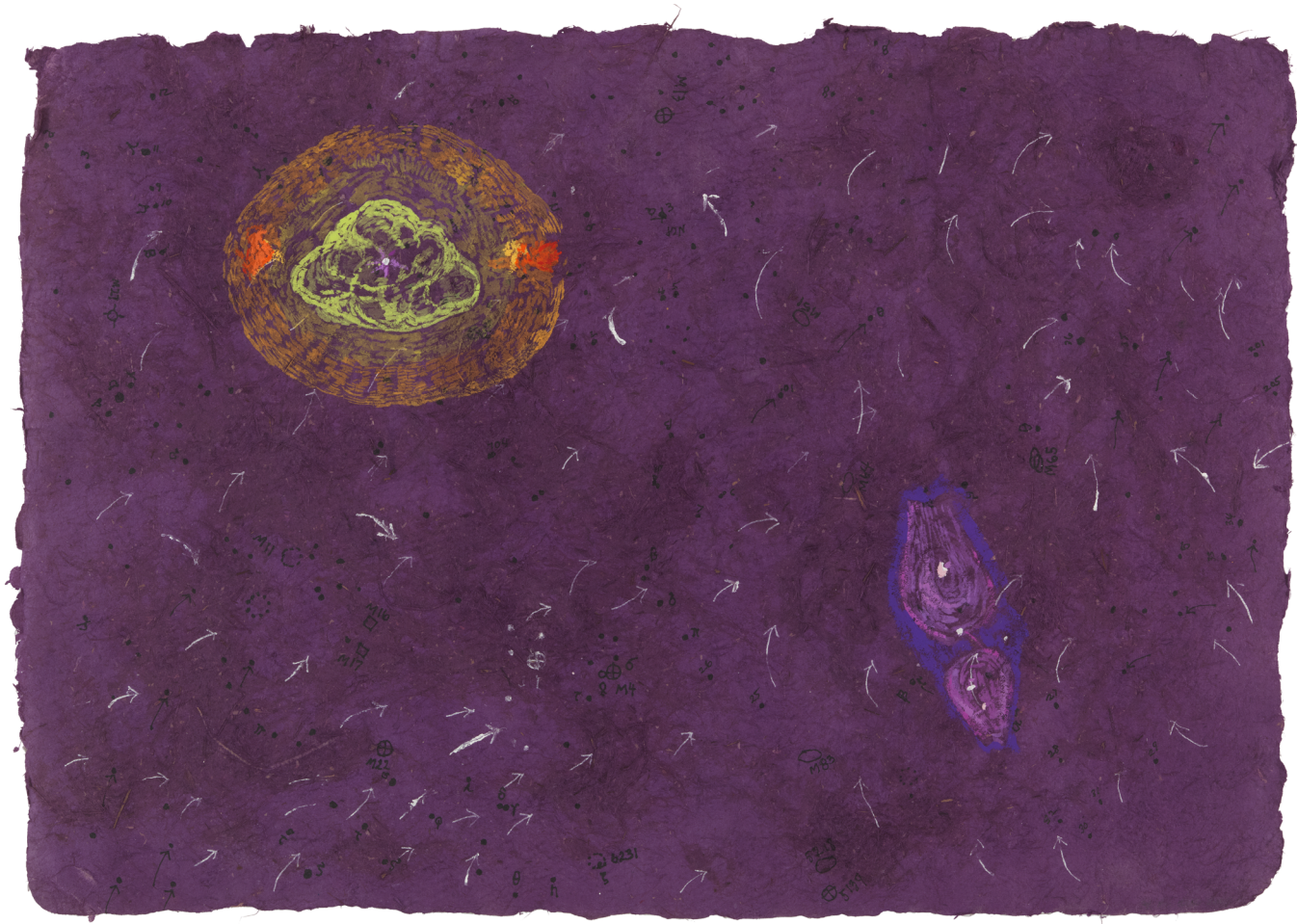


# HYPERALLERGIC

## Howardena Pindell Gets Her First Major Museum Survey

by Claire Voon April 1, 2018



*Astronomy: Nebula NGC6826*, 2005, ink, acrylic, and gouache on paper, 8 3/4 x 12 1/2 inches

When Howardena Pindell was working in the Museum of Modern Art's curatorial ranks in the late 1960s and '70s, she sometimes visited its frame shop to sift for treasures in its trash. She would pick out the discards of mat boards, cut out the beautifully beveled pieces. She obscured these canvases with clusters of punched-out papers, at times accentuating them with dollops of paint or holding them by thin thread. The works exemplify her adeptness at transforming detritus into elegant abstractions with alluring optical depth, as well as her long-lasting exploration of order within chaos, and vice versa. They are small versions of the large, unstretched paintings for which she is most known, which gleefully pushed away from painting traditions at the time.

Now, at age 74, Pindell is having her first major museum survey, currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, that illustrates how her practice developed over 50 years. *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen* progresses, for the most part, chronologically, beginning with the artist's early paintings as a graduate student at Yale University to her mixed-media works created as recently as 2015. It was co-curated by MCA curator Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, where it will travel next.

The exhibition clearly charts the chapters of Pindell's career, drawing connections between seemingly sudden changes in her visual language. Early works on paper show how she freely experimented with unconventional materials to find her unique voice within the formalist tradition of painting. Pindell first engaged with hole-punched circles by counting and numbering each one, then placed them over a gridded form—often the lines of graph paper—and added embellishments with acrylic, watercolor, glitter, and even baby powder.

"I saw writing numbers as drawing," she said at the exhibition preview, adding that her interests in numbers as well as the grid stem from her childhood. She recalled seeing her father, a mathematician, often write down figures in a gridded journal. *What Remains to be Seen* also includes Pindell's first soft sculpture—an Oldenburgian stuffed grid she made between 1968 and 1970.

The exhibition stresses how these fractures—her literal break with the institutional art world and her physical injury—altered the trajectory of her art making. A hallway splits the show in two with a didactic installation dedicated to what life was like for Americans in 1979. It features movie posters, magazine covers, and advertisements that highlight pop culture and politics; a separate timeline outlines key moments in Pindell's own life from 1968 to 1982.

While works before this hallway are concerned with formalism, those after grapple explicitly with social injustices, from those Pindell experienced as a black woman to broader, global issues. In the immediate gallery is her iconic video work, *Free, White and 21* (1980), which she made eight months after the car accident and debuted at the women's space A.I.R. Gallery. Speaking to the camera, Pindell frankly recounts her own experiences of racism and sexism; she then plays the role of a retorting white woman who claims that Pindell is paranoid and ungrateful. The work is a searing critique of institutionalized racism and the white feminism of the women's movement that often tokenizes women of color. The car accident nearly silenced Pindell; *Free, White and 21* epitomizes her determination to speak out. Although Pindell had long addressed the art world's racial and gender bias in lectures and writings (the MCA has diligently compiled examples online for this exhibition), after 1979, these frustrations also changed her art.

The car accident had also muddled her memory. To reconstruct traces of her past, Pindell integrated fragments of photographs and postcards of familiar places into her paintings. Her collaged pieces from the '80s record her working as a memoirist, but also, at times, an activist. In her *Autobiography* series, she explores her experiences of solace as well as trauma. *Autobiography: Air (CS560)* (1988), one of her first works to incorporate text, references universal struggles for civil and human rights. Like some other paintings in this series, it features subtle tracings of Pindell's own body that recall chalk outlines at crime scenes.

Other works are less personal and more overtly political. The exhibition includes photographs, created as video drawings, that respond to wars in Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Sudan. Other mixed media pieces from the late '80s and early '90s highlight issues from New York City's homelessness crisis to the AIDS epidemic.

Pindell wrote, in her artist statement for the 1980 show at A.I.R. Gallery: "As a Black American woman, I draw on my experience as I have lived it and not as others wish to perceive my living it as fictionalized in the media and so-called 'history' books." From developing her own painting language to producing portraits that describe her life in a way only she can, Pindell asserted power even as others denied it from her. The exhibition's title alludes not only to the layered visuals in her work but also to this agency she wields as an artist. It is she alone who determines what is seen, and what remains to be seen.