

HOWARDENA PINDELL
NUMBERS/PATHWAYS/GRIDS

DIEU DONNÉ
GARTH GREENAN GALLERY

In the 1950s, Howardena Pindell had a very particular encounter:

When I was a child, I was with my father in southern Ohio or northern Kentucky, and we went to a root beer stand and they gave us mugs with red circles on the bottom to designate that the glass was to be used by a person of color. I see that as the reason I have been obsessed with the circle, using it in a way that would be positive instead of negative.¹

Recalling this memory from her childhood, the young artist witnessed a seemingly innocuous shape, a circle, take on a symbolic meaning with no intrinsic connection to the form itself. Her use of the circle throughout her practice has become a way of reclaiming the symbol, not to inscribe her own significance to it, but to render it random, useless, and obsolete. While the connotation behind the circles creates an organizing principle of sorts, the artist disrupts the transfer of information between the signifier and the signified, calling our attention to the ways in which we assign and assume meaning. Throughout her practice, Pindell has drawn from personal experiences to create her own unique language of abstraction, forging connections between form, material, and identity.

With matrices of numbers, letters, and repeating patterns, Pindell's abstract work invites us to confront our own internal

1 Pindell quoted in *Howardena Pindell* (Chicago and Munich: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and DelMonico Books, 2018), 33.

processes of attempting to find order where there is none. In neglecting what's physically present on the surface of her works, one could fail to understand the work entirely. There are subtle interactions unfolding—some discernable, and others intentionally buried. Nothing truly exists in two-dimensions; cutouts of paper are layered on top of one another, refusing the flatness of the picture plane. Other bulkier shapes—embedded objects such as sequins, jewelry, nails, glitter, photographs, thick impasto—peek through, only partially concealed by layers of pigment, paint, and pulp. Fragments lie beneath this upper stratum, both revealing and concealing a particular surface tension.

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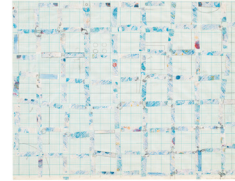
What makes Pindell's handmade paper works produced at Dieu Donn e so unique is that they collapse the boundary between surface and material. The work begins with pulp and water—wet and malleable, adaptive yet stubborn. Objects and pigments embedded into wet pulp become part of the paper itself as it dries. *Untitled #47*, for instance, features thread laid over wet sheets of abaca in a gridded pattern, with numbered circles of paper carefully inserted into each square and a translucent layer of abaca on top. She says the process is intuitive—while familiar characters such as numbers, letters, arrows, and grids occupy her compositions, they point to no real system of order. Pindell looks to both the formal and conceptual qualities of paper as a medium—collapsing the division between material and surface, content becomes inseparable from color, form, and light.

Trained as a figurative painter, Pindell began working abstractly in the 1960s during her time in graduate school at Yale University. She became more aware of what abstraction could offer in terms of visual decision-making, inspired by artists like Larry Poons, who's often associated with hard-edge painting, lyrical abstraction, and abstract expressionism. She started drawing and layering, a process that grew on its own and developed into the abstract works she is known for today. Her growing use of abstraction coincided with the famous "dematerialization" of

the art object, the emergence of conceptual art as a movement that prioritized thought over form.² Pindell takes this process a step further by eliminating the binary between these two values. Her works remain exceptionally beautifully while evoking the clean, calculated aesthetics of information, but they are entirely improvised, placing our attention firmly on her process of automatic response.

The artist's well-known preoccupation with the grid grew during her time at Yale, though it was not her first introduction to the form. She often cites her father's occupation as a mathematician as a foundational inspiration in her work; her use of numbers, gridded lines, and arguably of paper itself mimic the pages of her father's notebooks, but where he found logic, she finds a means of disrupting our desire to identify patterns and establish some sense of order. Pindell depicts the grid in early works such as *Untitled* (1970), which features a loose lattice of ink-stained paper pasted on commercial grid paper. The strips of paper never actually intersect, creating a "soft" grid. Pencil marks and hand drawn geometric symbols dip in and out of the mechanical structure of commercial grid paper, as the artist again identifies binaries and collapses them through an experimental interplay between paper as both a ready-made and artistic material.

Pindell has worked with paper throughout her career, as both an artist and a curator in the Museum of Modern Art's prints department. She began working there in 1967, the same year she completed graduate school at Yale and moved to New York. In 1974 she organized *Printed, Cut, Folded, and Torn*, an exhibition featuring fifty-four works on paper from the museum's collection. "For hundreds of years paper has been taken for granted as a material to print, write, or draw on," Pindell writes, "but only in recent years has its wider potential as a medium been exploited by artists." Artists in the show like Lucio Fontana and Richard Tuttle employed methods of puncturing and piercing, while Sam Gilliam folded his paper after printing, dispersing and blending the wet pigments on the surface. In a



UNTITLED (1970)

2 See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1973).

sense, many of the works in the show reflect Pindell's growing conceptual understanding of paper and its possibilities, particularly with abstraction.

Pindell's time as an administrative worker has an equal impact on her practice. A few years into her tenure at MoMA, rumblings about unionization began circulating around the museum. She joined in the strikes led by the Professional and Administrative Staff of the Museum of Modern Art (PASTA), which, in 1971, successfully formed a union, to the dismay of the museum's leadership. This bit of biographical information may seem more immediately relevant to Pindell's politically engaged works, but conceptually it bears a connection with her abstract works as well, which are rooted in labor and process. In an interview with Jason Jacobs, she recalls her shift to process-based abstraction:

I started turning my imagination for light and color and realized that I wanted to work with very small points of color and light...Perhaps I was a bit mechanical about the tedious aspects of my work, such as the numbering and sewing for example, but I enjoyed the physical labor and the craftsmanship and the sense of abandonment or non-decision.³

The hole-punch, a regular office tool, offered Pindell a way of physically accumulating the evidence of her labor as an administrative worker, but also a way of channeling the trauma and erasure she faced as a Black woman in the art world, first at MoMA, and then as a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery. She has collected chads from hole punching for the past half a century at home and in her studio in the Bronx, writing on them with "non-sense numbers,"⁴ letters, and other figures, layering them into her paper and canvas-based works, a process she likens to drawing. As she reflects: "I utilized a repetitive process of hole-punching in the construction of works made of

3 Pindell quoted in *Howardena Pindell*, 125.

accumulated circles to heal myself.”⁵ The works created at Dieu Donn  reflect a collective approach to this labor—*Untitled #59*, *#63*, *#66*, and *#67* (2022), for instance, each feature nearly twenty-thousand dots, applied by a rotating team of people in the studio over a week-long process.

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There are other forms of labor at play in Pindell’s abstractions, notably the process of memory work. In 1979, Pindell was in a car accident that resulted in a serious concussion. For some time after, she experienced not only memory loss, but an inability to recognize faces, voices, or the numbers on a clock. Visual information would overlap and blend together as she healed. Her work changed completely from this point on; while the sutures of the scar on her head inspired her to begin stitching her canvases together (a process she compares to weaving and African scarifications) she translates the disorientation she felt into her abstractions, playfully recreating her lack of control at this formative moment.

In connecting the visual with the experiential, Pindell reveals an understanding of abstraction that goes beyond modernist notions of the “aesthetic.” To the same end, she interrogates the binaries embedded in the theory of the dematerialized—namely, the idea that conceptual modes of artmaking reject the gestural, or that abstraction negates the discursive. As artist Charles Gaines observed of Pindell’s work:

Pindell’s use of abstraction can have a meaningful relation with content and iconography... [F]or part of the black experience of modernism was that historically it was an ideology that helped discriminate against minority inclusion in the art world of the 1960s and 1970s. Hence for Pindell, a gap that we find in the historical narrative between abstraction and conceptualism does not exist...Even though she fully recognizes the difference, minimalism and conceptualism for her did not constitute a rejection of painting given the fact that both constitute a narrative of her identity.⁶

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4 Author’s interview with the artist, May 8, 2022.

5 Pindell quoted in Jessica Bell Brown, “Howardena Pindell,” in *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*, ed. Darby English and Michelle Barat (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 358.

6 Charles Gaines, “Howardena Pindell: Negotiating Abstraction,” in *Howardena Pindell*, 143.

Understanding the connections between the artist's identity, experiences, and her abstractions is not always immediate; layers of transparency, both literally and figuratively, act as a veil. Encountering works such as *Untitled #42* (2021), the viewer is inundated with a dizzying network of numbers and arrows, while other works such as *Untitled #10* (2021) play with the idea of a motif itself, with circles of varying sizes folding in on each other into an irregular tessellation. In these works, she plays with varying degrees of transparency by layering sheer sheets of abaca paper over a wet sheet coated with cutout circles, creating the effect of looking through cloudy water. This technique, an early version of which appears in works such as *Untitled #4* (1973), was inspired by the Japanese Heike nōkyō, Buddhist scriptures on decorated scrolls that Pindell came across during the months she lived in Japan between 1981–82. Their delicate paper and diffused pigmentation create the illusion, Pindell recalls, of “looking into water,” an effect similarly echoed in pieces like *Untitled #64*.⁷ Water takes on another layer of significance for Pindell, evoking the Middle Passage of the transatlantic slave trade, as well as a near-death experience she encountered traveling to La Hague when her ship was nearly capsized by a three-day storm. These multidimensional connections resonate with her paper works—while she sees many of her works at Dieu Donn  as reiterations of her past work and techniques, they are likewise embedded with old tales of life, family history, and collective Black experiences.

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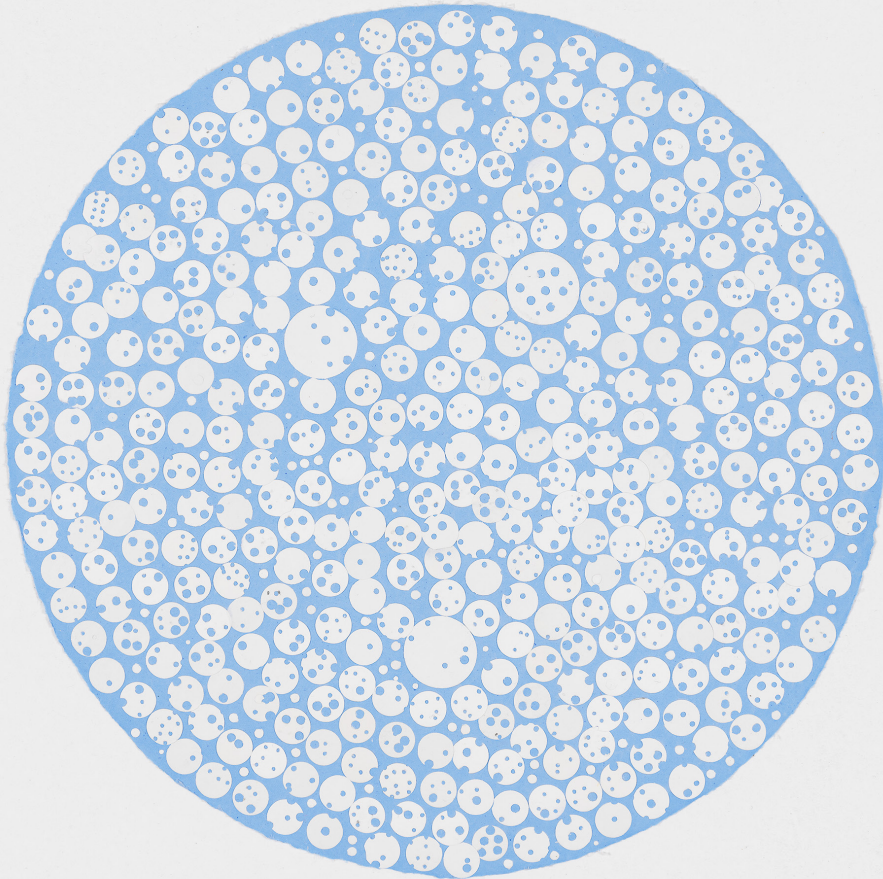


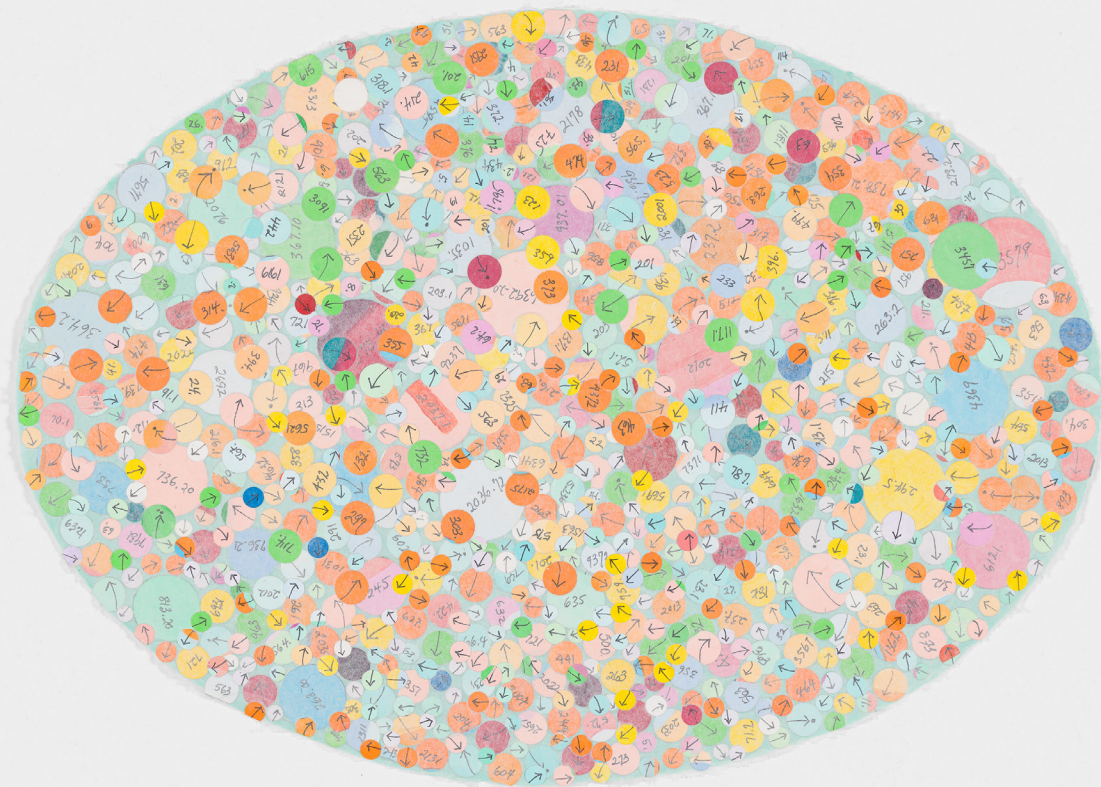
UNTITLED #4 (1973)

In eliciting her memories of the accident, and of other formative events throughout her life, Pindell creates a visual metaphor for processing trauma, which renders the simple act of recalling information as difficult as solving a puzzle. In drawing upon her own history, from her early childhood experiences to those of her expansive career, Pindell finds new connections between the abstract, the minimal, the expressive, and the conceptual. She reveals to us our own information biases and processes of understanding the world, while offering us

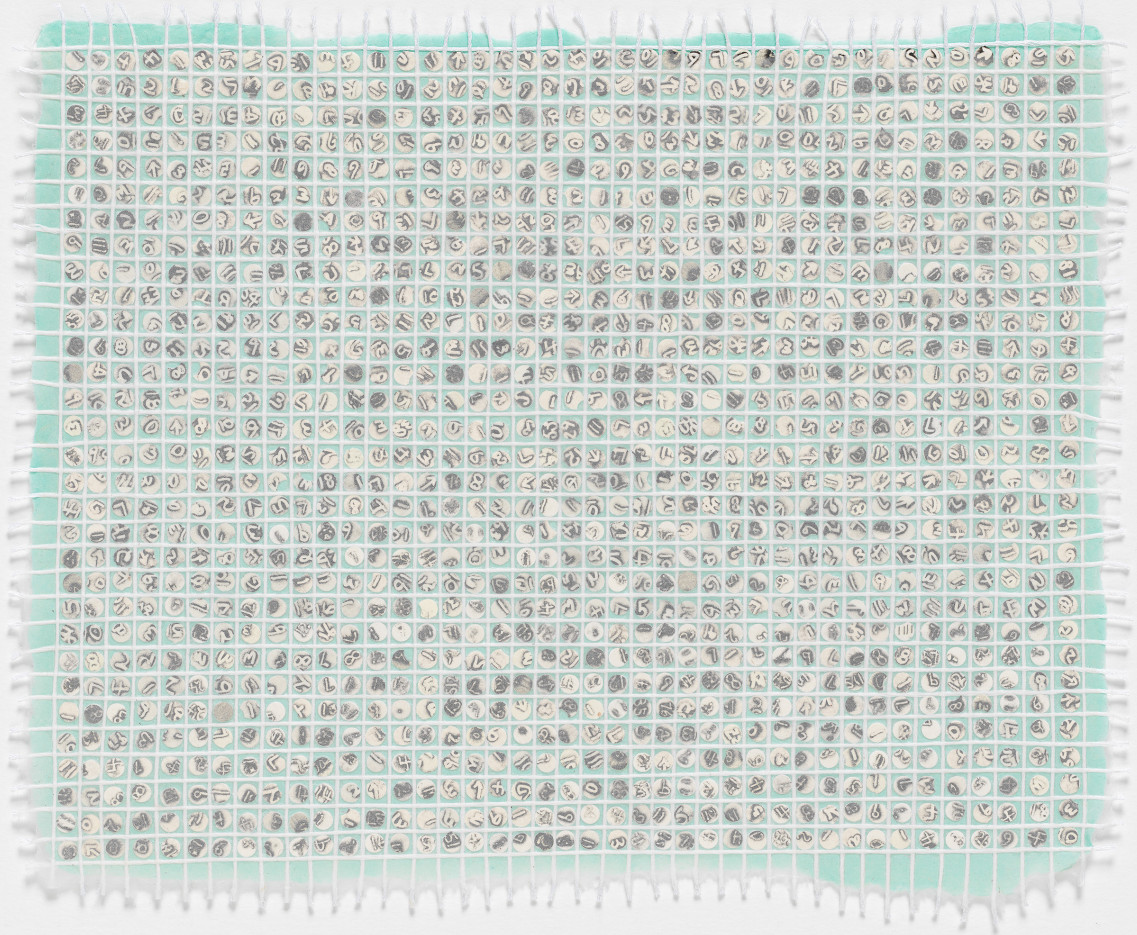
⁷ Author's interview with the artist, May 8, 2022. See also *Howardena Pindell: Autobiography* (New York: Garth Greenan Gallery, 2019).

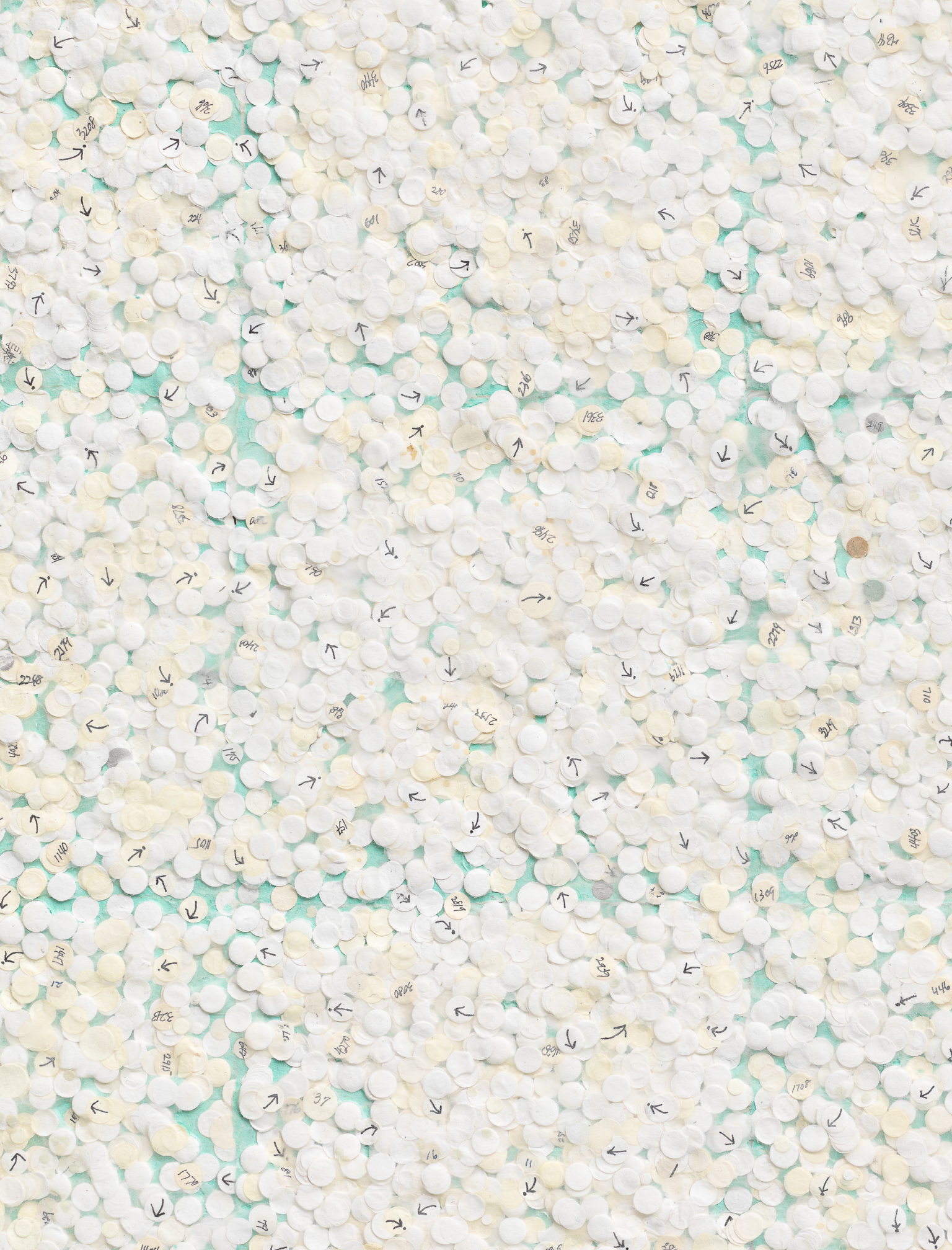
an invitation to explore the abstract language she has crafted. Taking up this invitation, we embrace the stories, symbols, and material encounters that unfold across her work—to delve into these tensions, she brings us back to the surface.

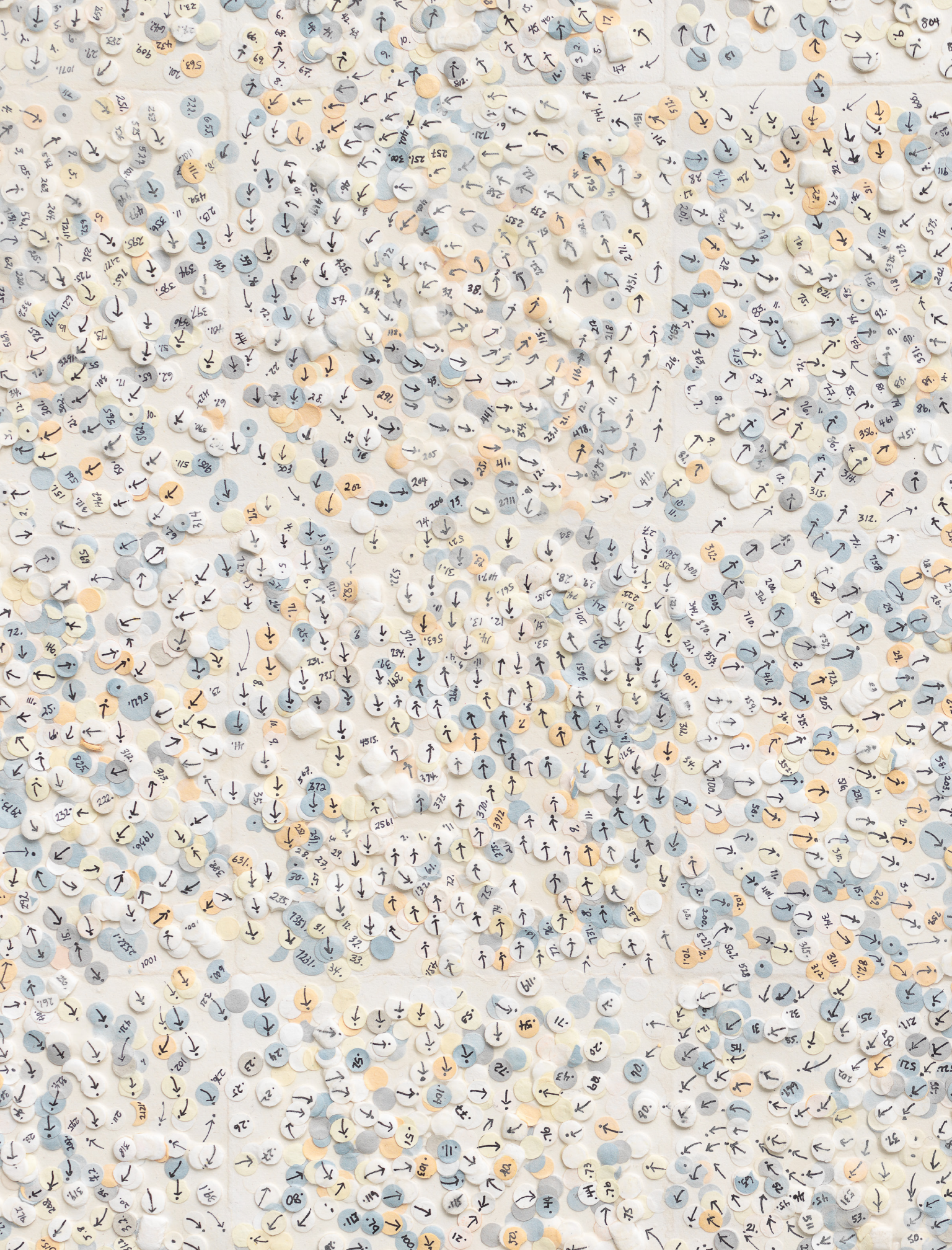


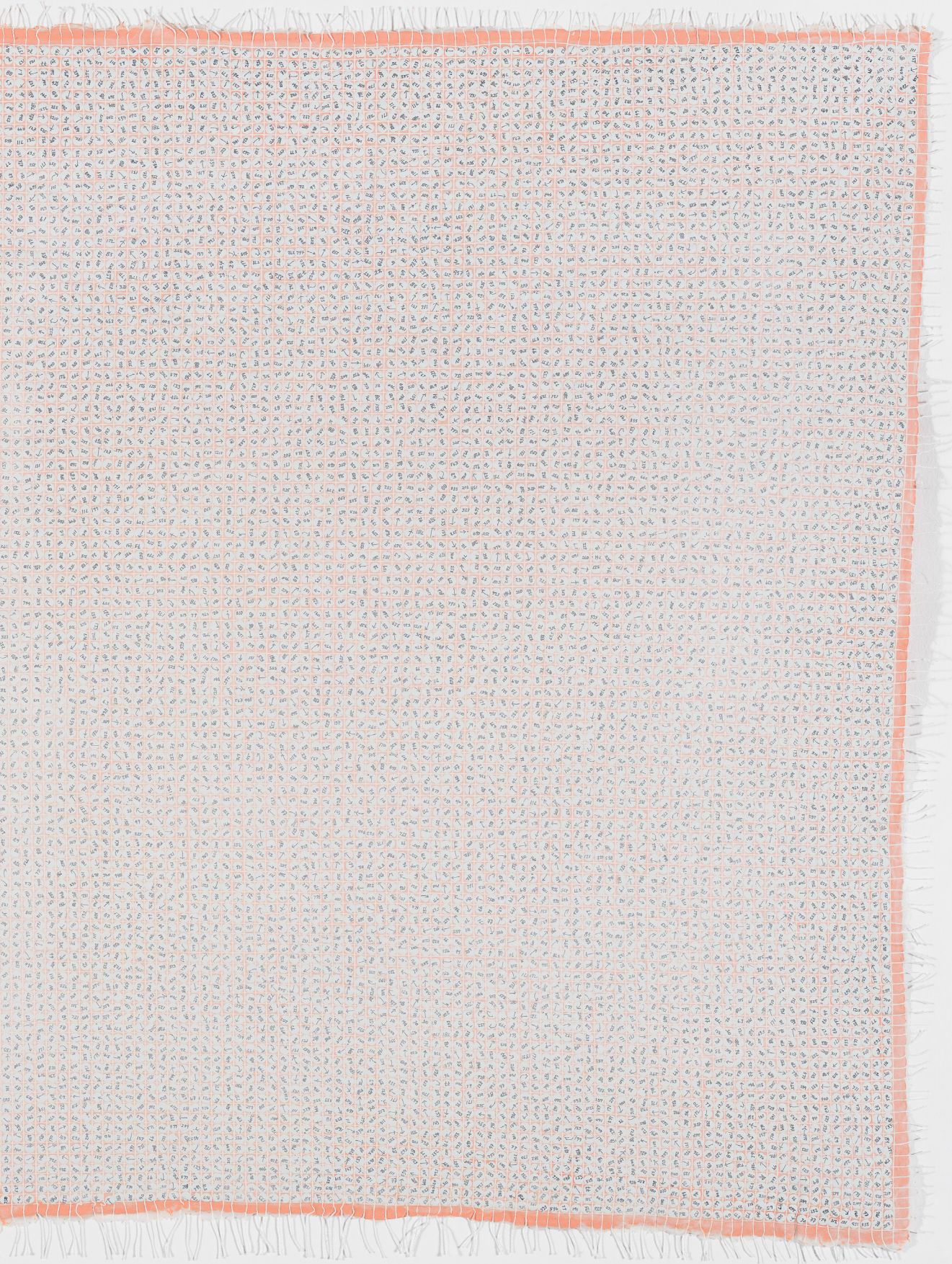


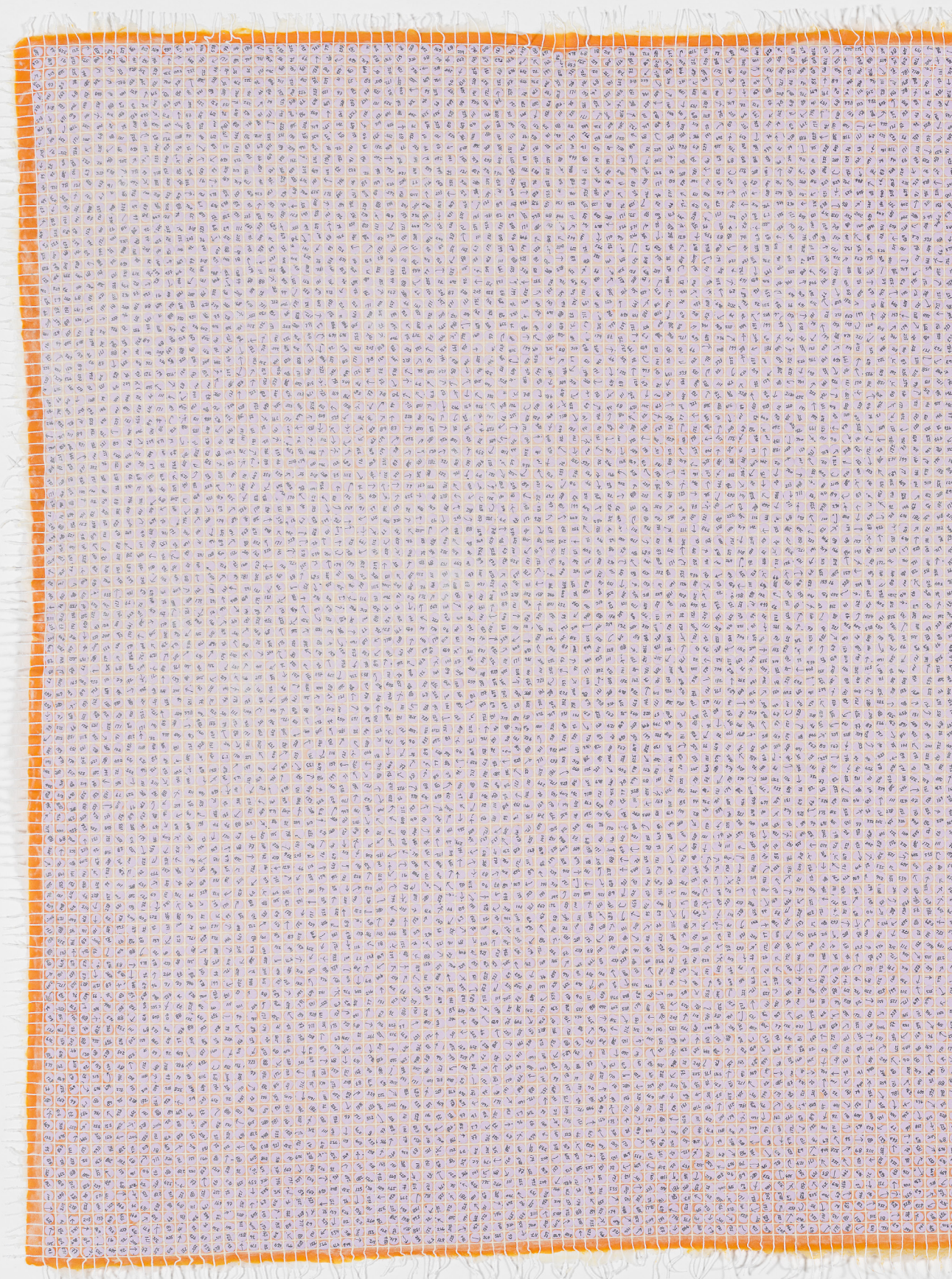
















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ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION

Howardena Pindell
Homage to the Square
September 15, 2022–October 29, 2022
Garth Greenan Gallery, New York

In May of 2021, Garth Greenan had the vision to bring together Howardena Pindell and Dieu Donn  to collaborate on a large body of works in handmade paper. Working closely with Master Collaborators Amy Jacobs and Tatiana Ginsberg, Pindell used stenciling and embedding on handmade paper made from abaca and cotton pulp. They experimented with varying sizes, colors, and materials, combining newly punched and printed paper dots with hand-written ones pulled from Pindell's archive. The newly realized body of work, centered around the concept of the grid, acts as a natural extension of Pindell's artistic practice into the medium of handmade paper.

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ABOUT DIEU DONN 

Dieu Donn  is a leading cultural institution dedicated to serving established and emerging artists through the collaborative creation of contemporary art using the process of hand papermaking.

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donn  introduces artists to the untapped potential of hand papermaking as an art medium. They introduce artists from a wide variety of practices to the creative possibilities in hand papermaking, fostering experimentation and creating innovative works of art. Any work of art is realized through extensive collaborations between the studio master papermakers and the artists. Dieu Donn  strives to teach a new visual language, providing a transformative experience that often leads to artistic breakthroughs.

SUPPORT FOR DIEU DONN 

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