side of the ocean — through abstraction, through Minimalism, **through** Conceptualism — were, either. It seems a little out of proportion, doesn't it? (There were some — Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, and Charles Gaines come to mind. But they were largely overshadowed by their peers, artists we're only getting to know now, in hindsight.)

And so, Pendleton makes his own notes in the margins. In February, this felt like wiley provocation, a language appropriated and turned back on itself. Amid the high-contrast, crisp forms on the walls, I was seized immediately by a partly-obscured black-and-white copy of a textbook page with clinical photos of African idols. If you don't know the full history, it's already a little uncomfortable — that European colonial habit of studying conquered cultures like specimens under glass. And if you do — the European Surrealists' preoccupation with "Primitivism," a supposedly primal aesthetic channeled, apparently, through a collective unconscious — well, you might just cringe like me.

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From Adam Pendleton's "Elements of Me" at the Gardner Museum. ANDY ROMER PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY ADAM PENDLETON

Whatever our 21st-century minds make of such condescending juvenelia (in my case, not much), this was the bona fide avant garde of its day. Primitivist ideas were vital to Pablo Picasso's conception of Cubism in the early 20th century, and thus Modernism more broadly. Today, it just feels like patronizing, willful narcissism, that colonial-minded notion that the rest of the world offered a menu from which to pick and choose in the grand remaking of a thoroughly modern reality. But Pendleton is the one doing the choosing here, deftly exposing those simplistic ideas by reattaching them to the meanings from which they were stolen. I'm particularly fond of a grid of black and white works on paper, some of which would be good mock-ups for Franz Kline's robust, gestural abstract works if not for the text Pendleton embeds within them. (One reads "OKDADAOKD" — cheerful mockery, maybe, of the bratty movement's' absurdist leaps. Whatever you say, fellas.)

Doesn't it feel like so much art made in the 21st century is trying to make up for art made in the 20th? It's not a bad strategy. With whole swaths of society missing until very recently from museum and gallery walls — women artists, Black artists, Native American artists, Asian-American artists — there's no shortage of material. But it's more than a strategy. It's a vital project, to challenge, engage with, annotate, and redefine a canon largely designed as much by what it left out as what it deigned to include. Such a canon serves only the few, which is a problem not just of the art world. The sin was always there to be seen. Work like Pendleton's helps lift the veil.

ADAM PENDLETON: ELEMENTS OF ME

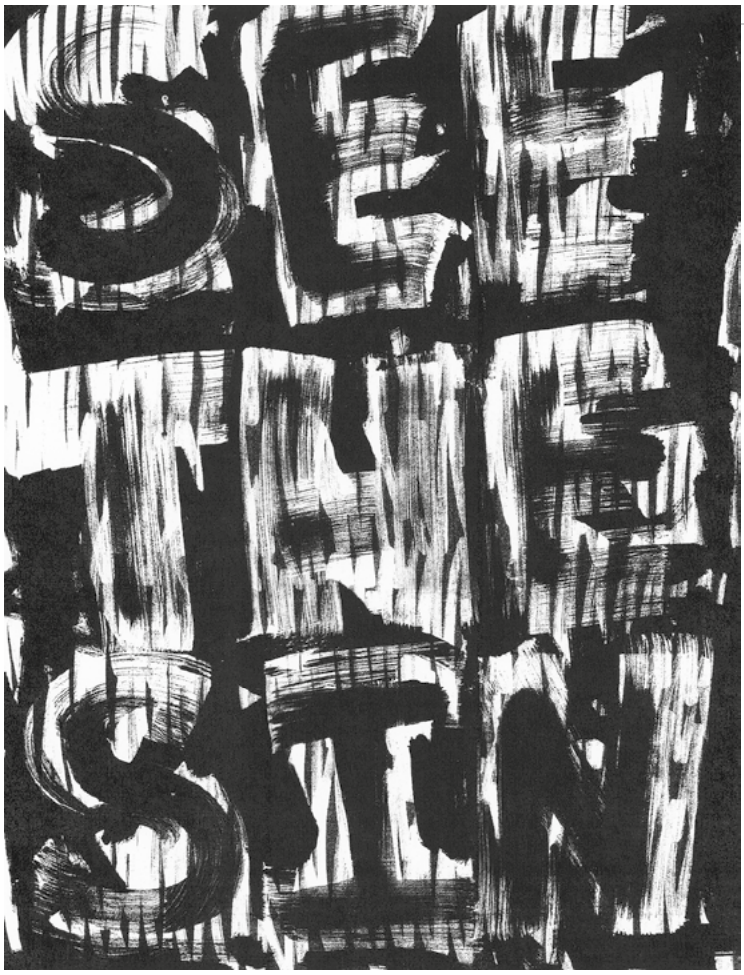
Through Nov. 15. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 25 Evans Way. 617-566-1401, www.gardnermuseum.org

Artist Adam Pendleton on Protests Across America:
“I Am Not Safe, and This Country Is Not Kind”
ARTnews, June 4, 2020

ARTnews

Artist Adam Pendleton on Protests Across America: ‘I Am Not Safe, and This Country Is Not Kind’

BY ADAM PENDLETON June 4, 2020 9:00am



Adam Pendleton, *Completed sketch for SEE THE SIN*, 2020.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Artist Adam Pendleton on Protests Across America:
"I Am Not Safe, and This Country Is Not Kind"
ARTnews, June 4, 2020

I woke up this morning and realized I live in a country where police mow down civilians with SUVs and storm protesters with batons, rubber bullets, teargas, and live rounds. I realized you can lose your life for standing up for life. I realized that I am not safe, and this country is not kind. I realized we are living through a health crisis, an economic crisis, a cultural crisis, and a social crisis while the country is being led by a man who fuels all flames of dumb violence and division. I realized I was tired of being asked "Are you OK?" by friends and colleagues. I realized I was tired of being asked to respond, yet heartened that people care. I realized I was angry that I was heartened that people care—because you *better* care. You are the person standing next to you: If I fail, you fail. If you fail, I fail.

I realized we have lost our collective sense of compassion and intelligence—and then that we probably never had it to lose. I realized that, after this moment quells, people will go back to their lives, and my life as well as those of my brothers and sisters—trans, cis, the we in all of us—will still be on the line. I woke up in the calm of the early morning light

next to the man I love and thought, “Live free or die.” I wondered if I should, if I would, give my own life for this urgent abstraction of Black life, of mattering. I wondered if I would die. I realized I am surrounded by contradictions, dysfunctions, and distractions. I realized I had better things to do than mourn for this country while thinking of Toni Morrison: “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”

But then I realized I must mourn for you who don’t speak up, act up, or take a stand. I realized my life might depend on you. I realized while I was culturally designated as “African-American”—words I’ve too often heard so violently used—it was my ancestors who built this country. I realized that, but for few of us, we’re all immigrants, forced and otherwise, on this land. I realized, too late as always, that there were people here long before us, and we only know how to plunder and think we’re flourishing. I realized I wanted to ask “Whose life *doesn’t* matter?” but then: when you have to ask, it’s probably too late.

I realized that my pessimism is realism and, of

course, it’s long been time to get real. I ask of history here: Did our artists join hands with our freedom fighters? Did they demonstrate in Birmingham? Did they cover their faces when the hoses were turned on? History shirks linearity. It exhausts us. It exhausts me.

I realized I want my language to fail. That my approach must be asyntactic and combinatorial. That I don’t want to become but to always be *becoming*. I realized my parents’ worries aren’t like other parents’ worries. I realized I scan headlines looking for statements of support, looking to see who would say my life matters. I realized I wonder who would choose capital over Black life and why a mayor who created Black life isn’t on my side. I realized I don’t think the rally or the cry could go too far when we have been waiting on something for more than 400 years.

I realized, lying here, that I believe in a politics of love but also ask: what is love without violence, and what is capital if not violence? I realized I had been punched in the gut. I took a breath and then realized that I needed to have a conversation with you—that I needed to reach out but that there is no “moving on” or “next page” until we *SEE THE SIN*. I realized the impossibility—and thus the poetics—of my plea.

Adam Pendleton (https://www.artnews.com/t/adam-pendleton/) *is an artist based in New York.*

The New York Times

MoMA's Atrium Set as Theatrical Stage for the Summer

A new multimedia installation by Adam Pendleton, with live events daily, will explore the politics and aesthetics of blackness.

By Hilarie M. Sheets

Feb. 10, 2020

Adam Pendleton will transform the Museum of Modern Art's atrium this summer into a theatrical stage set framed by three 60-foot-tall scaffolds displaying his work. The 36-year-old artist's multimedia installation is titled "Who Is Queen?" and will be on view from July 25 through Oct. 4, with live daily events surrounded by text-based paintings, mobiles, video portraits and sound pieces exploring his concept of "Black Dada."

"It's looking at blackness as an open-ended idea, not just related to race but in relationship to politics, to art, specifically to the avant-garde," said Mr. Pendleton, who for his roster of readings, lectures and musical performances has enlisted people including the civil rights activist Ruby Sales, the poet Susan Howe and the cultural theorist Judith Butler.

For each day of the exhibition, during hours with no live performance, Mr. Pendleton is creating a unique and dissonant sound collage, layering audio material of artists and curators, culled from MoMA's archives, with hip-hop music, for instance, or recordings of Black Lives Matter protests.

Discussing the title of his show, Mr. Pendleton said, "'Queen' could be a derogatory or loving name for a gay man," adding that he remembered being called this once and resented having to decide whether to reject or embrace it. "That's at the heart of 'Queen' — this idea of who we are, in personal but also collective terms."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: A Theatrical Turn For MoMA's Atrium