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How Adam Pendleton Is Pushing the Boundaries of What a Painter's Work Can Say and Do

By: Dodie Kazanjian | November 13, 2017



The Revival, 2007 Performance Photo: Courtesy of Joerg Lohse

Every so often, a young artist emerges on the scene with such force and originality that he (or she) seems to embody a new era. Robert Rauschenberg did that in the 1950s, blasting a way out of Abstract Expressionism and making room in his art for American popular culture in all its boisterous amplitude. A strong candidate for that role today is Adam Pendleton, a 33-year-old conceptual artist whose paintings and collages, murals, video portraits, live performances, lectures, and social activism have made him a rising star both here and abroad.

Kathy Halbreich, the Museum of Modern Art's associate director, who has just become head of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, gave Pendleton a MoMA residency in 2012. "Adam is relentlessly looking

forward by studying the whys and whats of the past," she says. As Pendleton puts it, "John Cage taught us that art can be whatever you want it to be. But for me, the question is not what art is, but what can art do?"

Pendleton's art has been doing quite a lot. His *Black Dada Reader* has recently been published—more than 350 pages of essays and texts that have inspired his thinking about blackness. Black Dada is clearly related to historical Dada, the brief, frenzied eruption of absurdity by European artists responding to the senseless carnage of World War I. Its primary focus, however, is a society that still oppresses and murders black people with impunity.

As he explains it, "Black Dada refers to Dada in an arguably illogical way. So much of Dada was about the absurdity of life, and there's something absurd about America today. I couldn't help but respond as an artist—and a citizen."

We're sitting in one of Pendleton's two studios in a building in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. He's of medium height, with clean-cut features and a warm, resonant baritone voice that often erupts into spontaneous laughter. The studio is immaculate, with well-ordered bookshelves, neat piles of books on tables, a Hay chair, and a pristine, pale-gray cement floor (no shoes allowed). This is where he thinks and reads—books on literature, modern and contemporary art, philosophy, poetry, music, film, dance, and social protest by a wide range of authors including W.E.B. Du Bois, Gertrude Stein, Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, and Amiri Baraka, whose 1964 poem "Black Dada Nihilismus" (written when he was still LeRoi Jones) is one of Pendleton's sacred texts.

Many of the large abstract paintings on the walls were done in his other (less pristine) studio down the hall. They teem with powerful shapes in action, clashing or melding together behind vertical lines that evoke prison bars. Here and there a capital letter intervenes—a *D*, an *A*—standing in for texts that inform and underlie his work. The paintings are talking to each other, and to the viewer, inviting us into an urgent conversation. Pendleton used color in his early work but later limited his palette to black and white, with all the infinite variations of tone and finishes that entails.

Their antecedents are Ad Reinhardt's all-black paintings in the 1960s, and Rauschenberg's early-1950s black paint-on-newsprint paintings, works in which, as Rauschenberg put it, there was "much to see but not much showing." Rauschenberg's blacks "left a permanent imprint on my mind early on," Pendleton says. "They made me think, What can I do with black paint?" In Pendleton's, there's much to see, and also much showing.

Pendleton paints slowly, producing ten to twelve paintings in a good year. He works in open-ended series, which continue and overlap in subtle ways. In the last year, he's added a new series called *Untitled (A Victim of American Democracy)*. He talks about one of these, made with sprayed and silk-screened ink, which is hanging on the wall behind us. "The series name refers to a speech that Malcolm X gave in 1964," he says. "The language is embedded within the painting, but it's not legible. When language breaks down, that's when we have a deeper engagement with it. For me, it makes the case that abstraction is a legitimate form of representation."

A few things to know about Adam Pendleton: Born in Richmond, Virginia; older brother, much younger sister. The passion for reading comes from his schoolteacher mother; for music, from his musician father, a contractor by day. Graduated from high school two years early; went straight to art school in Pietrasanta, Italy. Moved to a loft in New York City (Williamsburg) in 2002, age eighteen. ("I figured, OK, artists live in lofts, right?") First solo show, "Being Here," two years later at Wallspace in Manhattan, reviewed by Roberta Smith in the Times: "Mr. Pendleton asks, 'Is being here enough?' Not quite, but it is a good start."

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A few months later, learning that gallery owner Yvon Lambert had bought two of his paintings, he went to Lambert's gallery and said, "Hi, I'm Adam Pendleton, and you guys should show my work." They did, and Adam was on his way. He and his husband, Karsten Ch'ien (they married two years ago), divide their time between Brooklyn and Germantown, New York. They're both foodies—Ch'ien cofounded Yumami Food Company—who plan their travels around restaurants, including San Francisco at least once a year for Chez Panisse and Zuni Café.

Pendleton's breakthrough came with an immensely ambitious work called *The Revival*. RoseLee Goldberg, founder and director of the biennial performance series Performa, had heard him read his poems in front of his paintings at Yvon Lambert, and they "began speaking right then and there about a Performa commission," she tells me. *The Revival* premiered at Performa 07. Pendleton, drawing on his Southern roots, staged a nonreligious but highly emotional revival meeting, with himself as the preacher. A chorus of 30 gospel singers belted out jazzy hymns and secular songs, accompanied by Jason Moran on the piano. Moran and his wife, the gifted mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran, have been collaborating with Adam for more than a decade. "Adam sees so clearly," Alicia says. "I think he sees in music."

The quotations in Pendleton's *Revival* sermon ranged from Jesse Jackson's address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention to Larry Kramer's 2004 speech "The Tragedy of Today's Gays." "Adam's voice is irresistible," Goldberg says. "It can be a whisper or a cry, always modulated and sensual and musical. His full-blown gospel energy, which I don't think even he knew he was capable of, had the audience pretty worked up at the end." Pendleton was only 23 (he had told Goldberg he was five years older). The *Times* critic Holland Cotter wrote, "People around me were in tears, which felt like a right response."

It's a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and we're in Pendleton's orange Smart car, on our way to Rirkrit Tiravanija's opening at Gavin Brown's Harlem gallery. (My suggestion—he rarely interrupts his work to attend openings or social events.) I ask about the Black Lives Matter paintings he's been working on for the past few years. "Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman in 2012," he says. "For me, Black Lives Matter is a kind of poetic plea. I wanted to bring that short phrase outside the space of the news media and into my work, where it could be examined in a very different way—slowed down."

The paintings appeared in "New Work" in London in 2015, at the powerhouse Pace gallery (he joined Pace in 2012), and in the 2015 Venice Biennale. A Black Lives Matter mural was in his biggest museum show yet, "Becoming Imperceptible," which opened in New Orleans last year and traveled to Denver and Cleveland. He's working on a new painting series for a show in February at New York's Lever House.

But art can do more than "sit on its ass in a museum" (as Claes Oldenburg once said), and Pendleton is devoting a lot of energy right now to saving and preserving the three-room house in Tryon, North Carolina, where the great jazz-and-blues singer Nina Simone grew up. He heard about it from MoMA curator Laura Hoptman. "I didn't have to think for more than a minute about who to ask," Hoptman says. "I emailed him and he answered immediately."

Pendleton enlisted three other artists—Rashid Johnson, Ellen Gallagher, and Julie Mehretu. They pooled their funds and bought the house for \$95,000. Now they're raising money to renovate it, with the possibility that it might become an artists' retreat. "It was soon after the election," he says. "Nina Simone is so well known for her protest songs, like 'Mississippi Goddam.' To be a part of that in any way means something."

Halbreich adds, "He's trying to make history live again in a positive way, for a change. And for change, that's what Adam's work is all about. Imagine that!"