

IMMA
WEST WING GALLERIES
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Howardena Pindell A Renewed Language



Introduction

Howardena Pindell (USA, 1943) is an artist, activist, and educator working through the media of painting, drawing, print and video. Primarily an abstract painter, she emerged in the early 1970s in New York, making process-driven abstractions, embellishing the language of minimalism - of circles, grids and repetition - in a visibly laborious process of hole-punching, spraying, sewing, and numbering.

In the 1980s, her work took on a more overtly political tenor, which anticipated the Black Lives Matter movement by thirty years. Pindell deals with issues including colonisation and enslavement, violence against indigenous populations, police brutality, the AIDS crisis and climate change. Her video works tackle the pervasiveness of racial inequality, drawing on Pindell's own experiences and on her collation of historical data relating to segregation, discrimination and race-based violence in America.

The exhibition includes new works which show Pindell circling back to some of her concerns of the early 1970s and 80s. Returning to her method of painting using a stencil, her new work quotes from pieces made half a century ago. Pindell's work encompasses her own story with abstraction joined to a sense of social and political urgency and an understanding that the pressures, prejudices and exclusions she faced as a Black artist and a woman needed to be part of the subject of her art.

This is Pindell's first exhibition in Ireland, and the largest presentation of her work in Europe to date.

Room 1

Pindell created the surface of her early abstract paintings by spraying thin paint through a stencil, which itself was made by laboriously punching out holes from cardboard sheets cut from file folders using a standard office hole punch. The stencil Pindell used for *Untitled* (1972) can be seen displayed directly across from it in this room. Following a history of dark minimalist painting like Malevich's iconic work *Black Square*, 1915, Pindell imbues her dark canvases with nuanced layers of colour and depth applied in many thin layers.

Pindell worked at MoMA [the Museum of Modern Art, New York] between 1967-79. Surrounded by the basic tools of office work: manilla folders, archive boxes, hole punches and so on, she began to deploy these as art materials. *Untitled (Stencil)* (1970) was made by unfolding an archive box and making a pattern of holes with a hole punch. Pindell then used it as a stencil to paint works such as *Untitled* (1972) on the opposite wall. She saved the small pieces of punched-out paper, which she calls 'chads', and used them to disrupt the surface of works such as *Untitled (Talcum Powder)* (1973), also in this room.

Room 2

Trained as a figurative painter, Pindell began working abstractly in the 1960s during her time in graduate school at Yale University. She became more aware of what abstraction could offer in terms of visual decision-making, inspired by artists like Larry Poons, who's often associated with hard-edge painting, lyrical abstraction, and abstract expressionism. She started drawing and layering, a process that grew on its own and developed into the abstract works she is known for today. Her growing use of abstraction coincided with the famous "dematerialization" of the art object, the emergence of conceptual art as a movement that prioritized thought over form.

Ravine (2022) shows Pindell returning to her working methods of the early 1970s. More than fifty years separate the making of this, and the other paintings in this room, yet the aesthetic outcome is similar. This circling back can be read as a comment on the passing of time, and the very different contexts of their making. In the 1970s, her position as a Black woman and an abstract painter was invalidated – as she articulated in the film *Free, White and 21* (1980).

Southwest Corridor

Minimalism in New York emerged as a distinctive trend in the 1960s. Influential artists like Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, and Frank Stella embraced this movement, seeking to simplify painting to its most fundamental elements, that of pigment on surface. Minimalism often focused on geometric shapes, a theme that can be seen in the works across the room which feature grids. The use of the grid in art refers to the practice of creating a framework of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines on a surface to assist in the creation and organization of a composition. Pindell recalls that her organisation of numbered paper chads, as seen in many of the framed works in this room, recalled memories of her father, who was a mathematician, writing rows of numbers in gridded notebooks. Often exploring relationships between space, objects and viewer, this movement challenged traditional notions of art and art making which are still relevant today.

In the early 1970s Pindell began to work on unstretched canvas, pinned directly to the wall, which she found less cumbersome than working with stretchers. Unstretched canvases offered her flexibility and creative freedom, allowing Pindell to experiment with unconventional shapes and sizes. Unstretched canvases also offer a raw and 'unfinished' aesthetic, challenging traditional notions of a framed artwork. Highly experimental for its time, this approach allowed Pindell to explore new dimensions and engage with space in new and innovative ways.

Among the African American community, Pindell faced criticism for producing abstract work, because, as she puts it, 'the feeling was, the work should be about the Black experience.' Like the paintings, Pindell's engagement with race was abstracted at this

time – she saw the creams, ivories and peaches of the paintings she was making as referencing Whiteness, and reflective of the pressure she felt from the art world ‘to whitewash everything in order to make it palatable’.

Room 3: *Free, White and 21*

In this video, Pindell talks about her own experiences of racism throughout her life – then creates a rebuttal character in whiteface, who downplays the trauma of racism. “You really must be paranoid,” says the character. “That has never happened to me or anyone I know, but they are free, white and 21.” Playing these binary personas, Pindell performs an encounter between a Black everywoman recalling her experiences of racial inequality and an incredulous white woman, who repeatedly undercuts and invalidates the experiences of her counterpart. At the time of making this work, Pindell had recently suffered a serious concussion from a car accident which spurred her to make autobiographical and political work. A sharp critique both of racism in the art world and of the exclusion of women of colour from second-wave feminism. Looking back at the artwork 40 years later, Pindell says people were shocked. “The general reaction was pretty hostile,” the artist told *The Guardian*. “Dealing with the black body back then? Forget it. People didn’t want to talk about racism”.

Room 4

Pindell’s practice began to deal explicitly with issues of racism and discrimination in the 1980s. Here, Pindell emphasises considering historical and structural factors in understanding contemporary racial injustice. She examines how race and racism intersect with power structures and shape social, legal, and political systems. *Columbus* speaks to Christopher Columbus’s expeditions which led to the enslavement and murder of Indigenous peoples, laying the foundation for the transatlantic slave trade that followed. Pindell recognises that racism is not simply defined by overt acts of discrimination, but also embedded in institutions, policies, and everyday practices. Her work indicates that inequality is at the foundation of modern-day injustices which the Black Lives Matter movement speaks to.

Room 5

The works in this room link the pervasive forces of capitalism and their relationship to slavery, both historic and contemporary. The 17th century saw European powers, including England, France, Spain, and Portugal, embark on a triangular slave trade, fuelled by the demand for labour in their colonies across the Americas, and luxury goods in Europe. Africans were captured and forcibly transported across the Atlantic, to produce goods such as cotton, sugar, coffee and tobacco which were consumed in Europe. Contemporary slavery on the other hand sees the outsourcing of exploited labour, in the form of sweatshops, to Asia and the global south. These spaces are characterised by low wages, long hours, poor working conditions, and often violation of labour rights, where workers, usually in developing countries, produce goods for low-cost markets in wealthy countries.

Room 6: *Rope/ Fire/ Water*

Using anecdotes, historical narrative, collated sociological data and archival imagery, including an image from *Life* magazine, Pindell presents an unflinching discussion of slavery, lynching and the civil rights movement. *Rope/Fire/Water* bears witness to centuries of violence and dehumanisation inflicted on Black people as a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. A ticking metronome counts the beats throughout the video, a technique Pindell also used in *Free, White and 21* to mark the passage of time, represent the heartbeat, and to keep the viewer's attention focused on what she has to say. The metronome also serves as a counter, a parallel for the tallies and numbers of the hard-hitting data that Pindell presents in her paintings. Her use of data sets harks back to surveys she conducted in the 1980s tracking racism in the art world, and as she says, 'the numbers say everything.' In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Pindell added a coda to the video that memorialises victims of police brutality in recent years, reminding us that violence against Black people is not only an historical truth, but an ongoing crisis.

West Corridor

Following a near fatal car accident and memory loss in 1980, Pindell focused on recapturing the past through photographs from trips she made to Asia, Europe and Africa. Reviewing her life through these mementos led to the *Autobiography* series. Pindell has partial Indian heritage and while driving through Southern India, she noted the beautiful countryside where she saw a small lake with exquisite pink water lilies. This inspired the pinks seen in *Autobiography: India (Shiva, Ganges)*, affixing photographs to the surface to appeal to fragments of memory as seen in.

In *Plankton Lace #1*, (2020) Pindell turns her attention to the climate crisis. Its stitched and layered abstract surface deliberately recalls the experience of looking at micro-organisms under a microscope. In 2019 she visited an exhibition about oceans at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, in which there were luminous displays of plankton. The artist became fascinated by the role that plankton play in the health of the oceans and of the planet, as both a food source for sea creatures such as whales and as a producer of half the world's oxygen. As the oceans warm and become more acidic plankton can become harmful, affecting the whole eco-system. *Plankton Lace* is a reminder of both the beauty of the natural world and of its current state of peril, calling us to play our part in slowing the tide of climate change.

Songlines: Connect the Dots uses many of the techniques developed by Pindell in the 1970s, in particular the practice of cutting and sewing the canvas and encrusting the stitches with paint and layers of painted dots and ellipses to create a complex jewel-like surface. After seeing hard-hitting political works such as *Columbus* or *Rope/Fire/Water*, Pindell considers her abstract paintings as "an intense relief, a kind of visual healing, so that you get some distance from what you've seen. Then you can have a more peaceful or critical way to acknowledge what you've seen. And it helps you maybe overcome some of those deadly emotions that come from being shocked. So I want

people to see... It's like using beauty as a healing element, and for me making them has a healing side to it.”

The prints that can be seen between the windows in this corridor were made in collaboration with Dieu Donn , a New York institution founded in 1976 which explores the potential of hand papermaking as an art medium. Each print represents a day of work at the print studio, as Pindell constantly invents new forms, using stencilling and embedding on handmade paper made from abaca and cotton pulp.

Pindell produced over 60 works in handmade paper, incorporating lines, grids, and dots annotated with tiny arrows and numbers. Each of these paper dots—Pindell’s signature raw material, produced and collected over several decades—is individually drawn, etched, or printed, and then delicately fixed by hand into a still-wet matrix of dyed paper pulp. Uncommon paper substrates, from abaca to papyrus, reflect the artist’s enduring passion for travel and a broad interest in diverse expressions of material culture, while providing visual and textural variety.

Room 7

These ‘cut and sewn’ canvases are a celebration of colour. Here Pindell expands on the scale of her paper pieces, bringing new depth and texture to her surfaces. The making of individual panels and sewing them together, is a novel and labour-intensive method of construction. The work is unstretched and pinned to the wall and harks back to her 1970s works in which she took canvas off the stretcher to create new shapes that speak of the form and function of the painted ground. These monumental works mark the artist’s return to the grid—a theme of particular interest to Pindell and other modern artists. The thick underlying surface occasionally ruptures, revealing the matrix of cut and sewn canvas below.

Acknowledgements

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We are honoured to stage this exhibition and grateful to Howardena Pindell for sharing her beautiful and urgent work with us.

Exhibition Team:

Annie Fletcher: Director

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Sara Muthi: Curatorial Assistant

Aoife Loome: Curatorial Assistant

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Cillian Hayes: Technical Crew Supervisor

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The exhibition is accompanied by a new publication, featuring Anna Lovatt of the Southern Methodist University in Dallas; Amy Tobin of the University of Cambridge; and Adeze Wilford, Assistant Curator at The Shed in New York. The publication is co-published by Fruitmarket and Kettle's Yard. Available in the IMMA bookshop €30.00.

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Autobiography: India (Shiva, Ganges), 1985,

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