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Adam Pendleton: The Making of an Art-World Star

Virginia-born Adam Pendleton's race-infused take on the 20th-century avant-garde, 'Black Dada,' is conquering the art world one major venue at a time. London's Pace



Adam Pendleton *PHOTO: PETER ROSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Adam Pendleton is a textbook case in how to take off—big time—in the art world. Global gallery? Celebrity and hedge-fund collectors? Affiliations with major museums? Check, check, check.

There is a wait list for Mr. Pendleton's work at Manhattan's Pace Gallery, where the 31-year-old New Yorker is one of the gallery's youngest artists. Collectors of his pieces, which the gallery prices from \$25,000 to \$150,000, include Leonardo DiCaprio, Venus Williams and Steven A.

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Cohen, according to a person who works closely with the artist. Trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New Museum and the Guggenheim in New York all are collectors of Mr. Pendleton's work, according to his gallery, and his works are in the permanent collections of institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

He is booked with exhibitions through 2018. A silk screen by Mr. Pendleton, "Black Dada (A/D)," marked a record for the artist at auction when it sold at Sotheby's in London earlier this year for \$104,700, more than four times its high estimate. This week, a collection of new work went on display at Pace's London location, and he will make a major contribution to the Belgian pavilion at next month's Venice Biennale.

Mr. Pendleton's conceptual artworks include silk screens on canvas, with elements such as blown-up photographs, repurposed text and block letters. Most pieces start with grainy, black-and-white photocopies. "This," he said, slapping a hand on his laser copier during a recent visit, "is the queen of the studio."

Much of his art is underpinned by an idea he calls Black Dada, which fuses race with the early 20th century avant-garde, including Dadaism. His book dedicated to that concept, "Black Dada Reader," will be published this spring.

"He took the project of his life—of being an artist—very, very seriously from a very young age," said Pace CEO Marc Glimcher. Referring to the artist's work on his book, which includes historical and contemporary writing and original essays, he continued: "If you spend 10 years working on the 'Black Dada Reader' even more intensely than your own paintings, which are really intense, you get someone like Adam Pendleton."

Mr. Pendleton also has snagged a residency at MoMA. For the residency—offered only twice before, to artists who had existing relationships with the museum—he is creating a work based on the institution's archive of *Avalanche*, an artist-centric magazine from the 1970s. As another part of the residency, he will travel to sites of racially charged violence such as Ferguson, Mo., where unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was fatally shot by a white police officer last year.

"What these projects share is a question about authorship and a question about who gets to write history," said MoMA associate director Kathy Halbreich. Of Mr. Pendleton's plans to visit cities marked by recent conflict,



'Independance (Harvest: 3,000 Years),' 2014-2015 *ADAM PENDLETON/PACE GALLERY, NY AND LONDON*

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she said: “How do you go to Ferguson as an artist? And how do you not go as a voyeur? I think this is all part of the art.” Mr. Pendleton grew up painting in the basement of his family’s house in Richmond, Va., studying art by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and whomever else he could find on the shelves at the local bookstore. His father ran a construction company and played guitar. His mother, a teacher, loved books. By age 14, he was reading works from her collection with titles as sophisticated as “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”

While attending the private Collegiate School in Richmond, he traveled alone and with his father to galleries and museums in New York. “It was an encounter with something extraordinary,” he said of those first forays into the art world.

In 2000, he studied in an international art program in northern Italy. While other students carved elegant Madonnas from their marble blocks, he hacked clumsily at his slab. “The teacher was like, ‘What is this?’ ” he recalled. His response, “A building,” didn’t convince his instructor of his technical skills.

Undaunted, he kept painting when he returned home, sending slides of his works to New York galleries and following up with phone calls. One dealer, who was also an assistant to artist Sol LeWitt, put Mr. Pendleton in a group show. Mr. LeWitt saw one of Mr. Pendleton’s works on a visit to the gallery. He was impressed, and traded one of his gouaches for a painting by the 18-year-old unknown. Today, some of Mr. Pendleton’s best-known works reference imagery from a conceptual project by Mr. LeWitt known as incomplete open cubes.

Mr. Pendleton sounds matter-of-fact about the chance encounter with a famous artist whose early praise helped propel his career. “That is what a life in art is,” he said, “a series of perpetually unexplained events.”

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