

## Howardena Pindell: Recent Paintings

BY JAN AVGIKOS DECEMBER 2017



*Songlines: Connect the Dots*, 2017, mixed media on canvas, 60 1/2 x 83 inches

It's amazing what a complete game-change results when the stretcher bars for painting go missing. Reflecting on her early optical abstract paintings, Howardena Pindell once remarked that she gave up the rectangle in favor of unstretched canvases with idiosyncratic, non-symmetrical shapes that conjured, as she once put it, "some internal intuition of nature." In effect, she literally "othered" her paintings, which in their new form epitomized difference. That move alone probably diminished her status forever as an abstract painter of note. Add to that the social contents that overtook her field paintings of the '70s, contaminating what could have passed for reference-free minimalist-styled grids and monochromatic fields, with collage and text references to cultural politics. That's all before we get to the part that she is African-American, and female, and quite outspoken on issues of discrimination and social injustice. She became a de facto member of a very small group of African American artists who broke the color barrier, and the gender barrier, and who laid claim to abstraction on their own terms long before the current trend in African American abstraction (For instance, see Amber Jamilla Musser's essay in the October 2017 *Brooklyn Rail*). Can we name another black woman abstract painter from mid-century who has enjoyed any semblance of recognition? Besides Alma Thomas? Not likely.

In the '70s and '80s, Pindell was everywhere and nowhere at once. She allied with the feminist movement in New York and was a founding member of A.I.R.—its only Black member—but after two solo exhibitions the fit wasn't right and she left. In the early to mid '80s she began sewing strips of canvas together, approximating circular biomorphic shapes, loading up her paintings with color and dense layers of punched paper dots, collage elements, and decorative bits—but she never identified with the Pattern and Decoration movement. In the later '80s, after traveling extensively in Africa, India, and Asia, she embraced ethnic materials and techniques, opening her work up to still marginalized worlds of craft and handiwork, and prompting tangled flows of mythology, autobiography, and polemical contents. In retrospect, Pindell blazed trails that were crucial in the formation of multi-culturalism and identity politics, although her foundational role hasn't always been acknowledged.

Her new paintings are forged from technologies she developed in previous decades—for instance, cutting and stitching are integral gestures. The outer edges of the pieced together paintings are left raw and, as if disavowing the hierarchical status of painting itself, she nails her unstretched canvases to the wall with regular finishing nails. Surfaces are repositories for a wide-ranging inventory of mark-making and patterning—grids, counting systems, spiral motifs, doodles—and are drenched in hot, eye-popping candy colors clotted with sprays of decorative debris, including paper dots, foam-core circles, glitter, sequins, and who knows what else. (The press release says there is hair, too.) Paint blankets not only the profusion of collage elements, but also soaks into the fibrous threads from all the stitching that rhythmically animates the paintings and holds them together. There is so much to take in visually, and viscerally, that one of the most fundamental aspects of the work could go unnoticed. The initial impression is that a bunch of strips of canvas fabric have been salvaged from left-over scraps, and that all the piecing and stitching is part of a larger strategy that represents a wonderful act of frugality, recycling that which was once useless and fragmented, to achieve a tangible whole. If that were the case, the paintings would enjoy a certain resemblance to patchwork quilts. From there, it would be a mere step or two for them to be seen as "holistic" and "women's work" and to imply a durable morality: waste not, want not.

But something else happens instead. Pindell begins with a whole piece of canvas, draws on it or maps it out, and then she goes at it, cutting it up, destructing it, and rendering it virtually useless. One can imagine, at that stage of the process, how exquisitely limp that canvas has become, as if the veritable body of painting itself had been hopelessly compromised. Only then, once the idea of "lack" has been instrumentalized, does the act of suturing commence. The suturing stands in for, or takes the place of, closure. It is rough and approximate and it is everywhere in these paintings. It is not restorative but rather seems continually to compensate for that which is repressed. In fact, all the decorative energy and pastel reveries of the paint and the cascades of the shiny and the matte materials are like so many decoys, pretty layers scabbing over the sutured wounds, distracting us from the initial act of "dismemberment" Pindell has visited upon these paintings. The gestures are literal, but they implement worlds of metaphor.

The initial patterns of cutting mimic labyrinths and mazes, places/spaces typically associated with bewilderment and perplexity. Dazzling to look at, the paintings wreak havoc with retinal focus and promote visual confusion. The spider's web structure of *Night Flight* (2015–2016), painted in deep blue and pocked with peach, turquoise and lavender dots of color, plunges us into what could be seen as a microscopic view of an imaginary world. *Nautilus #1* (2014–2015), in sunny yellow, maps spiraling interiorities. *Songlines: Cosmos* (2017) features a large pale mint green mass, orbited with smaller blobs—one in pink, one in lavender. *Songlines: Connect the Dots* (2017), a large white cloud-shaped canvas, is a radiant confection of translucency, white glitter, and rhythmic stitch lines. What's amazing is how many "discredited forms" she mobilizes, whether it's folksy craftiness or the gaudy Funkadelic style of African American aesthetics. But then, it's in its many provocations that the work succeeds. Implemented by chaotic abundance and high-octane turbulence, the carnivalesque springs to life throughout the work, and proposes a world, with all its dazzling glittering, pulsing debauchery, turned upside down.

Pindell's new paintings promote a sense of delirium. Just as her paintings of the '70s threatened to break the frame with their thickly crusted surfaces built up and brimming with labor-rich intensity, so too the new works, with their affective dimension of wild abandon, seem continually to verge on falling apart—which is the primal moment that inaugurated this work and which serves as a precondition for all that follows.