

HYPERALLERGIC

The Beauty of Howardena Pindell's Rage

by John Yau May 11, 2014



Howardena Pindell, "Carnival at Ostende (detail)" (1977), mixed media on canvas, 93 1/2 x 117 1/4 inches

As much as Howardena Pindell's unstretched paintings and drawings—which were made between 1974 and 1980—share something with the Pattern and Decoration movement, or with monochromatic abstraction, color field painting, all-over painting, fiber art, the counting work of Roman Opalka, and the spot paintings of Larry Poons, what elevates them above all of these aesthetic and stylistic connections is her subtle infusion of a deep and palpable rage. In fact, one of the things I find remarkable about Pindell's paintings and drawings from this period is the time-consuming process she developed that enabled her to transform her rage into something that was added to the work step-by-step, and bit-by-bit.

This process consisted of layers of pale pastel acrylic paint and hundreds upon hundreds of punched paper dots made by a hole-punch, which were applied to canvasses that she had cut either into sections or strips and sewn back together. Pindell's rage became paintings in which dissonance and anarchy were submerged, but not hidden. There is also something delicate and vulnerable about her paintings and drawings at that time.

In an untitled drawing-collage measuring around 17 x 90 inches, and dating from 1973, Pindella glues more than 20 thousand hand-numbered paper dots to the paper's surface. The hand-numbered circles form neat vertical and horizontal rows that culminate in an elongated horizontal grid. From a distance, the drawing-collage looks like rows of circles, each of which has a black scribbled line in it. The rhythmic peacefulness this drawing seems to initially exude is quickly upended once you move closer and see that each circle is numbered, and that its placement within the grid, with its orderly rows, is completely arbitrary.

And yet there are uncanny correspondences. I am not sure how long it took me to notice that number 2090 is directly above its nearly identical twin, and the number 7111 is above 7110, but once I did, I found it daunting to consider scrutinizing the rest of the drawing with that kind of focus. Pindell puts a powerful political spin on what Hans Hofmann called "push-pull," flipping this viewer, at least, into a state of attraction, confusion and anxiety. At the same time, it was clear to me that these chance connections exist like bits of unanswered hope amid the order and chaos blooming throughout the drawing.

In this drawing, Pindell unites the obsessive behavior of madness with the logical behavior of the production line. I know of no other work that so perfectly merges order (grid), chaos (numbers in no discernible order or pattern), and the residue of compulsive behavior, which I see as a comment on both the hellish dullness of manual labor jobs and the frustration that artists of color feel about the art world's closed doors. And yet, at no point does Pindell seem to point fingers or claim to be a victim—she is too proud and, to my mind, courageous to settle for those roles. If anything, this drawing is as performative as one of Jackson Pollock's poured paintings, but towards a very different end. More importantly, at least from an aesthetic point of view, Pindell may have taken cues from Pollock, but the result is entirely her own and owes nothing to the precedent. That should count for something.

A number of commentators have pointed out the affinities between Pindell's paintings of this period and those of Claude Monet. In Pindell's work, a pale expanse of unevenly applied acrylic is speckled with differently sized paper dots (or spots) that have been colored, marked or drawn on—the detritus of a secretarial or clerk's job. In some paintings, such as "Untitled #20 (Dutch Wives Circled and Squared)" (1978), the surface is cluttered with paper circles, while in "Carnival at Ostende" (1977), the circles are scattered across the surface, like the aftermath of a parade.

The title "Carnival at Ostende," as well as its evocation of blue and red confetti, brought to mind James Ensor's poster, "Carnival at Ostende" (1931), which Pindell most likely saw while working as a curator in the print department of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The origin of the yearly carnival was a philanthropic party organized by a group of men (including Ensor) from Ostend, Belgium. In citing Ensor, Pindell invites the viewer to read her work allegorically and recognize that there might be sarcasm and mockery, not to mention something grotesque, disguised in these works. By suggesting that it was necessary for abstraction to don a disguise, Pindell critiques the ideal of non-objectivity and pure painting, as well as suggests its inherent bias.

In order to understand the possible sources of the artist's anger, I want to cite two biographical details. Firstly, in a conversation with the curator Lowery S. Sims for her exhibition, *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings: A Retrospective Exhibition 1972–1992*, at the Roland Gibson Gallery, SUNY, Potsdam, the artist stated: "the art world does not want artists of color to be full participants." Secondly, in an interview with Lynn Hershman that took place on May 9, 2006, Pindell talked about how she ended up getting a job as an exhibition assistant in the international and national program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, after graduating with an MFA in painting from Yale University. Unable to get a job teaching, she ended up by chance working at MoMA, where she met Lucy Lippard, who introduced her to the work of Eva Hesse and Ree Morton, both of whom had a big impact on her work.

In light of Pindell's statements, it is hard to imagine that she would want to make art that fit in to any trend or style since she recognized that there was no place for her as a "full participant." Moreover, by meeting Lippard and becoming familiar with the work of Hesse and Morton, Pindell learned that there were alternative and untold (or occult) histories to learn from, as well as paths to set out on. While these histories are less hidden than previously, the current exhibition, *Howardena Pindell: Paintings, 1974–1980*, at Garth Greenan Gallery (April 10–May 17, 2014) underscores how much more there is to do and see, particularly in a domain that seems permanently focused on money and the supposedly newsworthy speculations about the best places for the rich to park their cash.