

trade. The painting references the inhumane practice of removing the hands of indigenous people that was practised in the Congo under the regime of King Leopold II of Belgium, as well as atrocities committed by Columbus in the Americas, all for the purpose of accruing wealth, land and privilege. *Rope/Fire/Water* charts a devastating history of violence against Black people, bringing together horrific archival imagery with statistical data about slavery, lynching and police brutality. Together these works are a call to arms to break the ongoing cycle of racially motivated violence.

Always responsive to the most pressing issues of our time, in *Plankton Lace #1* (2020) Pindell conjures the imagery of micro-organisms that are essential to the health of the planet, but are currently under threat from rising sea temperatures. While it raises the issue of climate change, *Plankton Lace #1*, along with *Songlines: Connect the Dots* (2017), also uses abstraction as a salve to the important but difficult subject matter of other works shown here. She sees these paintings as ‘an intense relief, a kind of visual healing, so that you get some distance from what you’ve seen.’ With their stitched and encrusted surfaces, scattered with glitter, circles and ellipses, these canvases offer a moment of reflection, a space in which to take in the truths and insights of the ‘new language’ articulated in the work of this astonishing artist.

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Howardena Pindell

A New Language

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Howardena Pindell (b.1943, Philadelphia) is an artist, writer, activist, teacher and curator. She studied art at Boston and Yale Universities in the 1960s. Moving to New York City in 1967, Pindell was hired by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) as an exhibition assistant, and would become their first Black female curator, working there until 1979. In 1972 she became a founding member of the women's cooperative gallery A.I.R. (Artists in Residence), and began teaching at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (Long Island) in 1979, where she teaches still. Throughout her life she has dedicated herself to making beautiful, thoughtful and thought-provoking art, experimenting with materials and processes, and shedding light on hard-hitting issues with an unflinching eye.

This exhibition takes its title from an essay written as part of Pindell's research in the 1980s and '90s into racism in the art world, in which she writes: 'I am an artist. I am not part of a so-called "minority", "new" or "emerging" or "a new audience". These are all terms used to demean, limit, and make people of color appear to be powerless. We must evolve a new language which empowers us and does not cause us to participate in our own disenfranchisement'. The exhibition opens a window onto this 'new language', mapping Pindell's career over the last fifty years from early abstract works, through to issue-based works that tackle subjects including slavery, violence against Black and indigenous people, the AIDS pandemic, and the climate crisis.

Large, self-assured abstract works from the 1970s begin the exhibition in the lower gallery. Made from hazy veils of colour that reveal an increasingly complex palette the closer one stands – deep blues, greens and auburns – these paintings were created by spraying thinned acrylic paint through stencils. **Untitled (Stencil)** (1970), one of a number she created by punching holes in strips cut from file folders, carries the marks of Pindell's process – the dense clusters of perforations through which she worked her paint coloured by years of use.

In a series of large cream-coloured paintings on unstretched canvas and in several works on paper, Pindell uses the punched-

out chads. Layered under paper and paint, arranged in careful grids, or scattered, and combined with a range of materials including thread, glitter and powder, the chads allow Pindell to create absorbing material surfaces that unfold slowly as one looks. Numbering the chads – as can be seen in **Untitled (Talcum Powder)** (1973) – Pindell draws upon the serial processes, the tallies and grids, of minimalism and conceptualism.

Pindell's growing political awareness, coming from her experiences both as an artist and as an arts administrator, galvanised her to make work that was unambiguous in its anti-racist message. The video **Free, White and 21** (1980) marks this shift. A sharp indictment of white second-wave feminism for its exclusion of women of colour, the video shows the artist recounting situations in which she faced racism in both her personal life and career. Her white interlocutor (played by the artist in whiteface) meets every statement with increasing incredulity, claiming that Pindell is paranoid and ungrateful. While it reflected the lived experience of her and her peers, Pindell's video was often met with hostility by white audiences when shown in the 1980s and '90s.

In the upper gallery, the language of Pindell's earlier abstraction is put to work to draw attention to specific issues. Stitching, unstretched canvas and the use of collage are married with text in **Separate but Equal Genocide: AIDS** (1991–92) and **Diallo** (2000). The former painting memorialises individuals who died with AIDS, including Pindell's cousin, who had noticed differences in his healthcare treatment depending on whether he was perceived as white or Black. The two flags mark this racist division, with the names of white and Black young people divided across the two canvases. **Diallo**, likewise, lays bare systemic racism. Memorialising two innocent young Black men shot dead by New York City Police Department officers, Pindell draws attention to the racial profiling pervasive in the police force and the brutality to which it gives rise.

The painting **Columbus** (2020) and the video **Rope/Fire/Water** (2020) place racism against Black and indigenous people into a longer history dating back to the start of the transatlantic slave