

## ART REVIEW

# At the Gardner, Adam Pendleton puts the art world's sins in black and white

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 6, 2020, 3:29 p.m.



Installation view of "Adam Pendleton: Elements of Me" at the Gardner Museum. STEWART CLEMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN/COURTESY ADAM PENDLETON

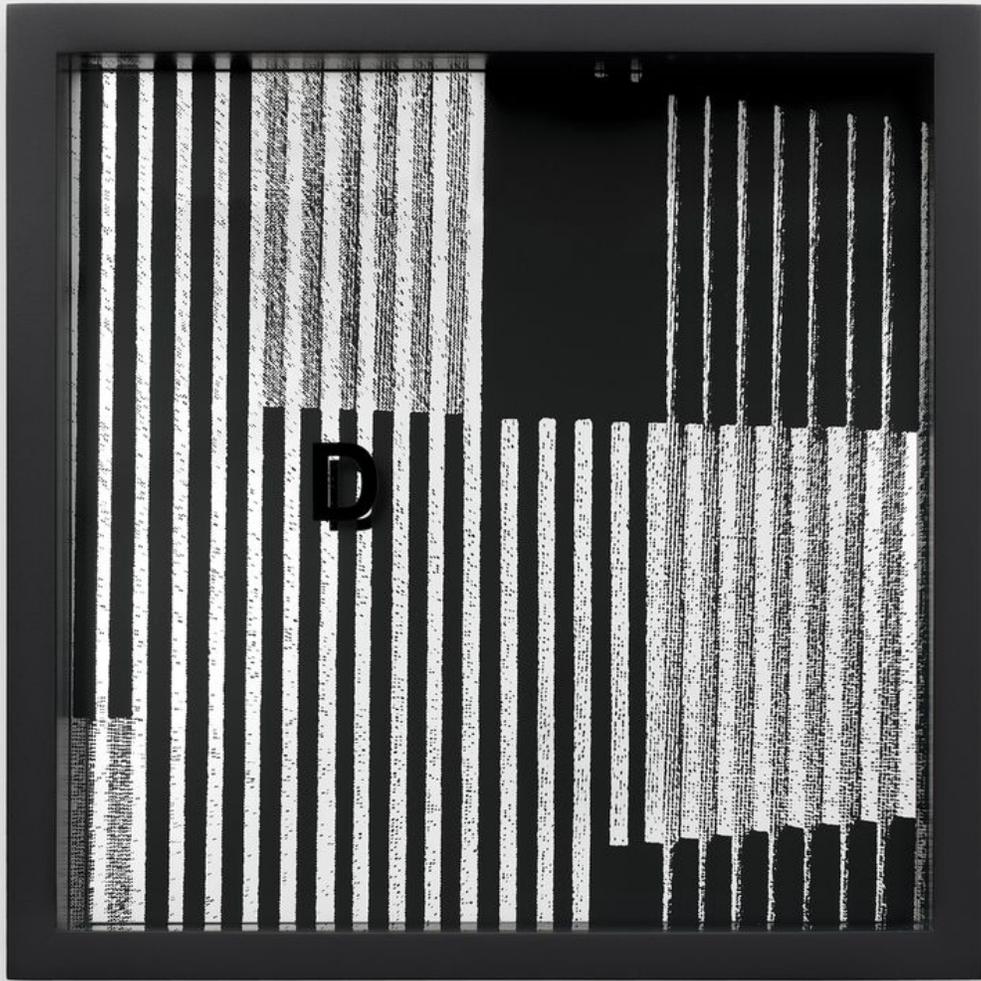
In April, when the pandemic was new, Adam Pendleton looked out the window of the Hudson Valley house he shares with his husband and kept seeing in his mind's eye three words floating over the budding leaves and patchy fields turning brown to green: SEE THE SIN. For Pendleton, a Black artist whose work serves up sly challenges to the exclusions of art history, it was less a moment of clairvoyance than a perpetual simmering, destined to boil over sooner or later.

[By the time he wrote about it for ARTNews, with his story published June 4](#), the pandemic's early, anxious novelty — and the sunny illusion that we were all, somehow, in this together — had given way to calamity. A week before, on May 26, the country erupted in mass protest, its long, bleak history of racial terror given a digital rallying point, shared on social media millions of times with the on-camera killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Truth emerged, for all to see: Whatever we were in, it was divided, as ever, on racial and economic lines.

For Pendleton, abstract rumination was consumed by urgent, stark fury. “I realized I wanted to ask ‘Whose life *doesn't* matter?’ ” he wrote. “But then: When you have to ask, it's probably too late.”

SEE THE SIN, for Pendleton, was no longer just a notion, hovering in his mind over a bucolic valley. The anguish of America's foundational sin — bondage, and the deep, generational racism bred deep in its bones — was spilling into streets all over America. In his rural retreat, Pendleton swiped those three words in black ink on white paper with quivering fury.

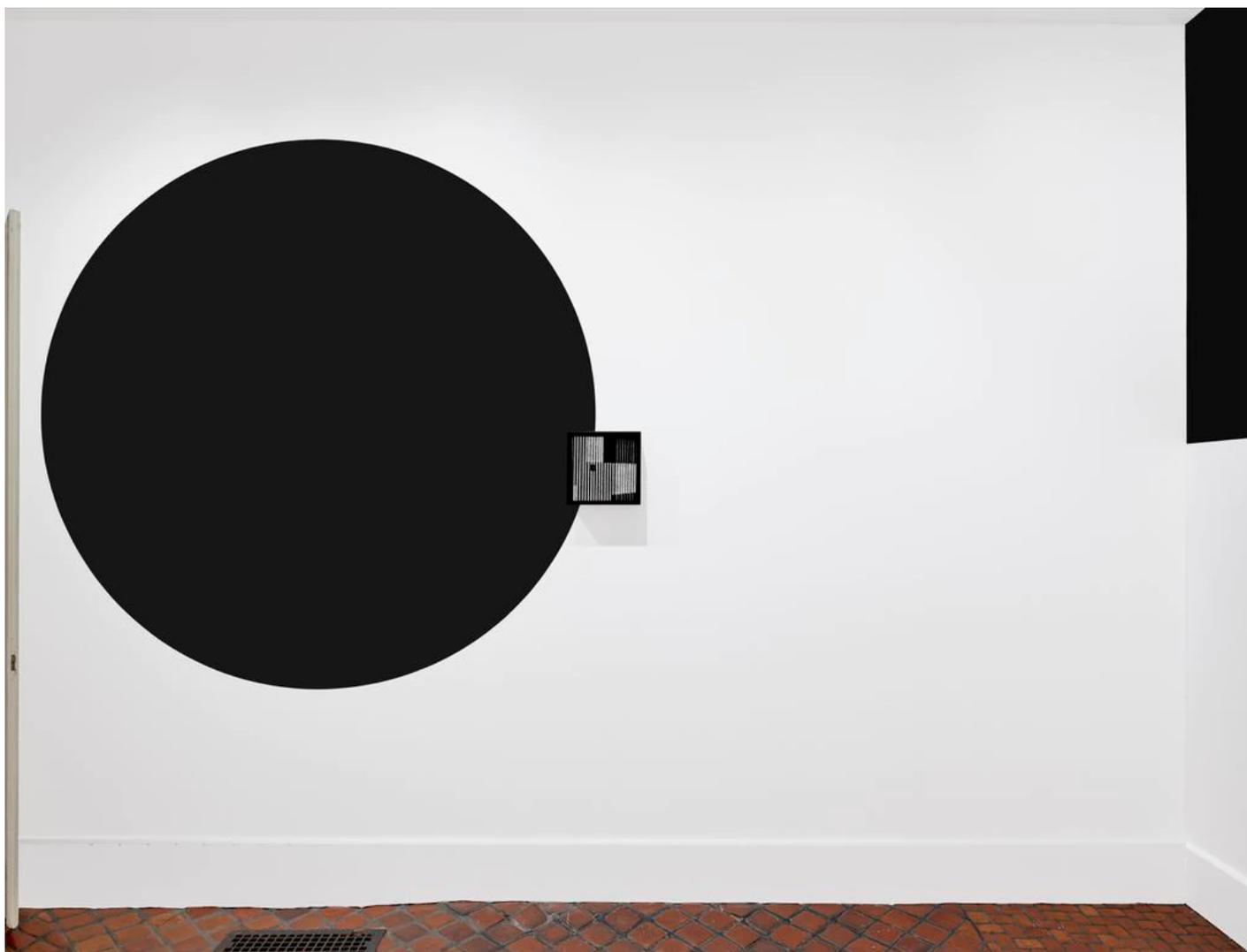
That work isn't part of “Elements of Me,” Pendleton's pocket-size show at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The show is from the time before — opened in February, suspended a few weeks later by the pandemic, and reopened now, into a new world. But “SEE THE SIN” would settle in comfortably here, explicit about a subject Pendleton's work has treated implicitly for much of his career.



Installation view from Adam Pendleton's "Elements of Me" at the Gardner Museum. ANDY ROMER PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY ADAM PENDLETON

I saw the show, and met the artist, in the winter. I found it wry and provocative, a history lesson from an alternate universe. Pendleton, in person, was taciturn and demure, an artist who preferred to let his work speak as it might, rather than boxing it in with too much guidance or explanation. Now it's August, and so much has happened. Walking through the Gardner *palazzo* this week, with its neoclassical vaults and expanses of Italianate tile — hallmarks of a Euro-centric ruling order here, the generational bulwark that kept official culture blithely insulated from the messy world outside its doors — I was sure Pendleton would now have more to say.

But the work still speaks for itself, and at a higher key than before. The show, with its sharp black geometric forms inscribed on white walls, its small etched mirrors in boxes, its rough and gestural works on paper, is mysterious. But it's also so very clear. Amid the dark hallways of the Gardner palace, it glows white-hot, a beacon. It jars, seduces, and slyly condemns.

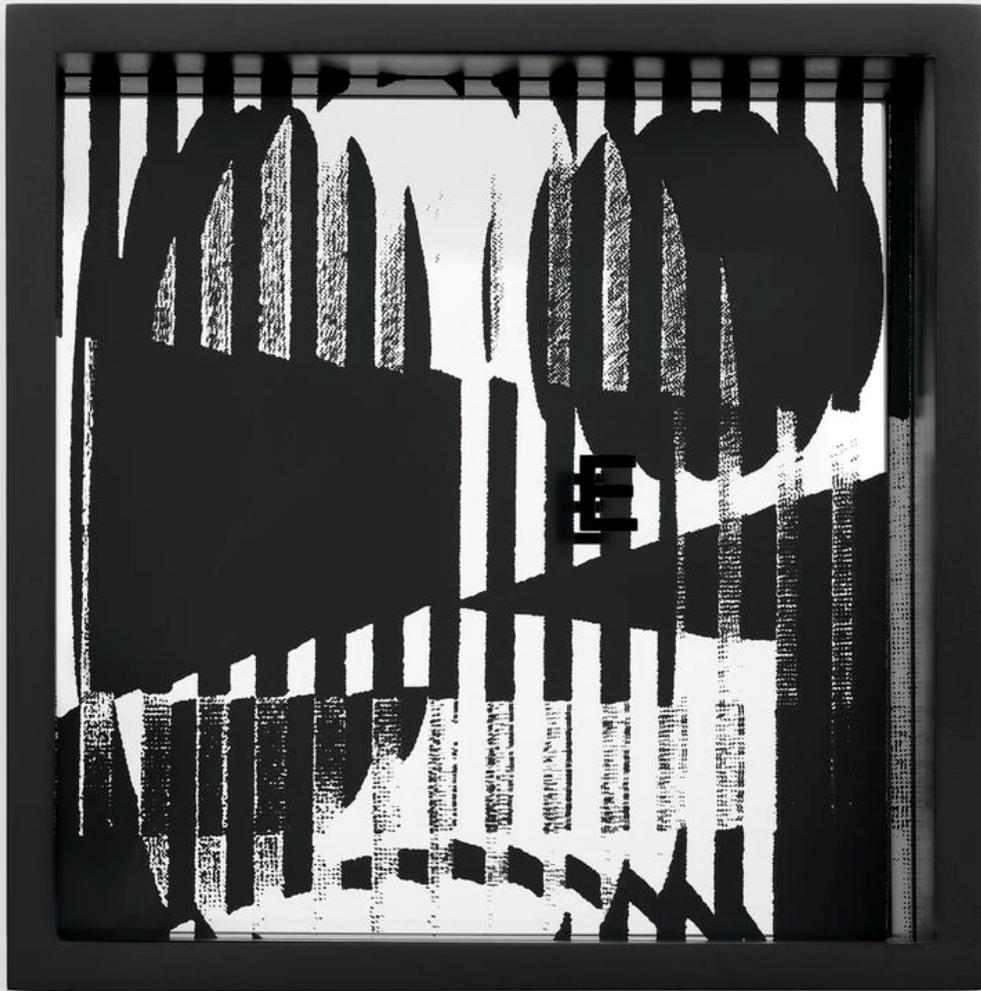


A view of "Adam Pendleton: Elements of Me" at the Gardner. STEWART CLEMENTS PHOTOGRAPHY AND DESIGN/ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

Pendleton, in his mid-30s, is on the younger end of a generation of Black artists digging at the footings of the country's ruling order and its narrow view of cultural history — I think right away of Leslie Hewitt and Theaster Gates. The fact that Pendleton aims his critique at Surrealism and Abstraction, using its own language against it, says a lot. He calls much of his work “Black Dada,” after the movement of early-20th century European absurdists (headlined by Marcel Duchamp and André Breton) who seeded generations of creative subversives, particularly in the United States. Dada was an exclusive club, to be sure. None of its members, as you might guess, were Black. Few of the movement's progeny on this side of the ocean — through abstraction, through Minimalism, [through Conceptualism](#) — were, either. It seems a little out of proportion, doesn't it? (There were some — Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, and Charles Gaines come to mind. But they were

largely overshadowed by their peers, artists we're only getting to know now, in hindsight.)

And so, Pendleton makes his own notes in the margins. In February, this felt like wiley provocation, a language appropriated and turned back on itself. Amid the high-contrast, crisp forms on the walls, I was seized immediately by a partly-observed black-and-white copy of a textbook page with clinical photos of African idols. If you don't know the full history, it's already a little uncomfortable — that European colonial habit of studying conquered cultures like specimens under glass. And if you do — the European Surrealists' preoccupation with “Primitivism,” a supposedly primal aesthetic channeled, apparently, through a collective unconscious — well, you might just cringe like me.



From Adam Pendleton's "Elements of Me" at the Gardner Museum. ANDY ROMER PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY ADAM PENDLETON

Whatever our 21st-century minds make of such condescending juvenelia (in my case, not much), this was the bona fide avant garde of its day. Primitivist ideas were vital to Pablo Picasso's conception of Cubism in the early 20th century, and thus Modernism more broadly. Today, it just feels like patronizing, willful narcissism, that colonial-minded notion that the rest of the world offered a menu from which to pick and choose in the grand remaking of a thoroughly modern reality. But Pendleton is the one doing the choosing here, deftly exposing those simplistic ideas by reattaching them to the meanings from which they were stolen. I'm particularly fond of a grid of black and white works on paper, some of which would be good mock-ups for Franz Kline's robust, gestural abstract works if not for the text Pendleton embeds within them. (One reads "OKDADAOKD" — cheerful mockery, maybe, of the bratty movement's' absurdist leaps. Whatever you say, fellas.)

Doesn't it feel like so much art made in the 21st century is trying to make up for art made in the 20th? It's not a bad strategy. With whole swaths of society missing until very recently from museum and gallery walls — women artists, Black artists, Native American artists, Asian-American artists — there's no shortage of material. But it's more than a strategy. It's a vital project, to challenge, engage with, annotate, and redefine a canon largely designed as much by what it left out as what it deigned to include. Such a canon serves only the few, which is a problem not just of the art world. The sin was always there to be seen. Work like Pendleton's helps lift the veil.

## **ADAM PENDLETON: ELEMENTS OF ME**

Through Nov. 15. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 25 Evans Way. 617-566-1401, [www.gardnermuseum.org](http://www.gardnermuseum.org)

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