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## Art Basel



*Autobiography: Fire (Suttee)* (detail), 1986–1987, mixed media on canvas, 90 x 56 inches

For the 2021 edition of Art Basel, Garth Greenan Gallery presents *Howardena Pindell: Autobiography*. The exhibition will include four iconic paintings from the artist's pivotal *Autobiography* series, all created between 1985 and 1987. Art Basel will be the first time these paintings have been displayed outside the United States.

The *Autobiography* series reflects a difficult but formative period for Pindell. In 1979, a car accident left the artist with acute memory loss. The crash, and her subsequent rehabilitation, literalized a metaphorical process of destruction and reconstruction she had begun exploring in her work of the preceding decade, cutting and sewing strips of canvas into swirling patterns, then building up the surfaces in elaborate stages.

Pindell had diligently collected postcards and photos for many years preceding the accident, relics that only revealed their full usefulness after the crash. In the works immediately following her trauma, Pindell wove the collected images into

sprawling, asymmetrical compositions in painful attempts to consolidate her disjointed memories. In *Autobiography: India (Shiva/Ganges)* (1985), the artist carried this practice forward, integrating more recent memories. Postcards of ancient objects and landmarks encountered on her 1984 National Endowment for the Arts Painting Fellowship to India are layered into the unstretched, asymmetrical canvas. The work is a striking soft pink, the unforgettable color of a lily-spotted pond that Pindell encountered in the Southern Indian countryside. India has always maintained particular significance to the artist, forming a part of her distant ancestry. She recalls her time in India as deeply ambivalent, a result of the country's staggering natural beauty and brutal poverty.

The uncanny resonance between her embodied experience and her formal interests in fragmentation and integration extend beyond the car crash. Dialectical patterns, like that of rupture and healing, abound in Pindell's life and ideas: in her seemingly opposed commitments to abstract and polemical political art; her sense of herself as an African-American, and as a composite of many cultures and backgrounds; her affection for rationality, science, and mathematics, along with her interest in ritual, tradition, and spirituality.

Pindell has alternately described her thick, layered paint strokes as both "the sounds of a mantra" and "symbolic of African ritual scarification." In her work, Pindell takes ritual and tradition seriously—examining their roles in human healing and meaning—whilst remaining wary of the dangerous ways they can be misused. Her deep study of world cultures is simultaneously anthropological and profoundly personal.

In *Autobiography: Fire (Suttee)* (1986–1987), Pindell traces the silhouette of her own body on an irregular ovoid canvas. In reference to the ancient Indian practice known as Suttee, or "widow burning," red, yellow, and orange fingers of paint overlap frantically atop a flame-blue background. Through her haunting use of her own body in the painting, she avoids both the ugly zeal of unqualified judgement of the Other and the academic trap of absolute cultural relativism. Her strong political commitments at home, along with her extensive travel and cross-cultural study, combine to form a dense and powerful work.

Garth Greenan Gallery is pleased to represent Howardena Pindell.

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