

## Audio Transcript: Pindell's Legacy: Artists

December 3, 2020

### Emma Enderby:

I'm Emma Enderby, chief curator at The Shed, and welcome to our series of talks that look to the legacy and the ideas of artist Howardena Pindell and her exhibition at The Shed, *Rope/Fire/Water*, curated by Adeze Wilford. We are so grateful to be able to be open and continue our work supporting artists at this time. Our mission at The Shed is to produce and welcome innovative art and ideas across all forms of creativity, to build a shared understanding of our rapidly changing world and a more equitable society. I'd like to thank the Ford Foundation and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs for their generous support of this exhibition and our public programs. I would also like to thank the Howard Gilman Foundation for providing the Zoom platform that we will all be using for this evening's conversation.

### Adeze Wilford:

My name is Adeze Wilford, and I'm an assistant curator at The Shed and organizer of the exhibition *Howardena Pindell: Rope/Fire/Water*, now on view at The Shed through this spring. Over her nearly 60-year career, Howardena Pindell has been a trailblazing artist, curator, and activist. The exhibition features her well-known, richly textured abstract paintings that critically engage with the politics and social issues of her time while also demonstrating the healing power of art. The exhibition is centered on Pindell's new film, *Rope/Fire/Water*, the artist's first video work in 25 years. The conversation is part of an ongoing series of programs that contextualize and celebrate the way that artists, curators, educators, policy makers, and so many more have felt the deep impact of Pindell's inspiring career. Experts from a wide range of fields come together to explore the intersections of art and policy, culture, and community. Thank you again for joining us this evening, and if it's safe for you to do so, we invite you to attend *Howardena Pindell: Rope/Fire/Water* in person at The Shed, open until the spring of 2021. Thank you. And I hope you enjoy the conversation. Hi, good evening. Thank you so much for joining us tonight. This is the first of a series of conversations that The Shed is hosting around the exhibition *Howardena Pindell: Rope/Fire/Water*, which we hope you have had a chance to see or will see soon. This conversation is called Pindell's Legacy: Artists and we have with us, in addition to Howardena Pindell, three incredible artists, Julie Mehretu, Torkwase Dyson, and Sam Levi Jones, who will be talking about how abstraction and their practice is in conversation with Howardena's decades-long career. We're quite excited about everything that's going to happen tonight in our discussion but I wanted to let you know a few housekeeping things. We'll spend the first portion of today's program talking with our panelists about their practice. And then we'll open up the platform to questions from all of you. At the lower right corner of your Zoom screen there is a Q and A button, and that's how you can submit questions. And feel free to send them throughout the conversation. And then we'll get to as many as we can before the end of the program. We also have a CART service for online captioning during the conversation. So feel free to turn that on by clicking the Captioning button at the lower banner of your screen. And I'm going to start with an introduction of our incredible panelists and we're so excited to have you are all here tonight. Up first, we have Julie Mehretu who was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and lives and works between Berlin and

New York. She received a master's of fine arts with honors from Rhode Island School of Design and has been the recipient of many awards including the MacArthur Award, the American Art Award granted by the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Berlin Prize among others. She has shown extensively and internationally and national exhibitions and is currently having a solo exhibition with Marianne Goodman up through Wednesday, December 23. Her work engages in a visual articulation of the contemporary experience, a depiction of social behavior and the psycho-, sorry, the psychography of space. And is informed by multitude of sources, including politics, literature, and music.

Samuel Levi Jones was born in Marion, Indiana, and now lives and works between Chicago and Indianapolis. His ongoing practice is inspired by questions of authority, representation, and recorded history and centers on physically undoing objects associated with the systems of power and control. He often rearranges deconstructed books into a grid-like compositions that expose their flaws and question their assumed command of truth. He has shown extensively, locally and internationally. And his work can be found in several museum and public collections, including the Chazen Museum Of Art at the University of Wisconsin, the SFMOMA, the Rubell Family Collection in Florida, LACMA, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Torkwase Dyson describes herself as a painter, working across multiple mediums to explore the continuity between ecology, infrastructure, and architecture. She was born in Chicago and spent her developmental years between North Carolina and Mississippi. Traversing these geographies has helped develop formal concerns of compositions, movement, precarity, distance, and scale. For Torkwase, addressing these conceptual informal concerns is a poetic affirmation of humanity and resistance. She received her BA from Tougaloo College and an MFA from Yale University, sorry, Yale School of Art in painting and printmaking. Her work has also been presented locally and internationally, including among others the Sharjah Biennial, the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art.

Finally Howardena Pindell was born in Philadelphia in 1943. Howardena studied painting at Boston University and Yale University. She then worked from 1967 to 1979 at the Museum of Modern Art as an exhibition assistant, assistant curator in the Department of National and International Traveling Exhibitions, and finally, as an associate curator and acting director in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books. In 1979, she began teaching at State University of New York, Stony Brook, where she is now a distinguished professor. In her work, she often employs lengthy metaphorical processes of deconstruction/reconstruction, addressing social issues of homelessness, AIDS, war, genocide, sexism, xenophobia and apartheid. Howardena's work has been featured in many landmark museum exhibitions and is in the permanent collections of major international museums. Most recently, her work was a subject of a retrospective, titled *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*, in 2018 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. And she is currently the subject of the exhibition at The Shed with several new commissions and the central video, which gives the exhibition its name. So, everyone has such incredibly impressive biographies. It's always a treat to go through all of the incredible accolades that you all have. And I'm incredibly excited to start our conversation with a question first for Howardena. So thank you, Howardena and everyone, for joining us tonight. And the first question will be, your undergraduate work was based in figuration. And then later on, when you went to Yale, your practice took on abstraction. Can you tell us about your experience moving into this mode of making?

**Howardena Pindell:**

It was a slow and gradual process. Although, some of my paintings had an image that was recognizable, the early brush work was more Abstract Expressionist. At Yale, I would utilize a skeleton. It was actually a real skeleton. The skeleton image on its back painted orange. I used very loose brushwork. I borrowed a skeleton from the medical school. I recently realized that I painted this during the Vietnam War and that the US was using agent orange resulting in the deaths of people and animals. Agent orange also caused grotesque birth defects. The paintings were large for me at the time. The various student painting styles while I was at Yale were Abstract Expressionism, hard-edge, and a very small group of us were figurative. I completely but slowly moved towards abstraction as I had a day job after I graduated. That was at the museum and I could no longer work with natural light. I was drawn to the work of Larry Poons and his circles and ellipses, and Ad Reinhardt for his close-value color. It was also influenced by one of the other graduate students, Nancy Marotta, who started using this circle. Now I was attracted to this circle because my father and I were in Northern Kentucky at a root beer stand that separated its glasses, dishware, and utensils using a large red circle at the bottom. I found in an art supply store the same size circle and the same color circle. Anyway, nonwhites used the marked items. It was during segregation. I have been fascinated by this circle, wanting to turn it into a positive image for me.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you Howardena. And I love that you brought the circle to show. In my head it was a much smaller object, so that large, I can see that leaving an impression. I wanted to discuss with you this idea that you mentioned about painting being a classed medium over video, which you've expressed feels like a more egalitarian form in terms of access. Can you explain to us how these two parts of your practice intersect?

**Howardena Pindell:**

I use video when I fully intuitively feel that that's the best option. However, my issue-related painting has mainly been in painting with text on the painting or additional installation options, mixing installation and painting. However, I feel film and video reaches more people and is accessible as it is inexpensive relative to painting. I think of painting sometimes as imperial and that only the wealthy can own it. And museums rotate the collections, so an issue-related painting may be locked up and out of sight. I have only made three video films. The second one was about, has been seen, rather, by very few people. It was about war atrocities and is titled, *Doubling*. The word doubling was invented by Dr. Robert Lifton. He used it to explain the double consciousness of Nazi doctors, who could go to the concentration camps and torture and murder people and come home and kiss his wife and hug the dog as if everything was normal. I do not think my second video film is as strong as the other two, the other two being, *Free, White and 21*, and, *Rope/Fire/Water*. I'm mainly a painter and the majority of my work is painting. And in some cases I use photography for my video drawing series.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you. And so my next question is for Julie. In the film, *Rope/Fire/Water*, Howardena uses violent images of Black death and subjugation, but what

was powerful for me about the film were these spaces in the film where there are no images present. And it's just Howardena's voice and the methodical metronome. And it made me think about your work because in many ways the absence of these images causes the imagination to conjure even worse things. And I'd love for you to walk us through and explain how you engage with current events and the manipulation of images in your paintings.

**Julie Mehretu:**

Thank you very much for including me in this conversation with all of you. And it's an honor to be here and especially in conversation around how Howardena Pindell's work and her legacy. She was such an important artist for me as a young artist and someone I really looked up to. So it's really an honor to be here. I think that it was interesting. I went back to see the show again today and to experience that film. And also I have an archive of a lot of those postcards and images that Howardena Pindell used in the film. And also I was also struck by the silence and when the screen was just black and you heard the metronome ticking and you had the text in the film as well. And I work with media images. I've worked with media images in my work for a very long time, whether it's just part of the archive and ephemera that I keep in the studio, or whether it actually informs directly the painting either by tracing architectural drawing that was in the media image, or actually blurring the image so that it becomes a base layer in the painting and becomes the color, light, and energy field of the painting that I start to work in. And I think I became most interested in the blur because one time I was in the studio and I was projecting a ruin onto this painting and I was gonna trace the ruin, and the projector was out of focus and the blur carried most of what I was interested in in that photograph. It carried the history of the photo and suggested that, but it also allowed for these kind of other specters to kind of emerge from the photo. And within that blur, it almost carried the sense of futurity that could be possible within the next phase of that ruin or what that would evolve into. And I was really interested in that indeterminate place, the uncertain place, the uncertainty of the blurred image. And I think especially right now where media, like, if you go back to the Marshall McLuhan idea that the medium is the method, or the media is the message. And we live in a hyper-mediated reality where each of us live in a mediated reality where meet those are constructed by, in weird algorithmic ways. We live in this complicated house of mirrors where trying to locate oneself, which is I think core to making, is complicated in terms of how do we understand where we are in time and space when each of us have a very different narrative being presented to us through this mediated landscape. And so for me, I think really trying to think about it on the decolonization of images and how do you really think about images and mediated images, especially that are trying to tell us about our world differently. I'm much more interested in what is suggested by that image. And so by blurring it and abstracting it and taking it into the haze and the place of uncertainty, something else is possible, but the DNA of that is in there. And it activates how I tend to respond and work back into the image. And for me, I think the development and the work and the layering of the mark-making is trying to, like, decenter, challenge ideas of the narrative, but also try to, like, invent some other possibility and mine other forms of visual language to kind of present or have a different time of time-based experience in front of the painting.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you. That's an incredibly thoughtful answer. And I love the idea of the blur as a site of history and the indeterminateness of that becoming such an important part of your work. My next question is for Howardena again. And I'll talk about how you fairly seamlessly work across the figurative and the abstract. And I'd love for you to talk about your process of making paintings in this way. How do you determine which subjects to explore in a more didactic and issues-based painting versus the aspirations that you make in abstraction? I think intuitively about an issue and that tends to dictate the medium. My video, *Free, White and 21*, could not have been done in any other way. My new project is about European slavery in Europe. Did you know that the Vikings were big slave traders and focused often on enslaving not only their own people but sailed to the British Isles and namely England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. They enslaved women and children and traded them in Turkey for silk and metal. There were slave markets in Venice and Florence. You could also be enslaved if you were in debt. According to Time Magazine, Leonardo DaVinci's mother was an enslaved woman of Arab heritage. He was the child of one of her enslaver's friends. She was freed when her enslaver died.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you Howardena. I love that you brought up this idea of the levels of research that you're doing as you're approaching this new work. That's one of the things that I most have admired and enjoyed as we've been working together and as we started this collaborative process. When I joined The Shed in 2018, just this level of research and constant learning, and also unlearning of certain things. I think the intentional use of the word "enslaved" rather than "slaves," or I just feel like it's such an incredible thing that you are working towards and continue to have in your practice. So thank you for that answer. Our next question is for Torkwase and I'd love if you would discuss your use of abstraction as a methodology and a tool to create a Black conceptual framework.

**Torkwase Dyson:**

Thank you everyone for having me. It's a pleasure to be here. When I did attend Tougaloo College, we made journey to see Howardena I think in Philadelphia. And since that time, her politic has really stayed with me and informed deeply my research practice but moreover the sound and the presence and the sort of security she had around her own politic is still inspiring me today. So when I think about abstraction, I think about ways of understanding, particularly Black experiences, particularly Black experiences that are rooted in ideas of liberation, right? So the idea of what does it mean to think about, in a colonial condition, in a condition of slou-- sorry, chattel slavery in a condition of systemic bind. How does one remove themselves within the system architectural infrastructure one is in. So in my mind, this history of moving the body around and prioritizing improvisation and prioritizing instinct and prioritizing perception within the unknown for me is a way I begin to think about abstraction. And I often say, as we understand in the wake of slavery, which produces many abstractions, how do we survive extraction with abstraction? So the sort of geometric language and the surface language, and the underpaintings all come from these questions of water as geography, architecture, movement, and liberation as things that are about not only a kind of desire to move oneself in these undeterminable ways to a condition of freedom, but how does one do

that under duress? And how does one continue to do that under duress? And the level of perception of improvisation has been such a high level with these histories. I'm interested in grounding myself in these Black geography, geographic histories, and producing paintings and shape language that questions that specter, that questions that movement, and that questions a kind of stillness but these sort of vibratory patterns that the body itself has pretty consistently. So abstraction for me is a movement, a development over time, based on these Black spatial histories that now sort of land in my studio at a point where I can take all these histories of resistance and combine them into a spatial experience on the canvas in a sculptural space that gives that sense of possibility and capability within the Black body, right? So it's this constant shifting of surface texture, constant shifting of light, but also a recognition of constant movement and a sort of acutely aware, being acutely aware of the power of stillness, right? So this sort of condition of a discursive condition of being in becoming. For me abstraction as a tool and all of its forms and all of its registers allows me closer to those histories. And I'm able to regard those histories as not only genius and ever-moving, but they're living and they're active and they're functioning. As we think about ancestorship as something that I am still connected to that's living and functioning. And I think about this ancestorship that I'm still calling out for and calling out to in this peace and healing and sort of way to move forward with better futures but never leaving that history behind, always having it present and always believing in the history of those liberations will give us so many ways forward to better futures. So, abstraction for me allows a sort of field for that work.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you. I was revisiting a text this week that I had seen at your show at Columbia and it's the *1919 Black Water* text. And I was really, really intrigued by the idea of architecture as this like building block through space. And how that has all of these historical connections. So, I'm really pleased to hear your connection from, like, the physical object but also to this more spectral and ancestral space. It's a really intriguing idea for me. And I love listening to you discuss that. It's one of my favorite parts of your practice. So thank you for that answer, Torkwase. Howardena, the next question is for you. And for the exhibition, in addition to this new film, you created five new paintings, and two of them are very much directly tied to the themes of the video work. And I'm thinking about the hands that are at the base of *Columbus* and also the memorial to the victims of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in *Four Little Girls*. And my question is, how did you decide which subjects in the show needed to be represented through objects that are in a more literal space?

**Howardena Pindell:**

Well, I felt that the best thing to do to enhance the issue related-work was seeing real things coupled with text. One of my studio assistant, Ko, who's here, cast my hands and his hands, and a few other people's hands, in silicone. The detailing of the silicone is quite amazing. In fact, kind of wiggles. They are placed in front of the painting and were piled utilizing a documentary photo taken in the Congo of Congolese citizens next to a pile of severed hands. If you refused to work for free, men from Belgium would cut off your hands and let you bleed to death. Sometimes they just cut off one hand and you might survive. Columbus would cut off your hands, cut off rather the hands of the Indigenous people, the Arawak and the Taino in Hispaniola if they did not

bring him gold. And something I realized recently, I have Congo DNA. And it's possible that one of my relatives was a victim of the practice of removing your hands if you would not freely allow yourself to be enslaved. For the *Four Little Girls*, I went to a huge thrift shop in the Bronx with Ko my assistant. The shop is called Unique. They have a gigantic selection of everything. I wanted to show the everyday reality under Jim Crow, if not only having your property destroyed but also to lose your life. The four little girls were killed by 15 sticks of dynamite. The two men who committed the crime were convicted in the 1970s. The attorney who brought them to justice is, I believe, someone who will be serving in the Biden administration.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you Howardena. Both of the objects at the base of those paintings are incredibly striking, but for me, those hands in particular, because I know that they are a mold of your hand, just to see the gesture in that way makes the work all the more striking, just this connection that we have as collaborators and working with each other, just knowing that that is the reference points. It drove home the point of that innate cruelty for me. As we were layering the hands together in the gallery while we were installing the show, I was able to very easily say, oh, that's Howardena's hand. I recognize that hand. It's such a jarring thing to experience. So I really do appreciate the addition of those objects to the show. I'm going to move on to Sam. And one of the questions that I have for you is discussing the unconventional material which connects really beautifully with the materials found in both Howardena's paintings and then these objects that we were just discussing. And can you walk us through some of the ways you use these unconventional objects like law books from landmark civil rights cases and how that's shifted over the years for you?

**Samuel Levi Jones:**

Yes, hello everyone. It's an honor to be here. I'm happy that I was asked to participate in this conversation. And in terms of material use, even though my work is abstract, and this is sort of this is one of my most recent works. And I work with the covers of books, reference books. I started off using the encyclopedia, to using law books and to using medical books, even art books and history books. And for me, it was interesting to use these various specific materials to reference things that are very specific. And it sort of advanced from what you see here is that the book covers are actually pulped. So I'm thinking about this way of abstraction in terms of how-- in relationship to how we as people are sort of abstracted to not pay attention to a lot of the things that are going on around us and sort of, we sort of are thrown off and maybe in ways unable to deal with matters at hand.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Okay. Thank you. And we'll show one more image of Sam's work because I think it's...

**Samuel Levi Jones:**

Can I tell you about this one?

**Adeze Wilford:**

Yeah, please.

**Samuel Levi Jones:**

So, this piece is titled *Blood on the Leaves* and it is made from pulped law books. I made this piece earlier this year in the early stages of the pandemic. I decided after the fact that I wanted to place this work and use the entire funds to give to different organizations that were supporting the relief. And those organizations were My Block, My Hood, My City, Brave Space Alliance, and the Underground Museum in LA. And so, I titled this piece *Blood on the Leaves*. It comes from the song, which was originally a poem, "Strange Fruit." And I have a close relationship to this event because my stepmother's uncle was one of the two men that were lynched in the town of Marion in 1930. So yeah.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you. And the next question is for Howardena. And I want to shift from the more thematic works that are based in a more direct conversation and confrontation about race-based issues and talk about the new commissions that are more focused on climate change. And I'd love for you to talk and share with us how you came to make those works.

**Howardena Pindell:**

I worked basically with color and texture first and then introduced a reference to plankton. Partly this is because the Museum of Natural History had a wonderful exhibition- it was 2019-about the ocean. I was inspired by the plankton part of the exhibition. I learned that plankton is the world's largest known biomass, floating and drifting in vast number near the water surface. The name plankton comes from the ancient Greek word meaning "wanderer." Plankton includes microbes that were the first kind of life on earth and the ancestors of plants and animals, including humans. They provide 50 percent of the world's oxygen and are the foundation of marine food. If the conditions are right, they bloom in masses of billions that can be seen from space and become hundreds of miles long. Mostly their blooms are essential to the health of the planet. However, they can become toxic if conditions are wrong and in the wrong place. I'm also fascinated by the color of water. Plankton can turn to a beautiful bioluminescent blue at night on the shorelines as the waves move in. Plankton feeds a lot of sea creatures, including whales. One of the things that made me interested in these minute plant and animal organisms is that as a child, I was given at a very young age a microscope and would spend time looking at small organisms swimming around in Philadelphia's drinking water. I still have the microscope, but I could not find anything swimming around in New York drinking water.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Well, as a New York City resident, that's a relief for me. I just wanted to stay on the *Plankton Lace* photo for a little while just because I think that there's something so magnetic about those paintings and this idea of making something intentionally beautiful. Even though you're talking about a subject that dramatically will impact every single person living on this planet. But, there is a lot of more recent research that does talk about how climate change will more directly impact Black and Brown bodies and disenfranchised populations in the world at a quicker rate. So even though this painting and this body of work is focused on the ocean and climate change in one specific way, I'm always thinking about how marginalized groups will be affected. And so, I'm very glad that you were thinking about climate change in the show as well. And jumping



from that, I want to talk about the timeliness of this exhibition and its themes because it's something that we've spoken about often. And I feel as though the events over this past summer really did drive home why it was so important to have *Rope/Fire/Water*, the film, be made, but it's also something that you had been thinking about for decades before The Shed even existed since we're such a new institution. And one of the things that you you did talk about with me is how your practice has changed and evolved, and often in very obvious ways. And I'd love for you to talk about what changed within your own practice as a result of the 2016 election.

**Howardena Pindell:**

Well, as a result, I feel a sense of urgency. That is why I constructed the content of the video film. I felt under the current administration we are sliding down the rabbit hole of prior years, the years of racism, Jim Crow, and segregation far back before I was born into a poisonous state of division and hatred and sanctified racism.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Yes, and one of the things that you discussed. We have a catalogue that's forthcoming for this exhibition which I'm quite excited for everyone to get a copy of. But one of the things that you discussed with me and Ashley James, who you had an interview with, was how the layered quality of your canvases changed over time, especially with a piece like *Ko's Snow Day*, as you needed a break and an outlet from everything that had been happening.

**Howardena Pindell:**

Well, like *Ko's Snow Day*, I saw that as a memory of the snowstorms we used to have. We're having incredibly warm weather now. I don't know if I can answer that question very clearly because my memory isn't great anymore. I'm like one walking senior moment. I don't know if I can answer it with the complexity that I would, if I wrote it out.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Okay, that's totally fine. But the snow day, I think is my memory of looking outside of my building when we had a big storm and we couldn't even open the front door of the building. It was so deep. And cars were also forbidden to go downtown. Only limousines, i.e. only the rich were allowed to travel if they were in a limousine.

**Adeze Wilford:**

I'm thinking about the texture on that canvas in comparison to the wor-- And we have a slide of works of yours from the early '70s, which I felt was important to include these historical paintings because you really do see a through line in terms of palette and color in your canvas, but just the radical shift in layering I find really, really intriguing.

**Howardena Pindell:**

Well, I think I was able to find a new source of material. I've been working with sheets of foam and you encase them in something called jade. And that's why some of the paintings have very thick texture because the jade will adhere it and it will not become brittle. And the paintings can be rolled and you get this texture with the thickness. And then I use very thin paper like rice paper.

Then I might use a wool paper so that you get the sense of inside and out. So I liked the depth of it. And the thing that influenced me that got me to thinking about that was when I was living in Japan on a grant, I went to a temple called Itsukushima Shrine near Hiroshima. And they had a temple, I guess collection that they would expose. They called it "mushi boshi," exposing or getting the bugs out. And so they would open part of the collection to the public. And I happened to be living there the year that they showed this particular school called the Heckinohio. And it had that amazing depth where when you looked at it you felt like you were looking through water. I mean, deep down into water. And this is maybe 12th century. So that influenced me in terms of wanting eventually to get that sense of depth. And the way I found I could get that was by using these thicker foams. I use a thinner foam, a thicker foam, and my friends who helped me, we cut it out and we attach it to the canvas, but we make sure that it's totally sealed. So, it won't disintegrate. So the actual, shall we say, influence on the work was a Japanese scroll from I think the 12th century.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you for sharing that. It was a really informative answer. And I appreciate you talking about your traveling because I know that's such an important part of your practice as well. My next question is for Julie. And I'd like to talk for a moment about scale with you. And a lot of the earlier works from the 1970s for Howardena are in conversation with this scale of Abstract Expressionists, but there's for me there's an element of femininity and craft to the works, in the canvases, with the stitching and the application of hole punches that it's decidedly her own intervention on painting. And I'd love for you to talk about taking on monumental scale in your paintings, Julie, and how working this way has impacted your practice.

**Julie Mehretu:**

The scale really came out of the work. I wanted, I was working with marks at a very, very small scale and I wanted this sense of dimension and kind of near ordered far. I wanted the sense of, like, this kind of decentered sense of space, where one couldn't necessarily locate oneself. And you had to kind of move across the canvas physically to actually be able to understand what was happening and that that understanding it was a very different understanding from what how you would experience the painting from a distance where you could actually see the entire painting and experience that, that those were very different types of experiences. I was really interested in that. And so scale has been crucial in many ways because it has informed not just how I think about space and time, and the time-based experience in front of the painting. And my interest in that comes from how to mine Black radical tradition and other radical traditions and radical forms of imagining something else. Like how do we invent other forms of space, time, and possibility? And for me, abstraction has been core to that. Abstraction has been this language where there's a lot of space to invent language and to invent and mine the breaks to find something else and kind of suture something else together. But scale allowed the marks to exist in all those spaces, from the level of plankton almost to the level of a superstructure. And then as I left the architectural drawing behind, the architectural drawing kind of kept the marks and the language rooted in a particular sense of scale. And I want it to be able to liberate that and really, in a way, as this work is an effort to kind of find this space of liberation and

really be able to like think through what are liberatory possibilities within this language and within the experience that can happen in front of the painting. That experience, which is visceral, is rooted in this other tradition. And so for me, the scale was essential, like, being able to work that way, being able to learn how to make a mark at that scale especially when I finished the *HOWL* paintings for SFMOMA, they were so enormous that everything about what I knew about making a mark, what I knew about painting kind of went out the door because it had to be reinvented for that other scale. And I looked at a lot of work of scale, to the early caves and doing one, second, third, fourth, fifth century Buddhist caves that were basically virtual realities in and of themselves, through two huge stellas and wall carvings in Egypt. And really studied this kind of history of working in that monumental way. But also going back to when you asked at the beginning, we are working in the history of painting and within the history and the grand tradition of painting. And part of what I was interrogating at the beginning is sense of time and space. Again history and history painting and the history of like what was implied and embedded in terms of that? In terms of colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity. All of these that are kind of assumptions and part of the history of the narrative in painting and abstraction, and to be able to kind of find ways to decenter that, undermine that, resist that challenge, that work, find other space of other possibilities of what painting and abstraction can be, became really crucial to me. So I think that's good enough. It's not taking too much time.

**Adeze Wilford:**

That was great. I was riveted by that answer, actually.

**Julie Mehretu:**

Thank you.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Torkwase, I'm gonna jump to you now. And so for me something that became increasingly important was this through line of water in the exhibition, both the passage over water by ancestors and then also Howardena's own interactions with bodies of water. She discusses this moment where she's standing in front of a glacier in Norway and this incredible vibration that she was feeling in front of this object. That's a hyperobject, something that was around for millennia. And I want you to talk to us about the ways that your own practice engages with water as a source material for broader explorations.

**Torkwase Dyson:**

Well, thank you. I'm there when I engage the exhibition. I was very interested in this idea, of course, as always, as climate change, the relationship to water and people of color historically and globally, the relationship between architecture, infrastructure, and water. And as we think about histories of extraction and I think talking about the plankton and you have to talk about the history of extraction, and the infrastructure that it takes to produce extraction, the architecture that it takes to produce extraction, and what it does, it disseminates all-- so-- sentient beings, right? These kinds of lived experiences. And I'm really interested in water as it's a complex geography where we can look at it and see a history of Blackness being born in this condition of liquidity. We can see it as a space that holds and still holds a specter. And we can also see it as a sacred space that not only now is in danger of deep-sea extraction, but

continues to be in danger of continued ways of technologies, advancements, and inventing different kinds of extractions in the future. So for me, water in relationship to architecture and infrastructure is all tied into Blackness and becoming. And seeing Howardena's paintings on the wall and thinking about the beauty of it reminds me of my own experience in water. And we were talking about abstraction before. So the way in which I grapple with water, body, architecture, history, extraction, climate change, is I had to condition myself around this idea of Black compositional thought, right? So I had to make something where I could enter and produce a discursive condition materially theoretically, philosophically, and formally. So water in this proposed piece specifically is my first time working with water as material. And water is clear, right? Water is a clear element and all of these different things from the earth, our coloring, our own eyes and our own bodies in relationship to the earth surroundings. And so thinking about this idea and I'm going to read something so I can be clear on the statement. If Blackness is already an architectonic developed out of liquidity, can the painting and/or sculpture embody this phenomenon and offer a sensory of the future of extraction? So how do we think about sculpture in the round and objects in the round and understand that there's no talk about climate crisis without talking about plantation slavery? There's no talking about environmental change or ocean rising without talking about the Gullah with people. There's no talking about these things in any radical way without real discursive understanding of all of these things happening all the time simultaneously on Black and Brown bodies on the planet. So, incorporating water in this work, the ability to create conditions of refraction, the ability to talk about what does it mean. And Glissant talks about this also, this idea of transparency and opacity within these systems, right? Registers of abstraction, political abstraction, economic abstraction, pure abstraction, right? All of these entry points into abstraction. For me, water is a way to think about, again, abstraction in relation to extraction, right? And if we weren't extracted, there was a whole life of abstraction before chattel slavery. There was a whole life of music and body and movement before chattel slavery. So, I think in my work, in this piece in particular, and I'll bring it to a close, the same piece in particular, I've been working with ideas of distance for like two years, and having this sort of water space 40 feet long has me really thinking about how do we, in this conversation around climate, really have a conversation around distance, and have a conversation around horizon, and have a conversation around residence time which Christina Sharpe talks about. And how do we understand what these new extractions that are coming out of new different ways to consume? How do we protect Brown people now? So, I'm interested in water as a space of geography in history and the present. I'm interested in water, as you see in most of my work, ideas of liquidity and belonging to this and understanding that this is what the work is for, the work is to point to everything around it. So, yeah.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Excellent. Thank you for that Torkwase. Just the idea of water relating to extraction of both physical objects but also of people, that's just a really poignant thought. And I love that you brought up Christina Sharpe's work because that was such an influential text for me as I was researching and thinking about the show. And I want to have one of our last questions go to Sam before we open up to the Q and A for a moment. And so Sam, I'd like to ask you to discuss the idea of gesture and how work takes form for you via stitching. And how does the use of a machine influence mark-making process for you?

**Samuel Levi Jones:**

I'll talk a little bit about that. I also want to tie, respond to some of Howardena's work and things that are on couple of particular pieces. For me, the stitching. So these covers they're, actually, they're stitched together with a sewing machine. And initially that was just sort of the first thing that came to me in terms of putting them back together. And for me, and I say referenced the use of the law book say, was using, I chose to use the law books because it was referencing police brutality. The book was sort of like a stand in for these power structures in a sort of a way of me breaking them down, deconstructing them and thinking about how they can be reimaged in order to sort of like fix these issues that we have. And when I was first sewing these together, I was using a linear stitch, which wasn't very visible. And then I switched it up and started using a zigzag stitch, which made it much more visible. And I also had this relationship to quilting and the history of that, but I wanted to speak on the *Columbus* work that Howardena did in referencing the atrocities on Indigenous people. And I also want to speak on the new video work because in that video work, she shows these statistics or these numbers that pertained to lynching. And not only did she reference the numbers of lynching of Black people, but she also referenced the numbers of lynching on white people. And then there's also the reference of the website called MappingPoliceViolence.org. And it gives a breakdown of not only the killing of of Black people by police, but also gives the numbers of the killing of, there's gender and there's also the number of people who are white who have been killed by police. And also referencing the issues of history of narratives and how they're sort of, how much truth there is, how much the truth is twisted. And Howardena you sort of in the referencing of those lynchings, you could have just not referenced white people, left them out. And in your work, you cannot reference, you could choose to not reference the atrocities of Indigenous people. And it makes me really think about going back to sort of the idea of a twisting of narratives. And I think specifically about the media and the things that are highlighted within media versus the things that are not, and sort of how in a lot of ways, all of these issues play a part in everyone as a whole. And what do you have to say in terms of, like, what made you choose to reference these other things? And what can you say to the poss-- the likelihood of these distorted presentations of these narratives and how they create this further division within people to keep us away from resolving these issues.

**Howardena Pindell:**

I'll try to answer that. I focused mainly on African Americans who had been killed by the police, or had been lynched, but I also saw, at first I thought I'll just leave the whites out. And then I thought, no, because I want them to realize that they could be the object of a lynching as well. Take for example, the governor in Michigan, where a white supremacist group or a militia targeted her for her stance on mask-wearing. They were going to have a trial and then they were going to kill her. So I see that as a lynching. I wanted whites to realize that you also are vulnerable. So, those people can't just step back and say, well that's not my problem, because I've heard whites respond to issues about racism as "that's not my problem." So pretty much, I mean, certainly the Indigenous people, I mean, I'm starting actually to do some active reading about, there's a book called, *The Hidden Slavery*. It has to do with how Indigenous populations were enslaved. But I did make a conscious choice to just, because I only had stats for the whites and for Blacks. I didn't

have any stats for what happened to Indigenous people within this country. But again, I'm trying to illuminate myself in terms of expanding the scope of my reading so that I can learn more and also include Indigenous statistics. I don't know who is keeping them but I have a number of Indigenous friends. There's a woman, Asiba Tupahache, and I should really speak with her. She has a newsletter called Spirit of January. And there's a section that she has on oppression, which is very good. She's the one that really gave me my voice way back in the 19-- I would say late 1970s, early 1980s. She thought of racism as not only oppression but she also saw that as an issue that had to do with dysfunctional families and people developing rage that they couldn't let out at their abuser. And so they had to lash out at someone who was different from them, who was already targeted by other people and named as different. Now, when I have done some paintings in the past, I had a commission for the social security building and I included texts in the painting about Indigenous lands, Native American lands. So I always tried to like put a little, in fact, I think in *Columbus* I also mentioned First Nation people. It's in the text, it's on this painting, First Nation people being enslaved. A lot of people don't know about that but I still have a lot to learn. I still have a lot to learn. Does that answer your question?

**Samuel Levi Jones:**

Thank you. I think we all have a lot to learn.

**Howardena Pindell:**

Yeah.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you for that answer. I realize that we are over our time, so I don't think we'll be able to get to our Q and A section of the talk. But one quick question that someone had was Howardena can you repeat the name of the book of the enslaved Indigenous population that you mentioned? Just the title.

**Howardena Pindell:**

Oh, it's actually on the table. Did you check out? I think it's, you'll see. It's not that one. Nope, not that one. I don't know if I have it out here, that's the problem.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Well, we'll send it. I think we do end-of-show email to people and we'll send that out to folks so that they can read it.

**Howardena Pindell:**

It might be under, *The Omega*. It's something about the hidden slavery, or the hidden history. He's looking for it.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Okay. We can find it later and then you or Ko can email me. But I'm truly grateful for everyone's thoughtful discussions this evening.

**Howardena Pindell:**

Oh, we found it.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Oh, perfect. *The Other Slavery*.

- *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*.

And it's by Andres Resendez, R-E-S-E-N-D-E-Z, Resendez. Resendez, okay.

**Adeze Wilford:**

Thank you so much. It's one of my favorite things about you is how books are such a deep part of your practice. Yeah, so it's one of my, I love books as well. And it's great whenever I encounter someone who is such a deep researcher. It always makes me excited with artists when they can back up their ideas with incredible depth of research. So then I can say that for everyone here today. So thank you again for your time. I'm just going to thank the Howard Gilman Foundation for providing the Zoom platform for tonight's conversation as well as the Ford Foundation and New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. And thank them for their support of our exhibition as well as the public programs. And I want to thank the supporters of Howardena, Torkwase, Julie, and Sam both through their studios and galleries. And I want to thank The Shed's civic programs and IT teams for helping to make sure that this program ran very smoothly. And I also, before we go, I want to plug, we are having a conversation next Thursday, the same time. Howardena and I will be in conversation with curator Ashley James. And there are a series of conversations that are related to the exhibition that are going to be released, their date and subjects, throughout early 2021. So we hope to see you again. Thank you so much for joining us this evening.