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SYNTHESIS AND INTEGRATION IN THE WORK OF HOWARDENA PINDELL, 1972–1992 A (Re) Consideration*

by Lowery Stokes Sims

This essay revisits an earlier version published in the catalogue for the exhibition *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings*, which surveyed the artist's work between 1972 and 1992.¹ The original text referenced curator Terrie Rouse's comparison of Pindell's career with the adventures of the Homeric hero Odysseus.² Certainly the artist's travels within this twenty-year period to several East and West African countries (1973), Egypt (1974), France and India (1975), Brazil (1977), Japan (1982), India (1984), the former Soviet Union (1988), and England and France (1989) not only provided subject matter for her work, but also inspired different approaches to materials and techniques. As Pindell has noted, she "sought solace during these trips in studying and practicing, in some cases, universal spiritual traditions as a link to understanding the culture" and as a means to find "alternative modes of living, thinking and seeing."³

Howardena Pindell is one of several black artists—including Al Loving, William T. Williams, Sam Gilliam, Frank Bowling, Joe Overstreet, McArthur Binion, and Peter Bradley—who established their presence in the art world in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They found their individual expressions within the prevailing modes of geometric and coloristic abstraction, but because this was the height of the civil rights movement, they were confronted with simplistic designations of their work as "black art" and, by implication, "political art."⁴ They were also pitted against their fellow African American artists—Dana Chandler, Jeff Donaldson, Nelson Stevens, Wadsworth Jarrell—who gravitated toward more polemical, culturally referential figuration and, in some circles, were seen as truly representing the black experience.

The dynamics of this era is captured by Susan Cahan in her revealing 2016 study *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, where she indicates the degree to which this split in the black art community was encumbered with destructive psychological connotations as museums attempted to respond to demands to open their doors to blacks and women. She records the opinion of Robert Doty—who organized the controversial 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America* at the Whitney Museum—that abstraction represented a "higher" state of intellectual achievement on the part of African Americans.⁵ He thus played into racist views about the capabilities of black people by presuming to adjudicate criteria by which they would be deemed worthy of inclusion in the greater white world.

* The reproduced text appears in full in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018, 53–86). ©2018 Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. All rights reserved.

This scenario seems to be playing out again in 2017 as black artists once again question appropriate stylistic choices in light of what artist and writer Chloé Bass describes as “the major failures of social relations resulting in an escalation of violence that categorizes the United States in the current moment.”⁶ As older black abstractionists of Pindell’s generation—such as Binion, Loving, Stanley Whitney, Jack Whitten, and Mel Edwards—gain traction in the art world after the extended era of postmodernist identity indulgences, and a younger generation—represented by Tomashi Jackson and Jennie C. Jones—make a strong bid for attention, the viability of abstract art is once again being interrogated. Coalitions such as Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter have unequivocally affirmed their focus “on the interdependence of care and action, invisibility and visibility, self-defense and self-determination, and desire and possibility in order to highlight and disavow pervasive conditions of racism.”⁷ As we will see, faced with such issues four decades ago, along with feminist identity before the model of intersectionality became current, Howardena Pindell admirably found a way to deal with them by progressively narrowing the gap between herself as the creator of her subject matter and herself as the subject matter of her art.

Establishing a Style

In the early 1970s, Pindell was leading a double life as an artist and as a curator in the Department of Drawings and Prints at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. She had completed her MFA at Yale University in 1967, and at that time one of the key references for her work was the elliptical imagery of Larry Poons. She evolved into a skilled practitioner of color-field techniques, creating paintings of subtly nuanced space and atmosphere, as seen in *Untitled* (1969). But by the mid-1970s it was clear that she had begun to rethink her approach to her art, which now involved processes of construction/destruction/reconstruction.

Pindell began to move away from the stretched canvas and would often cut the canvas into strips and sew them back together. This created registers or interwoven surfaces on which she would build up the surface in elaborate stages. She would paint a sheet of paper, punch out dots from it, drop the dots onto her canvas, and finally squeegee paint through the matrix left in the paper from which she had punched the dots. She also punched and collaged dots along with talcum powder onto paper, graph paper, and other semi-translucent sheets that evoked vellum of papyrus. As seen in *Untitled #20* (1974), Pindell suspended threads anchored by nails that signposted the junctures of the grids across the sheets or boards they were mounted on. The gravity-defying dots were allowed to accumulate along the length of the nails to the threads. She would often hang them so that they swung free, instead of encasing them in matboard, glass, and frame. Thus a spatial dimension was evident as the seeming randomness of the dots within the individual squares of graph paper evoked chaos within order. Even after all her various stylistic peregrinations, the trope of the atom could be found in the 2015 etching *Constellation*, which she produced with the Center for Contemporary Printmaking in Norwalk, Connecticut. Pindell took the grid to Oldenburgian (as in Claes) scale in *Untitled* (1970), a large, slack grid constructed

from stuffed and rolled canvas casing. All of these works, however, are united in concept and spirit by Pindell's confronting anew the challenge that preoccupied American artists in New York in the 1940s: how to reconcile structure and automatism.

Pindell found another approach to this deconstructivist attitude in the video drawings that she created from photographs taken directly from the television screen. The images emphasize the graininess of the electronically transmitted image, breaking them down so that we begin to focus on the structure of matter transmitted as electronic pulses. She found a substitute for her collaged dots in the individual pixels of the video drawing images, which—as she often did with the dots—she numbered nonsequentially. She once joked that the numbers on the dots were a response to queries about how many dots there were in her work. Also, given the variety of images Pindell had at her disposal, this became a particularly effective medium for political commentary, as she added numbers, directional lines, and subtitles to the photographs.

She has worked on the video drawings intermittently since 1973. As seen in the selection of images in this exhibition, the early versions focused on sporting events—swimming, hockey, baseball; the notations took on the character of play-by-play charts here conceived of as some greater cosmic event. There are also sly images based on science fiction—"Flash Gordon," "Metropolis"; and images from the 1980s respond to reportage of geopolitical atrocities—torture, famine, apartheid, displacement in Cambodia, Vietnam, South Africa, and the Sudan. On these and other images of political duplicity (*War: A Thousand Points of Light* and *War: The L Word (George Bush)*), the numbering serves to remind us of the magnitude of suffering in the world, while the ironic labeling reinforces the pungency of Pindell's observations.

By the later 1970s, a newer colorist impulse invaded Pindell's work, and brilliantly colored sequins were added as "atomizing" elements. This development may be attributed to her 1977 visit to Brazil, where she again encountered Africa, this time in the orisha culture of Candomblé. In 1981, she exhibited *December 31, 1980: Brazil: Feast of Iemanja* (1980) in *Afro-American Abstraction: An Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture by Nineteen Black American Artists*,⁸ a groundbreaking show organized by April Kingsley. The shimmering surface of this painting, like that of *Feast of Iemanja* (1980) in the present exhibition, evokes the coquettish goddess of the sea, who, along with her Haitian counterpart Erzulie and the West African synthesis Mami Wata, rules the destinies of lovers.⁹ The date in the title, December 31, refers to the Brazilian New Year's Eve ritual of young lovers sending lit candles on paper boats out into the ocean as a sacrifice to Iemanja.

In retrospect, it seems logical to read these techniques and approaches to materials as related to the deconstruction of the language of minimalism and formalism along the lines of Miriam Schapiro's use of patterned fabric to create paintings, and the deployment of craft and domestic arts such as embroidery and crochet in the ambitious projects of Judy Chicago. But there is an important and highly personal cultural component to these changes in Pindell's work. As she recalled, during that period she realized that there was a structural connection between her loosely hung strip-constructed canvases and African textiles, which were exhibited in *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972–73—just before she and I took a trip to West Africa.¹⁰

In her introduction to the catalogue of the *Afro-American Abstraction* exhibition, Kingsley took note of the association of Pindell's work with encrusted textile surfaces such as those

of hunter's tunics, or the Malian quilting technique of *gauffage*. Three years later, writing about adornment and embellishment in African art, Pindell herself would provide a critical context for her own work, noting how surface tension in textures would be created through the application of beadwork "in which the clustered and rippling effect is caused by the beads' relation to the support fabric, as well as by the building up of tension into the warp and woof of the network armature of threads . . . Figure and ground relationships also scintillate and may reverse, heightening the visual surface tension as the sense of background and foreground dissolve."¹¹ A group of resist prints from the Ivory Coast, included in the MoMA exhibition, featured circular patterns/dots set in registers on the surface that were slightly askew, similar to the seemingly random positioning of those as seen in the 1968 work on paper *Gray Space Frame*. Pindell also remembered being particularly attracted to the beadwork shown in the MoMA exhibition because as a young girl she had fabricated beaded pins, which she sold to her classmates in elementary school. And one of the highlights of our trip to Africa was a session bargaining for trade beads on the lawn of the residence of the American ambassador to Ghana.

Pindell's interest in textiles predicts the work of contemporary African artists particularly in the twenty-first century who have looked to textiles as media within which to explore postcolonial issues, identity politics, and aesthetics. As Pindell noted in 1984, "In Africa the geometry and texture of the individual human body engages in an ever-changing dialogue with the adornment selected by the wearer. Placing the objects on zones of the body, the wearer is able to convey messages not only of beauty of sexual allure, but also of status rank, age, tribal identification, and aesthetics, as well as of a state of mind or a desire to placate or seek protection from the environment."¹² This was amply demonstrated in the 2008 exhibition *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art*,¹³ seen at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, which witnessed how contemporary African art textiles have emerged from the shadow of traditional sculpture and masks: from El Anatsui's textile-inspired metal wall pieces, to Yinka Shonibare's signature use of Dutch wax-resist prints produced in Holland for West Africa since the mid-nineteenth century in sculptures and tableaux that reveal the intricate interactions between Africa and Europe, to Grace Ndiritu's videos in which she adapts the movements of contemporary dance to conceal and reveal her body as she manipulates swaths of African print fabric.

These perceptions and developments in Pindell's work occurred at a time when assertions of connections between artists' ethnicity and their work would not have been widely countenanced in the art world. But Pindell herself has always been actively involved in a process of self-reclamation and definition in both her art and her life. She has gradually peeled away the layers of obfuscation with which assimilation and acculturation have disguised her multi-ethnic background. While questions of identity and antecedence have challenged artists of African American descent for at least 150 years, in Pindell's case the question came full circle during this period of her career.

Synthesis

By 1979, Pindell had left her job at the Museum of Modern Art to teach full time at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. At the time the change was welcome, because at last her artwork could become the central focus of her life. Just a few months after Pindell began her new job, however, she was involved as a passenger in an automobile accident that injured her head and left her contending with memory loss. In a situation that would have daunted a less determined soul, Pindell faced the problem head on and came up with a solution by which she would recycle postcards to reclaim her present. An inveterate collector of such ephemera, she now deployed them in an investigation that became the extensive body of *Autobiography* works. As seen in *Autobiography: Japan, East/West Gardens*, and *India (Shiva, Ganges)*, Pindell has definitely gravitated to what she described as “more natural shapes” as the “circle / oval has become more biomorphic, less symmetrical, generated by some internal intuition of nature.”¹⁴ In these works, Pindell segments the postcard images that splay out form through the repetition of discretely progressive views of a scene (similar to the technique of Jiří Kolář). This can also be seen in her manipulation of photographs in *Autobiography/Egypt (Cairo Residential, 1974)* and *Autobiography: Switzerland (Road to Lucerne)* (both 1989).

In 1982, Pindell participated in *The UFO Show* organized by artist and UFO researcher Budd Hopkins at the Queens Museum. Pindell showed a work that consisted of a series of upstretched ovoid canvas shapes “adorned” with her habitual encrustations of dot forms, but now embedded in the surfaces were momentary breaks within which one could see views of various places. The ovals of canvases became floating worlds in some pre-Galilean universe, or—alternately—nebulae of solar systems. She notes that the eccentricity of these shapes was probably the result of her having navigated the asymmetrical, mazelike spaces of Japan,¹⁵ as seen in *Autobiography: Japan (Hiroshima Disguised)* (1982). In these compositions, Pindell shifts our perspective on our world and within the universe from the vestiges of Renaissance perspective, imagining how that perspective would be effected by vehicles that would allow us to journey into space.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw another crucial development in Pindell’s work, as she made herself explicitly its subject. This was first evident in her video *Free, White and 21* (1980), in which she alternately swathed her head in white gauze and appeared in whiteface wearing a blonde wig, while reciting a litany of racial abuses—mental, emotional, and physical—that she and her mother endured. *Free, White and 21* was shown as part of the exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation*, organized by Ana Mendieta in 1980 at A.I.R. Gallery. This milestone exhibition of works by women of African, Native, Asian, and Latino American heritage signaled the first stirrings of new political alignments in the art world and the world at large.

Mendieta’s statement for the exhibition is a pointed indictment of exclusionary tendencies in the women’s movement: “as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation of the white male culture, they failed to remember us.”¹⁶ Women of color are thus compelled to “question our own existence, our human reality” and “acquire an awareness in ourselves of who we are and how we will realize ourselves.”¹⁷ For her part, Pindell, who once saw the women’s movement as the most viable route for her into the

art world,¹⁸ would subsequently relinquish her membership in A.I.R. Gallery after having been one of its founding members in 1972. It was clear even then that race and gender issues in this country were more intertwined than those of us who care about these issues are willing to admit, and that redresses with regard to one modality did not necessarily carry over to the other.

The “Stuff” of It

Pindell’s appreciation of, and predilection for, manipulating materials is, as we have seen, as distinct from color-field abstraction as it is from the “pattern and decoration” tendencies that emerged in the art world in the 1970s. She not only engages long-suppressed cultural retentions, but also addresses perceptual, even psychic, dimensions of the artist’s relationship to the environment. Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy Philips focused on this distinction in her work in their 1978 publication on a group of artists they dubbed “Contextualists.” Among this cohort, who were involved with imbuing abstract and conceptual systems with content, Goode-Bryant and Philips observed in Pindell’s work aspects of “energy, mysticism, automatism, and ritual process.”¹⁹ They also remarked on her inclusion of hair (and later blood, as seen in *Autobiography: Air/SS560* [1988]²⁰), a definite ritualistic maneuver. The “visual suspense . . . created as color dots blend into textural field” that they observed in her work—especially paper works such as *Parabia Test #4* (1974)—was the influence that Pindell has attributed to Andean weavings.²¹

Autobiography: Air/SS560 demonstrates how the oval-scapes begin to engulf Pindell herself. As she sought to achieve a syncretistic relationship with her work, it seems to make perfect sense to see her enmeshed in her work, as in *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts* (1988). This erasure of boundaries—often considered a pathology to be avoided and rectified—seemed to be the ultimate way for Pindell to come into her own. The process becomes an expiation of a sort: in *Autobiography/CS560*, four versions of her supine silhouette are literally buffeted about by words and phrases and questions, written into the surface of the painting, which refer to her “direct personal experience with issues of abuse, some of which were brought about by encounters with racism, sexism and issues of class.”²² As we glimpse her realistically painted face peering out, her body is barely distinguished from the painted daubs and collages and painted bits of visual memory, but she maintains a serene demeanor as if she were impervious to these “slings and arrows.”

As the 1990s progressed, Pindell’s artwork began to exist more and more in conjunction with her political activism as she produced a prodigious number of white papers on the state of race and gender politics in the art world.²³ Undoubtedly these issues took on a new urgency in the era of burgeoning AIDS activism, as seen in *Separate But Equal Genocide: AIDS* (1991–92). Clearly the dichotomies between “black” and “white” came to connote a new matrix of exclusionary and diversionary policies and attitudes. By 2000, she again engaged deep space in the context of the revelations of the Hubble Space Telescope, as seen in *Astronomy: Saturn, Mars, Disks of Orion* (2007), in which she maps a segment of the universe, or *4C The Planets* (2007), where the model of the planets is submerged

into a miasma of larger versions of her signature dots. Ecological concerns are reflected in *Autobiography: Africa (Red Frog II)* (1986), alluding to the dire survival warnings conveyed by a species in crisis; *Untitled #5B (Krakatoa)* (2007), in which textural effects are again in evidence; and *Katrina Footprints Drawn . . .* (2007), all of which remind us of the consequences of unpredictable natural forces. In all of these works, it is clear that Pindell has found that her signature style has almost limitless possibilities with which she can explore her technical proclivities and political interests. She also fully engages current dialogues about the relevancy of abstract art to the social turmoil and challenges that global black people continue to encounter. But as noted previously Pindell doesn't need to rely on elaborate theoretical or critical theory to frame her practice. She has evolved in a uniquely synthetic way that allows her to meld her role as both creator and subject for her art. Therefore her work remains as energetic, cogent, and committed as it was at the beginning of her career.

NOTES

1. *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings*, essay by Lowery S. Sims (Potsdam: Roland Gibson Gallery, Potsdam College of the State University of New York, 1992). The specifics of the reconstructed interpretations of Pindell's art in this essay were guided by observations made over a twenty-year period, and particularly by a conversation between the author and the artist on January 5, 1992.
2. *Howardena Pindell: Odyssey*, introduction by Terrie Rouse (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1986), 5.
3. Howardena Pindell, Artist's Statement for *Howardena Pindell: Autobiography* (New York: Cyrus Gallery, 1989).
4. Frank Bowling became a particularly influential and important advocate for black abstract artists, publishing a series of articles in *Arts Magazine* and *Art News*. See Frank Bowling, "Black Art," *Arts Magazine* (Dec. 1969–Jan. 1970), 20–24; "Discussion on Black Art," *Arts Magazine* (Apr. 1969), 16–20; "Discussion on Black Art," *Arts Magazine* (May 1969); "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black is Beautiful,'" *Art News* (Apr. 1971), 53–55, 82; "The Rupture: Ancestor Worship, Revival, Confusion or Disguise," *Arts Magazine* (Summer 1970), 31–34.
5. Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 160.
6. Chloé Bass, "Can Abstraction Help Us Understand the Value of Black Lives?," *Hyperallergic*, July 28, 2016, at <https://hyperallergic.com/314166/can-abstraction-help-us-understand-the-value-of-black-lives/>.
7. See Priscilla Frank, "An Underground Collective of Black Women Artists Are Fighting Racism in Healthcare," *Huffington Post*, Aug. 31, 2016, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-women-artists-for-black-lives-matter_us_57c6d0d1e4b0e60d31dc3cd1.
8. April Kingsley, *Afro-American Abstraction: An Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture by Nineteen Black American Artists* (New York: P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, 1981).
9. See Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diaspora* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008).
10. See Roy Sieber, *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972).
11. Howardena Pindell, in *Beauty by Design: The Aesthetics of African Adornment*, ed. Marie-Thérèse Brincard (New York: African-American Institute, 1984), 37, 38.
12. *Ibid.*, 36–39.
13. See Lynn Gumpert, ed., *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles/Recent Art* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2008).
14. Howardena Pindell, "Japanese Series," in *Howardena Pindell: Paintings and Drawings*, p. 36.
15. Howardena Pindell, interview in *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art* (Lewisburg, PA: The Center Gallery, Bucknell University, 1985), 34.
16. See the essay by Brian Wallis in this volume.
17. *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States*, ed. Ana Mendieta (New York: A.I.R. Gallery, 1980), n.p. (my emphasis).

18. In her interview in the catalogue for *Since the Harlem Renaissance*, Pindell says, "I was first told that my work wasn't black because it wasn't showing a certain kind of imagery, and then I was put down a bit for being a woman. So the first place I really made an effort to show my work was a black institution, and I was told to go away. That meant I had to show in a white context, and that was a problem because they were basically saying go away as well. The only other approach was the woman's movement. This was in the late 60s and early 70s. I was approached by A.I.R., which was just forming, and that was the way I got to first show my work" (36).
19. Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, *Contextures* (New York: Just Above Midtown, 1978), 66.
20. *Ibid.*, 67.
21. *Ibid.*, 69.
22. See Kingsley, *Afro-American Abstraction*, p. 6.
23. These were published as *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell*, introduction by Lowery Stokes Sims (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997).