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*Motherhood's
Impossible Syllogism*
Emma Enderby

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Motherhood's Impossible Syllogism

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism.¹

—Julia Kristeva

Each painting by Loie Hollowell is a story brought into being through sculptured sensual forms, poised compositions, illuminated surfaces, and iridescent colors. They originate from 9 × 12 inch pastel studies; some begin as musings that turn into paintings only when the imagined story becomes real. When Hollowell's son was born, her pastel works based on the fantasy of pregnancy and giving birth became large-scale paintings.

These tightly rendered paintings featured in her exhibition *Plumb Line* (Pace Gallery, 2019)—nearly human in scale, six times the size of the pastels—use the vernacular of abstraction to dissect the human form, or to be more precise, a pregnant woman's form. Hollowell breaks down the figure into distinct areas or planes. While this style recalls Cubism, the artist does not offer simultaneous viewpoints within the same space but rather one fixed perspective—that of a monolithic being. Hollowell interrupts the two-dimensional flatness of the surface by adhering high-density, geometric foam shapes to the canvas so that the paintings protrude as sculpture. Whole and dissected circles and ovals move down a central axis, a spine: heads, breasts, stomachs, butt cheeks, vulvas. Sometimes a figure stands; at others it sits or squats.

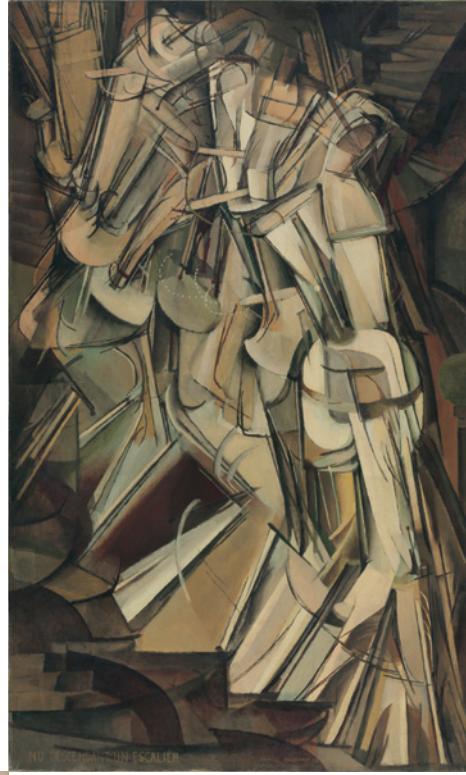
The Paleolithic sculpture *Woman of Willendorf* {FIG. 1}—whether ancient fecundity figure or self-portrait—distills the sensation and realness of fertility and nurturing to the parts of the body most affected, most changed, by pregnancy. Similarly, in Hollowell's recent paintings, the figure is heavy and full, with disproportionately large breasts and butt, and a prominent open vulva. Yet the rectangle of the canvas holds the body, which never breaks the boundary of the frame, sitting composed and still with a Zen-like luminosity.

In the contemporary period, scientific order is applied to this time-honored experience of bodily chaos through gynecology, hospitals,

{FIG. 1} *Venus von Willendorf*



{FIG. 2} Marcel Duchamp
Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 1912



{FIG. 3} Giacomo Balla,
Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash 1912



{FIG. 4} Nicolás Enríquez
The Virgin of Guadalupe with the Four Apparitions 1773{FIG. 5} Hilma af Klint
The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood 1907

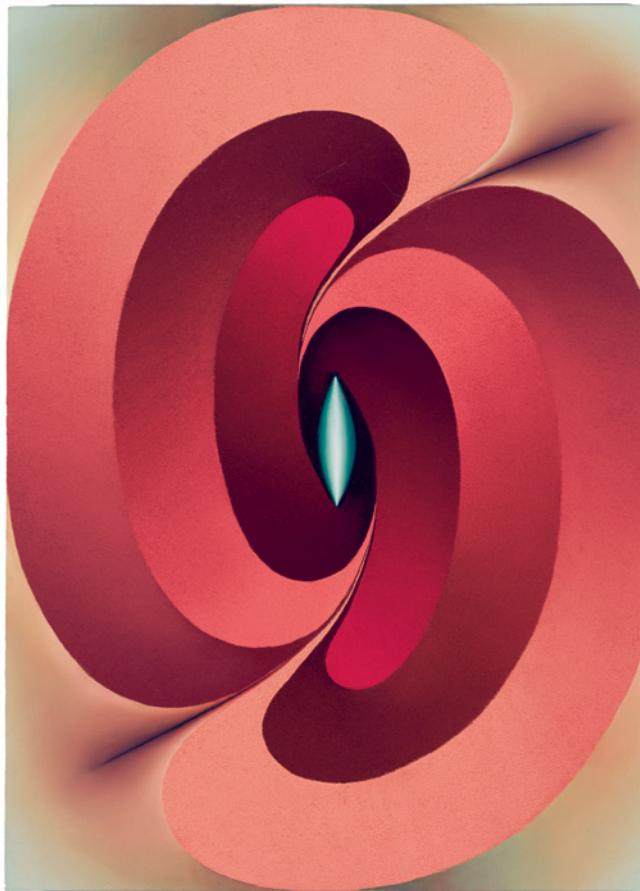
suggested rhythms and positions, the epidural. For Hollowell, the “automatic” process extended into the early months of motherhood, which was “both the most bodily yet mechanical-like experience.”² This sensation—body as machine, machine as body—might have led to the chronophotographic composition of *Postpartum Plumb Line* (2019) {PAGE 153}, in which the motion of the lower body is mapped through a set of static positions reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) {FIG. 2} or Futurist Giacomo Balla’s *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) {FIG. 3}. Hollowell, who often references and adopts the methodology of Modernist painting, extends to motherhood a key fixation of the twentieth-century avant-garde: the dilution of the human-machine dichotomy; and as with the Dada artists—Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray—the idea of motion steps beyond movement itself and into a preoccupation with the flux of memories and sensations.

As scholar Erik Davis writes in his book *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998), science and technology have often intersected with the mystical, especially when it comes to the functions of the human body. Hollowell is clearly aware of the relationship between scientific order and the mystical unknown. Her paintings frequently include sacred geometries, such as the shell-shaped logarithmic spiral, oval lingam, and almond-shaped *vesica piscis* formed by the intersection of two disks. These fundamental universal patterns reappear at all scales in the natural and human-made world, from the cosmos to architecture. For Hollowell, their universality is imbedded in the female form: In her paintings the *vesica piscis*—that meeting of Heaven and Earth, according to Christian symbolism—exclusively represents female genitalia. Hollowell has referenced the *vesica piscis* as genitalia and connected it to the mandorla, the almond-shaped frame surrounding Jesus and the Virgin Mary {FIG. 4} in medieval artworks, relating to an open, light-filled orifice, most notably appearing in scenes of the annunciation and the ascension, the inception and the death of Christ.

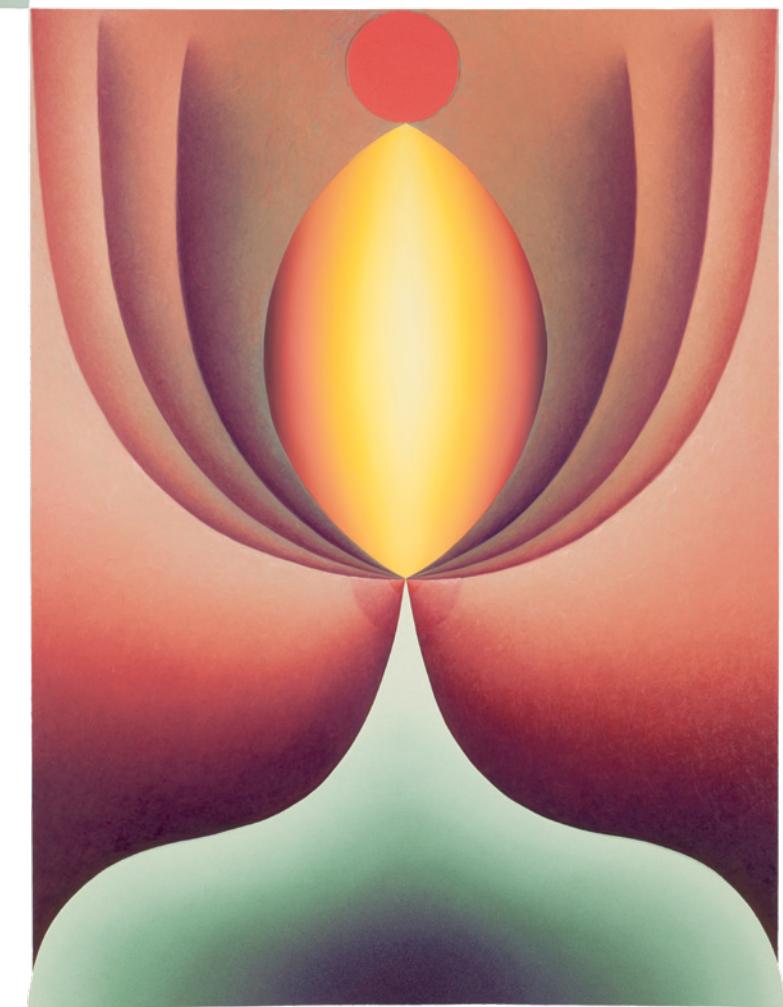
Hollowell's works can be understood next to those that seek a universal knowledge—tangible and intangible—through the canvas. Transcendental artists such as Agnes Pelton and Emil Bisttram rejected realism in favor of painting an inner emotional state using symmetry, color, and abstract iconography. Neo-tantric artists Gulam Rasool Santosh and Biren De composed the body by employing geometry and color in order to create mystical imagery. Hollowell follows Santosh and De in presenting feminine and masculine energies through form and color—just as visionary Swedish painter Hilma af Klint did before them.

In af Klint's work we see an abundance of the spiral and *vesica piscis*, forms so universal, so dynamic, they transcend their time and maker. Af Klint assigned meaning to dominant colors within her works: Yellow was masculine, blue feminine, and green—the blending of the two—harmony, the universal. This resonates with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810), where yellow and blue are complementary and green is the congruous result of mixing them; “[t]he [beholder has] neither the wish nor the power to imagine a state beyond it,”³ he wrote. It's little surprise that after Hollowell gave birth, when painting *Postpartum Plumb Line* she shifted the original hues of the pastel drawing—orange, yellow, red—to green, a color of union, life and growth, the cosmos.

Like Hollowell, whose paintings chart the stages of pregnancy in geometric form from inception to lactation to the realignment of the body, in her series *The Ten Largest* (1907), af Klint envisioned the stages of human growth from “childhood” to “old age.” The diverse symbolic shapes and floral patterns—germ cells, blossoms, seeds, stamens—exemplify her continuous use of allegory and plant imagery in exploring sexual reproduction and geometry: Spheres resemble testicles, semicircles resemble female breasts, sperm wriggle, cells divide {FIG. 5}.⁴ Hollowell too develops explicit allegories between



{FIG. 6} Loie Hollowell
Linked Lingams in Red and Blue 2015



{FIG. 7} Loie Hollowell
A Gentle Meeting of Trips 2018

sex and floral compositions in works such as *Linked Lingams in Red and Blue* (2015) {FIG. 6} and *A Gentle Meeting of Tips* (2018) {FIG. 7}, leading many to compare her to Georgia O'Keeffe.

What I find most interesting here is the abstraction of the flower motif as a feminist gesture. Whether or not O'Keeffe identified as a feminist, one can't deny her accomplishment in creating new ways to see the female form. Through allegory, she broke with the tradition of the male gaze defining the female nude. Other artists followed—Louise Bourgeois, Huguette Caland, Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, Judy Chicago—showing that women should provide the art historical definition of their own bodies. They used metaphor and abstraction to depict the female form as a feminist act, a tradition Hollowell continues in her unapologetically frank, sensual, sexual, raw, intoxicating paintings. Her work is phenomenological—as if symmetry, color, and light are painted into the surface. She probes at our self-awareness, our sense of being. Hollowell celebrates the realities of order and disarray within the lived form, finding balance within a chaotic event, intertwining the mystical and scientific, terrestrial and comic realms, “[m]otherhood's impossible syllogism.”

Notes

1 Julia Kristeva, “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237.

2 Conversation with the author, July 23, 2019.

3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840), 316.

4 See Julia Voss, “Hilma af Klint and the Evolution of Art,” in *Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen*, ed. Emma Enderby with Melissa Blanchflower (London: Serpentine Galleries, 2016), 28.

sex and floral compositions in works such as *Lingams in Red and Blue* (2015) {FIG. 6} and *Meeting of Tips* (2018) {FIG. 7}, however, we can compare her to Georgia O'Keeffe.

here is the abstraction of the female nude, the gesture. Whether one is a realist or a feminist, one can't deny that Huguette Gruyaert's Chicago—based historical paintings are metaphors for the female nude. As a feminist, unapologetically celebrating power, if symmetrical, she does not face. She does not depict being. Her work is disarranged, showing a chaotic, scientific, terrible, impossible

1 Julia Kristeva, "The Feminine Principle," According to Kristeva, trans. Karen H. Follett, in *Desire in Language: A Political Argument for an Approach to Literature*, trans. Karen H. Follett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 237.

2 Conversation with the author, April 23, 2019.

Approaching the edge of a foreign planet, we prepare ourselves to touch sublime surface. As in, what lies on the other side of anything we've known before. Fingers brush against a bright border, the planet's membrane stretched to the point of opening. Reach through, first with hands, and then—remember there are no gloves, no helmet, no vessel to bring us to the interior. Perihelion. Even our skin now porous, penetrated by the law of the place we are entering.