

INCONVERSATION

Howardena Pindell with Toby Kamps

BY TOBY KAMPS JULY 2019

“I felt it was my duty to criticize the art world, and I had the experience to do it.”



Untitled, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 78 1/4 x 98 1/2 inches

Howardena Pindell (b. 1943, Philadelphia) has had a long and pioneering career making art and art history. A painter and mixed-media and video artist with a unique, bifurcated practice, Pindell makes both sumptuous process-driven abstract works and pull-no-punches issue-based works that call out racism, sexism, and other injustices. She was the first black woman to work as a curator at MoMA, a founding member of the first all-female cooperative A.I.R. Gallery (Artists in Residence), and a leading light in the feminist and Black Arts Movement. In addition, she is an accomplished writer and teacher. Following her major traveling retrospective organized by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassell Oliver that opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2018 and her first solo exhibition in London at Victoria Miro Mayfair, Pindell speaks about her inspirations, her methods and her current projects.

Toby Kamps (Rail): Few artists play on two registers the way you do. You make process-driven abstract works that are beautiful in an engulfing, embracing, and all-over way. You also make biting political work that uses text and collage elements along with intentionally abrasive painted marks to name and criticize injustice in all of its forms. How do you reconcile these two poles of your work? Do they come from different sides of the brain?

Howardena Pindell: I don't know about the brain, although the right side of mine was injured in a car accident in 1979. I just know I do both because I need to keep myself balanced. It's hard sometimes, but I try to make it so that the process-driven work is a kind of peaceful space because the other work—with its research—is pretty grim. So, I use both to kind of balance out my brain as best I can, although I often feel a lot of anxiety. How to explain it? I need to do both in order to be a little more balanced. Because if you only do the political work, or the issue related work, it's pretty upsetting.

Rail: Upsetting because you're fiddling while Rome burns when you're working abstractly, and spending too much time on negative things in the issue-based work?

Pindell: Rome is burning regardless of the focus of my work. Perhaps my work, along with the activists working for other causes to change things, will help to put a fire out.

Rail: But first you were a representational painter, right?

Pindell: Yes, originally. I was a traditional figurative painter, and then my work became more abstract when I went to graduate school at Yale. And then I had a full-time job after I graduated. I was working at the Museum of Modern Art in the curatorial department, first as an exhibition assistant, then as a curatorial assistant, then as an assistant curator associate, and finally as an associate curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. I was also acting head of the department when the department head was traveling.

Rail: You were the first Black curator at MoMA, correct?

Pindell: Yes, that's right. And I didn't have daylight in the studio after work, you know. I was used to doing figurative work with daylight. So, I just started playing around with the grid and circles, and the circles were inspired by one of the artists in my class at Yale, Nancy Murata. She started playing with circles and that kind of clicked, and I've been obsessive about using that shape ever since. But that also comes from when I was a child traveling with my parents from Philadelphia, where we lived, to southern Ohio. My mother would hang out with her sisters and her mom, and my father and I—he loved to drive around—we would drive down to northern Kentucky.

He liked root beer, so we stopped at a root beer stand, and they gave us a chilled mug like everyone else's, but the bottom of ours was a big red circle. And that meant under Jim Crow that the dishware was segregated. If it didn't have a circle it meant you were white, and if it had a circle it meant that you were not white. So that kind of stuck in my brain, and then I found that just transforming the circle into something positive was a task that seems ongoing. Especially now, when it feels like things are being rolled back, the circle's working on one level in my abstract work, but then it keeps me, shall we say, honest. It keeps me aware that there's so much to do in terms of racism and sexism and xenophobia and the way LGBT people are treated. Under our current administration in Washington things seem to be going backward. The current political climate reinvigorates the circle for me.

Rail: Would you consider the circle a submerged political element in the early abstract work?

Pindell: Maybe. I was trying to figure it out: why am I using the circle? And when I realized this reason, oh my God, that was a shocking experience! I find it very soothing to replace the circle as a negative symbol with something that's positive. Although, I mean, I look at the planet. A lot of nature is round. A lot in the cosmos is round.

Rail: Often your circles are numbered. Why is that?

Pindell: Well, a friend of mine told me years ago that, during slavery, if you think of circles as dog tags, some slaves had to wear geometric metal tags with dates and numbers that designated their plantation or what their particular skill was. I don't know whether it meant that you could go out at night, but it was a form of identification. Another person looked at my circles as representing the number of slaves—the massive amount of people that were brought over here to build the economy, to work for free. Or, it represented the number of kidnapped Africans who were thrown overboard from slave ships for insurance. The White House and the Capital were built by slave labor.

Rail: When I was thinking about the abstract work, the term “murmuration” came to mind.

Pindell: Oh, what's that?

Rail: Murmuration is the act of murmuring and also the term for a swarm of starlings. Your abstract work, especially the bas-relief works on paper incorporating circles punched from paper and thread, reminds me of the energy of crowds, and things in nature like rustling leaves. I think of collective consciousness: we're little dots that bounce up against other dots. The numbers you sometimes write on the hundreds and thousands of paper circles in these works also seem to me to have a kind of biblical significance—the number of the living. Of course, you can think of the millions of slaves and those minds that never got to express themselves fully. Is this too metaphorical a reading?

Pindell: No.

Rail: But I also know there's also a personal reason for numbering the dots. Your father was a mathematician, right?

Pindell: Yeah, he did a lot of calculations in log books in the car. I would see him write number in books that had a kind of grid. He would count how many miles we had gone. He would have the odometer numbers for the beginning of the trip and he would compare the numbers at the end to find out how many miles we had gone and how many miles per gallon we averaged.

Rail: You mentioned the grid, which is a recurring motif throughout your work. It's drawn with pencil. It's laid down with string. You've even transformed it into a soft sculpture that droops onto the floor, perhaps spoofing all the minimal work that fetishized regularity and order. An impulse to graph, analyze, and count—perhaps inspired by your father—runs through your work, certainly. But what interests me is the fact that it also moves away from logic it becomes something like a stretchable web or a net. I know that you're interested in astronomy. Do the concepts from the vastness and complexity of space affect your pictorial space and conception of grids?

Pindell: Well, the thing is, I came to astronomy very late, so I don't think so. I've seen pictures of deep space in books. I love the images from the Hubble Telescope. Some look like my dot pieces, especially a black one currently on view at Victoria Miro.

With the grid, I was being playful with it, and maybe sarcastic, because when I graduated from graduate school and came to New York it was all about the grid and the golden mean and all kinds of formal devices. I just poked fun at all that by having a portable grid you could carry with you.

Just the other day, after we began talking, I did a little research and I something by a woman named Katrina Axford about the grid. Apparently—this is something that's new to me—the ancient Egyptians used a grid. They used a snap line with red pigment to make a grid. And then between the 14th and 16th centuries in the Renaissance, painters used the grid, and she points out Durer and—to my surprise—Van Gogh, who she says at some point used the grid. And then when they made frescoes, they also used the grid, which I didn't know. And then I was thinking, well, I live in New York City, which has a grid pattern. But then I just got back from London which has a maze pattern for its streets. And then I remembered living in Japan where cities are often on a maze plan, with the head of the clan and their court in the middle. This meant that if there was an adversarial group trying to get to them, they couldn't just go straight, and they would be easily lost in the maze. And then Chuck Close uses the grid. I remember when I curated a show at the Modern about a print he made—a huge mezzotint, a portrait of a man—and the grid was clearly shown because he drew each section of the face separately, square by square. And so, the grid has been out there for a while. I think the photorealists also used it. So, I mean, the grid is really nothing new.

Rail: But you've personalized it, torqued it in a personal way.

Pindell: To some degree, yeah. But I think in the spray paintings the grid is kind of accidental. And what I like about it in them is that it shifts when you look at the painting. There are so many circles that the grid bounces around as you look at the work, and it changes every time a human eye reads it.

Rail: When did the political work or the issue-based work start, and what was the catalyst?

Pindell: I would say the catalyst was a car accident. I was a passenger in the back seat of a car. I had just left the Modern and I changed jobs. I was teaching at Stony Brook University, where I'm teaching now. I've been there about 40 years. And it was my first month or so there, and the department head who lived close to me, the critic Donald Kuspit, picked me up to drive me to school. And that particular morning an art critic wanted to come out to see my work. I had a show up at Stony Brook. And I was in the back seat. She was in the front seat, and a woman on back medication drove across the median strip onto the other side and she hit us on a diagonal. Fortunately, we were slowing down at the light as she turned. I don't know how she got across the median strip, but I ended up with a concussion. My skull was not broken but dented. I was 20 minutes from school. I couldn't sit up, I couldn't read. It was horrible. And I went back to school too soon. My parents were nice enough to come and live with me in my loft in the city on 7th Avenue, and my father would drive me to school. It was a really horrible experience. So hard to explain, it was just terrible.

Rail: Was it one of momentous events that make you reappraise everything?

Pindell: Yes, well, as a result I started the first issue-related piece in 1980. The work was my tape *Free, White and 21*, and in it I wrap my head, and that has to do with the accident. *Free, White and 21* came about because I was really annoyed at the white women's movement because they were being racist as the white men. Maybe a little bit less so.

Rail: You were a founding member of Artists in Residence or A.I.R. gallery.

Pindell: Yes, I'm one of the founding members. I also named the gallery, but I would run into hostility from the white women. I was trying to push the different groups like Guerrilla Girls and to some extent The Heresies. I was asking the other members of A.I.R. to please deal with racism as well as sexism. Because, once they achieve what they want—feminism—they're going to be racist to me. So, I remember someone was told to come to me and tell me to back off, to be “cooperative.” And I wouldn't back off. And what came out of that was the video *Free, White and 21*.

Rail: You play two characters in the video: yourself and, in whiteface and a wig with a stocking pulled over your head, a blonde white woman. Can you describe the dramatic action and where the title came from?

Pindell: I play myself and a generic white, blond woman. I spoke from my own experiences dealing with day-by-day racism. And my white, generic character spoke in opposition to those experiences, questioning their validity.

Rail: You said the issue-related paintings followed *Free, White and 21*. You've also mentioned the influence of your experiences traveling and living around the world. How did this work and these experiences catalyze the issue-based work?

Pindell: After the accident, the paintings started to come through that experience. One was about wife burning in India. I've travelled a lot. I've lived in India for maybe four months. I've lived in Sweden, I've lived in Japan, I've lived in several different cultures, and I've been influenced by them. Each culture has its own troubles. But the Japanese were very prejudiced against foreigners, that included whites. In Sweden, I didn't think I ran into a problem, until, I remember—and I keep thinking about it now—that the group I was traveling with, we were assigned a family, and at the end we travelled with the families. Instead of being given a room in a hotel, they put me in a bed in a bathroom. And I really feel that was racism. I didn't think about it at the time. And they hated the gypsies. They'd all run screaming if they saw one. It was very strange. India is complicated. India, I think, has had the most negative impact on me. I had friends that still want me to come back and visit them, but I won't go back. This is because of the poverty, and the fact that they have the largest enslaved population in the world. They have two-thirds of the world's slaves. And yet they call themselves a democracy. So, I'm just careful. I don't want to go back there.

Rail: Back to this idea of the two branches of your work: some of the issue-related works have really aggressive surfaces—jagged, heavily impastoed brush marks that you've compared to scars ...

Pindell: Yeah, and cutting and sewing too. I like the surface to be invitingly tactile. I remember at Yale that the Paul Rudolph building had rusticated concrete wall, and you could scrape your knuckles on them, especially if you were carrying a portfolio. Maybe that's where that came from. But a lot of African American artists of my generation made physical and tactile work where the hand of the artist was obvious.

Rail: If the abstract work is an ambient embrace, the issue-based images are a punch. They've got a real bite to them. You know how to make a gorgeous sumptuous abstract image. But you know how to pack a punch too. How do you stretch that way?

Pindell: I don't know how to answer that. That's just the way I am.

Rail: Who is your ideal viewer? Would you want a viewer to embrace both of these works equally?

Pindell: Pretty much, yes. As best I can. Right now, in the studio I'm working on some pieces for a show at the Shed in Hudson Yards in Manhattan. They're very tough pieces. One is a video, and the other two are painting installations. They deal with hard subjects like lynching. And then, at the same time, I'm working on three abstract pieces involving sewing. I do it in steps. I have two studio assistants, and we share the sewing. I put down that which needs to be cut and sewn, and then we share it. So, it goes a little bit faster.

Rail: Do you have a studio ritual when you get down to work?

Pindell: No, I just work.

Rail: You don't clean up your desk or have a cup of coffee?

Pindell: No, that's always a problem because I'm such a clutterer. But one of my assistants tries to clear the way.

Rail: Is there a project you've always wanted to realize if time and money were no object?

Pindell: The piece about lynching at the Shed was a piece I proposed for A.I.R., and they turned it down in the early 1970s.

Rail: In that same decade, you drew from your experience as a MoMA curator to critique and expose the way decisions were being made and power was being accumulated in the art world. Do you have any insights into what's going on today?

Pindell: No, I don't, to tell you the truth. I mean, one thing is that things got a little bit better under Obama. And I think that Trump is negative but fortunately he's not interested in culture. Hitler was an artist, and he went after artists whose work didn't follow his standards for Nazi art. He called them “degenerates.” But the current situation is propelling some people who might consider themselves conservatives to become slightly more progressive, so they don't get lumped into the same camp with him. So, it seems as if there are more shows with more people of color. I mean the group that always seems to get left out are the First Nations artists, the American Indian artists. But I think we are seeing more Black artists. I don't know in terms of the Asian artists whether that's improved or not. But I know for Black artists it has improved somewhat, and I think the momentum began under Obama. He was interested in culture.

Rail: So, do you think art-world politics have gotten better?

Pindell: I don't know, yes and no. I think it was Sotheby's that wanted to interview me for a podcast about diversity recently. That wouldn't have happened ten years ago. So, there is some interest expressed by people who normally you wouldn't expect to care.

Rail: You mentioned you're going back to video works. Can you talk a little bit about this and whether they have connections to some of your earlier works, like maybe the television drawings—your arrows and numbers drawn on acetate placed over a television screen that seem to trace political and emotional lines of force?

Pindell: They don't have any connection to the video drawings. I don't want to talk about the new work because I don't want to give it away.

Rail: What's the first art thought that comes to you during the day?

Pindell: That's hard to know. One of my assistants has been getting here earlier, and I do something I call ‘day pages’ every day, I try to at least. And then I do ‘artist pages’ to capture and develop a notebook. I learned about artist pages from Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. It is a great book for helping visual artists and writers to conquer a work block. And I don't know, it just it all melds together. We just ordered some very expensive hole punchers that can punch through a lot of paper. I just got some fresh canvases, and started doing the drawing on it for cutting, so it's all wrapped up together. I've also been collecting images for the video, trying to deal with perceptions.

Rail: I imagine that the barriers between your art and your life have always been very permeable. When you close your eyes at night what do you see?

Pindell: I just go to sleep.

Rail: I'm a little surprised because I do think you have a spiritual and a searching side. But perhaps the way things come to you is different than my Romantic idea of your method.

Pindell: Well, I'm kind of scared of spirituality, because, since the head injury, I tend to be a spiritualist, and I'm more aware of the negative aspects of spirit than I am of the positive aspects. I used to meditate a lot, but I found it's not a good idea. I was for a while working with psychologist Margaret Singer from Berkeley, and she said people should never meditate. She was the expert for the government at the time, although we didn't know she was working for the government. She was the expert on negative effects of meditation.

Rail: Yes, there can be a nihilistic side to some forms of meditation. Are you doing any writing these days?

Pindell: No. I'm more absorbed in the actual physical work.

Rail: The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago has done a great thing and put a terrific archive of your writings online.

Pindell: I'm so grateful for that. Because most of those publications are very rare. The only place you can probably find all of them is in the Museum of Modern Art library. So I'm thrilled they've done that. I'm also very grateful to Garth Greenan Gallery in New York. Garth's really put me on the map these days.

Rail: You've said that your writing was influenced by contemporary events and not your work. But do you see a connection between the writing and the work?

Pindell: No, not necessarily. Because, when I was doing my writing, I was looking at the actual, day-to-day administration of different artistic institutions—how they selected artists, or what artists they favor, or what art galleries were willing to show artists of color. Meanwhile, the Guerrilla Girls were dealing with artists's issues. But they usually really meant white women. There was a show on Madison Avenue, and I can't remember what the gallery name was, but it was 50% white men, 50% white women, and when I brought up the fact there were no women of color, a white woman in the exhibition said “Ah, but we're women.” So as long as they got what they wanted, they didn't care about women of color.

Rail: I'm intrigued by the video drawings. What inspired these works, and what were you trying to trace?

Pindell: As a child I had a Magic Slate toy that had a thick plastic sheet over the top of a wax board. You could draw on it with a stylus, and when you pulled up the top layer, the drawing disappeared. I also had an Etch-A-Sketch. I think I was trying to trace all those words and words you emptied that disappear over time.

Rail: Again, I think of murmurations—the constant flow of words and ideas we're all exposed to every day and also the microaggressions that come at people of color.

Pindell: You never know when you will confront something or someone unpleasant. Years ago I was a bridesmaid in an “upscale” white wedding in Kennebunkport, Maine, George Bush Country. One of the white women guests said to me, “You do not have to lie to me. What do you really do at the Museum of Modern Art?” Another brief story is, I was in my office at the Modern and a white art dealer called to see if a work that had been submitted to the acquisition committee had been accepted into the collection. I said “No.” She asked who was accepted and I mentioned along with others an African American male artist. She started yelling at me, “N****s, n****s, all the Museum wants are n****s.”

Rail: You've obviously got an analytical mind, and early on you used your experience as a curator researching the permanent collection at MoMA to catalogue inequality and underrepresentation in museum collections and exhibitions. I wonder how you applied your curatorial experience when you made the switch to full-time artist. And I ask this as someone who was a museum curator for nearly 30 years and often daydreamed about becoming an artist!

Pindell: It's analytical, but of course there's an emotional component, too, when I encounter something that I feel is wrong. I have worked really hard to be a critical thinker instead of an overly emotional thinker. And I also feel because of my background I have a duty to say something, because no one can say “oh, how would you know?” I've been on the inside of the world's major art museums, and I was acting director of my department when my department head was gone, so I had access to department meetings and saw what went on behind the scenes.

I really felt it was my duty to criticize the art world in general, and I had the experience to do it. The Museum tried to diversify briefly and gathered together a committee. The committee included museum staff and outside individuals like Betty Blayton-Taylor, who was head of the Children's Art Carnival in Harlem, and a Museum of Modern Art project. I was on the committee. The head of the committee was a youngish, wealthy white man, and his assistant was an older Black man. The committee was named after the white man: Byars. It was called the “Byars Committee.” Out of it came a Bearden exhibition and a Richard Hunt exhibition, and then things went back to where they were before. Sometime after the committee had finished its work, Byars committed suicide. We do not know if he faced harassment for what he had done or was he in his own personal hell that had nothing to do with the committee. It was a bit of a shock.

Rail: You've spoken about early interests, and you say when you were eight years old growing up in Philadelphia, Duchamp was your favorite artist. Do you see his influence running through your work?

Pindell: I think only in terms of my taking chances. And playing with odd things. When I was at the Modern, I was in the department that housed his Boite-en-valise (1935–1940) which had miniatures of his pieces in it. That was very rewarding, to be able to basically do what a registrar would do: condition report, and catalogue the specifics of the piece.

Rail: You also do scale shifts very well. In your exhibition at Victoria Miro there are some recent beautiful miniature works on paper.

Pindell: Yeah, for me they're not that small, but the three dimensional pieces, the one that is right on the wall in Victoria Miro's office is called *Dragon*—I think it was the stand-up punched paper circles that create the odd juxtaposition of paper and paint and other mixed media. That's one of my favorites.

Rail: Naomi Beckwith, one of the curators of your recent retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, which traveled to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond and the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University near Boston, spoke about your relationship to the body. You used glitter and even perfume to activate all of the senses, including our sense of time. Are you still thinking about the entire sensorium now?

Pindell: Well, I don't use perfume now. It doesn't last. But the work does have to do with time. I'm always saying, “Do I have enough time to do all the things I want?” I am still teaching, although I only go to Stony Brook twice a week, and I have someone who drives me. But I'm working on my will, and that's kind of upsetting. You have to deal with stuff that isn't pleasant. This is going into territory I try to avoid thinking about.

Rail: Do you feel like saying anything publicly about posterity? Are you thinking a foundation or a gift?

Pindell: I'm thinking about a charitable foundation or charitable trust. A nonprofit.

Rail: Who better than you? That would be fantastic.