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Language, Gesture And Freedom: Adam Pendleton At Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum

With his latest exhibition "Some Wild Kind of Language", American artist Adam Pendleton transforms Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum into an immersive landscape of abstraction, language and blackness, continually pushing his painting practice into bold new territory.

By Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle, Contributor

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Adam Pendleton's Basis drawings in the exhibition Some Wild Kind of Language at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
Photo Peter Tijlhuis

Few artists working today have expanded the language of contemporary painting as radically as Adam Pendleton. Over the past two decades, the American artist has built an internationally acclaimed practice that moves seamlessly between

painting, drawing, video, performance and publishing, while challenging conventional ideas about abstraction, language and history. His work is intellectually rigorous yet visually magnetic, drawing viewers into layered compositions where words dissolve into gesture, black becomes a spatial force and every mark carries the possibility of multiple meanings. Rather than offering definitive answers, he invites us to linger in uncertainty, asking us to see abstraction not as distance from reality but as a way of understanding it more deeply.

That approach unfolds on an impressive scale in “Some Wild Kind of Language”, on view at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum until January 17, 2027, in what is Pendleton’s first museum exhibition in the Netherlands. Most strikingly, he has painted the walls surrounding the grand staircase black for the first time in the Stedelijk’s history, a bold gesture that reframes the architecture while echoing the black grounds that underpin many of his paintings. Eight monumental “Basis” drawings composed of gold ink on mat black paper—the largest drawings he has completed to date—populate the black cube, while across his “Black Dada”, “Days” and “We Are Not” series, he fuses text, drawing, paint, ink and silkscreen into multilayered abstractions. Across the exhibition, language fragments, geometric forms and gestural marks merge into expansive visual fields that reward slow looking and repeated encounters.

A short distance away, Pendleton’s solo show, “The Compositional Logic of We”, held at Eenwerk gallery until November 28, offers a complementary perspective. Featuring more intimate paintings and drawings, the presentation reveals the same conceptual concerns distilled into a smaller scale, creating a revealing dialog with the monumental works at the Stedelijk. Seen together, the two exhibitions reveal the remarkable breadth of a practice that has established Pendleton as one of the defining voices of his generation. Born in 1984 in Richmond, Virgin-



Installation view of the exhibition Adam Pendleton - Some Wild Kind of Language at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
Photo Peter Tijlhuis

ia, his influential concept of “Black Dada” has reshaped conversations around art, identity and history, and his work now features in many of the world’s leading museum collections, including New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum and Whitney Museum of American Art, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Tate London and the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich.

“Black Dada gives me permission to break rules,” says Pendleton. “Don’t tell me how a painting should be made, or the limits of abstraction or language. Don’t tell me what a Black artist should or should not do, or the look and feel of Blackness. Black Dada is precise, generatively capacious and unfolds in real time.” During our conversation in Amsterdam, the artist reflected on transforming the Stedelijk’s historic galleries, the role of black as a generator of space, the visual power of language, the artists who continue to shape his thinking and why abstraction remains, for him, one of the most generous and liberating ways of imagining the world.

Your paintings begin with a black ground. What does black make possible that no other color can?

I started using black grounds maybe about a decade ago, and now I realize how critically important it is to me. I think about the white surface as something that things sit on top of, whereas the black ground is something that creates space. The gestures on top of it become part of that space. The experience of looking at my work becomes a little bit different from looking at a painting that begins on a white ground. You do wonder, what is this blackness? It creates this kind of sense of expansive space that you can enter. These are paintings you can walk into.

Your latest exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum is titled “Some Wild Kind of Language”. What does being wild mean to you, and what do you hope visitors take away from it?

It’s an invitation to encourage others to be free and to be wild, to be wild about their expectations around language, around painting, around abstraction, to put aside the baggage that one might arrive with and to be willing to be wild, which is to say willing to be open. Ultimately, there’s this suggestion in these works, including also the “Basis” drawings, which have these fragments of letters or language that give structure and meaning culturally. The “W” and the “E” mean “we” because that’s the meaning we have inscribed to them. But really, it’s just gesture, just like everything else that visually occupies the space of the painting. Some of the questions that I ask are: How shall we choose to engage? How shall we choose to speak to each other? I suggest that we should choose to be wild, which is a way of saying that we shall choose to be free in relationship to each other and all the possibilities that we might ultimately imagine together.

You have also painted the walls around the Stedelijk Museum’s grand staircase black. How does this intervention change the experience of your exhibition?



Adam Pendleton, Untitled (We Are Not), 2026, silkscreen ink and black gesso on canvas
Photo Peter Tijlhuis

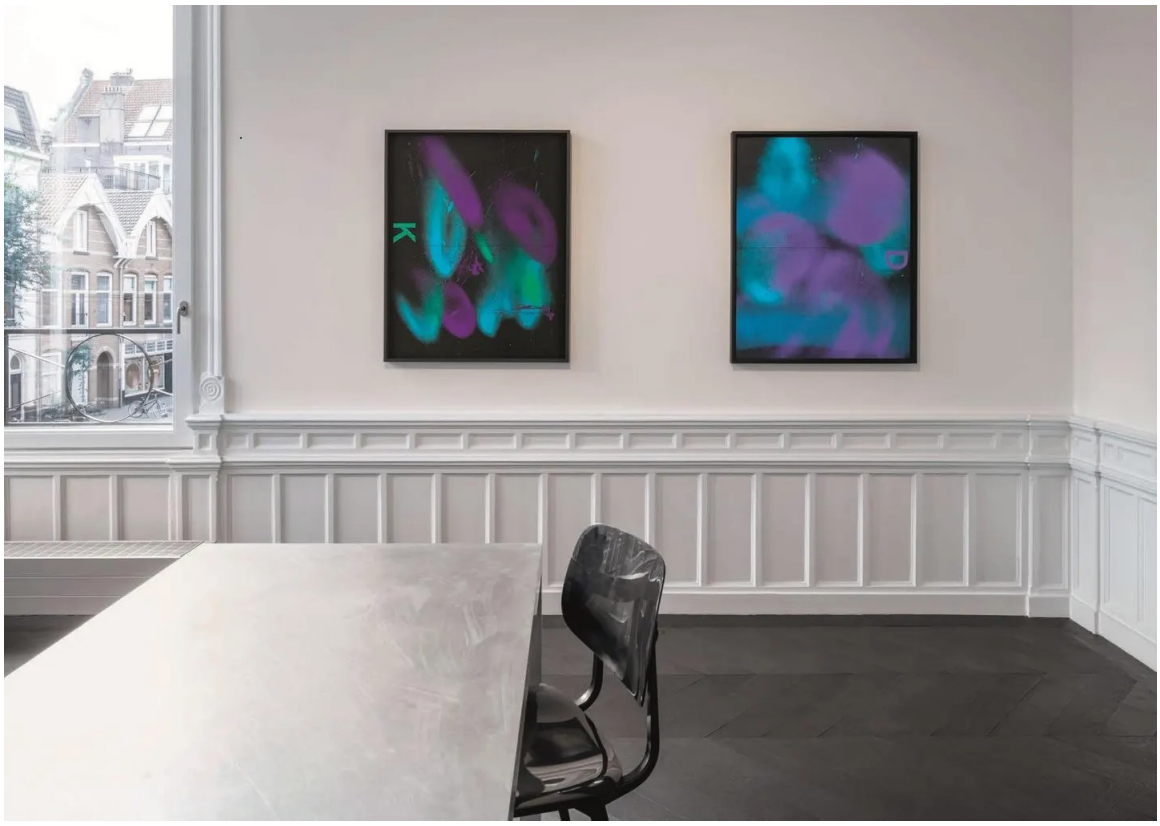
I wanted to transform the space on my own terms. By painting the walls black, I was not only transforming the space, but I was also creating space for the “Basis” drawings and the temporal and gestural realities that occupy those works. I was amazed at how much it transformed the space. It made the space feel larger and suggested that the walls were not neutral, not so much because of the color, but because literally something had changed. I think it has been 90 years since those walls have been anything other than white. It changes your sense of expectations.

Some of the paintings at the Stedelijk are composed of two canvases. Why are these decisions about scale, format and composition important to your work?

I want to encourage people to think about how paintings are made, how they are constructed realities. The “Black Dada” paintings, the ones that are diptychs, where they’re two joined panels, prompt that question: “Why?” Clearly, it’s not because the painting could only be made this big if I joined the panels, as I have ones that are much bigger that are not. You start to think about how these things are made, and all the decisions about scale, format, surface and edge. I want you to consider that there are decisions behind everything you’re looking at.

Where does painting start for you? Does it start with the color, the feeling or the thought?

It starts in my mind’s eye. I have a kind of image or sense of what might be possible—which is actually occurring because you can’t turn off your brain, right? So imagine that instead of it just being thoughts like “he didn’t call me back” or “I have to go to the grocery store”, imagine that a part of those thoughts were images. That’s what it’s like for me.



Adam Pendleton, Black Dada Drawing (K) and Black Dada Drawing (D), 2026, silkscreen ink on paper in artist’s frame, 38 × 30 ⅜ inches, on display in The Compositional Logic of We exhibition at Eenwerk gallery in Amsterdam
Photo courtesy of Eenwerk

Which artists are you inspired by?

It changes all the time. Looking back over the long arc, the first artists I came across were by happenstance, through the museum in my hometown. There was a wide range of people, from Sol LeWitt to Robert Morris, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly. Those were maybe the first figures I saw because they were in the collection of my hometown museum. As an artist, I’m always going to galleries and museums and having a wide range of responses and reactions. One work I can’t get out of my mind currently is “Cathedra” by Barnett Newman. One of the things that’s so beautiful about “Cathedra” is that it really asks you to think about the poetics of process. It’s fascinating to think about how he created that blue surface. We know it’s made of many different layers of blue that vary in opacity and thickness, but what I find so beautiful, in relationship to my own work, is that the blue almost looks as though it was sprayed. You can

almost feel the performance of his body, whether with a brush, his hand or some other tool. I always think about what tools painters use to get the paint onto the canvas. I look at that painting and imagine not only how he created that blue, but how he put it on there. True or not, I imagine this aerosol pigment layered meticulously—or perhaps not—to create this expansive field of possibility.

At the end of the day, what role do you feel the artist plays in society?

To live rigorously. We can’t be casual about our endeavors. I don’t want to be self-serious, but I am serious about what I do because if I am creating these artifacts that record and represent our humanistic potential, there’s something very serious about that endeavor, that in some way and across time, they might represent who and what we are and also what we can do. I have to be rigorous about that. I have to have a kind of critical disposition and relationship to the ideas and things that I put into the world.