



CULTURE

# The New New Orleans Emerges On the Art World's Map

by Ally Betker

April 6, 2016 3:04 pm



Nine days before the artist Adam Pendleton's first museum exhibition, "Becoming Imperceptible," opened at the Contemporary Arts Center in **New Orleans**, he was due back in New York, where he's based, for a **fundraiser in Harlem**. But when it came time to leave for the airport, he couldn't bring himself to abandon the installation process at the museum, even for 24 hours. "You have to stick to the plan," Pendleton said at the opening on April 1 (it runs through June 16), revealing an endearing neuroticism, ever so slightly. The three-week install involved wrapping the first floor in vinyl wallpaper, building out new wall configurations on the second floor, and using a rigger and crane to bring screens in through the third-floor windows.

"The way his work is successful is just absolutely wild attention to every detail," said CAC Visual Arts Curator Andrea Andersson. "And so for him to step out of that process was going to be way too anxiety-inducing for him."

That attention to detail has served Pendleton, 32, well. He landed his first group show in New York at Gallery 128 only after relentlessly sending his work to galleries all over the city, and then following up in person. Shortly thereafter, he had his first solo show with the blue-chip Yvon Lambert Gallery

in 2005. “It’s a little over 10 years ago, and when you hit a decade that’s a significant chunk of time,” he said. “It’s an amazing opportunity for an artist to be able to look at their work, to see where they have been and where they’re going.”

In 2007, he performed a piece called *The Revival* at Performa 07, in which he delivered a poetic sermon in front of 30-person choir and gained almost overnight recognition in the art world. Since then, his work has been shown at the Whitney, Venice Biennale, and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. In 2012, he signed with Pace Gallery, the youngest artist to do so since the '70s. At 32, with a museum survey now under his belt, Pendleton is well ahead of most of the the rest of his class.

“What I’ve always most valued about Adam’s work is that he brings conversations together,” said Andersson, who pitched Pendleton as her first show after joining the CAC in 2015. “His investment in the history of African liberation, in the civil rights movement, in these conversations that are very much at stake in New Orleans is something that I think many different communities here can come to with enthusiasm.”

"Becoming Imperceptible" includes past works from Pendleton's *Black Lives Matter* series, and video work such as *My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard* (2011–14). There are familiar tropes: mirrors, words like “we” and “independance,” and silkscreened stock images of an Ian Berry photograph or Anna Karina in *Made in U.S.A.*

But it’s hard not to feel the works' symbolism even more acutely in New Orleans. According to the show notes, the exhibition “frames his oeuvre as a dialogue between culture and system,” and that push/pull is evident in the city as well, even to a first-time visitor. While there have been always tourists in the Big Easy, the city is now experiencing an influx of people who don’t want to leave. As artists, filmmakers, and families move in, inevitably, deep-rooted communities—often black—are being priced out and displaced. “Oh, gentrification,” New Yorkers might say with a shrug, but in New Orleans, where the fabric of local tradition is more tangled than most, that process becomes fraught.

“That is one of the tragedies and complexities of the storm,” Andersson explained. Even 10 years later, you can’t have a conversation about New Orleans that doesn’t involve Hurricane Katrina. “This way in which New Orleans neighborhoods historically operated had been unchanged for so long, and that created long-standing relationships within the community. But it also gave a lot of space for problems to remain unsolved. There were neighborhoods in terrific neglect, and there wasn’t really an opportunity for mobility or change.”

Pendleton’s work digs into these sociopolitical issues; its driving force is something he calls “Black Dada,” which comes from the 1964 poem “Black Dada Nihilismus,” by Amiri Baraka. Black Dada combines his interest in dadaism, an art movement of the European avant-garde and a form of artistic anarchy, with racial tensions in America. A recent 2016 silkscreen work being shown in New Orleans, for example, is titled *Not Reconciled, Or Only Violence Helps Where Violence . Rules*

The CAC, in fact, has found itself in the middle of this sea change. When Neil Barclay moved from Los Angeles to take over as the museum's director in 2013, he initiated an open call for New Orleans-based artists “just as a way to understand what’s here,” he said over lunch at Marcello's, in the Warehouse District. Out of over 250 yearly applicants, 30 local artists are selected for a show that opens at the CAC on White Linen Night, an annual block party in August for galleries and museums. But that is only half the story, if not less: the regional museum is in the midst of repositioning its program to focus—and, it would follow, to raise money—outside of New Orleans. The future exhibition calendar include shows by Sweden's Jockum Nordstrom, Chilean-born Cecilia Vicuña, and New York-based (though New Orleans-born) **Rashaad Newsome**.

The art world has noticed. “I think 10 years ago, somebody would have said, ‘Ugh, you’re being offered a show in New Orleans, forget it. Don’t even waste your time. We need to have your shows in New York or Chicago ... even Denver, maybe,’” said Marc Glimcher, the CEO of Pace Galleries, which provided support for Pendleton’s show. “Now you can see that there’s so much energy here. New Orleans feels like a fresh start for an art world that has some meaning.”

Historically, artists have flocked to vibrant cities where the real estate is cheap, and entire arts districts have sprung up as result, such as the St. Claude neighborhood, which is east of the French Quarter and Marigny and has been entirely revitalized as a hub full of collectives and galleries.

Last year, the CAC was awarded a million-dollar grant from the The Wallace Foundation specifically to help expand its audience. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation also signed on to support the 2015-16 season, as did the Ford Foundation, which Barclay pointed out hadn't funded the museum in 10 years. "I think it's because the work that we're trying to do is so much a part of trying to add something to the ecology of what's happening here," he said.

It's easy to be cynical, maybe, about the CAC's great ambition beyond New Orleans. But the museum's success will only spill over into the community around it. "We've been developing a real sense of who's out there and who might benefit from our support, while also trying to be involved more nationally and internationally, so that our support of these local artists also can have resonance for their careers beyond New Orleans," said Barclay during lunch. "So we're trying to be really smart about how do we get our own reputation to a level that it means something when these artists are shown at the CAC."

Back at the opening of "Becoming Imperceptible," the Edna Karr High School Drumline marched through the CAC's lobby, and two musicians performed Steve Reich's clapping music. Following the performance, guests retreated to the coffee shop-cum-bar.

Up on the second floor, Pendleton briefly stepped away from his adoring public. "What the CAC is trying to do is imagine a future for itself and also its place within the community," he explained. "What is the role of art and an arts organization? What effect can it have on society? How does it shape and create social space? And that is an aspect of my work. It's something that I hope to complicate, if that makes sense, in terms of the ideas that I put forth."

He turned, ready to return to his schmoozing.

“It’s a capacious space, to say the least.”