

Adam Pendleton on Art's Turbulent Moment In "Midnight in America," the conceptual artist uses language and abstraction to consider history's "different sense of possibility."

By Sophie Gilbert | December 5, 2016



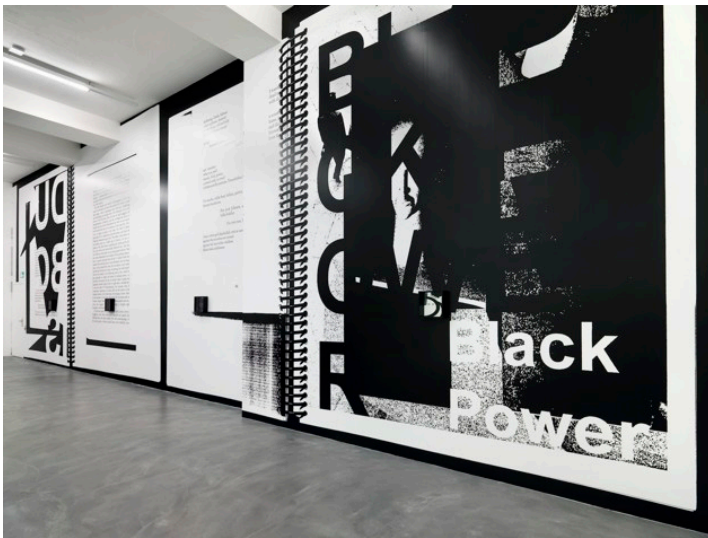
Although Adam Pendleton's new exhibition, "Midnight in America," was finalized long before the results of the U.S. presidential election in November, the timing of its opening at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich, Switzerland, coincided neatly with intense global curiosity about what the next chapter of American history might look like. For Pendleton, whose work uses language and abstraction to explore history, race, and art itself, the show was a direct response to ideas that had been swirling around in popular discourse regarding the election.

Its title is a play on the famous television commercial for Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in 1984, referenced by Hillary Clinton earlier this year. Donald Trump she said, has "taken the Republican Party a long way, from 'Morning in America' to 'Midnight in America.' He wants us to fear the future and fear each other."

Despite the sense of darkness the title evokes, Pendleton insists that the exhibition isn't trying to equate midnight with metaphorical darkness, but rather is emphasizing that history is moving in a different direction, one that allows "a different sense of possibility." His show includes six new paintings, called "Untitled (A Victim of American Democracy)," spray painted and silk screened in superimposed layers of black paint. Two larger wall works, resembling pages from a notebook, incorporate writing by W.E.B. DuBois and Amiri Baraka. Pendleton's artistic manifesto, which he calls "Black Dada," refers in part to Baraka's poem "Black Dada Nihilismus," which is featured in the show.

Pendleton hails from Richmond, Virginia, and works in a studio in Brooklyn, New York. He's one of the youngest artists represented by Pace Gallery, and his work has been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. He spoke with me by phone. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Sophie Gilbert: Can you tell me a little about "Midnight in America," and where the idea for the show came from?



Installation view, *Midnight in America*, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, 2016

Adam Pendleton: The language I use in the paintings that anchor the show was pulled from a speech that Malcolm X gave in 1964 called “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Not exact phrases or quotes, but pulling from something he was saying in the speech about how he, and African Americans, were victims of American democracy. I often use language in my works. And the historical context was that someone who was being systematically oppressed in American society actually had a deeper belief in the American democratic project, and was arguing that it could in fact be a more open and just place.

So when I was thinking about how to contextualize these paintings, which are actually rather abstract when you see them, I wanted the title of the exhibition to prompt an interaction with the works on view. “Midnight in America” seems appropriate as it plays on Ronald Reagan’s “Morning in America,” and I think with the tone and the dynamic of the recent election it seemed as though we were headed toward a darker place. This isn’t a binary that I’m setting up between light and dark, where light is good and dark is bad. It’s rather that we’re opening up to a different realm, a different sense of possibility.

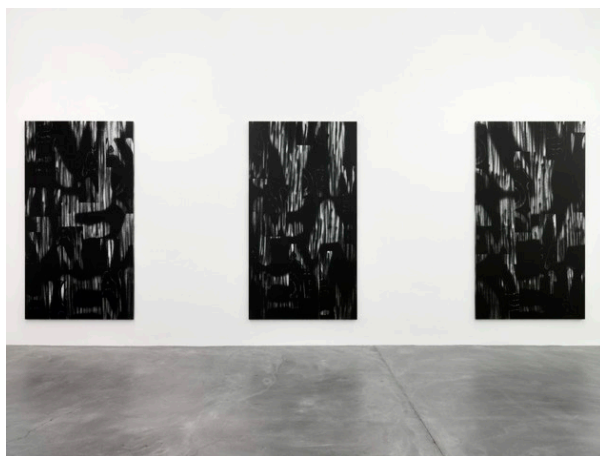
Gilbert: What does it mean to you to have the show open now, in the context of recent events?

Pendleton: It’s funny, because I think the title of the exhibition suggests something that would be subdued in some ways. But strangely enough, now that I’ve finished installing the exhibition, there’s a kind of exuberance that’s on display that exist in the individual works but also in between the objects themselves. I think that it articulates that arriving at one place or political situation or dynamic that isn’t desirable just means there’s somewhere else to go. It can shift attention in a critical and meaningful way and I think it’s time for us as citizens—and perhaps for me as an artist—to ask critical questions about the cultural and social space that we share with each other.

Gilbert: You’re someone who juxtaposes history with a perception of the future in your works, so how do you begin to respond to events like those of the past month?

Pendleton: I’m very much involved in examining the past, and the present in relationship with the past, and how that helps to articulate a future dynamic. In the past several years, current events have played a role in my works, between the Black Lives Matter movement and perhaps the recent election, but in a strange way I’m more grappling with and deconstructing both the language and the potential of this phrase, “Black Lives Matter.” It can be read in so many different ways and it registers in increasingly complex ways within the work, often through abstraction. Abstraction is really another word for freedom. You’re sort of untethered from obvious obligations, creating something that is unspecified and undefined.

Gilbert: Do you see your work as having a particular message or is it more about encouraging a particular kind of interrogation?



Installation view, *Midnight in America*, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, 2016

Pendleton: It's much more about encouraging an interrogation, and a thoughtfulness to slow things down. You read a news article and you forget about it the next day, but we've been looking at the same paintings and sculptures and even films for decade after decade, and reading the same books. So there's this kind of base where things slow down when we look at them outside of the immediacy of current events. This tells us something about ourselves either in a theoretical or in an aesthetic sense, by speaking to a more complicated idea of who we are as human beings.

Gilbert: You used the word "exuberance" earlier. Some people have expressed recently that difficult times in history are times when art can really thrive. Do you have a sense of that in your own work?

Pendleton: I've been using this phrase "Black Dada" to articulate my body of work in general. When Dada came about it had a direct relationship to World War I and how artists responded to that moment. I think there are many different ingredients that are utilized to make something of some kind of cultural worth, so I'm not going to make a direct connection. The exuberance I speak to is the fact that I respond to things visually. And I often refer to what I do as visual note-taking. So in saying there's an exuberance in the work itself, it's not necessarily me responding to socio-political dynamics that may cause or create the exuberance. It's really me investing deeply in my project as an artist and asking myself perpetually, what does Black Dada look like? And each project, exhibition, or publication, offers an opportunity to better articulate that.

Gilbert: What do you have on the horizon?

Pendleton: After this show here in Zurich I'm opening the third leg of my traveling museum exhibition "Becoming Imperceptible," which will be followed by my first solo show in a European institution at the KW Institute in Berlin.

Gilbert: Do you find that responses to your work are different around the world to how it's received in the U.S.?

Pendleton: Yes and no. Largely, no. I think my project is broad enough that there's something to take away from it no matter where it's showing.

Gilbert: Do you have an idea of what role you in particular and artists in general can play over the next four years?

Pendleton: I hope that artists realize that there are stakes involved in everything they do. No gesture lacks weight even when you want it to. It matters. Personally, as an artist, I always attempt to be as rigorous as I can, but I hope that I take even more seriously what I find to be a responsibility as an artist, as someone to look at something to think about it—to acknowledge it exists.

Gilbert: What was it like being in Switzerland during the election?

Pendleton: I said to someone that it's nice to go, and it's nice to come back. And I think that articulates perpetually what it's like to be an American. Because it's not uninteresting how things unfold and how there's this perpetually regressive tendency in America to go backward. Like, "Oh, let's revisit that 1973 decision of the Supreme Court." I like thinking about it.

Gilbert: Who do you think are some of the American artists doing the most interesting, relevant work right now?

Pendleton: It's wide-ranging. Someone like Robert Ryman oddly enough is as interesting to me as William Pope.L. These are both interesting conceptual projects with formal dimensions that have a kind of rigor in relationship to art history that not all artistic projects have. And then I can think of someone like Joan Jonas, and people who shift our attention, and change how we think about our project of living.

Gilbert: What do you hope people take away from "Midnight in America"?

Pendleton: I hope they realize that there's perpetually a direct relationship between political and social movements and art-historical movements as they relate to conceptualism and abstraction—that they really feed into each other. I like to say that I'm a conceptual artist. Conceptual art came about during the civil-rights movement, and that's a dynamic I always like to think about and examine in my work.