

Plaster Magazine

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Matthew Holman speaks to the American artist about the futility of language and the virtues and vices of abstraction



Installation view of Adam Pendleton, 'These Gestures Towards You' at Galerie Max Hetzler, London. Photographed for *Plaster* in March 2024

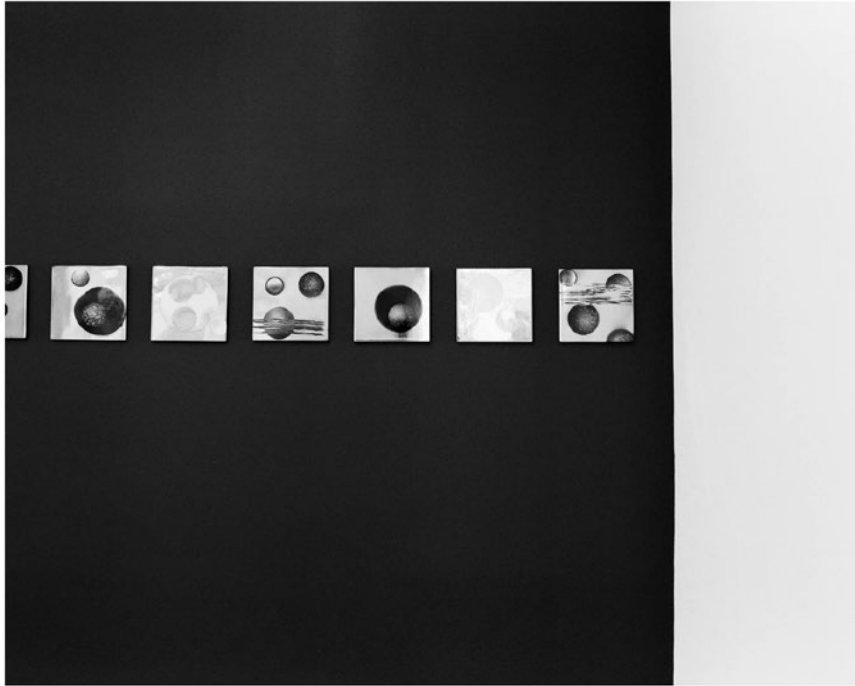
Adam Pendleton has been busy this winter. A major exhibition at the Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis, which closed in January, established an extensive call-and-response network that asked the small questions like 'How did you end up here?' and 'Where are you from?' in towering geometric paintings. His collaborative exhibition with Arlene Shechet opened last week at Pedro Cera in Madrid, with Shechet's gravity-defying, tactically seductive sculptures shown alongside Pendleton's graffito palimpsests. As part of the Hirschhorn's 50th-anniversary celebrations in the spring, Pendleton will transform the museum's inner ring gallery with interventions that will include some 22 paintings and drawings that explore contemporary approaches to abstraction. And all of that is to say nothing about Pendleton's current exhibition, 'These Gestures Towards You', now open at Galerie Max Hetzler in London, which is centred around a single work composed of 45 ceramic paintings, titled *45 Gestures Towards You*, alongside five drawings, *Days (for drawing)* in a second room. These ceramics are born from slow, methodical experiments and represent a more contemplative approach for an artist best known for impassioned ten-foot scrawls invoking a collective subject.





Both the glazed ceramics and the sprayed drawings refer to Pendleton's daily experimentation in his East Williamsburg studio, a kind of laboratory, manned by a team of assistants, for testing out new forms and measuring the scope of what his trademark black-on-white palette can do. "These forms constitute the alchemy or mess of painting", Pendleton tells me from his plush Madrid hotel room as he prepared the hang for the Shechet collaboration: "The drips, the splatters, the sprays, the way marks are made and the way different mediums--aerosol, ink, oil--create space for deep looking."

The exhibition has been curated along a single eye-level line, or a broken line, from one room to the other, in which we are asked to contemplate how a single work subtly transforms when it becomes part of a series. It's like a biologist's table has been upended onto the wall as we can trace the results of various chemical experiments expanding and contracting in biomorphic shapes. The metamorphoses between each ceramic square can't be followed sequentially; they don't follow one to the other across linear time.





“When you’re at the symphony”, he says, “it’s not one note at the time, it’s many notes, many sounds; the violins are doing this, the trumpets are doing that... it all creates layers across and between, and that’s what these works try to do visually.” The ceramics could probably be rearranged in any order and have the same effect. Pendleton’s approach to exhibitions is concerned with “how the work can help compose the space, be that something that is fractured or undivided,” he explains. “I want to know how the individual parts make up the whole.”

But upstairs on Dover Street, the first thing that hits you is not what’s here but what’s not. No words, no language. No stencilled references to the contestation of race and identity in America. If Pendleton is best known as the intellectual analogue of Glenn Ligon for a millennial generation who believe politically-engaged art should be expressed in a rhetorical flourish as opposed to rammed over one’s head with a ton of bricks, what we have here feels different. Less opaque and less in the frenetic social world of interpersonal relationships –it’s more monochrome Orphism than Black Dada, Pendleton’s theory of radical juxtapositions that combine voices in a way that disrupts easy logic and established histories of avant-garde art.



So, what does Pendleton have to say this time around? While he feels that his recent works respond to the “futility of language, the question is not the either/or if there is language or there is not language [in his works], but what language.” In his characteristic tone, at once verbose and oblique, Pendleton seeks what he calls the “polyphonic, polyvocal, contrapuntal” forms that elude his diaristic experiences in the studio. Above all, these new works, he says, are seeking to represent “abstract impulses.” Sometimes, those impulses might be spoken with words, as in those works most closely associated with Black Dada, and at other times with the traces of intense gestural mark-making, as here. These are abstract ideas in abstract works.

The virtue and the vice of abstraction, though, as everyone knows, is that we all have different ideas of what it means. For some, it is the highest form of subjective expression, a kind of pure and spontaneous embodiment of interior feeling; for others, it’s merely pictures about nothing. It’s true that Pendleton has always ensconced himself somewhere in the middle ground between these two extremes, offering something to both sides.



“Abstraction is a big question”, he tells me, “because there’s no way to arguably qualify what it is or what it isn’t, and that’s what is so generative about it.” Indeed, here is an artist who doesn’t seem minded to ‘qualify’ very much; instead, Pendleton is interested in expressing himself, perhaps for the first time, with the legibility of the mathematician’s ruler rather than the poet’s pen. For instance, he describes abstraction as a “metric” to take up space. He talks of time and space. In the drawn-up constellations of orbs, ovoids and spheres on show at Max Hetzler, Pendleton wants to catch both the dewdrop and depict the cosmos at the same time. In other words, the works feel both very big, like planets, and very small, like molecules, at the same time. They feel like abstracted microcosms of the natural world.

But Adam Pendleton hasn’t got everything figured out. He is resistant to explain these new works as predetermined and entirely measurable. Instead, it is his “visual curiosity” that propels these chance-led encounters in his studio. He might not be using words for now, but he is still asking us questions.

