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Adam Pendleton Holds Our Attention

The artist discusses his work routine, selling paintings as a teenager and the first piece that made him cry.

By Nicole Acheampong
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The artist Adam Pendleton in his studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.

Nostalgia, says the artist Adam Pendleton, “isn’t really my vibe.” We’re sitting across from each other at his studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, neither of us wearing shoes — a

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condition for entry. His assistants pad around softly. The space is pristine and discreet. The only exception is the room in the back where Pendleton, 40, paints; there, inks have drizzled onto strips of rosin paper covering the floor, and the counters are crowded with bottles of spray paint and exhibition maquettes. Even still, the shelves are neatly labeled: “brushes large,” “brushes small.” Perhaps Pendleton’s reluctance to look sentimentally at the past isn’t all that surprising; he seems to favor a stripped-down view in both his practice and his surroundings.



“Before I begin working, I like to set the stage by having everything in its place,” the artist says. Credit...Eric Chakeen

He calls his artistic philosophy Black Dada, a term that melds his interest in the avant-garde with his ongoing theories of Blackness. It’s also the name of one of his longest running and best-known bodies of work; begun in 2008, it features abstract paintings and drawings, mostly in black monochrome, depicting letters from the titular phrase and strokes of ink and gesso. The project “does not give me a clear sense of purpose per se, because it’s not about clarity, but it does give me a direction,” he says — a structure through which he can think about why he paints the things he does. In “An Abstraction,” his current solo exhibition of 25 new drawings and paintings at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, the “Black Dada” pieces on view there are a departure from previous iterations, incorporating vivid blues and reds, a crisp green and a yolky yellow.

“I think what emerges in [the show’s] paintings is the feeling of a visual vocabulary,” he says. “Working with it — but also working to abandon it. Which is to say, using it, but

always trying to find something new.” That balance between engagement and abandonment in favor of the new aligns with his resistance to nostalgia: Look back, but stay detached. When he put together a manifesto for Black Dada in 2008, he wrote, “History is in fact an incomplete cube shirking linearity.”



“I’m trying to incorporate as many kinds of marks as possible,” Pendleton says of his artworks. He uses ink, watercolor and spray paints, among other materials. Credit...Eric Chakeen

The word “shirking” comes to mind at certain points in our conversation; Pendleton is warmly, playfully evasive. He won’t tell me much about the first artwork he made as a teen. But he does tell me that his mother, a former schoolteacher, played him Miles Davis back then. These days, he’ll still listen to “In a Silent Way,” Davis’s 1969 album — but only every so often. Born in Richmond, Va., he left home young. First at 16 to study art in the medieval Italian town of Pietrasanta. And then again at around 18, when he moved to New York, soon making a name for himself with his work “The Revival,” presented at the 2007 Performa biennial.

In that approximately hourlong performance, Pendleton dips into the role of a preacher, whooping freely about the love of the Lord and sermonizing on the joys of gay life with the backing of a 30-person gospel choir — a far cry from the restrained, nonnarrative pieces he’s known for now. Yet even then, the artist switched between registers, at points reciting lines of experimental poetry. “The overall tone of the piece was hard to

read. Mr. Pendleton clearly meant to keep reactions off balance, hold easy sentimentality at bay,” the critic Holland Cotter [wrote in his review of the biennial](#). Pendleton’s new works at Pace hold visitors at a distance, too. They’re set off by large black walls that were built for the site. You’re not allowed to touch them, and they jut out at irregular angles, interrupting the flow of movement. Pendleton talks about wanting to slow things down with his art. He’s aiming for poetry, which he defines as “that which is elusive and overwhelming. Meaning you can’t quite put your finger on it. But it sustains attention. And creates the conditions for and of engagement.”



Exhibition maquettes in Pendleton’s work space. Along the wall hang what he calls “initial impressions on paper — the beginning of the painting process.”Credit...Eric Chakeen

Though the artist is ambivalent about recounting his adolescent years, those early experiences seem to be at the heart of how he wants time to work in his pieces now. Back when he was in Pietrasanta, he’d take short trips to Florence, submerging himself in “a flood of tourists and people, old sculptures and paintings,” he says. “I just remember time feeling sort of twisted.” Encountering centuries-old artworks, registering how long they’ve sustained the attention of so many people, staggered his mind. Telling me about it now, Pendleton seems awed all over again, transported by memory despite himself.

Below, he answers T’s [Artist’s Questionnaire](#).

What's your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule?

I try to sleep a minimum of six hours. Seven is the sweet spot. And I like getting up earlyish, around 5:45 or 6 a.m. My mind is going for sure [by then]. And then I'm usually getting out of bed to jot down a thought.

My days change a lot. I remember an artist who shall remain nameless said, "You don't wait for inspiration — you just work." And that's been really important and sustaining. The best days are the clear [ones] where there's really nothing on your calendar and you can work [the whole time]. I really like Sundays and Mondays. I like the quietness of Sunday. And then on Mondays, you can tackle things, address things and push [them] along.



Drawings from the artist's ongoing "Untitled (Days)" body of work. Credit...Eric Chakeen

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

On average, probably over six. It might not be painting all day. It might be reading. It might be reviewing what I painted or studying a model for an upcoming exhibition.

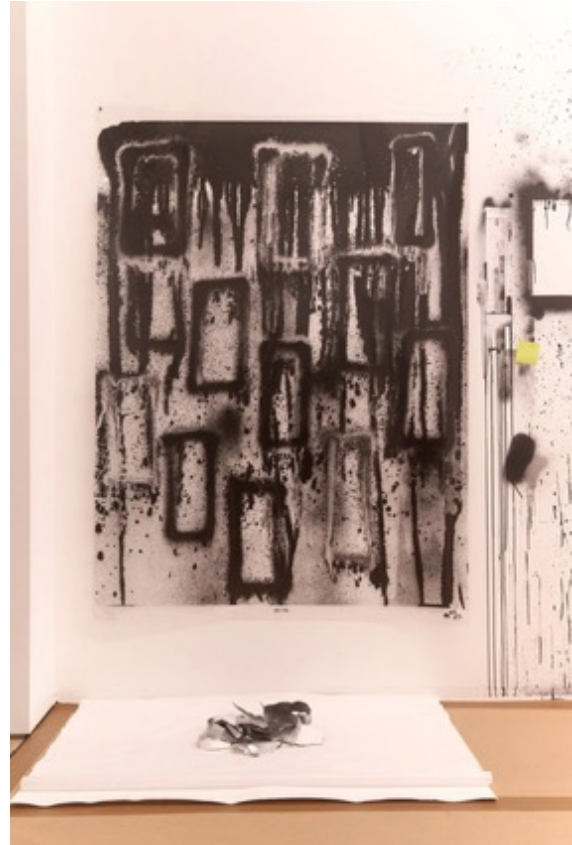
But I don't really think about "work" and "not work," which is confusing to a lot of people I know. I just have a "do what needs to get done" attitude. I'm always thinking about it. I can't help it. If I open my eyes, I'm thinking about the world on a visual level.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I painted a picture of the house I grew up in, or something like that. I think my parents still have it. I probably started seriously painting around 14 or 15.



A basket of slippers. All guests are asked to remove their shoes before entering the studio. Credit...Eric Chakeen



"Untitled (Composition)," a drawing on mylar made in 2022. Credit...Eric Chakeen

Are there any works that you would do over in a different way now?

There was a museum show, I think it was in 2017, that I wish I could do again. It was such a lesson for me because I didn't have enough time to get it right. I've been guarding against that ever since. So I work, I work, I work, I work — until I can't.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

The worst studio was not having a studio at all. For some reason, I thought I could do it all in my apartment when I was living in Midtown East — which I wouldn't recommend to anyone. And then it finally dawned on me: "This is not working." Space is a luxury, and it can really change everything.



More of Pendleton's initial impressions on paper. These were made using stencils and spray paint. Credit...Eric Chakeen



Painted covers for a special edition of "Adam Pendleton. Blackness, White and Light" (2024), the catalog for his recent exhibition \ at the Mumok in Vienna. Credit...Eric Chakeen

What's the first work you ever sold? And for how much?

I sold a group of works when I was a teenager to the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. My dad is a gregarious person. I think he was talking around town, saying, "Oh, you know, my son makes paintings." He showed them to one person, and they showed them to someone else and then *that* someone else was curating the collection at the Federal Reserve and was like, "These are actually pretty good." They sold for maybe \$2,500. I didn't have a bank account, so someone else had to get the check.

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

Hanging paper. Or even before that, sometimes paintings begin with notes: "What if I did this? What if I did that?" Or instructions: "I'm *going* to do this. I'm *going* to do that." And then I execute. But sometimes you realize those ideas do not translate to the visual space. So you just sort of *start*.

And how do you know when you're done?

When I feel like things are coming together but are also on the edge of coming apart.

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A maquette for an exhibition in the “possible future,” as Pendleton puts it.Credit...Eric Chakeen

How many assistants do you have?

About a dozen. In so many ways, the studio is a collaborative space. But the painting part is very solo.

Have you assisted other artists before?

I haven't. I've collaborated with other artists. Well, in the sense that I had to do what they told me to do. I participated in a piece Joan Jonas did at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, reading Dante. In my mind, I said, “This is her work. I'm an instrument. I'm a happy instrument. And I will do whatever she asks me to do” — which is, of course, different than collaboration. And yet, it was a collaboration! We have to be open to all different ways of working, to have a deeper and truer sense of things in ourselves.



The studio's library, a space for daily reading and research. Credit...Eric Chakeen

What music do you play when you're making art?

I've been playing Duval Timothy recently, his album "Meeting With the Judas Tree." Adrienne Lenker's new album, "Bright Future." Abel Selaocoe, an incredible cellist and vocalist — if I need to really get into it, I'll put him on. And I've been listening to Wild Up and Christopher Rountree's "Julius Eastman Volume 1: Femenine," which was introduced to me by a music supervisor that I was working with [on] a different project.

I know you've been engaging with Julius Eastman's music for a while. [Pendleton's "Untitled (Who We Are)," started in 2018, is partially inspired by Eastman's circa 1980 piano composition "Crazy Nigger"; the abstract silk-screen paintings feature the song's title and other phrases riffing on the musician's themes.] When did you first encounter it?

Around 2000. I got jazzed up about the language, like "Crazy Nigger." "What?" Just the titles, like "Gay Guerrilla" [which was released around the same time]. "What does that mean?" And then you listen to the music and it doesn't make any more sense, which I love.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When I moved to New York, around when I was 18, and people would ask, “Oh, what do you do?” [I started saying] “I’m an artist.” But you know, I don’t go around saying it all the time.



Adam Pendleton’s “Black Dada Drawing (L)” (2024).Credit...© Adam Pendleton, courtesy of Pace Gallery



Adam Pendleton’s “Black Dada Drawing (A)” (2024).Credit...© Adam Pendleton, courtesy of Pace Gallery

Do you have a favorite procrastination technique?

I have proofs of the paintings that I’m working on; they replicate what the finished works will look like once the screen-printing process is complete. And I’ll spend hours going through those. Which isn’t actually procrastination.

What’s the weirdest object in your studio?

Object ...? [*Silently looks around.*]

This isn’t a space with much clutter.

It’s probably been removed. [*Laughs.*] I’m definitely the one in here saying, “What is this?”

What do you usually wear when you work?

Very old, thread-worn Issey Miyake pants and a T-shirt.

How often do you talk to other artists?

I like doing two-person shows. I just did one with [the sculptor] Arlene Shechet in Madrid. And I did one with Pope.L [in 2019 at Eva Presenhuber gallery in Zurich]. I like having structured dialogue with artists and thinking through the work together in space.



Installation view of “Adam Pendleton: An Abstraction” at Pace Gallery. Credit... Andy Romer Photography © Adam Pendleton, courtesy of Pace Gallery

What do you bulk buy with the most frequency?

Nuts. Cashews, pecans, walnuts.

What would you say is your worst habit?

Although I get up early, I don't pop out of bed. I'm slow to [rise]. That's my worst habit. I keep trying. I just want to pop out! But I'm not a popper outer.

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What embarrasses you?

Just knowing I could do better.

Has that always been your main source of embarrassment?

I would say so.

Do you exercise?

Four days a week. I do some weight lifting and some biking. I try to get a minimum of 7,000 steps a day.

What are you reading right now?

I'm reading a lot about the work of [the sculptor] David Smith. I'm deeply interested in how he dealt with and thought through space.

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

[["Whirlirama,"](#) 1970] the Sam Gilliam painting that's on view at the Met right now, is off the hook. And so is [Jackson Pollock's] "[Autumn Rhythm Number 30](#)" (1950), which is also at the Met. That was the first artwork that made me cry.