

Art in America

Up Close 2016: New Orleans

By Cameron Shaw | January 4, 2017



Adam Pendleton: *Black Lives Matter #2*, 2015, wall work. Courtesy Pace Gallery, New York and London.

Hannah Weiner's poems written with the International Code of Symbols—communicated Pendleton's core interest: how we build and parse languages to make meaning. In an election year that thrust identity politics, stereotypes, and misinformation to the fore, Pendleton's heady mix of sloganeering and esoterica reads even more strongly in retrospect as a quiet refusal of cultural legibility, especially as it is demanded of blackness—a visualization of his own expansiveness as an artist and as a black man in a society whose violence and marginalization is predicated on the flattening of identities.

For better and for worse, we learn to read culture through the images we're shown and two of my favorite local exhibitions in recent years have been about Florida and the construction of place. In 2013, Richard McCabe, curator of photography at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, mounted "The Mythology of Florida," a small, witty visual study of photography, postcards, and other archival materials that historicized how we have come to see the Sunshine State. This year, at artist-run gallery The Front, Florida natives Cristina Molina and Jonathan Traviesa pushed the concept into slapstick territory with "Sad Tropics." The recently married couple's first collaborative exhibition not only realized the thematic potential of the four-room space, which is generally carved up to varyingly accommodate the collective's eighteen members, but also gave the latent quirkiness and humor of the artists' individual practices room to breathe. It included videos, site-specific photo murals, framed photographs, and a touristy gift-shop installation consisting of postcards, tote bags, and a life-size cutout of the couple for souvenir

In 2016 we launched the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Art in America Arts Writing Fellowships, a joint project designed to foster art and culture writing in cities throughout the US. For our October issue, fellowship recipient Cameron Shaw wrote on New Orleans artist Willie Birch and his interest in fractal geometries in African cultural production as an aesthetic analogue to decentralized models of social organization in the African diaspora. Here Shaw looks back on some of her strongest visual impressions in the city last year.

We don't see many museum presentations of internationally recognized contemporary artists in New Orleans, so "Adam Pendleton: *Becoming Imperceptible*" at the Contemporary Arts Center was a rarity. It was notably rarified—"I don't get it" was a common refrain—not to mention brazenly expensive to produce. Chief curator Andrea Andersson took the biggest risk of any New Orleans institution in 2016. The exhibition featured a range of work, from textured, inky appropriations of Josef Albers's water photographs transposed onto mirrors to a silent, six-and-a-half-second video loop of Deerhoof frontwoman Satomi Matsuzaki in a recording studio. There was a surfeit of images to be sure, but full-wall installations of words from Amiri Baraka, Jean-Luc Godard, and the Black Lives Matter movement—not to mention ceramic sculptures borrowing from

photos. But the standout work was a stop-motion animation, *Florida Man + Florida Woman* (2016), featuring characters resembling Molina and Traviesa enacting ridiculous headlines of the kind that have made the state synonymous with human folly in the collective imagination, such as "Florida Man Accidentally Butt Dials 911 While Cooking Meth with His Mom" and "Florida Woman Robbed by Dolphin."

Nobody in 2016 manipulated tabloid hysteria better than Beyoncé, whose *Lemonade* and subsequent "Formation" world tour spun public speculation into the pure gold of self-mythologization. When the multimedia extravaganza came to New Orleans, I joined legions of screaming fans in the nosebleed seats of the Superdome. With a multistory video feed that combined recorded and live footage, a moving sculptural set, and impossibly deft choreography, the concert had me on the verge of a perceptual meltdown. I spent the first twenty minutes training my eyes to dart around the stage, vainly attempting to take it all in at once, trying to process what I was seeing. It was undoubtedly the most challenging and transformative visual input I received all year.