

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Howardena Pindell, *Free, White and 21*, 1980.
U-matic (color, sound); 12 minutes, 15 seconds.
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago, gift of Garth Greenan and Bryan
Davidson Blue, 2014.22.

The Artist: When my mother grew up in Ohio, her mother would bring in various babysitters. There were about ten children in the family, and one of the babysitters happened to be white. My mother happened to be the darkest of ten children so that when this woman saw my mother's skin she thought that she was dirty and washed her in lye. As a result of this, my mother has burn marks on her arm.

White Woman: Hmmm.

The Artist: When I was in kindergarten, I had a teacher who was not very fond of black children. There were very few of us, possibly two in a class of perhaps forty. During the afternoon hours we were given time to sleep. Each of us had our own cot, and we were told that if we had to go to the bathroom we should raise our hands and one of the teachers would take us to the bathroom. I raised my hand and my teacher flew into a rage, yelling, "I can't stand these people." She took out sheets and tied me to the bed. She left me there for a couple of hours and then she finally released me. One of the students filed a complaint, perhaps to a parent who did not know I was black. Perhaps the child did not know, or had not learned to differentiate between race at that time. I later found out that the teacher was fired for bothering a student. Perhaps I was not the first one.

I went to a high school in Philadelphia which was for girls and emphasized academic achievement. Everyone was very competitive with one another for grades. I did very well in history classes and asked that my history teacher put me in the accelerated class. She told me that she would be happy, with my grades, to put me in the accelerated level. However, she felt that a white student with lower grades would go further; therefore she would not put me in the accelerated course.

White Woman: You know you really must be paranoid. Those things never happened to me. I don't know anyone who's had those things happen to them. But then, of course, they are free, white, and 21, so they wouldn't have had that kind of experience.

The Artist: I went to Boston University, and for my first year I lived in a dormitory. I was entered as a freshman student in January. I had been active in high school running for various offices, so I decided to run for an office in Boston University within my dormitory. The office that they had available was one where you would act as a liaison with other universities, with MIT or with Harvard. I did whatever was necessary to get my name on the ballot, and just before the vote was to be taken, my house mother brought me into a meeting with other officers of the house and members of the Boston University student community. I was informed that my name was being removed from the ballot because they felt that my being black—and if I, of course, won—I would be highly inappropriate for that office.

White Woman: You ungrateful little . . . after all we have done for you.

The Artist: When I graduated from graduate school, I proceeded to look for a job. I was not able to find a job, although I had applied to over fifty schools for teaching positions. I received approximately fifty rejections. So I decided to come to New York and go door-to-door looking for any kind of job. Someone suggested that I try Time-Life and to apply for a job as a picture researcher. I went to the Time-Life building and the personnel office was willing to see me because they saw on my application that I had graduated from Yale University. While sitting in the front office waiting to be interviewed, a number of women came in looking for secretarial positions. The white women were told to fill out an application, and when they turned in the application were told they were interested in their qualifications and would notify them if a position became available. Any nonwhite women, Hispanic or black (I did not see any Asian women coming in looking for jobs at that time), were told that there were no positions available. They were not given applications, they were just told point blank that there were no positions available, and then they would leave. Eventually I was interviewed, and I was told that I would not be considered unless I came in with a slide projector.

White Woman: Don't worry, we will find other tokens! Don't worry!

The Artist: I was invited to be in a wedding in Maine. I was the only nonwhite at the wedding. One of the [bride's] friends owned an old house that had been built in the early 1800s. She wanted to invite all the members of the wedding party to her home for lunch—that included the five bridesmaids and the five ushers. When we entered the house, she gave us a tour and finished the afternoon by giving us lunch. She seemed quite unnerved that I was a member of the wedding party, and had her place changed from another table to my table where she could sit and watch me eat. At the end of the afternoon, as we were leaving, the men stood on one side of the door and the women stood on the other side of the door. She shook hands with all the white women, skipped over me, shook hands with all the white men, and then came to me last.

White Woman: You really must be paranoid. Your art really isn't political either, you know. I hear your experiences and I think, well, it's gotta be in her art, that's the only way we'll validate you. It's gotta be in your art in a way that we consider valid. If it isn't used in a way—if the symbols are not used in a way—that we use them, then we won't acknowledge them. In fact, you don't exist until we validate you. And, you know, if you don't want to do what we tell you to do then we will find other tokens.

The Artist: After the wedding ceremony there was a party held for the bride and groom and for members of the wedding and their guests. They had a live band and dancing. Of course, no one asked me to dance until near the end of the party. The minister, who was a man in his mid-sixties, came over to me, winked, and asked me to dance. Then he whispered into my ear, "I come to New York often, why don't we get together, we can have some fun."

White Woman: You ungrateful little . . . after all we have done for you. You know we don't believe in your symbols, they are not valid unless we validate them. And you really must be paranoid. I have never had experiences like that. But, of course, I am free, white, and 21.