

ARTS | ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; Howardena Pindell -- 'Works on Paper 1968-2004'

By HOLLAND COTTER MAY 14, 2004

Sragow Gallery

73 Spring Street

SoHo

Through June 5

Howardena Pindell belongs to an understudied generation of African-American artists who were working with abstract painting and sculpture in the 1960's and 70's. And although in the 1980's she moved to photo-based collage, videos and relief paintings with an intensely political content, abstraction has remained her fundamental language, as it is in this jewellike selection of prints and drawings.

The earliest drawings, composed of patterned sequences of words and numbers on graph paper, suggest post-Minimalism as a major ingredient in Ms. Pindell's abstraction. And her more painterly work is similarly systematic. In the 1970's she developed a collage technique using small circles hand-punched from sheets of blank or printed paper. After numbering the dots individually, she pasted them on sheets of punched and unpunched paper so that they floated on surfaces at once porous and solid.

Initially Ms. Pindell's palette was spartan, but that soon changed, as is seen in "Untitled No. 28" (1974), with its red, orange, yellow and green circles scattered over multicolored layers of paper. A recent series of three-dimensional etchings, executed by the master printer Tad Mike, is also rich chromatically, with brightly colored clumps and clusters of dots suspended on grids made of thread. In her new drawings the word and number strings of an earlier day are replaced by the names and coordinates of seasonal constellations. In the show's single painting, which dates from 1987 and addresses South African apartheid, the pitch-black surface is studded with fake diamonds, like a night sky glinting with stars.

Clearly abstraction has been a fertile and versatile medium for an artist who wants art to reflect complex, changing social and aesthetic identities. For many of her peers it has served the same function. Anyone visiting the Sragow show will get a sense of this dynamic. And anyone wanting to experience its broader history might consider a visit to the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa., where "Something to Look Forward To," an exhibition of work by nearly two dozen African-American abstract artists, including Ms. Pindell, is on view through June 27. HOLLAND COTTER