

# Howardena Pindell

## Atomizing Art

**Time:** 15 minutes

## Study Guide

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### INTRODUCTION

**Howardena Pindell: Atomizing Art** is a film about an artist and social critic, whose work is a statement about her beliefs and her life. She confronts us with her views as an African-American woman artist, teacher and world traveler.

In her artwork, she challenges propaganda and fights racism and injustice. She is also concerned with identity and cultural heritage. Her work is highly personal as she records her own struggles as an African America woman trying to find her sense of self in a society where overt and subtle discrimination conflict with individualism and equality.

She says painting is a way of renewal and a reflection of her constantly evolving ideas. She is equally inventive in her use of materials. In her early works, she used punched out cardboard dots of different colors, which she considered atoms or spirits, as a background for superimposed images that conveyed a powerful message. She went on to mix different materials, combining photographs, drawings, paper, postcards, thick paint, fabric and video to create arresting collages.

Her first autobiographical series, which used outlines of her body on unstretched canvas and strident words, was unsettling to viewers. However, the artwork inspired by her world travels, particularly in Japan and India, is more spiritual and organic, displaying another aspect of the artist's perspective and conviction.

### TO THE TEACHER:

*This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:*

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds.
- provide questions for reflection.

- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

## **SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST**

*You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and her accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.*

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Howardena Pindell (1943 - ) painter, museum curator, and professor, grew up in Philadelphia, PA. She always wanted to be an artist and took art classes on Saturdays. In the video she shares stories of experiences she had with teachers that wanted to keep her in her place and denied her opportunities as a black student. She went to receive a B.F.A. from Boston University and an M.F.A. at Yale University, where she was a graduate assistant. After college she was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and now teaches at the State University of New York in Stony Brook.

Her career has been prolific, not only in terms of her art-making, but also as a writer. For many years she has been an activist in the art community. Since the 1970s, she has published groundbreaking studies that document the lack of representation of artists of color in the major museums and galleries. She has written numerous articles attacking censorship, racism and violence.

She has received many grants from such prestigious entities as the National Endowment for the Arts and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and a U.S./Japan Friendship Commission fellowship. In 1990 The College Art Association gave her the Artist Award for a Distinguished Body of Work. Ms. Pindell's work is part of the collections of corporations and major museums in the U.S., Europe and Japan. She has been a featured artist in a multitude of solo and group exhibitions and is a frequent panelist and lecturer.

Travel is an important part of her life, and she has visited Egypt, Africa, Asia, Europe, Russia, Latin American and the Caribbean. She lived in Japan for eight months, India for seven months and spent several months in Sweden, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Senegal. She uses the inspiration of these sojourns as well as her experiences in the United

States, as content for the autobiographies she present to the world as a reflection of her life and a challenge to the viewer.

### **WHAT TO WATCH FOR**

*Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.*

- Watch for the artist sitting on the floor sketching.
- Watch for how the artist describes her work and what it means.
- Watch for how the artist wraps herself in white.
- Watch for how the artist makes dots, arranges them and paints them.
- Watch for artworks of different shapes.
- Watch for how the artist tells what s wrong with society.
- Watch for artworks about slavery.
- Watch for what other people say about the artist.
- Watch for how the artist works with tints and shades and the process of how she paints.
- Watch for the artist drawing off of a video and the effect of graininess.
- Watch for the artist s wish for peace.

## QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Howardena Pindell and her work.

? How did Howardena Pindell use drama to tell about experiences that happened to her when she was young? (She did a role play of her teacher.) Tell about the incidents.

? Why does the artist say her art is her own spirit?

? How does she use ordinary material to make her art? (hole punch, file folders, paint.) Describe the process.

? What are some ideas the artist expresses in her art? (injustice, slavery, etc.) How does she use dots to express these ideas?

? What kind of atmosphere does she have when she works?

? Explain what this statement means: Racism with a friendly face.

? What connection is there between the video paintings and dot paintings?

? Why did the artwork of her body outline upset people?

? Why does she wrap herself in white in the film?

? Which words would you use to describe Howardena Pindell's art - spontaneous, careful, unplanned, methodical, angry, peaceful? Explain why.

? What can you learn from Howardena Pindell?

## **EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS**

*The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Howardena Pindell's message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.*

1. Go on a positive/negative space hunt. Look for examples of space that's filled (positive) and space that is unfilled or empty (negative) in the classroom, body shapes, photographs and in the artist's work. Use construction paper and drawing materials to make an abstract collage of positive/negative space.
2. Get file folders and a hole punch to make dots to assemble like Howardena Pindell. How many did you make? Was it hard or easy? Write about why this intensive, detailed process and material was important to the artist and her work.
3. Prepare cut-out dots (use construction paper if the file folders are too difficult) and use this to create a work of art. Remember negative shape. You may want to superimpose paintings or drawings over the dots.
4. Experiment with complementary and analogous tints and shades of color. Write words to describe the mood and effects.
5. In the video, Howardena Pindell tells about an incident when a teacher tells her it's better for her not to be successful: If you succeed, we shall destroy you. What does this statement mean? Write about what advice you would give Howardena or any person faced with this problem of not being too good.
6. Most of Howardena Pindell's art has a message. Does all art have a message? Ask students to debate both sides of the question.
7. Define and discuss autobiography. Look for examples of autobiography in Pindell's artworks. Briefly outline some important experiences in your life. Choose one as the theme of a collage, incorporating a photo or a drawing of yourself.

8. Think about something unfair that has happened to you or someone you know. Find a partner to create a dialogue about what happened and present it to the class.

9. Have a classmate draw an outline around your body. Fill the outline with writings and drawings of your thoughts, ideas and feelings about your life.

10. Howardena Pindell's artwork is a protest against what she feels is wrong in the world. Writing is another way to protest. Choose an issue or problem you would like to change and write a strong letter to the editor or an editorial about it.

## **VIDEO SERIES**

**Howardena Pindell: Atomizing Art**, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about **Howardena Pindell: Atomizing Art** and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Video, Inc.  
Tel: 914-238-9366; Fax: 914-238-6324.

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