

The New York Times

In the Heart of Washington, Adam Pendleton's Work Demands Deep Thought

The new show at the Hirshhorn Museum, "Adam Pendleton: Love, Queen," plumbs the past, the idea of presence and the possibilities of what painting could be.

By **Pierre-Antoine Louis**
Reporting from Washington

April 24, 2025



The artist Adam Pendleton in front of his piece "Black Dada (D), 2024" part of his exhibit "Adam Pendleton: Love, Queen" at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

When Adam Pendleton begins preparing for an exhibition, his first step is always the same: build a model of the space.

Pendleton, who lives and works in New York, has employed this process for years, as he has prepared for shows in New York, London and Los Angeles. He finds that it allows him to visualize and refine his approach before and during installation.

His first solo exhibition in Washington, D.C., "Adam Pendleton: Love, Queen," at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden was no exception. It opened April 4 and runs through Jan. 3, 2027.

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Pendleton, 41, had a very clear vision for the show from the start.

He noted that, to him, the unique thing about art was its ability to function both within a particular moment and outside of it, offering a timeless reflection.

"What I want this work to do is to actually make people more conscious of how they spend their time and what they're doing with it," Pendleton said in an interview at the museum in March, as preparations for the show were underway. "And so I hope the exhibition is an opportunity to slow down and actually just, if only for a moment, exists outside of the dynamics or the pressures of any given moment."



Pendleton's "Untitled (Days)" series on the walls of the Hirshhorn Museum.
Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Evelyn C. Hankins, the Hirshhorn's head curator, and the organizer of "Love, Queen," explained that the show — a major retrospective — was years in the making.

She recalled that she and Pendleton started talking about the show in early 2022. Since then, she said that she visited his studio in New York every few months.

"Every time I'd go to the studio, there were these little scaled images of the paintings moving around," Hankins explained in an interview at the museum. "I think he spent so much time looking at the model, thinking about the building and what he wanted to do in here."

The show comes at a big moment for the institution, during its 50th anniversary year (it was founded in 1974). Aptly, "Love, Queen" speaks very directly to the Hirshhorn, taking inspiration from both the museum's architecture and its location, right on the National Mall.

"For us, this project is very much part of our mission, which is about reflecting the art of our time, and Adam does that in his painting practice especially," the Hirshhorn's director, Melissa Chiu, said in an interview.



Pendleton's painting "WE ARE NOT," part of an ongoing series. Adam Pendleton. Photo by Andy Romer

Pendleton explained that "the exhibition is a kind of a retrospective of the way in which I thought and moved through the discipline of painting for about 20 years."

He said the show presented an argument about what painting can be — exploring its possibilities within the context of the 21st century, while also reflecting on its history and role in the early 20th century.

"Love, Queen" features 35 of Pendleton's paintings, displayed in the museum's second-floor inner-ring galleries. The paintings represent five different bodies of work: Some of the canvases are from three of Pendleton's ongoing series — "Black Dada," "Days" and "WE ARE NOT" — while others are from two new series, "Composition" and "Movement."

Through "Black Dada" — the name of Pendleton's evolving conceptual framework, as well as the title of one series of paintings — Pendleton explores the relationship between Blackness and abstraction.



Pendleton's painting "Black Dada (A/A)." Credit...Adam Pendleton. Photo by Andy Romer

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His process begins on paper, where he builds compositions through paint, ink and watercolor, often incorporating stenciled text and geometric shapes. These works are then photographed and transformed through screen printing, blurring the lines between painting, drawing and photography. The final works reflect his belief in paintings as a powerful force.

"I think that's unique, because particularly in contemporary life, or just in general, we're always thinking, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts. But are we present?" Pendleton said while walking through the circular space on the second floor of the Hirshhorn where his works were being hung. "Painting is, for me, a way to be my most present self. I hope that aspect of the act of painting, the act of making, of doing, is not necessarily understood by the viewer, but felt."

A centerpiece of the exhibition is "Resurrection City Revisited (Who Owns Geometry Anyway?)," a nine-minute video installation exploring Resurrection City



A scene from the nine-minute video installation "Resurrection City Revisited (Who Owns Geometry Anyway?)" about an encampment erected on the National Mall in 1968 as part of the Poor People's Campaign. Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

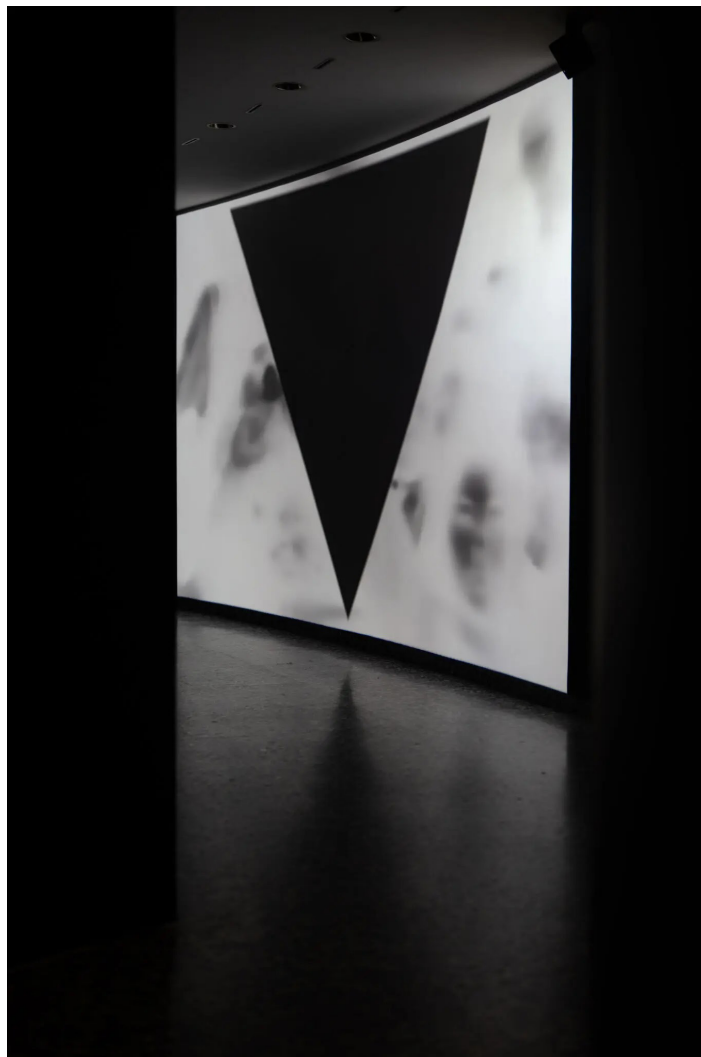
Louis, Pierre-Antoine, "In the Heart of Washington, Adam Pendleton's Work Demands Deep Thought," *NYTimes.com*, April 24, 2025

— an encampment erected on the National Mall in the spring and summer of 1968 as part of the Poor People's Campaign.

Planned by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and carried forward by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy after King's assassination, the campaign brought together thousands of people in a call for economic justice across racial lines.

Pendleton became interested in Resurrection City after encountering photographs by Jill Freedman who, after King's assassination, took up residence in a plywood shantytown erected in Washington by the Poor People's Campaign, documenting the encampment's structures and daily life.

Pendleton said that, "in those photos, there's these lush blacks, these muted whites, but also there were the primary structures that existed within the context of the encampment."



Another scene from "Resurrection City Revisited (Who Owns Geometry Anyway?)". Erin Schaff/The New York Times

He added, "I became interested in them because I'm obsessed with triangles, circles, squares." Pendleton studied Freedman's photographs for about four years before deciding to engage with them artistically.

"I've been mining Resurrection City as an example of a radical avant-garde," Pendleton said of the encampment on the Mall. "If I had to define the avant-garde, it's this drive to move forward — intelligently, willfully, joyfully. And that's really what Resurrection City is."

The video's score, composed by the multi-instrumentalist Hahn Rowe, weaves together a reading by the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka with rich orchestration of brass, woodwinds and drums.

Pendleton is not just revisiting a historical moment, he is navigating a visual space where art stands on its own. "It's a feeling you can't find anywhere else," he said. "This idea of deep looking and letting something resonate in an unexpected way."

This concept extends into his video installation. Like each of his paintings, the video is designed to offer a rich viewing experience, in which the visitor discovers something new each time they revisit it.

"It drives you to look and think deeply, so that things are actually seen, felt and heard," Pendleton explained. "And I think that's what really resonates — how the video functions in relation to the paintings."

Throughout "Love, Queen," Pendleton extends his exploration of the relationship between history and form. His large-scale paintings — layered with bold strokes and fragmented text — defy singular interpretation, instead prompting viewers to actively construct meaning.

"I think that's one of the really beautiful things about painting," Pendleton reflected. "It marks time in a very human and humanistic way. And that's why it has spoken so deeply to us as human beings for so long, because it articulates something very specific about our humanistic potential."

A version of this article appears in print on April 27, 2025, Section F, Page 40 of the New York edition with the headline: Art That Demands Deep Thought.