

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

My San Antonio
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Exhibit uses language as a visual medium

By Steve Bennett



New York artist Adam Pendleton created these black ceramic towers for his Artpace installation "i smashed my sickening face," part of the 12.1 International Artists-in-Residence exhibition. Photo: Photo
By Todd Johnson / SA

2021 S WABASH AVE
CHICAGO IL 60616
+1 (312) 226 2223

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James Sham works in the field of what he calls “social interrogation,” which is “marinated” in “lite to medium absurdity.”

In order to own one of his 2005 “Painting Trades” works, for instance, a viewer had to complete a task and document it. “Price: Run your fingers through the hair of 50 people wearing business suits.” The artist would trade the painting for the documentation. Fair deal?

For “Untitled” (yes, um), his multimedia installation at Artpace as part of the 12.1 International Artist in Residence exhibition, the Houston-based artist continues to explore his interest in language, communication and personal relationships — from a slightly askew stance.

Sham, a young artist who works primarily in video, photography and sculpture, recruited members of the San Antonio deaf community for videos with topics he assigned. For instance, two men sign the old “Who's on first?” routine. The catch? Sham places bulky objects on their arms and wrists, or ties a group of participants together in another work, making it difficult for them to “talk,” feeding the artist's ongoing fascination with “mistranslation.” Sham also used eye-tracking technology, which appears onscreen as colored smudges, in the video works. He seems to be making a pretty clear statement on our inability to understand each other, even as our means of communication grow more sophisticated.

“I've always been interested in language,” Sham says, “and sign language distills language to its visual concepts.”

In another work, very clever, Sham updates the old drinking-glass-as-eavesdropping-device. He taped audio interviews with politicians and civic leaders — City Councilman Diego Bernal, U.S. Rep. Charlie Gonzalez, state Rep. Mike Villarreal — tossing them softballs about dreams and goals, then incorporating their responses into the work. He asked the participants to lend beverage containers, and they did — from superhero cups to ice-tea tumblers — then attached these to the wall at head height. A listener can hear the conversations by putting his or her ear to the bottom of the glass. Of course, what that listener overhears is fairly banal.

Language lies at the heart of New York Adam Pendleton's installation as well.

Titled “i smashed my sickening face,” it features three totem-like pillars composed of black bucket-shaped ceramic forms stacked bottom to top, echoing the zigs and zags of Brancusi's “Endless Column.”

The title phrase comes from Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, who was detained and persecuted by the Pinochet regime. Pendleton says he was “intrigued by the fact that (Zurita's) response to that was poetry, was language.”

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The new pieces conceptualized during the three-month residency here are a “logical development,” says the artist, of the black ceramic cube works he has been working on since 2007; Pendleton just wanted to give that body of work a “formal conceptual swerve, if you will.”

Working from the premise that “an object is an idea,” Pendleton explores the notion of exchanging information, of “an illogical alphabet as a way of creating structure and meaning.”

“I’m interested in how an abstract form can function as a linguistic device,” he says. “I’m asking the question, ‘When does something take on meaning?’”

In the upstairs Artpace gallery, Berlin conceptual artist Florian Slotawa, known for deconstructing or recontextualizing objects and devices (such as a museum’s A/C system for one show), has been busy with potted plants.

Using objects such as plastic tables and rolling carts found around the complex, as well as other items brought from his apartment at home, Slotawa has created “Local Plants” — with references to Polish sculptor Katarzyna Kobro and American minimalist Donald Judd.

Featuring several individual sculptural components working as a whole — stacked objects topped by popular potted products from a Texas nursery — the installation is in line with the artist’s “invasive” philosophy, in which he takes objects from their natural settings and “invades” another space.

“On one hand, they are sculptures; on the other, they are functional objects,” he says. “I like to bring objects from the art world into everyday life, and vice versa. I like to cross that boundary.”

sbennett@express-news.net

The 12.1 International Artists-in-Residence exhibition can be viewed through May 20 at Artpace, 445 N. Main Ave., 210-212-4900.

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