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Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018

ART & DESIGN

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By Robin Pogrebin

May 3, 2018

When the unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012, Florida's self-defense law known as Stand Your Ground became the subject of much public discussion, though it was ultimately not used in court to defend the shooter, George Zimmerman.

The artist Adam Pendleton nevertheless believed that the law informed the acquittal, which helped prompt the "Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)" he created for the Venice Biennale in 2015.

"Zimmerman got off because he 'stood his ground,'" Mr. Pendleton said in a recent interview at his Brooklyn studio. "I'm trying to find language that stands ground. I think language that stands ground is 'Black Lives Matter.'"

This week a monumental version of that Black Dada flag was planted on Randalls Island as part of Frieze New York. Selected for the fair's first six-month-long installation, the flag waves near what was historically known as Negro Point (now Scylla Point), between Harlem and the South Bronx.

"It's about, what is this island that is used for entertainment events, yet sits between these two communities that are beacons of survival?" said Adrienne Edwards, the curator of live programs at Frieze, who has worked closely with Mr. Pendleton for years. "Some of the most difficult moments in New York City history have happened in these communities."

The New York Times

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3 May 2018



Mr. Pendleton, in his studio in April. He initially created his text-based “Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)” for the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, his response to the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Heather Sten for The New York Times

The project is grounded in two of Mr. Pendleton’s favorite subjects — history and language — and comes at a time when the 34-year-old artist is increasingly in the limelight.

He has had no fewer than four solo shows in five years at Pace — the youngest artist the gallery has represented since the 1970s. Museum shows have followed, along with the attention of highly visible private collectors like Michael Ovitz and David Martinez, as well as Aby Rosen and Alberto Mugarabi, who together purchased the work by Mr. Pendleton that is currently on view at Lever House on Park Avenue.

Last fall, Mr. Pendleton achieved a record price for his work at auction: \$225,000 for one of his “Black Dada” paintings, nearly four times Christie’s high estimate. Koenig Books published a hardcover version of his “Black Dada Reader” — a 2011 spiral-bound selection

The New York Times

Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018

of essays originally photocopied and passed among friends — one of The New York Times’s Best Art Books of 2017.

“Language shapes our experience or it gives shape to the things we experience,” Mr. Pendleton said. “It compels me, it pushes me forward.”

Those who know him well say the young artist has an old soul, and that he is committed to investigating and honoring the past. Together with the artists Rashid Johnson, Ellen Gallagher and Julie Mehretu, for example, he is helping to rescue the North Carolina house of the singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone.

The New York Times

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3 May 2018



Mr. Pendleton's "Black Dada (K)," from 2012, gesso and silkscreen ink on canvas. It sold for \$225,000 last fall at Christie's, a record at auction for the artist. Christie's

The New York Times

Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018

“He has several passions and he approaches these passions from many different directions,” said Laura Hoptman, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art who contributed an essay to Mr. Pendleton’s “Black Dada” book. “This is a very contemporary way of looking at the world and a very contemporary way of approaching art.”

In discussing his work, people in the art world often make reference to the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt, the collages of Robert Rauschenberg and the text-heavy works of artists like Glenn Ligon and Christopher Wool.

Indeed, words are central to Mr. Pendleton’s practice, which also takes the form of sculpture, film, performance and video. His black-on-black “Black Dada” paintings — which incorporate letters from the titular phrase — reference the artistic and literary movement that arose in reaction to what he has referred to as the “state-sanctioned physical and intellectual brutality” of World War I, as well as LeRoi Jones’s 1964 poem, “Black Dada Nihilismus.”

While Mr. Pendleton may qualify as a millennial, he does his reading in hard copy, rising around 5:30 a.m. in his apartment in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn to immerse himself in books or essays before breakfast.

He typically gravitates toward cultural theorists, poets and critics — Stuart Hall’s posthumous memoir, “Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands,” about growing up in Jamaica in the 1930s; Fred Moten’s “In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,” on the connections between jazz, sexual identity and radical black politics; Judith Butler’s “Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,” a look at the vulnerability and aggression that followed Sept. 11.

The New York Times

Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018



Installation view of “Adam Pendleton: what a day was this,” through Aug. 28 at Lever House, New York, includes works from his “OK DADA OK BLACK DADA OK” and “System of Display” series, along with two multipaneled silkscreen ink on Mylar works. Courtesy the artist

“I’m pretty sure he came into this world as a 50-year-old man,” Ms. Edwards said. “He’s a sage.”

The shelves in Mr. Pendleton’s Richmond, Va., childhood home included the poets Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. His mother, a retired elementary schoolteacher, wanted to be a writer (his father, a contractor, is also a musician). Young Adam started writing poetry and plays at an early age.

“My mom said, ‘When you buy a book you’re not really spending money,’” he said. “I would never buy 100 shirts a year, but I know I buy 100 books a year.”

Painting for hours a day in his basement as a teenager, Mr. Pendleton finished high school two years early, studied art in northern Italy and then moved to New York.

The New York Times

Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018

He came out to his mother as gay on New Year's Eve 1999, just before the new millennium. "I think I wanted it to be something I would remember," he said. (He married Karsten Ch'ien, co-founder of the Yumami Food Company, two years ago.)

"My parents did this really generous thing," Mr. Pendleton, said of growing up with his older brother and younger sister. "They let us be who we are."

Reviewing the artist's first solo show, "Being Here," at Wallspace in 2004, Roberta Smith wrote in The New York Times that Mr. Pendleton's "text-based works bring a no-frills simplicity to interactive art."

He went on to show his work at Yvon Lambert's gallery, but it was his 2007 Performa performance piece, "Revival," in which he combined reading with a gospel choir, that put Mr. Pendleton on the map. "A commanding performer, he delivered a soliloquy, part sermon, part aria," wrote Holland Cotter in The Times, "of spliced-together quotations about family, marriage, AIDS and racism."

Thinking back on the project now, Mr. Pendleton said, he is somewhat incredulous, describing himself as "maybe gracefully naïve."

"A lot can go wrong when 200 people are in a room watching you," he said. "No one had responded to anything I put out in the world that way before."

Things took off from there. Ms. Hoptman asked Mr. Pendleton to participate in the New Museum's first triennial in 2009.

The New York Times

Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018



Street view of “Adam Pendleton: what a day was this” at Lever House. The artist designed the installation to capture reflections on the famous glass wall of the modernist building.

Courtesy the artist

Eventually, Pace got interested (Mr. Pendleton is also represented by Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich, Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin, and Galeria Pedro Cera in Portugal). “He is assembling an intuitive poetry out of language, which roots itself in his experience — the African-American experience,” said Marc Glimcher, Pace’s president. “The result is what art should be.”

At first, Mr. Pendleton felt out of place at such an established gallery. But after digging into the history of its artists, from Agnes Martin to Robert Ryman, “I realized that in a strange way it did make sense,” he said, “because I disrupted that space — a young African-American artist showing alongside these giants.”

The New York Times

Pogrebin, Robin: A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants his Flag for Black Lives

3 May 2018

While the artist's bright eyes and boyish cheeks convey a callowness, he also has a deliberative way of working that suggests he won't be pushed into overproducing (he makes about 12 works a year).

With his work now hanging in institutions like MoMA and the Tate, Mr. Pendleton said the current effort by museums to better incorporate black artists has only just begun. "I hope they realize how deep they have to go, how long it will take," he said.

"It can't just be one show," he added, citing as an example the survey of little-known sculpture by the American artist Jack Whitten, which opened April 22 at the Baltimore Museum of Art and comes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in September. "It has to be many — many shows, many essays, many conversations. There's a lot of work to be done."

Sara Friedlander, the head of Christie's Post-War & Contemporary Art department in New York, said that Mr. Pendleton's auction strength is reflecting a transition in art buyers. "We're in a moment right now where people are not just about what they're looking at on their walls, but the intention and the meaning behind it," she said. Mr. Pendleton, she added, "is making art that is about a specific moment in history that we all have to pay attention to."

Despite the commercial pressures, the artist insists he has stayed focused on the work. "The studio is the first place I want to be and the last place I want to leave," he said.

Still fresh in his memory are the days when he first moved to New York City, found himself "overwhelmed" and moved upstate to Germantown for five years — in part because it was more affordable. When recalling how a landlord let him live rent-free for the first six months, Mr. Pendleton's eyes fill with tears.

However difficult the road has been at times, Mr. Pendleton said his upbringing kept him feeling rooted and supported. "I knew I could go home — it allows you to take risks," he said. "Even now I think to myself: at least I can go home."