

LOIE HOLLOWELL

Dominant / Recessive

PACE

Corporeal: Loie Hollowell's *Dominant / Recessive*

Diana Nawi

Close up to me / Up close to my anatomy / Close up to me / Up close to my autonomy / Corporeal corporeal corporeal — Broadcast, “Corporeal”

Loie Hollowell's striking abstractions blur temporal, art historical, cultural, and geographical delineations. In their bold, sensuous color palette and unique approach to dimensionality, her paintings draw the viewer into not only an act of close looking, but also a bodily experience. They reveal the unmoored possibilities of abstraction, simultaneously exploring its relationship to expressive and emotive impulses as well as its long relationship to iconography and traditional and indigenous modes of depiction. Hollowell's paintings represent both transcendent states and the lived reality of being. They are above all images of existing in a thinking, feeling, hurting, pleasure-seeking, and gestational body. In the suite of drawings and paintings in *Dominant / Recessive*, Hollowell has created images that reflect her experience of and ideas about sex, pregnancy, and her body. From these deeply personal and specific subjects Hollowell has formed evocative, expansive works that elicit myriad readings and resonances for her viewers. These ethereal, cosmic images simultaneously suggest the physical and the spiritual, revealing the larger universe and the universe contained within.

Georgia O'Keeffe—the clearest reference point for Hollowell's work—painted landscapes, flowers, and sun-bleached bones that are unmistakably vulvar, pillowy, and penetrable. Hollowell likewise unabashedly engages the human body, reveling in the depiction and sensation of our breasts, bellies, balls, assholes, and vaginas. The literal dimensionality of her work beautifully underscores this corporeality, the bulbous, protruding curves of a body and its cavities, holes, and pliability. But Hollowell also persists in complicating the subjects she represents—landscape, horizon, outer space, anatomy, cosmos, microscopic entities, topography, architecture, and organs coalesce in singular images. Her images seem less set on confusing these things than on relaying their inherent interconnectedness.

Hollowell's work similarly moves across aesthetic and art historical references, exploiting the overlapping and porous visual cues among such genres as geometric abstraction, still life painting, spiritual mapping, religious iconography, botanical and anatomical drawing, textile patterning, cartooning, and mid-century design. In engaging these varied modes, the artist has arrived at her own unique visual language, one that retains the open and communicative possibilities that such a broad set of influences engender.

Hollowell's experience of pregnancy established the subject matter for the paintings and drawings in *Dominant/Recessive*. These works sit comfortably within the artist's multiyear investigation of the radically abstracted—and sometimes barely suggested—body. *Something Acidic* (2018) might be understood as both an outlier and a key to these new works. While the artist worked with this imagery as a drawing for a number of years, the newly rendered version begins to unlock her distinctly representational impulse. Its hues more closely approximate colors of a body and it contains clear belly buttons and the suggestion of pursed vaginas, even as it gestures toward the surreal. The ovoids that seem to lie atop this mutated, repeated body are abstract, but their bold colors evoke citrus fruits. In this work the body is made overtly legible; the painting points us to flesh and offers a lens through which we might read the artist's other works, anchoring us in the body as we move through a breadth of symbols, images, and citations.

In her abstracted images of embodiment, Hollowell is particularly adept at allowing a multiplicity of visual readings to coexist in forms that are both ambiguous and explicit. *Touchy Subject* (2018) exemplifies this tendency. In this vertically symmetrical painting a swollen, organic blue form sits on a reddish background, split by a delicate, glimmering fissure of white; this form is overlaid with a glowing ellipse and a radiating, seemingly concave blue and white hole. The central blue shape has orbs at its bottom and petal shapes at its top. Permeating its side are fingerlike dips. For the artist, it depicts a spread vagina and anus with hands approaching from the sides, but it also evokes a mandala, an abstracted mask, a biomorphic image, and a cross section of a flower. Even within the shape that we might identify as rounded buttocks, we also see the suggestion of testicles, cheeks, or breasts. Likewise, the painting *Direct Shot* (2018) and its suite of related drawings—*Direct Shot*, *Life Line*, and *Up the Shoot* (all 2018)—ostensibly depict a phallic form ejaculating a single line of fluid into a corresponding hollow topped by a perfectly round egg—the moment of conception. Despite such specific subject matter, the images take on other formal possibilities, conjuring everything from caves to spaceships. Hollowell's titles, a combination of straightforward descriptors, colloquialisms, and puns, reveal her sense of humor, reinforce the subtle playfulness of her works, and offer interpretative clues, often explicitly bringing us back to anatomy and sex.

In *Dominant/Recessive* Hollowell deftly pivots between figuration and abstraction, using both as means to express the experiences of sex, reproduction, and motherhood. The exhibition abounds in sensations of the body, of both the surface of skin and the interior of organs, of both observing a body and existing within one. The works offer a dual operation, depicting the body—recognizable in its various parts—and more abstractly capturing its sensations—the explosion of an orgasm, the liquidity of sex, and the thick, meaty experience of squishing one's flesh against someone else's. Her images capture the dichotomous relationship between representation and lived experience, as in *Mother's Milk* (2018), a legible illustration of a breast emitting seemingly cosmic symbols, for instance, or in *Beacon* (2018), which shows a phallus entering a vulvic space crowned by light and surrounded by cascading waves, a visualization of the undulating feeling of an orgasm. The artist illustrates the inarticulable and purely experiential through form and a productive synesthesia that finds a visual expression for the commonplace but nonetheless confounding gap between what we have words for and what we understand only through sensation. Additionally, through the interplay of two- and three-dimensional

forms, Hollowell explores and undermines the binary of image and object as analogous to the receptive actions of seeing and experiencing, activating an intellectual space in which we might understand the distinctions and contingencies of mind and body.

Drawing is at the core of Hollowell's practice, as she begins her process of making paintings by first creating soft pastel works on roughly textured paper. These exist as both finished artworks and preparatory sketches, sites to formulate ideas and experiment with composition and color. All of Hollowell's works on paper are surrounded by a blank border; in addition to including her signature and the work's title and date in this space, if the drawing is a study for a painting, she also often adds detailed notations relating to the work's form and palette as they will evolve in this new medium. The titles of the drawings, which relate to but are typically different from the titles of the paintings, offer the immediacy of an idea translated through the hand and can be more revealing of the artist's thought process and references. Many call out color combinations, as in *All the Possibilities in blue and red* and *All the Possibilities in teal, red and orange*, as well as more narrative ideas, such as *Lick it to make it work better* (all 2018), which conflates lapping faces, breastlike shapes, and a luminous, orificial slit in a rippling composition.

The large-scale works that grow out of Hollowell's drawings closely correlate to her studies on paper, but they differ from these initial works in a critical, definitive way—they are reliefs. Each of Hollowell's paintings has an extended surface that protrudes approximately three inches from the wall. The interrelationship between drawing and painting is not an act of direct translation nor of scale shifting, but rather one of transformation that seeks to both extend and undermine the contingent nature of form and color in her works. The artist achieves this by building up and digging out the surface of her canvases to create gentle, organic three-dimensional shapes. Using a combination of carving foam, which is adhered in cutout shapes to the canvas, and repeated coatings of gel medium mixed with sawdust, Hollowell creates an almost seamless surface, something that appears akin to vacuum-sealed plastic and belies the intense, handmade labor it necessitates. These subtly sculptural canvases are then painted in vivid colors that mimic, reinforce, or exaggerate the actual dimensionality of the works.

Rise and Set Over Bloody Water, a sixteen-by-twelve inch drawing in soft pastel, and the related painting *Dominant/Recessive* (both 2018), which lends the exhibition its title, are emblematic of this process, in which the image of the drawing—two facing blue half circles separated by a sliver of glowing white and underlined by a warm orange band with a black circle at its center—is made literal in some formal sense in the painting. The titular relationship between the two works is worth noting. The drawing's title explicitly bridges landscape (sun/moon and water) and body (blood), while the painting's title more firmly establishes its subject in the realm of biology and reproduction, while also pointing to its own formal strategies, even as the image itself invites a multiplicity of allusions and readings.

While the drawing creates the impression of depth, particularly in the gradient of the orbs, which suggests the effects of light hitting them as if one was concave and one convex (throwing light off at the bottom and top, respectively), the painting makes this illusion real. Ostensibly relaying the same image, *Dominant/Recessive* has subtle projections emerging from the flat substrate of underlying linen. The blue spheres conversely bubble up and recede in perfectly sculpted curvatures that reiterate the effects of their shading;

the undergirding strip is actually the rounded cylinder that its gradient suggests and the black circle is in fact hollowed out. In this unique approach to the sculptural possibilities of painting, Hollowell's practice offers a rejoinder to the fact that we view the majority of artworks on screens as luminous two-dimensional pictures. While she creates works that happily flatten out into delectable and seductive compositions in digital and print reproduction (and at a distance), Hollowell rewards the in-person experience of the works through the surprise of crevasses and bulges, which invite the eye to bend and twist along the paintings' surfaces. There is a pleasure in realizing that a seeming optical illusion is in fact dimensional, and in the quick work our eyes and brains must do to reconcile the contradiction and marriage of the appearance and reality of form. This bodily relationship creates an immediacy between viewer and work, one in which we are thrust into the now of being with the object.

Like its preliminary drawing, the surface of *Dominant/Recessive* is made of passages of seamless color, appearing almost airbrushed. But unlike the two-dimensional work, it also contains a quiet, messy pattern of lines. This effect is subtly visible in the tight lines in the purple-yellow middle areas of the painting and in looser, lighter lines that overlay the blue orbs. Hollowell's mark making is a less well-noted aspect of her works, but one that is particularly striking in a firsthand encounter. Rather than only apply swathes of flat color, the artist uses a varied set of tools and gestures—sponges to create gradients between colors and tones, colored wax medium applied with a fan brush to achieve an even surface, and, somewhat unexpectedly, wet paint applied on top of wet paint to produce an intense swirl of lines. This last technique creates what almost appears to be a dense bush of hair—the jumble of frenetic threads layered on top of one another pulls the eye in and out of the illusion of depth and the immediate surface of the work. These varied painting devices also add a rich component to the artist's palette, tingeing white with pinks and orange with yellows, and allowing for a subtle and delicate fade of one shade into the next. In both her two- and three-dimensional works, Hollowell is particularly adept in her use of color and gradation to suggest not only depth, but also spatiality; intimate holes become otherworldly portals and decontextualized body parts suggest the infinite expanse of planets.

In all of Hollowell's work we are offered access to a breadth of ideas and references, but ultimately we are ushered into the space of corporeality, of spirit, and of the necessary intersection of these things that comprises being. The profundity of expression, emotion, and imagination and the pleasures and pains of the body—in no experience perhaps more deeply realized than in pregnancy—are revealed in these strange, otherworldly abstractions. These works activate both the structures of imagery and the ambiguities of sensation; they help us to better see and feel our experience.

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