

ART TALK

BEYOND WORDS

Incorporating collage, cultural criticism, poetry and video, Adam Pendleton's work defies categorization. That's only part of what makes it so appealing to collectors and museums alike.

BY TED LOOS PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLOS CHAVARRÍA

WHEN AN ARTIST captures a cultural moment just so, it's like a lightning bolt—there's a crackle in the air, a blinding flash, and the clouds part. At just 34, Brooklyn-based artist Adam Pendleton has proved himself capable of generating such phenomena.

Over the past decade, Pendleton's conceptual take on race in America has drawn attention and stirred discussion across the country. Last year, he had solo shows at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland and Pace Gallery in Palo Alto, California.

This year, Pendleton is showing a body of work that demonstrates the range of his artistic practice: a video project at MIT's List Visual Arts Center, a multiwork exhibition at Manhattan's Lever House on view until June and an especially powerful new private installation in the offices of Emerson Collective, the philanthropist Laurene Powell Jobs's nonprofit. "Adam is a kind of citizen-poet," says Powell Jobs, one of his many influential advocates. "His work has beauty, power and raw energy."

Over coffee near his studio in the Sunset Park neighborhood, Pendleton shows the kind of interest in language you'd expect from someone who deploys words as a tool in his art, which frequently takes the form of graphic, collage-based paintings in black-and-white. If you mention that there are a lot of high-profile African-American artists dealing with race right now, he will politely but firmly correct you: "Everyone's talking about race." But he's not doctrinaire about his project, or art making in general. "When someone I don't know asks me what I do, I often say, 'I make things that go on the wall,'" he says. In fact, Pendleton's gift is partly his ability to digest and transmit ideas that are already out there.

Pendleton first came to notice at Performa, the New York performance art biennial, in 2007. He delivered an impassioned soliloquy about politics and language accompanied by a live gospel choir, moving some to tears. He was 23 at the time. The next year, he embarked on a body of work called Black Dada, still the framework and source of his art to this day.

Black Dada began as a series of paintings and as an old-fashioned manifesto, in the form of a witty, 13-page epic poem, that references some of his touchstones, including the slain activist Malcolm X and the conceptual art icon Sol LeWitt. "Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past,"

he writes. Pendleton doesn't think he invented the conversation that he's a part of. "It is a continuum," he says, "but it doesn't only move forward; it moves backwards and sideways, too."

Though he works in many media, much of his visual work starts as collage, and he has a canny eye for juxtapositions that recalls one of his idols, Jasper Johns. "Already in his incredibly youthful career, he has managed to land on a graphic language that is unimpeachably his own," says Christopher Bedford, the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art. The museum tapped him for its board, making him among the youngest museum trustees around. "He bides his time, reaches a conclusion and then commands the room" is Bedford's summation of Pendleton's approach in meetings.

For the Emerson Collective commission, Pendleton designed a floor-to-ceiling panel for the main space at the headquarters in Palo Alto, California. Unveiled in January, the project is covered with pages from Malcolm X's famous 1964 "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech. On top of that, Pendleton placed 11 dense and layered works, whose words and letters collide and mix—somewhat mysteriously, inviting the viewer to engage and decipher them—punctuated with culturally resonant images like an African mask or a page from a monograph of the Dada movement. Powell Jobs, the widow of Apple's Steve Jobs, loves the way the brainy work energizes the workspace at Emerson: "Adam creates an environment to dream what's possible."

These days, Pendleton works almost exclusively in black-and-white, which might make the casual observer think that the choice is meant to evoke racial categories. "That's not how I arrived here," he says, now standing in his studio and looking down at images of collages on the floor, which will eventually turn into silkscreens. (The actual collage work he does in a separate room, away from his two assistants.) "I found that color was becoming a distraction."

Pendleton grew up in Richmond, Virginia. His mother was a schoolteacher who had a library with books by Adrienne Rich and Toni Morrison; his father was a contractor who played jazz on the side.

As a young teenager he spent hours in his basement, painting with cheap materials from Home Depot. "I was sort of always preoccupied with projects that I would create for myself, which is exactly what I do today, you know?" he says, laughing.

Being gay and black gave him a useful outsider's perspective. "When you're sort of off to the side, you supply yourself with something that long term is ultimately more productive," he says. (Pendleton is now married to a food entrepreneur, and they live in Brooklyn's Fort Greene.)

In 2002, he completed a two-year independent artist's study program in Pietrasanta, Italy, but he doesn't have a bachelor's degree or an M.F.A. as so many young art stars do today. "He's not an academically trained artist," says Laura Hoptman, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art who was an early champion of his work when she was at the New Museum. She thinks it's part of why he speaks to everyone: "The nonparochial nature of it is what makes his work so great."

Hoptman says Pendleton's "masterpiece" is the video *Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer* (2016-17), the same piece that was recently presented at the List Center. As he often does, Pendleton approached the project with radical simplicity: He sat down in a diner with Rainer, the pioneering dancer and choreographer, and just talked. "The chemistry they had as strangers, that was so moving," says Hoptman of the mind-meld that resulted despite the differences in age, gender and race.

Pendleton adds, "It was an unlikely encounter with an unlikely outcome that neither of us planned. We had a sincere interaction with each other on different levels, a strange brew that by luck, by chance, got captured." Luck helps, but *Portrait* owes its success to Pendleton's gift for harnessing such moments, and his cultivation of conditions that encourage them to thrive.

Collectors have taken notice. At Christie's New York auction last fall—in the same sale that became famous for selling a Leonardo da Vinci for an all-time-record price of \$450 million—a 2012 Pendleton piece, *Black Dada (K)*, got the prestigious first-lot position and sold for \$225,000, almost four times its high estimate.

Pendleton is conscious that he has a platform that was denied to black artists of previous generations who are only now getting their proper due, such as Alma Thomas and Jack Whitten. "They are people who continued to make work even when no one was looking," he says. "In my work, there's this attitude of 'take it or leave it,' but also 'take what you need,'" he adds. "I think it gets lost that a lot of what I actually do is look and listen, rather than scream and shout." ●



MAN OF LETTERS
Adam Pendleton
alongside *what they used*
to only look at (2017),
his installation at the
Emerson Collective
headquarters in Palo
Alto, California.