

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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In Adam Pendleton show at CAC, thickets of poetry, politics, art and history

Here is a list — by no means exhaustive — of things you might want to brush up on before you see Adam Pendleton’s “Becoming Imperceptible” at the Contemporary Arts Center: Dada art, post-colonial African nationalism, the poetry of **Amiri Baraka**, the art of Sol LeWitt, the films of Jean-Luc Godard, the Black Panther movement, the **Black Lives Matter** movement, post-structuralist philosophy, and **Morse code**.

Otherwise, you may find yourself very confused.

A native of Virginia who divides his time between New York City and upstate New York, Pendleton is a rising star in the art world. His work is included in the permanent collections of such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art and the Art Institute of Chicago.

The show, which is the first to be organized at the CAC by its new visual arts curator Andrea Andersson, is described as Pendleton’s largest public exhibition to date.

While Pendleton works in several different media and formats, including painting and video, collage in its various forms is the dominant presence in the CAC show, providing a sort of throughline linking the different and seemingly cryptic works on display.

The exhibition eschews explanatory labels in favor of a densely worded brochure at its entrance, which provides titles and explanations for each work, and you shouldn’t miss picking one up if you hope to make any sense of the show.

Pendleton combines texts and images from a wide range of historical and cultural sources to create a body of work that creates dialogues between European, African and American artistic practices. As such, his work carries an impressive amount of intellectual heft.

Some of that work is striking.

Large expanses of wall on the first floor are covered in overlapping fragments of graffiti to powerful effect, while another wall-sized painting on the second floor selectively edits all the proper nouns from a poem by Amiri Baraka to create a richly associative list of names and places.

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But while much of Pendleton's work deals with highly charged subjects such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the overall mood of "Becoming Imperceptible" is abstracted, detached and cerebral — often to a fault. The experience often feels less like one of looking and feeling than being lectured to. And for all of their thick layers of allusion and references, many of the objects simply aren't that visually engaging.

That said, don't let the frustration of unpacking some of the more opaque examples of Pendleton's work keep you from taking the elevator to the third floor of the CAC, which contains the strongest work in the show.

"My Education" is a short video piece on three screens featuring an interview with David Hilliard, a founding member of the Black Panther party who takes Pendleton and his viewers on what he describes as a "Black Panther history tour" of Oakland, California.

In the video, Hilliard points out locations including the first offices of the Black Panthers and the exact spot on the sidewalk where their leader, Huey Newton, was murdered in 1989 (along with bullet holes from the incident that may or may not still be visible on a house nearby). In its vivid specificity, the piece has a depth and vibrancy that the rest of "Becoming Imperceptible" often lacks.

Back on the first floor, a resource center in the CAC's oval gallery invites viewers to consult books from Pendleton's library and follow his artistic practice by making "erasure poems" and collages. But it's crammed in an awkward space that doesn't encourage lingering or substantive engagement with the many layers of Pendleton's source material.

Which is too bad, since much of Pendleton's work depends on that kind of sustained attention in order to understand and appreciate it fully. In the meantime, though, don't forget to pick up one of those brochures.

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