

GARAGE

"Loie Hollowell's Light Source"

By Haley Mellin

Spring/Summer, 2017



"Hung", 2016, Oil, acrylic medium, and sawdust on linen over panel, Courtesy Feuer/Mesler, New York

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What was it like to grow up in northern California?

My mom is a cartoonist and a seamstress, and my dad is a painter. He taught drawing and painting at UC Davis. They had a very open parenting style—I ran around making mud paintings. There's a lot of mud out there in the farmland of Woodland, California! My dad studied with William Bailey at Yale grad school in the 1970s, so he looked at everything through a formalist lens. It was hard, growing up, trying to find my point of view—a feminist voice to which he couldn't relate.

Can you describe your undergraduate education?

I was at the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara. In that program, you could take advanced art classes or science classes—whatever you wanted. In my freshman year I made dresses that people could get under, Victorian-style dresses with large pannier skirts. I dressed up my girlfriends in naked suits, with realistic-looking hair and breasts painted on them, because we were all too scared to be naked. We'd walk around campus and jump out from underneath the dresses and dance around people. I'm embarrassed to recall another "feminist" performance I did during my junior year, in which I stood on a pedestal on campus, naked, smearing pomegranate juice all over my body and moaning.

When did you begin painting?

My senior year of undergrad. That was when my conversations with my dad about painting started to become fruitful.

Being from a family of artists, do you have long conversations about what you're working on?

It's more like we discuss the philosophical and technical questions about painting in general. It's never about the content of my work. When we do talk about a specific painting we're discussing how to accomplish something formally. My dad has been the greatest teacher in that respect, especially about color. Color is hard to understand and I've been really intrigued by it.

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Loie Hollowell, "Standing in Water", 72" x 54" x 3.5" along side a beautiful Lynda Benglis at ArtBasel Pace gallery booth D8.
Photo: Artist's Instagram

I imagine having a parent who is an artist can be very informative.

I'm only now starting to realize how special that is. When my father sees my paintings, he'll say something like, "Try using a Naples yellow here instead of that cadmium." He's always spot-on. Those are the kinds of conversations we have that I can't get from anyone else.

Simple things like lemon yellow can solve a painting. What else do you talk about?

I'll have a long conversation with my father about mixing certain colors to create an illusion of deeper space. I'm trying to create a psychological effect. I'll feel like I'm not getting my dark blues right and he'll throw out some suggestions. And then I'll go and find those blues.

Do your paintings begin with drawing?

I start by making a line drawing in my sketchbook. This is where I figure out how to abstract the

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body or an action. I then color these quick sketches with pastels, where I work out the color and the texture for the painting. With soft pastel you can get rich colors. In paint, the colors are slightly different because I'm changing mediums, but I always try to find the same intensity of color that I achieved in the drawing.

And do your drawings come from your body?

Yes. It's all about the motions of the body—my partner's body or my own or our interactions together. Sometimes it's less personal and more metaphorical of women's bodies in general.

Let's talk about light.

Light has become a central character in my work. Often there will be a light source, a stream of light that penetrates the entire dimension of the canvas. The light moves through the action in the painting, or the action is coming out of the stream of light. Or the light is the action that's happening in the painting.

How do you choreograph light in your paintings?

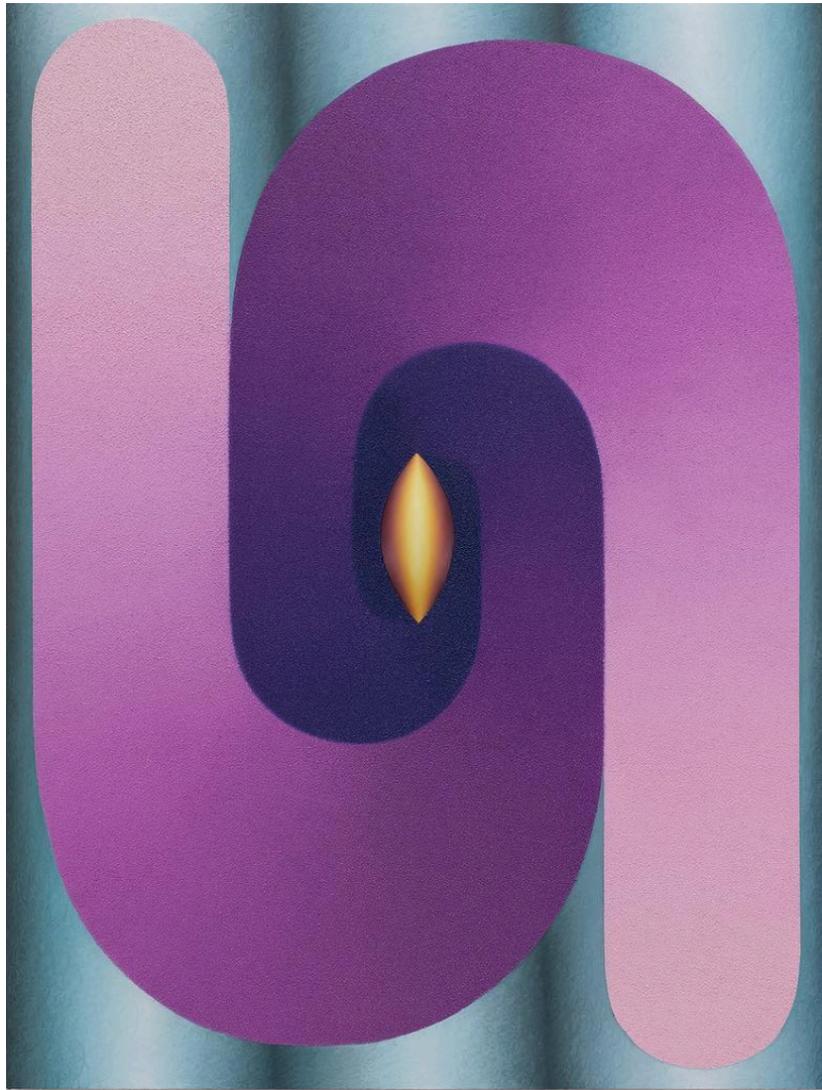
The mandorla and the ogee, or breast shape, are often the source of light. But sometimes the light will take on a character of its own by becoming a symbolic stream of energy, or pee, or cum.

The light gives a pulse to your paintings.

Good! Those areas of chiaroscuro and high-intensity light are places of arousal. The pulsing light is like the body's energy—the pulsing of sex or the pulsing of the heart. During sexual climax it feels like there's a bright light pouring out of me, like I'm going to explode. That's the kind of light energy I want to create in my paintings.

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Loie Hollowell, Another 21x28in Lingam and Mandorla making its way to Hong Kong for a March show with pace gallery.
Photo: Artist's Instagram

You approach the flat canvas as a landscape. You construct a feeling of light with the canvas as the terrain.

I see the flat blank canvas as a space of potential. I grew up in a very flat landscape that was laser-leveled for farming. Every season a new crop was grown—corn, watermelons, almonds. In California the sun is bright white, it's almost blinding. When I moved east, I noticed that the sunlight became dappled, either coming through the lush upstate trees or the tall city buildings. The light out here is also softer and saturated. [Charles Burchfield](#) and the Transcendental Painting Group of the early 1900s depicted it really well.

You often mention the Transcendental Painting Group and American naturalist painters who were inspired by nature or their personal visions.

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Yes, painters of nature like Burchfield and Transcendentalists such as [Agnes Pelton](#) and [Emil Bisttram](#) were all deeply engaged with painting light. Georgia O'Keeffe, also. Their work reflects the sunlight in which they lived. In all of their paintings, light, either internal or external, is a central character.

In a recent show of American painting, I saw an O'Keeffe landscape with a frame that she had crafted out of metal. Where the desert sand moved to blue sky, she changed the metal of the frame from copper to pewter, so the color turned from orange to blue along with the painting. It was deliberate and beautiful. And it was good to see sculpture in her painting.

That sounds really beautiful. I have to see that piece! I feel like the mass commodification of certain O'Keeffe images keeps young artists from taking her work really seriously. But there is a deep formal and spiritual investigation that runs throughout her practice that makes her arguably the best painter of the 20th century.

I agree. When I first saw your work, it reminded me of the compositional structures of early modern American paintings, which imply a layout, or a metaphoric plan, for a societal structure. A floor plan for going forward.

I like the idea of creating a map for moving forward.

Are you an abstractionist?

I don't think so. Maybe. In my head my paintings are realistic depictions of bodies and actions. Even though I'm constantly trying to push the figure into an abstract space, I can never get the realism of where it originated out of my head.

You often use well-known shapes.

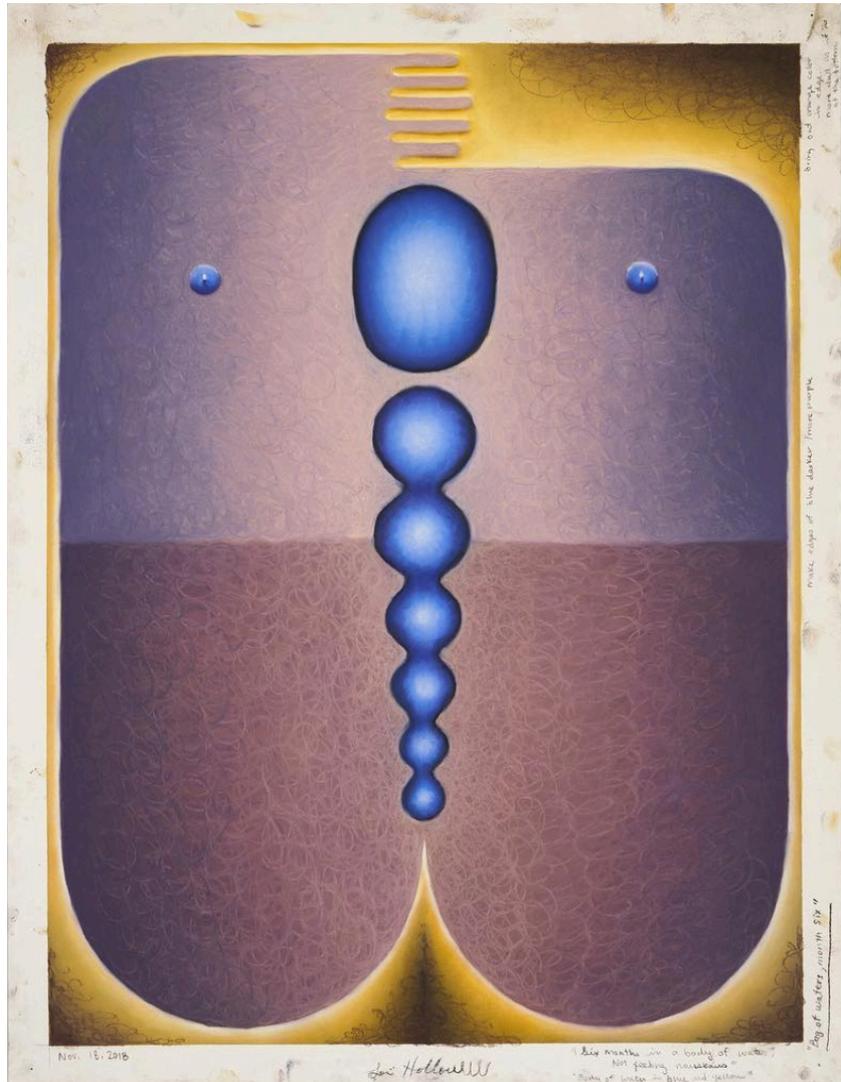
I have followed tantric artists like [G.R. Santosh](#) and [Biren De](#), who were trying to represent the masculine and feminine energies of the universe in their shapes. They used a painting language of symmetry.

Where do tantric shapes take your work?

Symbols such as the mandorla and the lingam—the phallus—allow for a more abstract, universal conversation about things that can be very personal. The mandorla [meaning "almond" in Italian] is the perfect symbol for the vagina. In my paintings I use the mandorla as a central focus point and as a source of light. Gothic artists often painted the Virgin Mary surrounded by a glowing mandorla. They're primal shapes—they repeatedly pop up throughout art history. Everyone can relate to them because they originate from the body.

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Loie Hollowell, New drawings at Zona Maco with Pace Gallery, Feb 6-10th. Photo: Ben Strauss-Malcolm, Artist's Instagram

Are you painting contemporary people forms?

I think so. I love your term "people forms." There have been so many people forms within the history of painting.

Your figures have a robotic quality.

Even though the figurative elements stem mostly from my body and my partner's body, I break them down into abstract, repetitive, and symmetrical forms. In this way the bodily elements are controlled, constructed, and mechanical.

They feel rational and surreal at once.

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It was cool that the Merriam-Webster dictionary named "surreal" the word of the year for 2016. It seems like there are surrealist aspects in the work of young painters I'm looking at, particularly [Sascha Braunig](#) and my friend [Veronika Pausova](#), and in my work as well. I think we all reimagine the figure in some alternate world. I've got more thoughts on this, but they are not flushed out yet.

How do you work out the ratio of your forms in relation to each other?

For me, the forms are all figures. The figure is always broken down in relation to the rectangular space I'm painting on—either 9 by 12, or 21 by 28, or 36 by 48 inches, etc. It is very basic math. My forms are often symmetrical on one axis. Limiting my variables with symmetry is one of the ways I've been intentionally slowing myself down so I don't try a million new things in one painting.

How do you decide on size?

When I started on this work, I began with 9- by 12-inch paintings. I liked that size because it was the size of the area of my vagina and ovaries, my female core area. The paintings were about orgasm and menstruation, explosions of pleasure and explosions of pain. When I increase the size I always use the same ratio, which is also the size of my pastel studies, so translation from painting to drawing is direct. Last year I made a series of 21- by 28-inch paintings, *Lick Lick*—they were paintings of psychological headspace, exploding or expanding heads. I liked that size for exploring the territory of the brain. This year I explored the body as a whole and its relationship to landscape, so I increased my paintings to 36 by 48 inches, a size that is more all-encompassing.

Sometimes when I look at your paintings, they are deceptive. I can't tell what is an image and what is actual depth that you have built up on the linen.

At first the sponge texture was the dimensional element. Then I started creating actual sculpted depth on the surface. The sculpted areas enhance the painted illusory form. This conflation of space entices the viewer to move close to the painting in order to figure out which areas are real and which are not.

To create a confusion of what is real and what is a picture?

Exactly.

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Loie Hollowell, "I miss this old gal (small painting of a queef from 2014). She's going up for auction this week Christie in London. I hope she finds a good home with someone who actually wants to keep her." Photo: Artist's Instagram

And your pictures are so light-hearted!

They're not meant to be depressing! They're meant to show the pleasurable actions of the body—what the body can be and do—and to take your eyes into that space of sensual potential. I'm driven by an aggressive and playful female energy. My paintings are abstracted from sexually explicit places - sometimes they end up being really silly. I enjoy the humor of painters such as Carroll Dunham and Lisa Yuskavage.

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I like the humor of Carroll Dunham's painting, too. The sexuality is so over the top, it sometimes makes me laugh.

Totally. I like how goofy and primal Dunham's figures are. Comedy is a good icebreaker.

Why paint?

Good question. I think painting is the most direct conversation we can have with ourselves and the world. Its long history means that almost anyone can read a painting. I don't want to have to do much explaining about the content in my work—what you see is what you get. If you don't see all the sexual stuff, that's fine by me, hopefully you're taking it in on a subconscious level. In today's political climate, with a president-elect who has sexually assaulted women and the increasing restrictions on abortion, I feel like it's necessary to present a positive view of female sexuality.

There's very often a gap between what a painter wants a painting to do and what it actually does.

What it actually does is fine by me.

This is a wide question, but something I would like to ask – what would you like your paintings to do?

I want my paintings to be experiential. I want them to take the viewer into a phenomenological space of sensual pleasure. I want them to bring the viewer into the present—into their present—and into their own space, within their body. I want the work to be felt on a physical level. I want my work to feel freeing, liberating. I use an abstract language to paint vaginas and penises so that I don't scare people off. But I hope that even the most sexually conservative viewer feels the painting's sensual energy.

What does it mean, to be good at painting?

Being good at painting means you give yourself a question and you try to answer it again and again. When you get to the point where you feel like you're answering it, then you up the stakes. Right now I'm trying to work on slowing down. I have so many ideas in my head, I want to work them all out at the same time, but I need to take on one question, otherwise I'm going to go crazy. Being good at painting means you're working on it every day, even when you're not in the studio, but most of the time you should be in the studio putting paint to canvas.

Staying in the space of one thing at a time is hard these days, with the rapidity of the digital world. When I take a little walk it helps me to slow down.

I need to start taking walking breaks.

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