

June 18, 1993

Art in Review

By CHARLES HAGEN

'Howardena Pindell' 'Abstraction as Metaphor 1972-1992' Kenkeleba House 214-216 East Second Street Lower East Side Through June 23 'Howardena Pindell' 'Social and Political Work 1980-1993' Alternative Museum 594 Broadway, at Houston Street SoHo Through Wednesday

In her prolific career, Howardena Pindell has moved from work that relies on formal nuances to a passionate involvement with questions of identity and politics. These two shows trace the evolution of Ms. Pindell's art over the last 20 years, with Kenkeleba House offering a retrospective of her earlier paintings and collages, while the Alternative Museum features later works on political and social themes.

In the 1970's, Ms. Pindell often mixed confettilike bits of paper produced by a hole punch into the pastel surfaces of paintings done on unstretched canvas. A few early pieces suggest the influence of Minimalism, but more often these colorful, textured paintings achieve an all-over, decorative quality.

Gradually, Ms. Pindell added other techniques to her formal repertory, among them applying paint in regular crosshatched patterns and cutting up canvases and loosely stitching them back together. In collages made after trips to Japan, Egypt and other countries, she stretched out postcards by cutting them into strips and filling in the gaps with painted renderings of the same scenes.

Unfortunately, this roster of devices never really adds up to a distinctive style. The quiet exuberance found in a few early collages is lost in Ms. Pindell's later paintings, and her photocollages do little to transform the original tourist views.

At the Alternative Museum, Ms. Pindell offers works that are explicitly autobiographical and political. Charged words and phrases march across the canvases; while the sense of outrage behind these strident works is manifest, it is not always clear what issues they address.

Occasionally, Ms. Pindell finds a powerful metaphor for her concerns. In a recent painting, names of African slaves float above a landscape of chains; clustered in the ocean in the foreground are the names of New World ports that early slaves were brought to. But despite such occasional successes, most of the works here seem strident and unfocused.

Photo: Part of Howardena Pindell's "Slavery" at the Alternative Museum. (Kevin Noble)

