

## Howardena Pindell: What Remains to be Seen

BY DAVID SPRECHER APRIL 4, 2018



Video Drawings: Swimming, 1975

The poster image for Howardena Pindell's first major museum retrospective, *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen*, shows a blurred figure diving into a pool overlaid with marker-drawn numbers and arrows that seem to describe a hidden kinetic order. The photograph was made in 1975 and is one of the first iterations from her series of *Video Drawings* (1974–ongoing) in which Pindell photographed drawings on acetate in front of her television screen. Many of the early *Video Drawings* depict athletes in motion and have a vaguely conspiratorial quality to them, as if they're revealing urgent truths encoded in quotidian events. Without any indication of what the numbers and arrows refer to, the works resonate with implied significance that's undampened by political specificity. More than any other works in the show, the early *Video Drawings* feel like questions.

A selection of *Video Drawings* are included in the middle of the loosely chronological retrospective, co-curated by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, that spans five decades of Pindell's compelling and varied career. Their central placement in the exhibition allows them to bridge the formal abstraction of her early career and the far more autobiographical and overtly political work she's done since 1979. That year Pindell's life and career were dramatically altered by a near fatal car accident that left her with concussive memory loss. Because the shift in her work is so acute, the exhibition folds around that event with a central gallery devoted to reproductions of newspaper clippings and pop culture debris conveying the zeitgeist of 1979.

The drawings and painting from the late sixties and seventies that make up the first half of the exhibition introduce Pindell's enduring fascination with numbers, grids, and pointillism. Many of the drawings included are done on graph paper and reflect a post-minimalism akin to Eva Hesse's drawings or the programmatic approach Lee Lozano utilized in her notebooks and Wave Paintings. *1-6031 with Additions, Corrections, and Coffee Stain* (1973), for example, is accurately titled. The tiny numbers are drawn sequentially in ink on graph paper and fill the frame entirely so as to soften into a uniform texture when viewed at a distance. *Untitled #3* (1973) is similar but the numbers are out of order and written on small chads glued to the graph paper. The chads are the bi-product of the large pointillist color-field paintings Pindell made during that period by spray painting layers of color through cardstock stencils with hundreds of small holes punched in them. The simple act of numbering the chads grants them an individuality that extends to the thousands of dots that compose the paintings. When considered alongside the numbered dots in the *Video Drawings*, it starts to feel as though all these works are employing the same roster of particles. Maybe the paintings are zoomed-in renderings of television screens. Maybe the drawings on graph paper are calculations for the enigmatic theories outlined in the *Video Drawings*. The possibilities are exciting and the exhibition does a good job of fostering these explorations.

After the car accident in 1979, motivated by the near-death experience, Pindell began expressing her political views more bluntly in her art. In 1980 she made *Free, White and 21*, a video piece in which she dresses in whiteface to parody a racist interlocutor. Pindell, as herself, recounts the racism she'd experienced growing up in America while, as the white woman, she dismisses her accounts with phrases like "... you really must be paranoid. Those things never happen to me."

Figuration and language become prominent in her drawings and paintings as well. In *Autobiography: Air (CS560)* (1988), an unstretched canvas is filled with the silhouettes of bodies beneath words and phrases like, "HOW DARE YOU QUESTION," "SLAVE MARKET," "BURIED ALIVE," "CENSORSHIP," and "BEATEN." Pindell said the work "*Air (CS560)* symbolizes my feelings about universal struggles for dignity, civil and human rights, as well as some of my personal agonies. To emphasize this, I have put my own blood on the canvas before gessoing it." A similar work from 2014 titled *Hunger: The Color of Bones* depicts starving children amidst a field of capitalized words including the names of countries, "FINLAND," "MEXICO," "SOUTH AFRICA," general atrocities, "GENOCIDE," "HOLOCAUSTS," "STARVATION," and statements about cannibalism, "ANCIENT EGYPTIANS ATE THEIR CHILDREN DURING FAMINES." On a low plinth in front of the painting, model skeletons and skulls are arranged as they might be for a theatrical dragon's lair.

Pindell's life long work as an activist is impressive and she's been a powerful and influential voice challenging racism in the art world, but her heavy-handed rendering of her political concerns, as in the paintings described above, flattens much of her later work. In a Video Drawing from 1988 titled *War: The "L" Word (George Bush)*, a screenshot of the former president is overlaid with the arrows, dots, and numbers as in the earlier *Video Drawings* but in this instance the word "LIAR" is capitalized and centered in a clean font. A statement so literal and familiar leaves no room for the viewer to participate in the work. The mystery evoked by the numbers and arrows in the earlier *Video Drawings* is muted, along with their invitation to speculate. Nevertheless, as a whole, the exhibition is a complex portrait of a multifaceted artist. The through lines and frictions between the diverse ways Pindell makes art are as thought provoking as the best of her work.