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# Artist Adam Pendleton on Protests Across America: 'I Am Not Safe, and This Country Is Not Kind'

BY ADAM PENDLETON  June 4, 2020 9:00am



Adam Pendleton, *Completed sketch for SEE THE SIN*, 2020.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

I woke up this morning and realized I live in a country where police mow down civilians with SUVs and storm protesters with batons, rubber bullets, tears gas, and live rounds. I realized you can lose your life for standing up for life. I realized that I am not safe, and this country is not kind. I realized we are living through a health crisis, an economic crisis, a cultural crisis, and a social crisis while the country is being led by a man who fuels all flames of dumb violence and division. I realized I was tired of being asked “Are you OK?” by friends and colleagues. I realized I was tired of being asked to respond yet heartened that people care. I realized I was angry that I was heartened that people care—because you *better* care. You are the person standing next to you: If I fail, you fail. If you fail, I fail.

I realized we have lost our collective sense of compassion and intelligence—and then that we probably never had it to lose. I realized that, after this moment quiets, people will go back to their lives, and my life as well as those of my brothers and sisters—trans, cis, the we in all of us—will still be on the line. I woke up in the calm of the early morning light next to the man I love and thought, “Live free or die.” I wondered if I should, if I would, give my own life for this urgent abstraction of Black life, of mattering. I wondered if I would die. I

realized I am surrounded by contradictions, dysfunctions, and distractions. I realized I had better things to do than mourn for this country while thinking of Toni Morrison: “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”

But then I realized I must mourn for you who don’t speak up, act up, or take a stand. I realized my life might depend on you. I realized while I was culturally designated as “African-American” — words I’ve too often heard so violently used—it was my ancestors who built this country. I realized that, but for few of us, we’re all immigrants, forced and otherwise, on this land. I realized, too late as always, that there were people here long before us, and we only know how to plunder and think we’re flourishing. I realized I wanted to ask “Whose life *doesn’t* matter?” but then: when you have to ask, it’s probably too late.

I realized that my pessimism is realism and, of course, it’s long been time to get real. I ask of history here: Did our artists join hands with our freedom fighters? Did they demonstrate in Birmingham? Did they cover their faces when the hoses were turned on? History shirks linearity. It exhausts us. It

exhausts me.

I realized I want my language to fail. That my approach must be asyntactic and combinatorial. That I don't want to become but to always be *becoming*. I realized my parents' worries aren't like other parents' worries. I realized I scan headlines looking for statements of support, looking to see who would say my life matters. I realized I wonder who would choose capital over Black life and why a mayor who created Black life isn't on my side. I realized I don't think the rally or the cry could go too far when we have been waiting on something for more than 400 years.

I realized, lying here, that I believe in a politics of love but also ask: what is love without violence, and what is capital if not violence? I realized I had been punched in the gut. I took a breath and then realized that I needed to have a conversation with you—that I needed to reach out but that there is no “moving on” or “next page” until we *SEE THE SIN*. I realized the impossibility—and thus the poetics—of my plea.

***Adam Pendleton***

***(<https://www.artnews.com/t/adam-pendleton/>) is an artist based in New York.***