

San Francisco Chronicle

"Bohemian upbringing informs Loie Hollowell's art"

By Carolyn Zinko

September 7, 2017



Artist Loie Hollowell shows the deck to a home she helped build and lived in for two years on Tuesday, August 15, 2017, in Woodland, Calif. She mentions the light on the farm fields was inspirational in her art. Photo: Liz Hafalia

On a blindingly bright August morning in farm country near Davis, the heat rising from newly shorn fields, Loie Hollowell is anything but indolent, darting around and eagerly showing off the homestead where she was raised.

At the edge of the driveway is a wooden sign: Camp Hollowell, and it's no joke. Within the 1-acre property lies a wonderland: a cottage, a barn converted into a house, a two-story backyard tree fort, a man cave (literally, a cave built from scrap metal covered with concrete) and found-art sculptures like a dinosaur that peeks out of towering hedges coated with purply-blue morning glories.

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This world — “idyllic,” she calls it — where she and her three siblings grew and played, was created by her father, David Hollowell, a painter and longtime UC Davis art professor (now retired) and her mother, Terry, a graphic artist, political cartoonist and, more recently, Burning Man costume designer. The pair eschewed campus life for a quieter existence that gave them room to focus and create at their own pace, away from the pressures of city life.

That fertile environment — literal and figurative — had a cause and effect. Loie, a Yolo County native, is now the toast of the New York art scene for her painted abstractions of the human body that focus on sexuality and female forms. In a homecoming of sorts, the 34-year-old, who lives and works in the N.Y. borough of Queens, returns to the Bay Area later this month, where Pace Gallery, an influential international firm, presents her global debut, “Point of Entry.” The exhibition of 10 works runs at its Palo Alto branch from Sept. 19 to Nov. 2.

“Growing up here, we were left alone,” says the willowy blonde, barefoot and makeup-free in a calico dress, sitting on a back porch and reflecting on her past. “We didn’t have TV, cell phones or computers. My dad doesn’t read. So we never read. We would just make art, all day. We all made mud pies and sculptures and helped my dad build stuff. It was a really strong work ethic put toward creativity and expression of the self.”

They sloshed through irrigation ditches, played in gravel pits and smeared themselves with pomegranate seeds from backyard trees. Inside, they toboganned down the stairs, played dress up with thrift-store clothes and made videos of their costumed exploits.

What sort of parents would encourage this? Terry Hollowell, for one, who introduces herself as “Feral,” her alter-ego at Burning Man, and Dave, who wears his long white hair in a ponytail and offers a guest a cup of freshly brewed Folgers.

“We could have a tomato war later today!” Terry says, motioning to the fields behind the house. “They’ve just harvested and they haven’t picked up the dregs.”

Provocation apparently runs in the genes.

Dave, a native of upstate New York, attended Ithaca College on an athletic scholarship but liked to paint and earned a master’s degree in fine art from Yale University. He met his wife-to-be in the mid-1970s, when she was a graphic design student at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., where he was a teacher.

“We passed each other in the hallway and boom!” Terry says of the encounter. “That was 40 years ago.”

Loie grabs a decades-old photo from a kitchen ledge. “How could you pass *that* up?” she asks a visitor, with pride. “She was a model! She’s like a hippie cowgirl!”

“Oh, you’re gonna show that s—?” her mother retorts playfully. “I’m gonna show *this* s—!”

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From the same shelf, she grabs a photo of Loie at 16. Terry sent the snapshot to San Francisco's Mitchell agency, which picked up the teen as a model for three years.

The oldest of four children, Loie was conceived in 1982 in Roswell, N.M., (site of a rumored UFO crash in 1947) where her father was an artist in residence. "She's an alien," he jests. "That's why she's so weird."

Loie was born the following year in Minnesota, where her parents moved to teach, but she has called Woodland, outside Davis, home since 1984. That's when her father joined the faculty of UC Davis. A painter of large, illusionistic pastels, he taught alongside colleagues and friends — Wayne Thiebaud, Roy De Forest and Manuel Neri, to name a few. He retired in 2003.

Her mother focused on raising the children — Loie, Adrienne, Lucia and Jack — and volunteering at school.

Terry's craft room — under the second-story loft where the children slept in Scandinavian bed boxes at night — and the creativity within it had a lasting effect, as did her feminist beliefs and the political cartooning she did for a local newspaper.

"This was very influential for my art," Loie says emphatically, looking at the neon-hued clothing illuminated by a black light. "She has a really clear sense of line and design."

Loie studied fashion design and performance art in her undergraduate years at UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies. (She holds a master's of fine art in painting from Virginia Commonwealth University.)

From her father, she learned the importance of discipline.

"Talking with my dad, I'd watch him mix colors and we'd talk about painting as form," she says. "About painting as hard work. It wasn't necessarily fun. It was work."

"Aw no, I never said that," he protests, sitting in front of a towering canvas in his studio.

"But watching it, Dad, you're in here a full day, just putting on dots," she says, pointing to one small corner of the canvas. "You realize, you recognize, that it's discipline."

Dave's "aha" moment about Loie's inner calling occurred when she was 3 years old. She was in his studio, where he was painting, when he heard her scream. Fear turned to relief when he saw she'd climbed up a ladder, grabbed a palette knife and had begun mixing green and red paint together. "Look! New color!" he recalls her saying. "And I said, 'Holy s—.' The excitement she had from that chemistry — two colors making a new color is why artists become and stay artists. It's because of that wonderful kind of chemistry. That constant renewal of magic."

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She has long been an adept artist — facile at drawing, sculpting and painting, he notes, but her talent emerged with laser-like intensity when she began to focus solely on painting about five years ago with a new concept. It's something Loie describes as "metaphors for the body."

After college, Loie had moved to New York with three girlfriends to experience the big city art scene. They worked odd jobs and pursued their art, Loie painting figurative works of herself and her then-partner, often in sexual pairings. After their breakup and an abortion, a "devastating" experience, she says, she turned from figurative works to abstracts that depict the experience of her body's emotional sensations.

"That experience made me really in tune with my body," she says. "I was super intensely aware of my body's relationship to my mind and emotion."

If the fertile landscapes of Yolo County have been an influence on her work, so is the comfortable relationship her parents have with one another and their own sexuality. A framed drawing of her naked parents has hung in the home since her childhood. On her 23rd birthday, Loie's mother gave her a vibrator, urging her to "loosen up," Loie recalls.

"There's no religion in our family so there's no structured repression, there's no shame," says Loie, who is now married to artist Brian Caverly, a teacher of drawing and sculpture at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. "That has been a very grounding force in how I'm a woman in relationship to the world. I'm presenting my own sexuality in a very structured and controlled and possessive way. You can enter it as much as you want, but it's mine."

Is she a "Georgia O'Keeffe for the Instagram age," as some have asked?

Marc Glimcher, president of Pace Gallery, says by phone that his new young artist is "channeling the mystical energy of the human body. These are body landscapes, obviously. And she is kind of divining sacred geometries that exist in that consciousness of your own body. It plugs right into your brain, immediately." He presented her work at Art Basel, and dozens of clients are now on a waiting list, eager to buy her work.

Meanwhile, her parents are pleased that her talent has been recognized, but are taking it in stride.

"I'm not going to be surprised that she becomes one of the best painters in the world," says her father, from the perspective of both doting parent and detached professor. "She has an innate ability that's beyond."

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