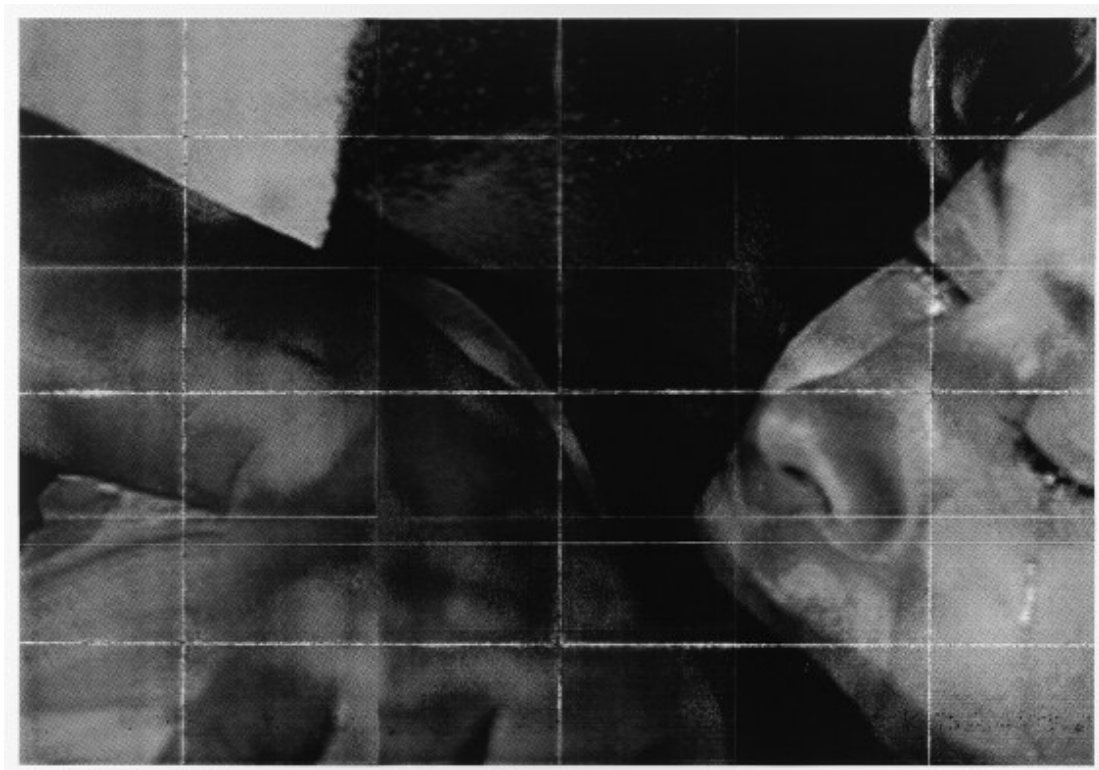


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Adam Pendleton: A Mirror into the Present



Have you ever looked at a piece of art and just stopped in your tracks, utterly confused? Well, for certain artists, this is a completely appropriate issue. Adam

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Pendleton's conceptual art aims to make you ask questions, rather than draw conclusions. Perhaps this is why Artspace, a digital market place for fine art and design, refers to him as "a thinking man's artist." Regardless of titles, Pendleton has gained much attention from art critics worldwide for his puzzling, yet bold artwork.

Growing up in Virginia, Pendleton's early experiences with art came from reading poetry that his mother kept around the house. This poetic influence seems highly appropriate, as his work often deals with the connection between language and visual art. According M.H. Miller, a gallerist and a writer: "[Pendleton's] interest in language...stems from reading his mother's books as a child—writers like Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde—as well as admiring the work of other text-based painters like Liam Gillick, Roni Horn and Terry Winters." Additionally, Pendleton often cites poets Gertrude Stein and Hugo Ball when discussing his interest in linguistic experimentation.

Although Pendleton will freely discuss his artistic influences, he seems to avoid the question of biographical information. In an interview with Highlights journalist Gillian Seed, Pendleton asserts that "very little of [his] work has any kind of autobiographical subtext." He then goes on to say: "For minority artists, I've always felt, our work tends to be marginalized through biographical interpretations of intention." Thus, Pendleton enjoys maintaining his enigmatic status, desiring for his art to be judged solely by content and not biography.



Despite his resistance, we can make a few assumptions of how Pendleton's background colors his artwork. Many of the photographs that Pendleton manipulates

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with his silkscreen paintings were taken from both the American Civil Rights Movement and the 1950s African Freedom Movement. The artist is identified as an African American from the South more than likely impacts his interest in these cultural movements. Furthermore, the African American gospel tradition shines through in his performance piece “Revival.” However, I do not want to box Pendleton into the category of a “Black artist” because his work is by no means exclusively racial.

Instead, his artistic philosophy, a concept that he names the “Black Dada,” is a hybrid shaped by multiple artistic movements. Critics will often cite Black nationalist Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Dada Nihilismus” as a source of influence for Pendleton’s art. Hence, some component of his work concerns the empowerment of the Black race. Secondly, the concept of the Dada resonates within his work. The Dada was an avant-garde movement during World War I that focused upon irrationality and nonsense. The visual arts, poetry, critical art theory and literature of that era were all reflective of the Dada movement. Dada began as a response to the War, for many believed that the cultural norms of the ruling class led to this violence. But, we cannot simply rely on literary allusions to explain the concept of the “Black Dada,” for Pendleton does not simply mimic these artistic styles – he has made a new one.



Much of Pendleton’s interviews are spent hashing over what exactly “Black Dada” means to him. In response, he writes, “Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It is our present moment. The Black Dada must use irrational language. The Black Dada

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must exploit the logic of identity.” Pendleton’s art strives for a reinvention of the past by combining different images and language from various time frames into one piece of art. In an interview with Museum of Modern Art Associate Curator Jenny Schlenzka, Pendleton, discusses his main artistic challenge as “a question of how to make things new.” He enjoys combining unrelated works of the past into one, fluid piece. He goes on to explain how “using existing material and putting it in relationship to something that it’s not normally in relationship to is a way to really shift what [he] would call...the geometry of attention...you’re sort of looking at things from multiple viewpoints and not just in a linear fashion.” Although we may be confused by such



pairings of unrelated ideas, the artist assures us that responding to his art with questions is okay and actually preferred. Ideally, when looking at Pendleton’s art, we are ignoring our preconceived notions of these images and languages and allowing ourselves to reconsider them within the present moment. This type of reinvention is highly characteristic of his earlier works, a performance piece entitled “Revival” and his on-going work the “Black Dada Paintings.”

In 2007, Pendleton debuted his performance piece “Revival” for the Performa Biennial 07 at Stephan Weiss studio in Greenwich Village, New York City. While a choir sang a traditional Southern gospel song, Pendleton delivered a rather unorthodox “sermon.” Reciting lines of poetry from various writers, along with a speech by Gay Rights Activist Larry Kramer.

This spiritual atmosphere juxtaposed with the secular content of Pendleton’s words created a dynamic, yet puzzling performance. The overlap of language between the choir’s call and response and Pendleton’s interrupting speech results in this sort of cathartic chaos – ah-hah! the “Black Dada.” The lack of logic and identity that characterizes this piece is what makes it so striking. Moreover, the combination of unrelated ideas (gospel, modern poetry, gay rights) is highly characteristic of the “Black Dada” principle.

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“Revival” established Pendleton’s artistic style as modern and abstract; he continued to harvest this sense of style with his “Black Dada Paintings.” The paintings utilize several artistic media, beginning with a xerox copy of a black and white photograph. These photographs contain fragmented images of minimalist Sol LeWitt’s cubic sculptures. Once the copy has been made, Pendleton uses silkscreen printing to insert random letters from the words “Black Dada” onto the xerox copy.

Undoubtedly, the “Black Dada Paintings” reaffirm this artistic philosophy upon which Pendleton’s career thrives. Simultaneously referencing 1960s minimalism and 1960s Black nationalist poetry, the paintings illustrate how the political and poetic can thrive in one single space. In his interview with Highlights writer Gillian Seed, Pendleton explains his emphasis of cohesion: “I work hard to make sure things are, and remain, fluid; that both (text and image) are on the same plane if not literally, then at the least theoretically.” Furthermore, by placing these eclectic fragments of image and text together onto one canvas, Pendleton gives a new, modern meaning to images and language of the past. His ability to relate such contrasted ideas into one framework has distinguished him among other artists and given him great praise via the global art community.

After receiving his formal education at the Artspace Independent Study Program in Pietrasanta Italy (2000-2002), Pendleton featured his work in several galleries throughout Virginia and New York. “Revival,” however, is what turned him into a sort of overnight success. Moving to New York City in 2008, Pendleton soon gained the support of his mentor Sol LeWitt, which helped him to further his career both in New York and internationally. He has become a favorite at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. After adding his “Black Dada Paintings” to the MoMa collection, the museum featured his 2010 series My Education: A Portrait of David Hillard as a solo exhibition and “Abolition of Alienated Labor” in the Greater New York exhibition. In 2012, Pendleton’s series “Black Dada Paintings” and “System of Display” were shown in his I’ll Be Your exhibition at the Pace Gallery in London.

Pendleton’s collections, though changing in medium (video, collage, painting, performance), maintain this disruptive, yet universal nature. The concept of “Black Dada” remains a great source of influence throughout his art. Thom Donovan describes this recurring use of the “Black Dada” principle as Pendleton’s “commitment to process.” His later pieces contain photographs and video from the American Civil Rights Movement, 1950s African Freedom Movement, French New Wave period and several others. Combining scenes of the alienated and oppressed with visuals from varied artistic movements, Pendleton produces a multi-layered, fragmented narrative that is truly reflective of modern life.

-Caitlin Eldred

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