

Howardena Pindell

BY CATHERINE TAFT DECEMBER 2015

To legibly capture a television screen, a photographer must have both patience and a variety of technical tricks at her disposal, including a carefully calibrated shutter speed and an exposure time determined through trial and error. In addition to the motion of the video image, the analog photographer must also be sensitive to the friction between the camera's straightforward light-capture process and the CRT monitor's beams of magnetized electrons, which light up pixels within the screen to present a steady image to the human eye, but whose glow registers quite differently to the camera. This finicky process was often used to document early video art, yet, for all the technical skill it required, it was rarely presented as "serious art" itself. For this reason, Howardena Pindell's early experiments with this process are especially vital; her work is a touchstone for the seminal generation of artists who immediately succeeded her and who strategically employed rephotography, photographic appropriation, and mass-media imagery. Installed in a single row in Honor Fraser's main gallery, thirteen small "Video Drawings," which Pindell made between 1976 and 2007, reveal an artist deeply engaged with the subtle social codes of broadcast imagery and the formal properties of its technology.



Video Drawings: Baseball, 1975, chromogenic print, 20 x 25 cm

Pindell's photographs intentionally retain the marks of raster lines, image blur, and RGB discoloration, and the images are further obscured by transparencies—marked with abstract systems of arrows, dots, lines, numbers, and other symbols that don't necessarily refer to the underlying image they seemingly diagram—which Pindell laid over the video screens she shot. Each drawing was then rephotographed again, a technique that provided an additional distancing from the picture's source. *Video Drawings: Football*, 1976, for example, depicts a pileup of male athletes, their bodies crowded by gestural arrows, perhaps indicating potential movement or stasis. *Video Drawings: Boxing*, 2007, shows two African American boxers engaged in a match, the surface of their muscular bodies marked with another flurry of arrows. While they aren't exactly "stills" in the filmic sense, Pindell's freeze-framed deconstructions allow political and racially driven content to surface. Decades before Thelma Golden's groundbreaking 1994 exhibition "Black Male," Pindell was addressing representations of African American men in the popular imagination.

The artist's engagement with themes of racism and sexism in her media work was here revealed as direct, poetic, and particularly relevant to the current moment, both as the sociopolitical climate in America has shifted and as our cultural institutions have begun to revisit art of the '70s and '80s. And yet this body of photographic work contrasts starkly with Pindell's other mode of abstraction, as the ten compositions in this exhibition made evident. Installed in adjacent galleries, these works—acrylic painting, mixed media, and cut-paper collages on board or canvas made between 1971 and 2010—speak to a tradition of post-Minimal, process-driven abstraction. The painted surface of *Untitled #84*, 1977, is typical of these colorful accumulations of paper dots produced with a hole punch and affixed to a gridlike substrate. The black, red, and gray dots of *Untitled #27*, 2003, create a pointillist flurry of symbols that demonstrates the structuralist aspects of Pindell's practice.

Although conceptual through lines between the two bodies of work are evident, these formalist works seem to come from a different place than Pindell's culturally oriented massmedia examinations. However, it is important to note that she developed both modes of artmaking concurrently in the late '60s and early '70s. The shift between these two bodies of work here felt abrupt, and certainly this exhibition could have benefited from a more integrated and considered installation—one that might have teased out various formal and conceptual connections. Nevertheless, this selective survey from nearly forty years of Pindell's career positioned her as a meticulously consistent artist and an increasingly important figure in the history of American art.