Adam Pendleton Examines the Multiplicity of Blackness

The artist's largest solo exhibition to date explores blackness as a color, an idea, an identity, a method, and a political movement.

Diana Sette

Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible, installation view (photo by Jerry Birchfield, courtesy MOCA Cleveland)

CLEVELAND — Adam Pendleton's *Becoming Imperceptible* at Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Cleveland offers a refreshing juxtaposition of often-segregated art histories and their cultural counterparts, presenting a multiplicity of perspectives that provide insights into our interconnectedness and future possibilities. Pendleton describes his work as Black Dada, a title he borrowed from the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus" by Amiri Baraka (who was known as LeRoi Jones at the time of its publication). In his Black Dada Manifesto, Pendleton describes the movement as "a way to talk about the future while talking about the past." Particularly in *Becoming Imperceptible*, Pendleton's work examines what blackness is, how it relates to our humanity, and how our understanding of a history of blackness impacts our understanding of the present and, in turn, our collective capacity for change.

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Becoming Imperceptible was organized by the Contemporary Art Center New Orleans and traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver before coming to Cleveland. The artist's fragmented displays recontextualize European, African, and American aesthetic and cultural movements, from Minimalism and Dada to Black Lives Matter, specifically looking at blackness as a material to be reshaped and explored, a multiplicity that is simultaneously a color, an idea, an identity, a method, and a political movement.

Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible, installation view (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Pendleton's fragmentation of black images reflects blackness as incomplete, in motion, and the artist works to disrupt space that presents a logic of identity related to blackness. For example, the *Black Dada* series of silkscreens on canvas appropriate and fragment Sol LeWitt's "Incomplete Open Cubes" onto segmented, striped black canvases and evoke "black" through the isolated letters "B," "A," and "K." The sheen of the deep, dark black reflects light in a way that makes the letters and color gradients barely discernable, depending upon your viewing perspective.

The multiplicity of blackness as both color and concept is most strongly presented by the contrast between the three Black Dada works hanging on a stark white wall, and the

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lone Black Dada painting hanging elsewhere, with "Black Lives Matter #3 (wall work)" (2015) in the background. These contrasting backgrounds present wildly different experiences of blackness, with one sticking out dramatically and the other camouflaged nearly to the point of invisibility, making the viewer reconsider how they understand blackness in context. The words "Black Lives Matter" as a background slow down potential reactions to the text, forcing a reconsideration of its meaning in relation to the other images and language interacting with it.

This multiplicity in representation is reified in "My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard" (2011–14), in which the former Black Panther leader's straightforward narrative becomes a layered and complex history through a three-channel video presenting simultaneous perspectives. "Untitled (1958)" (2016) is a détournement of the representation of the Civil Rights movement. In the center walks Martin Luther King Jr. accompanied by two other Civil Rights leaders, but the iconic photograph is broken down into nine parts, with illegible words written over the image. The fragmented work suggests that the narrative is incomplete, and the piece's reflective Mylar background invites self-recognition, self-reflection, and a multiplicity of perspectives.

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Adam Pendleton, "My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard" (2011–14), 3-channel black-and-white video with sound, 9 minutes 19 seconds (image courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery)

The text from which Pendleton drew the show's name defines "becoming imperceptible" as "the event for which there is no immediate representation." Pendleton chooses to break down and fragment representations of blackness, because for him, becoming imperceptible where there is no immediate representation creates the potential for arriving at a totally new understanding. What might be possible if we consider blackness in a new way?

The black and white single-channel film *Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer* is the most powerful piece in the show. It documents an exchange, both unscripted and scripted, between Rainer and Pendleton during a meeting at the Ridgeway Diner in NYC's Chelsea neighborhood. One of the most moving parts of the film is when Rainer reads a text Pendleton prepared for her that mixes words from Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, antiwar poet Ron Silliman, and Rainer's own published works. Laid over fragmented images of Pendleton and Rainer sitting in the classic '50s diner and Rainer's 1966 minimalist dance "Trio A" is the Silver Harps's gospel song "I Am Saved" and Rainer & Pendleton's voices. The film travels through multiple periods of time and encourages deep contemplation of the past, present, and potential future of civil rights in the US. Listening to Rainer's steady, slow reading, particularly of Taylor's description of police killings of John Crawford, Michael Brown, Tanesha Anderson, and Tamir Rice, while watching her, a white woman, dancing

in black, arms behind her back, rolling on the floor — it creates an alienated and moving experience of the brutality and trauma being plainly described. Rainer concludes by reading her own words: "I remember the breathlessness of the lifting section … I remember … you grinning at the pleasure we had." Viewing the film in Cleveland, the site of several of the police killings described, amplifies the work's urgency and potency, creating a simultaneously overwhelming and transcendental experience.

Adam Pendleton, "Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer" (2017), still image, single-channel black-and-white video, sound, 13 minutes 51 seconds (courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery)

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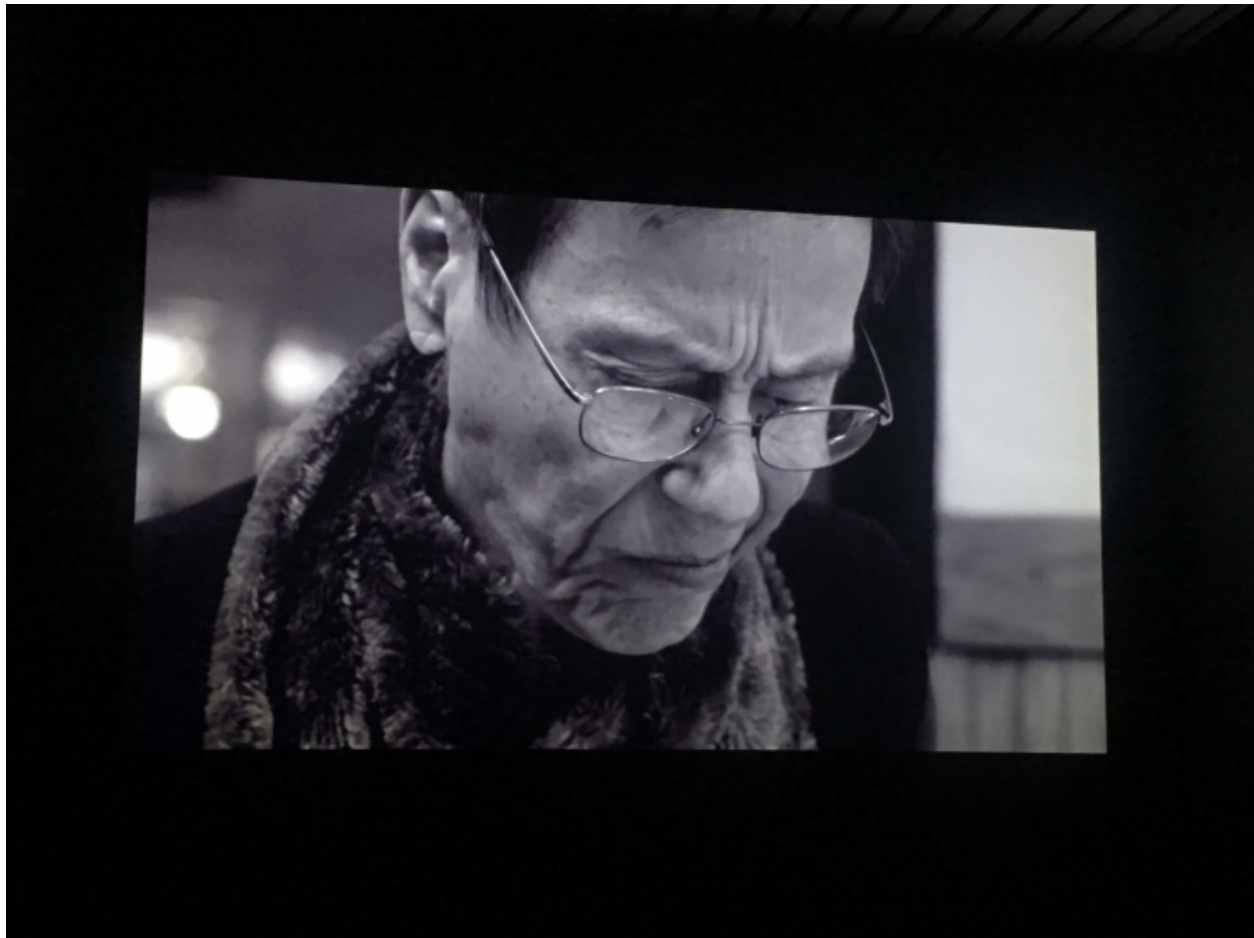
Adam Pendleton, "Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer" (2017), still image, single-channel black-and-white video, sound, 13 minutes 51 seconds (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The film breaks down cohesive narratives of segregated histories and reveals them in connection with one another. The tenderness of Pendleton and Rainer engaging in an exercise called "arm drop" — where they hold each other's arms, drop them, and grab them again in different positions — visually reinforces the interconnectedness, tenderness, and generosity required to move forward and create something new. The film ends powerfully and with reverence as the gospel song drops out and Rainer continues moving deliberately, in silence.

In Deleuze and Gauttari's words, "the Becoming-Imperceptible is an eruption of desire for the future which reshapes the present … flooding the present by possible futures." James Baldwin reminds us that "if [history] were in the past, it would not matter … History is the present." Pendleton's works present the profound ambiguity of the present by creating revised histories, encouraging us to devise new vocabularies that speak to and question the present with an understanding of interconnectedness and an encouragement for inquiry.

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