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Ian McGillis

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Four large paintings from Adam Pendleton's Untitled (WE ARE NOT) series invite philosophical discussion at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

There are shows with ambitious thematic reach. And then there's These Things We've Done Together.

Adam Pendleton's newly mounted Montreal Museum of Fine Arts exhibition, the first solo Canadian showcase for the 38-year-old multidisciplinary American artist, underlines how he has achieved a rare combination of radical experimentation and popularity. This is art that is both demanding and accessible, work whose meaning spreads in concentric circles.

A compelling case in point can be found in the show's main room, featuring four large paintings, one on each wall, from Pendleton's ongoing Untitled (WE ARE NOT) series. As you read the words "we are not" in various stages of legibility on the densely composed canvases, your eyes might reflexively search for the word (or words) that would complete the thought. It turns out there are none. Identity, Pendleton is suggesting, can be defined not in terms of what we are, but of what we aren't. Which leaves a lot of possibilities. What might at first seem like a limiting idea is revealed to be a potentially liberating one.

Like all the works on display, the Untitled pieces invite subjective interpretation and philosophical discussion, in this case on the relationship between reading and viewing.

"We may tend to think of the two as diametrically opposed activities, but they're really not," Pendleton said. "Language is a visual experience and a material reality."

The epic scale of the four Untitled paintings is no random matter; for Pendleton, that choice is essential to the enterprise. The combination of size and depth of field gives the works a cinematic quality, and indeed each piece has roughly the dimensions of a screen in a first-run movie theatre.

"We relate to things literally through the body — hearing things, seeing things, touching things," he said. "The scale of these paintings announces that the body's relationship to the paintings is important. They're bigger than us, they're not human-scaled, they're larger than life in a sense. They're grand, but there are also details and quiet moments within them."

The layered composition of the paintings allows for an element of the random and the accidental, for both artist and viewer. Spend some time with these works and the experience will be enriched exponentially: stand roughly in the middle of the room and do a slow 360, then view each piece from a variety of distances and angles, letting images and impressions change according to your spatial relationship with them.

A clue to Pendleton's sensibility can be found in Black Dada, the name under which he has been organizing his drawings and other multimedia works since 2008. Taken from an Amiri Baraka poem, its second word also makes reference to the post-First World War Swiss movement whose ultimate aim, Pendleton is keen to point out, was to change the way people see. The Black Dada works in the show are done on mylar, a surface that, unlike canvas or paper, is non-absorbent, investing the images with a certain fragile, of-the-moment quality.

Something that will be immediately evident to all visitors upon stepping into the exhibition is the tonal range on display, comprised strictly of black, white and shades thereof.

"To me, it's not a restriction at all," Pendleton said of his chosen colours. "It's actually an opportunity. Limits make us think differently, approach things differently."



Adam Pendleton's tonal range is made up of black, white and shades thereof. "Limits make us think differently, approach things differently." PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

A component of the show not to be missed is the 13-minute video *Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer*, in which Pendleton converses in a Manhattan diner with the octogenarian dancer, choreographer and filmmaker. Their exchange takes place across gaps of generation and culture not always bridged in the course of everyday living. It also presents a concept of conversation that includes the idea of one person reading to another.

"I like to think about how a conversation can take place. It can take place in silence, in touch, in reading. The conceit (of the video) was that we would each bring something of our own to the encounter. It's a documentation of a meeting of two artists whose work is very different but also has important similarities."

At this point, we're back to the name of the exhibition — a name whose meanings and implications continue to unfold, showing no sign of exhausting themselves.

"It's been nice for me, in staging this exhibition, to see these bodies of work in relationship to each other, to see how they're all visually and poetically connected," Pendleton said. "They're also indebted to each other and supportive of each other. And that's something we do together in our humanity. At its best."

In the end, for Pendleton, what he does could be said to boil down to one verb.

"The most important thing we all do is decide to engage — to look at something, think about it, read about it, listen to it. We should all choose to engage. Is it always enough? Perhaps not. There are different levels and kinds of engagement, but to open your mind to looking is a start."

AT A GLANCE

Adam Pendleton: These Things We've Done Together opens Thursday, March 17 and runs through July 10 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1380 Sherbrooke St. W. For full scheduling and ticket information, visit mbam.qc.ca.