

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Howardena Pindell

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com   |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Pindell, Howardena, 1943-  |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell,  |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | January 5, 2007  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2007   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:59:41).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Visual artist and curator Howardena Pindell (1943 - ) began her career as the first African American Associate Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books at the New York Museum of Modern Art, and became a renowned abstract artist. Pindell also published groundbreaking studies that document the lack of representation of artists of color through racism, censorship, and violence. Pindell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 5, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2007_002  |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.  |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist and curator Howardena Pindell was born on April 14, 1943, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Pindell became interested in art at an early age when she began taking art classes on Saturdays; she started out as a figurative painter. Pindell received her B.F.A. degree in painting from Boston University's School of Fine and Applied Arts in 1965, and her M.F.A. degree from Yale University's School of Art and Architecture in 1967. Pindell was also awarded two honorary

doctorates: one from the Massachusetts College of Art, and one from Parson School of Design in New York.

Pindell began her career in the art world as the first African American Associate Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books at the New York Museum of Modern Art, a position she held for twelve years. Pindell rose from Curatorial Assistant to Associate Curator during her time at the New York Museum of Modern Art.. In 1979, Pindell began a new career as Associate Professor of Students at State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Pindell's earliest drawings, composed of a patterned sequence of words and numbers on graph paper, suggest post minimalism as a major ingredient in her abstractions. In the 1970s, Pindell developed a collage technique using small circles hand punched from sheets of blank or printed paper. After numbering each one individually, she pasted them on sheets of punched and un-punched paper so that they floated on surfaces at once porous and solid. In the 1980s, she moved to photo-based collage, video, and relief paintings with intensely political subject matter. Pindell traveled extensively to Africa, Asia, Europe, Russia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, lived in Japan for seven months, and in India for four months. Pindell used these journeys and experiences as inspiration to integrate her own history as content for the autobiographies of her life. Between 1995 and 1999, Pindell taught at Yale University as a visiting professor; from 2003 to 2006, she served as Director of the MFA Program at Stony Brook University. Pindell also served as a full Professor of Art at Stony Brook University.

Pindell's belief that the arts community should become more inclusive of women and minorities sparked a revolution in her work; she published groundbreaking studies that documented the lack of representation of artists of color through racism, censorship and violence.

Pindell works are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Yale Art Museum, New Haven, the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, and the Rhode Island School of Art Museum. Pindell also became an accomplished writer; a book of her writings, *The Heart of the Question*, was published in 1997. In 2000 Pindell received the IAM Pioneer award.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Howardena Pindell was conducted by Denise Gines on January 5, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6

Betacame SP videocassettes. Visual artist and curator Howardena Pindell (1943 - ) began her career as the first African American Associate Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books at the New York Museum of Modern Art, and became a renowned abstract artist. Pindell also published groundbreaking studies that document the lack of representation of artists of color through racism, censorship, and violence.

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## **Restrictions**

### **Restrictions on Access**

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### **Restrictions on Use**

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## **Related Material**

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Pindell, Howardena, 1943-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Burghlea, Neculai (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Pindell, Howardena, 1943---Interviews

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African American artists--Interviews

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Art teachers--Interviews

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African American editors--Interviews

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African American painters--Interviews

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**Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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**Occupations:**

Visual Artist

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Curator

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**HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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**Administrative Information**

## **Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

## **Preferred Citation**

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, January 5, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## **Other Finding Aid**

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## **Detailed Description of the Collection**

### **Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, Section  
A2007\_002\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:27 2007/01/05

Howardena Pindell was born April 14, 1943 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Howard Pindell and Mildred Lewis Pindell. Pindell's maternal grandparents, Loula Lewis and Presley Lewis, owned a farm in Hamilton, Ohio, where some family members passed for white. Her mother had a white birth certificate and

attended white schools, despite her darker skin. Pindell's father was born in 1908, and she recalls little about her paternal grandparents, Sarah Jane Hinkson and Philip Pindell. Her father obtained a bachelor's degree in mathematics at Morgan State University in 1931, and went on to earn degrees from Columbia University and Temple University. Pindell's parents met while her mother was a student at Maryland State Teachers College at Bowie. In 1935, while the principal of a school, Pindell's father organized the Colored Teachers Association of Anne Arundel County to challenge discrimination in salaries. He was fired because of his union activism, but found a position in social services in Philadelphia.

African American artists--Interviews.

Art teachers--Interviews.

African American editors--Interviews.

African American painters--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, Section  
A2007\_002\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:25 2007/01/05

Howardena Pindell's parents eloped in Covington, Kentucky. She describes her mother, Mildred Lewis Pindell, as intelligent and organized. Her mother earned a bachelor's degree; and, in 1935, a master's degree in geography at The Ohio State University. After her mother's death, Pindell discovered her mother's artistic talents. She notes similarities between the posters her mother made for her students and her own collage technique. Pindell also remembers her passion for art as a young girl. Growing up in the 1940s in segregated Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Pindell experienced racial discrimination on a daily basis. At the integrated Francis D. Pastorius School, Pindell was tied to a cot by her teacher when she asked to use the restroom, an experience that deeply impacted her personality. She transferred to the more diverse Thaddeus Stevens School of Observation, and went on to attend Jay Cooke Junior High School, and the prestigious Philadelphia High School for Girls, where she graduated in 1961.

Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, Section  
A2007\_002\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:24 2007/01/05

Howardena Pindell visited museums with her father as a child, where he encouraged her interest in art. At Thaddeus Stevens School of Observation and Jay Cooke Junior High School in Philadelphia, Pindell was unable to concentrate due to gang violence. She was accepted into the gifted program at Philadelphia High School for Girls, where she was supported by her art teacher, Ephraim Weinberg. As a teenager, Pindell picketed F.W. Woolworth Company's segregated lunch counters, although her parents' discouraged her involvement. Pindell graduated high school at the age of sixteen; and, in 1961, Pindell enrolled in the B.F.A. program at Boston University, despite her high school teachers' recommendation that she study education. While studying in Boston, she experienced racial discrimination. Pindell went on to graduate school at Yale University, where she minored in art history, and worked in the Mabel Brady Garvan Art Collection. Upon earning her degree, she was hired by New York City's Museum of Modern Art.

Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, Section A2007\_002\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:20 2007/01/05

Howardena Pindell graduated from Yale University with an M.F.A. degree in 1967. Immediately after, she was hired as an exhibition assistant at New York City's Museum of Modern Art. There, Pindell was promoted, becoming the museum's first African American associate curator of prints and illustrated books; and was introduced to the feminist movement. She assisted in founding Artists in Residence Inc., a feminist cooperative gallery. Pindell recalls racial discrimination and strikes against low wages at the Museum of Modern Art; black artists' exclusion from New York City galleries; and protests following the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 'Harlem on My Mind' exhibit. She also explains how the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement influenced her artwork, although her pieces became more abstract after her artistic breakthrough in 1971. She incorporated circle and ellipsis motifs, and developed process oriented pieces. In 1979, Pindell left the Museum of Modern Art to teach at Stony Brook University.

Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, Section

A2007\_002\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:16 2007/01/05

Howardena Pindell began producing small scale prints to make her art more accessible to the African American community. She portrayed the Middle Passage in her 'Autobiography' series, and incorporated other images of slavery. In addition to race, her art explored themes of gender and war. Pindell began to incorporate astronomical charts into her pieces after she saw images from the Hubble Space Telescope in an astronomy course at The New School for Social Research. Pindell published article in journals like the New Art Examiner and Art in America, and her book, 'The Heart of the Question,' was published in 1997. She describes the art world's censorship of women and people of color, and explains how discrimination masquerades as curatorial choice. She also talks about artist Kara Walker, and the trend of racial stereotyping in the commercial art world. Pindell names the artists she admires, such as Sam Gilliam and William T. Williams. She also mentions her travels to India and Japan.

Video Oral History Interview with Howardena Pindell, Section  
A2007\_002\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:49 2007/01/05

Howardena Pindell travelled to Japan in 1981, and describes the xenophobia she experienced there. She also made trips to India and Africa, and hoped to return to Uganda. Pindell served on a panel discussion organized by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, a group dedicated to expanding the museum's African American collection and making it more accessible. She describes her plans for artwork portraying genocide and war. She also talks about the unique spiritual component of African American art. Pindell shares advice for aspiring artists, and describes her concerns for the African American community. She reflects upon her life, including her car accident and her relationship with her mother. Pindell would like to be remembered through her art and writings. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.