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SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL
OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE
Skowhegan, Maine

Lecture by Howardena Pindell
Summer 1980

NOTE: THIS IS ONLY A PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT – THE FIRST PART OF LECTURE WAS NOT AUDIBLE.

H. PINDELL: … set of slides.

So, what I started doing were series of drawings on acetate, which I attach to the television set. When you turn on the TV, it sticks to the set. And then I just did photographs of that imagery. And I did them just, you know, I have maybe seven or eight hundred images. I just did them, you know, just to do them, as a release, as play.

The next slides.

Does anyone have any questions up to this point?

Does anyone have any questions?

Now, while I was doing this, I was doing the number of pieces, but then I started moving back into painting, where I was embedding blank spots of paper in white paint. I haven't really shown those pieces. So simultaneously you have this work with the number pieces, and then I move back into painting. So I'm doing, again, several things at once.

Next set. Hmm?

(Audience: How big are these?)

Oh, these are only five by seven, color. And they can go as large as eleven, fourteen without getting too grainy.

Yeah?

(Audience: I don't understand [inaudible] photographs of the acetate on the TV?)

Everything is on the negative. You send everything to… Okay, your tripod, camera, you photograph the image from the TV. Everything… Therefore you don't draw on, you're not drawing on a finished print. So everything is on a negative. You know, you can print them in editions of ten or whatever.

(Audience: To print it, what [inaudible]?)

You fool around with the set. (Laugh)

(Audience: laughter)

You know, and I found basically sports images seem to lend themselves, like the right-hand side is a motorcycle race, and the other is a football race—a football game. But they kind of transform themselves, they become something else.

(Audience: Would you sort of wait for the right moment, or would you just keep taking?)

I just kept taking pictures. It cost a fortune after a while, though, you know. Because you end up running to the darkroom, you know, to a commercial place, and your fees run about 20 bucks, 30 bucks, every time you pick up your stuff.

(Audience: [Inaudible] numbers [inaudible] arrow type features?)

Yeah, there are numbers and vectors. They mean nothing. And the only thing I can dig them out from is my father was one of these kind of Renaissance types that loved physics and mathematics. And he had taught those subjects when he was about my age, and he used to keep books of numbers. And that sounds very odd, but he in fact was tutoring people who would get 800s on their college boards. I hated them, you know. They would come up and get all these high grades, you know, and I, um… Anyway, so I was always around him, you know, and he was always, you know, either teaching someone about mathematics, or he would keep books. Every time he'd get in the car, he'd write down the speedometer thing, you know. So, I always saw sort of numbers as drawing, not as functional, because I still don't balance my checkbook very well. You know, I don't use numbers other than for drawing.

Next set.

(Audience: Do the drawings themselves mean anything?)

Nothing. Once I was in a show, and some mathematician figured out a system. And he was confronted with one of those pieces that was all numbers, nothing but numbers, densely. I don't know how he did it.

Anyway, this is a hockey match.

(Audience: Hockey match?)

Yeah.

(Audience: Do you wait until, you know, a certain image finally [inaudible]?)

Well, I do, I do sort of pick out certain things that I think will work. You know, like the one on the left: I found that if you get something that's real close and something's going on far away, you'll get a stronger image. And then if you get like a lot of little people in the distance.

(Audience: But I mean do you take like a lot of shots in a row, and then select?)

Yeah. Yeah, I would run through about three rolls of film in a sitting.

Next.

Yeah, the one on the right is a Kate Smith, I think. It's a bicentennial series.

(Audience: laughter)

And the one on the left is Flash Gordon series. Yeah, when I was a kid I had a thing about the Flash Gordon, you know, series. You can date me from that, you know. And Kate Smith, I remember running home from school to watch Kate Smith sing, you know, "When the Moon Goes Over the Mountain," or whatever. (Laugh) She isn't in the image, but there is another image from that series that has her in it.

Next slides.

Okay, the swimmer and a weightlifter. It's funny, if you take the same drawings, you know, how they change depending on what's behind the image.

(Audience: How'd you go about drawing on the acetate?)

you just, well you just buy…

(Audience: No, no, not physically. But, was it just at random?)

At random. Everything I do is at random. The play. I find if I start… That was what bothered me about figurative painting: I couldn't do anything at random. You know, I mean you cant put the muscles on at random. You cant build… I mean unless I get into cubism. There's not much room for play for me in figurative painting. And I like being very playful. I like, you know, the seriousness of it, but, you know, on one hand, but the playfulness of it, I think, gives it much more options. Or it gives the image more options.

(Audience: Howardena, do you put the piece of acetate on the TV, kind of like [inaudible]?)

Yeah, you know, it's like Winky Dink. 'Cause I use a lot of the stuff that I had when I was a kid. You know, there were the game sh… I don't know if, you know, maybe some of us are, you know, ten years, some of us are ten or twelve years older, but there was a thing on TV where you attach acetate and you would draw along with Winky Dink. You know. In fact, well… There's some things that I think link to the work I do now with the whole, sort of, you know, before… Some of you may remember the cards that they sent around, and they had holes, and you would pull them off and get a prize. I don't know, it might be, you know, too far back.

Next slides.

Okay, and this is just tennis. I just wanted to show you a smattering of that kind of group of images 'cause they're very varied. And yet they're very kind of separate from the other work I do. I've heard some people mention that… Hannah, can that be focused at all?

(Isn't this where you had a blank?)

Oh, there's a blank on that side. I was just wondering if you could focus this other side.

(Audience: laughter)

Ah. (laugh) Sorry.

But, there's, you know, some people have looked at the work and said, Well, yeah, sure, you use the TV, the TV is a series of dot-patterns. You know, that it does in some way hook up with the work, because you are getting a series of dots and you see it as a total configuration when you see the full signal.

Okay, now. I think we jump to something else. Next slides.

Now, what stated to happen… Again, you know, not a linear development. I started to do drawings on paper and destroying—I'd recycle those drawings. I would do drawings with watercolor, gouache, acrylic, anything. And then I would do a drawing, punch it up, put it in an envelop, put it aside. Then when I wanted to do a drawing, I would take all the drawings and then reassemble them as a single drawing. So that we contain both the holes and then the negative areas as well.

This series started around '74. Yeah, '74. You get a whole lot of things going on, I guess, at the same time. I'm trying painting using, you know, these small circles imbedded in white paint, this stuff is happening, plus the video drawings. And I've given up the numbering.

Yeah?

(Audience: [inaudible]?)

These are small. About the size of typewriter paper. Some are 11, 14.

Yeah?

(Audience: [inaudible]?)

Okay, what I use is spray photo dry mount, something I learned about through photography. It's permanent, it does not brittle, and it does not turn yellow. The way I do it I have, well, in my old job I'd go down to the frame shop and scavenge, and you know, when you cut a mat you have the center part—they would always throw out these 100% rag center sections. I'd save them, and then I would run a thread grid on them. Sometimes I would do a drawing on the mount before covering it with the other drawings. And I would work back into it with tweezers, pins, stencils, and then after I'd finished spraying all the layers I would add talcum powder.

(Audience: Why?)

Why, because I hated the patina of the spray adhesive, and the talcum powder gave it almost a latex sense, you know, sort of sense to it. I didn't like that kind of, um, it looked like muselage or something. It was very unpleasant. So, I preferred it to have a powdery, almost frosted sense to it.

(Audience: Is there a real [density?], or is that the talcum powder?)

There's… Well, the depth is… They're about maybe an inch deep.

Uh, next.

Now, we jump. Those pieces, those last two pieces were maybe around '74, '75. Then we'll jump a few years. I'm still painting. I'm experimenting with imbedding paper in paint, but it still hasn't resolved itself. They look like Ryman's painting with pimples. I mean they're really unpleasant looking things. I started to do them larger—these are probably 20 inches by 18 or so—and I started doing different size hole-punches. The others you saw only had one size. These had three or four sizes, including the remains of telex machine, those tiny, tiny little ones. So that I had a hole-punch made, maybe it was an eighth of an inch, a quarter of an inch, and then a half an inch. Then I started using powder pigments, so that you have this dense, almost earthy quality. And I started using sparkle—glitter, but colorless glitter.

(Audience: Did you kind of attach the pigment on, or…?)

I would dust it on. I would dust it on. I'd save my torn pantyhose, you know, and use that, put that over a bottle and kind of shake it on. Some of it comes out of I used to love to cook, and there's, you know, I just don't have time or energy to do that, but there's certain processes that you get from, you know, seasoning things, and I almost sometimes when I when I work… It's almost like seasoning the work—you sort of dust a little of this, a little salt, a little pepper, and whatever.

(Audience: How does it stay on?)

Spray photo dry mount.

(Audience: Oh, the…)

Yeah. It holds it on. You just layer things, and then you put… It's like an apple pie—apples, cinnamon, sugar, you know, butter, whatever. You just keep layering it, layer upon layer.

Yeah?

(Audience: What do you use to apply that. I mean, 'cause…)

I drop it on, I wear gloves 'cause adhesive can be kind of, can give you kidney damage. You know, I'll wear rubber gloves or something, and I'll sprinkle it on, I'll use tweezers, and I'll…

(Audience: The reason I ask is that I can imagine, like, the spraying carelessly, something [inaudible])

It happens, it happens. Plus I have cats, and there are cat hairs all over them. You know, I just consider it part of the work. You know.

Next slides.

Yeah, this one you can see more obviously the telex, you know those tiny little spots. I'm using different kinds of paper—always 100% rag. I would go to the architecture supply places and buy very transparent papers, parchments, so that I'd have a variety of thickness of paper within the piece.

(Audience: By this time you've like resolved your [inaudible]?)

Well, the grid kind of started to disappear, and I started to get flaps. If you notice these reds, this red, the one, the yellow one here has a red square in it—that is actually a protrusion. They kind of… It's like I would take a square and split the bottom of it so it stands up like a T, and but the T part of it is… The top of the T is flat on the piece. So there would be all kinds of spaces in it, quite different from the regimented space you would get with the grid of thread.

(Audience: You kind of ground it with yellow first, or is that like yellow piece of uh…?)

Oh, well, yeah, sometimes I put a ground on. I think this is more obvious, you know, that there was a yellow ground. I might have painted… I paint back into them too. And the orange one was probably more obviously painted orange in the background, but I would work into it. But the color would generate itself as I was doing it. I didn't decide I'm gonna do one that's yellow and one that's orange.

Next slides.

Now, some more play. What I did was I had my darkroom, but since I was doing color work I didn't need the black and white darkroom. So I took the darkroom trays and started making paper. I really haven't shown these things very much. But what I did was embed drawings. It's like going back to

the number pieces. I would do drawings on Japan papers, and then I'd take my blender and different kinds of charcoal papers that had tint to them, and I'd make up a mess of pulp, and then take window screens and dip them. And then sprinkle in drawings. I've gotten a grant to go to Japan next year, so for six months I'll probably start working with paper. But I don't want to get into artsy fartsy paper, you know. That can be, you know people get too crafty with it. I'll go an observe the paper villages in Japan, and if it's, you know, really too much, then I'll, you know, I'll drop it. But anyway, this was just a diversion. I've done about maybe 40 pieces, but I haven't shown them. Maybe I've shown a couple of them in shows, but I just considered it another outlet for play.

Next slides.

Now, finally I got the painting thing, you know, after all the hassles. I was doing paintings on canvas, you know the white things with the stuff embedded, and colors started to get into the paintings, and I started to disassemble the canvas. I would cut it apart and re-sew it. The one on the left, you can see the lines where it has been re-sewn. And this gives you a sense of the surface. That's a telex strip right there, with the little holes, and the rest are papers. And there's some glitter you can see and some sequence, and you can see where the lines, you know, where I've sewn it.

Next slides.

Hannah, can these be focused at all? Oh, okay.

(Audience: You set up your [inaudible] together, [inaudible] white layer of paint on top?)

Well, it's not really white. I think this slide just looks bleached out. What I do is I sew… It takes about a month to sew. Then I would gesso it, and usually a color ground. I don't like working with a white ground. Then I would, oh, pick different colors. Like I might use… I might… Well, I take thick paint and I push it through templates. Then when that—I work on the wall for that. Then when the whole surface is covered with these real sticky, you know, these things that stick out, then I put it on the ground and I have papers that are drawings that I've punched out. And usually I have some kind of dye on it so it bleeds through. And then is sprinkle them in and put the paint on. But usually it's not white. I never, I very rarely use white now. And then the things that have dye bleed up. So you get these sort of ghosts of spots.

Uh, next slides.

Just, you know, give you an example of how they look, that one's probably seven feet by seven feet, and the last one is probably eight or nine feet by seven feet. They get very heavy. Sometimes I wonder how I ever did them. You know, after I'm finished. I don't know how I lift them, but I do, for some reason. And the final layer has talcum powder and glitter—crystal glitter.

Next slides.

Now, things started to change a bit. I travel a lot. And I had gone to Brazil about three years ago, and I'd become very interested in the cult of [Imanja??], which is something, a religious thing that comes through the Europe and Africa that was brought to Brazil. And I just, well, I'm psychic, and I

was very interested in their whole thing about psychic ability. And I would just observe, you know, on the beach. I was living in Ipanema, right near the beach, and there would be candles in the morning, and people would bring offerings. Well, [Imanja??] is the goddess of the sea, and apparently you present offerings in boats that are silver. And she likes things that are glittery, whatever. And somehow I changed my grid from a grid to stripes that reminded me of waves of water. so I started titling my paintings, which is, I never title my work, and I started having them take on a smell. I started using powders that smelled, like herbal essence, or whatever, when I would sprinkle the painting. And then on the back I would put all kinds of cheap perfume. So when you walk in the room you have a sensory, you know, you're physically smelling the piece, and as well as feeling its presence.

Next slides.

(Audience: Are those, uh, are these kind of stiff, or?)

Yeah, they get stiff, but you roll them. They're really flexible. They're very tough, you know.

Now, real life. You know, you've been hearing from us that you have to get real life into your work or, you know, your sense of things that have happened to you. Up until this time, I think my work has been pretty detached. The work has not been… Well, it's been kind of formal problems, but also a certain emotional detachment form the work, where I think I wouldn't show any real experience that I had had. I mean the last one maybe was close to it, but it's very abstracted out. So someone would not necessarily have to know my experience to experience the piece. I've probably talked about this enough to some of you, but I was in a bad car accident in October, and suddenly I had to deal with the fact that I had lost my memory. And I had amnesia. And I also couldn't walk for a while. And I was having a show in April, and I had produced, you know, I had done most of the work except the small work. And I couldn't work in the studio. I couldn't stand very long, you know, not at all for a while. And I was doing the small pieces, and suddenly figurative images started coming out in the work. Also, I had always been doing postcard pieces, where I altered postcards, and I took the postcards that I had and started putting them in the pieces. And part of it was kind of the exercise of trying to remember things. They were sort of metaphors for the function of memory, using postcards that I had received or postcards other people had received and then reliving certain things that I enjoy doing. Like I had gone to Norway, and I really love being there. So I took postcards of Norway and used it in the piece, and then would call the piece memory test because I felt, you know, I'd have to go to the neurologist, and they'd test my memory. You know, they'd test to see if I could walk properly and whatever. So this piece—I mean I wanted also to have my humor come out too. This piece is called *Sorry It Was an Accident*. (laugh) And what I did was, I had before this accident had happened I loved… There are two sources of supply for me, Woolworth's and Utrecht, and thank god I had gone to Woolworth's, and I had picked up a little bag of, you know, of kids' toys, and there's a skeleton that I had found. I don't think the slide shows it, but if you look in the eyes of the skeleton, I had cut out two little eyes, and they're way, way in the back of the skeleton. So when you look at the piece it's like it follows you around, like those ads where someone stares at you, and every position, you know, you look the person's looking at you. And that's just a detail of it.

Next slides.

Now this whole series is memory tests. This is the one with an image of Norway on. It has a very strange title, it's called *Watch the Birdy*, something like that. And it has a bound up giraffe. I had gone to Africa, I guess maybe seven or eight years ago, but it somehow, the sense of not being able to walk or get around very well, so I was bound up, but yet I was remembering a wonderful experience I had had in another space. So the pieces start to take on a narrative content. Then I started driving nails into the work. Now, that's kind of a new thing. And I figured that that was exorcising the experience. I had seen some fetish work—in Africa you can see it, you know, in any museum that has African work—and nails are drawn, I think some of you might have seen sculpture where nails are, you know, driven into the sculpture. It's a ritual piece, and usually it's not necessarily putting a hex on something, but it has an emotional content to it. You're… I don't know whether you're… I don't know enough about African religion, but to me, I was putting nails through the experience. I wanted to get as far away from the experience as I could. But yet I painted the nails so that they had a more joyous content, better than blood and chickens. (Laugh) You know, African religion.

Next slides.

And this piece is again, this is memory test again, and it's called *Throne*, and it was about I had gone to Egypt, and I had gone to see Tut's tomb, before Tut became a Bloomingdale's item, you know.

Next.

And this one, I think, is called *Fence*. It's about Bavaria. In my other job, I remember having a crush on… One of the International Council members would have been the king of Bavaria. He was, what was he? What it is H.R., your royal highness, whatever. He was an incredible person, but you know, it was like he was one of these fairy tale people who was related to that Mad Ludwig of Bavaria. (Laugh) You know, I don't like normal people. Anyway, so this is apparently… He lives in an area which is near this, you know, in Munich.

Hmm?

(Audience: What size are these?)

These pieces are about this big. Whatever that is. Oh, I don't know, maybe 18, maybe 18 by 16 or 20. They're not, you know, small like the other ones. They're about, yeah they're a good size. Somehow covering them with, well, I start off painting, you know I put the postcards, and then I paint in with tempera paints kind of echoing what the postcards have, and then I put the spots over it, and it flips back and forth between the spots and the figurative image. And I can work on larger scale than I can on the ones that are very dense.

Uh, next please.

Now, this is a funny one. Talk about real life. I was sort of going out with someone last year who was working for Chase Manhattan Bank, and that, you know, talk about… Well, when I worked for the museum, you know, I was around those kinds of people. And when I left the museum I became

real radical the other way. so, I was getting real angry at, you know, what Chase Manhattan Bank stands for, and just angry in general at the capitalist pig syndrome is what I would call it. So, I did a piece using Dracula teeth. This is for Tom. If you look you can see the open mouth and the teeth, and they're tipped with red and green. You can buy them in the five and dime. Kids, you know. And it's called, *You Have a Friend at Chase*. (Laugh).

(Audience: laughter)

And it's made up of Chase Manhattan Bank checks. If you look closely, you can see that those are checks. Those were old Peter Max checks that he made for them, I think, in the early seventies. And I had boxes of them. I don't bank at Chase, but I had decided I could someday use the checks for something. So, I told this friend of mine that there was a piece in the show that I named for him, and you know, he wasn't too offended by it.

Next.

And this is just called *Roofs*. It was just a memory of a place I'd seen in Europe.

Next.

And this is just called *Philosopher's Stone*. I'm very interested in stone, and I've been reading some books about stone circles, and I had gone to see Stonehenge at summer solstice a number of years ago. So this was just, you know, an intellectual kind of thing, but it's still part of memory test.

(Audience: Are these grid lines [inaudible])

Yeah.

(Audience: Yeah.)

And this is sort of unusual. I cut the board apart and reassembled it. It's just called *Palm*. Palm trees give me a very, uh… they have a tranquilizing effect on me. If you had a palm tree at Skowhegan, I'd be under it all the time.

Next.

I think we're pretty much near the end.

Now, I also have another side of me that's some out. It's a political side that I think partly came from working for the Modern for so long, and also coming to grips with my own feelings. I had always been involved in the women's movement, and I'd become more involved in, sort of, feelings about myself being black. And this piece has a funny level to it. It's called *White Bore*. So, there's the punning, kind of. (Laugh) It's starting to come out in the work now. I've always been doing pieces for heresies that were about being black, and I'm starting to do more pieces like that. The punning side of it is coming out in this work.

Next please.

And this is called *Free White in Plastic*.

(Audience: laughter)

It's a gorilla that I got at the five and dime, and I put genitals on it. (Laugh) 'Cause I figured it was… I had really thought about it, and I didn't think it was a female gorilla. And my mother, when she saw this show, she said, "What did you do to that gorilla? I didn't think you could buy them like that!" (Laugh) Oh, god.

Okay, I think that's the end of the slides. I just wanted to… Well, my work is really moving away in a strange way from the object. I enjoy making objects, but I'm starting to do things that are very different. I've done a video tape that I hope will get shown next year, or this spring. Well, it's going to be at Franklin Furnace this spring, but I hope to get it shown in September. It's called *Free White and Twenty-one*. And what I've done is I've taken… I went out and bought stage makeup, and I have myself in white-face. And I'm two people. I'm myself talking about my own personal experience of being black, and then I'm the other people who would say to me, "Oh, that's never happened." I've taken real experience, you know, and words that were said to me, and I become both sides. And it's very very strange. The tape has to be edited, but it'll be—it's three quarter inch color, about a half an hour tape. I'm also doing a piece out in central park when I get back that reminds me of the cow pasture because what I did was I made rubber molds of circles that I had molded in clay that look like cow patties. And I cast them in [hydrocal?]. And they're different colors, and they have a rubber stamp in them, or they have embedded in them information telling the person who finds them to send a postcard to me telling me they have the piece, but they can keep it. It's called *Objet Trouve*, or found object. I'm going to go around and plant those in Central Park as part of an exhibition. But when I went through the cow pasture at Cummings, I though someone had gotten the idea ahead of me.

(Audience: laughter)

And then I though, maybe I should add smell to those pieces (laugh), but I don't think I will.

And then, lets see, another piece I'm doing, I want to do a piece called *Corporate Kill*, about the car, the Pinto and the Ford, and what we just heard about Tampax, that it can kill you, and they've known for years. You know, just about corporations and their lack of responsibility, but in a way that it's visual information as well as educational. I also wanted to do a piece about lynching that involves smell. And a piece about slavery in New York City. I found the first slave market was at the base of Wall Street. So, I'm finding the work is moving way, you know, from the object and is becoming more involved with my real life and my experience of it.

Are there any questions?

Okay, well, I guess that's all.

(Audience: applause)

END OF AUDIO