

Howardena Pindell

BY EVAN MOFFITT DECEMBER 2015

Howardena Pindell made the collages in her first West Coast solo show at Honor Fraser using the simple medium of hole-punched painted paper. Colourful chads are affixed to thin wire or string armatures that form delicate grids on the surface of museum board backings. Many hang from tiny daubs of glue in seemingly random arrangements, like a child's dashed fistful of rainbow glitter.

For most of her 40-year career, Pindell eschewed figurative art in favour of abstraction, partly to undermine the market's aesthetic expectations of 'black contemporary art'. As a result, critics considered her work insufficiently political; but her politics reveal themselves upon close study. Pindell's visual preference for details over generalities is an aesthetic corollary to her belief in the value of human subjectivity. In her abstract collages, identity is atomized: Vibrant dots, like unique human individuals, refuse to fully bond in the service of a whole. Each numbered form demands precise attention. Pindell has said that she chooses her numbers randomly. Rather than direct the eye outside of the frame, they draw it towards each labeled paper particle. The tension between compositional unity and singular detail gives the small, layered works a formidable yet lively presence.

While making her earliest collages, Pindell served as the Associate Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books at MoMA, New York. Hole-punch scraps are a natural medium for someone accustomed to bureaucratic paperwork. But Pindell's brightly hued chads seem to tremble on their threads like tiny flapping flags. Neither static nor flat, they stretch out towards the viewer as dynamic sculptural objects. In *Untitled #27* (2003), for instance, razor-thin black paper circles jut out from their board backing like a bed of mussel shells on the belly of a seafront pier. The dense composition in *Untitled #42* (2004–2005) recalls a frozen flurry of red and white blood cells. In *Untitled 6F* (2008–2009), a collage with the contours of a cumulus cloud, each cut-paper disc, coloured with an iridescent watercolour wash, seems, despite its resolute flatness, to shimmer like the scale of a rainbow trout.

On her travels in Africa, Pindell was inspired by the layered detail in indigenous costume and scarification. In many West African cultures, refined bodily adornment offers the wearer a means to communicate with spirits. Pindell was drawn to this idea of aesthetic transcendence, which she felt was absent from the cold conceptual concerns of Western contemporary art. The body is a space on which the free play of decorative ornament produces surface tension, like the wire frames on which she layers paper.

Pindell's subdued politics sharpened in a series of 'video drawings' on display. Storms of arrows drawn in marker pen brew over photographs of paused television footage like a football coach's notes on offensive plays. Indeed, many of the images show athletes in strained poses: linemen mid-tackle, sprinters bowed at starting blocks. Pindell has called the drawings formal exercises that break down the material structure of images by underlining the movements of figures. More than mere pictorial analysis, though, the drawings have a sharp, dissecting power. In one drawing, white faces cheer on two black boxers trading blows. Their heads folded inward, we cannot identify either man, but it is clear they have been thrown together in order to tear each other apart. The arrows emphasize the centripetal pressure of their violent embrace. In this context, the black bodies of Pindell's chosen athletes seem less heroic than sacrificial.

Aside from the darker subtext of her video drawings, Pindell's works are ultimately uplifting. With sparkling colours and animated arrangements, she highlights the parts of us worthy of attention. The result is a confetti-like celebration of life's dazzling diversity, one that always begs a closer look.



Untitled 6F, 2008–9, mixed media on paper collage, 17 x 30 cm