

Tatler

"Artist Loie Hollowell On How Motherhood Inspired Her Paintings"

By Oliver Giles

April 11, 2021



Loie Hollowell in her studio in New York, Photo: Melissa Goodwin

Loie Hollowell's experiences of pregnancy inspire her radiant, sensual paintings, but influences from Asia also play a surprising role in her work.

Soon after American artist [Loie Hollowell](#) landed in Hong Kong in March 2018, she started feeling ill. "I was nauseous and really, really hungry," Hollowell recalls during a video interview from her studio in [New York](#) City. It was her first trip to Asia, and she was here for an exhibition of her paintings at [Pace](#), the global mega-gallery that has represented her since 2017, so she brushed her queasiness aside and threw herself into her week in the city.

On the Monday of that week, Hollowell opened her exhibition of 18 paintings, all of which sold, most to collectors from mainland China, but some to fans in [Singapore](#) and [South Korea](#). On

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Tuesday, she attended the opening of the [Art Basel](#) fair, where Pace was showing more of her work. On Wednesday night, she attended a *Tatler* party at [Popinjays](#), the rooftop bar at The Murray hotel. The next morning, when Hollowell finally had a break, and still did not feel entirely right, something clicked.

"I took a [pregnancy](#) test," says Hollowell, with one of the bursts of laughter that pepper her conversation. "I found out in Hong Kong that I was pregnant with my first child."



Loie Hollowell, "Prenatal Plumb Line" (2019), one of the paintings in Hollowell's latest exhibition, which opens this month at the Long Museum West Bund in Shanghai. Image: courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Thrilled, Hollowell returned to the US and embarked on a new series inspired by her pregnancy. These works combined the luminous, pulsating colours for which Hollowell, then 34, was already famous, with drawings of orbs, ovals and half-moons. She introduced these swollen shapes as representations of all the ways her body was changing.

Hollowell painted these abstract self-portraits until the birth of her son, Linden, that December, and she continued making them when she returned to her studio, expanding the series to explore the physical sensation of giving birth. She unveiled these paintings in her most celebrated exhibition, *Plumb Line*, at Pace in New York in September 2019, when Linden was nine months old.

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SILVERMAN**

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Hollowell didn't tell anyone then, but she was already pregnant with her second child, a daughter, Juniper, who was born in April 2020.

Now, almost three years to the day since Hollowell discovered she was pregnant in Hong Kong, the art sparked by that moment and her subsequent journey into motherhood is returning to Asia. This month, the Long Museum West Bund in [Shanghai](#) is opening an exhibition of 15 paintings that Hollowell made during that time, many of which have not been exhibited before. "Hong Kong was the beginning of these works, and now they're in Shanghai, which is the ending," says Hollowell, who is using the pandemic-enforced downtime to experiment with new ideas.



Loie Hollowell, "Standing in Blue" (2018), Hollowell's canvases are richly textured, sometimes featuring layers of high-density foam and sawdust. Image: courtesy of Pace Gallery.

The exhibition at the [Long Museum West Bund](#), which runs from April 24 to July 11, is titled *Recalibrate*. "All of these paintings are about repositioning my body during pregnancy. I was coming up with all these terms—repositioning, realigning, readjusting—then I thought, 'Recalibrate, that sounds like something you'd do to a machine'. **This work is about the recalibration of my body as a baby-making machine,**" says Hollowell, laughing again.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

On some canvases, shapes depict her entire, long experience from impregnation to childbirth, as well as returning to her former size. "In the Shanghai show there are two works I call the pendulum paintings, which show the movement of the literal aligning of my body. It was kind of like my spine was swinging," she says.

Other pieces are rooted in particular, and sometimes excruciating, moments. "The three works *Red Hole*, *Yellow Hole* and *Blue Hole* are investigations of the visceral, painful experience of the final push of delivery," says Hollowell. "I was trying to make a composition that played with that sensation, so there is a pulsating circle in the middle of the canvas."



Loie Hollowell, "Yellow Ovum" (2019). Image: courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Colour is what first attracts many collectors to Hollowell's work. "I own a beautiful painting that Pace exhibited in Hong Kong in 2018," says Wendi Murdoch, the investor and a co-founder of [Artsy](#), an online art marketplace. "It lives in my home office in New York. Working from home, I love looking at it every day—it really adds positive energy to the space. It is saturated with beautiful, bright colours and has amazing texture."

While Hollowell was in Hong Kong, Murdoch, who used to live in the city, led Hollowell and her husband, artist Brian Caverly; Marc Glimcher, CEO and president of Pace; and a handful of others on a [hike](#) along the Dragon's Back trail. "Loie is such fun to be around—she is so energetic. I've also visited her studio in New York with my teenage daughters, who loved learning about her creative process," says Murdoch.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Other collectors, as well as plenty of critics and curators, are seduced by the similarities between Hollowell's fleshy paintings and those of the late American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, whose depictions of flowers and the arid desert landscape around her New Mexico ranch are some of the most famous artworks of the 20th century. Hollowell has often cited O'Keeffe as a major influence, but other artists inform her approach, too.

"I really resonated with the Light and Space artists once I left [California](#)," says Hollowell, who grew up in the Golden State and moved to New York in 2012. That movement emerged on the West Coast in the 1960s, when artists began making ambitious, abstract works inspired by the Californian landscape and the state's famously fierce sunshine. Leading proponents include installation artists James Turrell and Robert Irwin, and painter Mary Corse, all of whom are also represented by Pace.



Wendi Murdoch and Loie Hollowell at Pace's booth at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2018, Image: Courtesy of Wendi Murdoch

I realized that the light source was different here—it's a very dappled light on the East Coast," says Hollowell. "In California it is oppressive and aggressive and white. With Robert Irwin specifically, I really resonate with his disc pieces that have a line in the middle— they really capture the potency of the Californian light. Many of my *Plumb Line* paintings have a similar centre line that holds all the semicircles together."

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

The late GR Santosh, a little-known neotantric painter from [India](#) who made hundreds of colourful paintings exploring sexuality and mysticism, is also a major inspiration. "His work is phenomenal," says Hollowell. "It is my number one dream to find someone who works with his estate and host a show of his work in New York. He is so of-the-moment, but no one knows who he is."

All of these influences can be seen in Hollowell's upcoming exhibitions. As well as the Long Museum West Bund show, Hollowell is opening a show of her *Split Orbs* series in Berlin, which is scheduled to run from April 30 to June 13 at König Galerie's striking space in a 1960s brutalist church. "The *Split Orbs* are an abstraction of my mind and body splitting open during labour. They reference the inhale and exhale of breath, expanding and contracting of the body, and flow from painful contraction to rest during the last stages of labour," says Hollowell. She is also preparing for an exhibition at Pace's gallery in [Seoul](#) planned for 2022.

And, in her studio, Hollowell is embarking on a new series. "A lot of the work I'm making now is focused on the intensity of the experience of breastfeeding and pumping," she says. "As a working mom, you're constantly having to deal with the milk you're making while you're at work, then getting it out of you with your child when you get home. It's constant frustration."



Loie Hollowell, "Standing in water" (2019). Image: courtesy of Pace Gallery.

During her second pregnancy, Hollowell and her husband cast her torso three times, once to mark each trimester. She has framed these casts and wrapped them with linen, creating three-dimensional canvases in the shape of her body. Hollowell also cast the bodies of her pregnant friends and used them to make abstract grids of disembodied breasts. She has started painting these sculptural forms, though she is still working out a colour palette.

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SILVERMAN**

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jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

"They're very new and I don't even know what term I would use for them; they are sculptures but also paintings. They are weird, so I don't know where they are going to go, but it has been fun to have something to play with during the [pandemic](#), when things have been so emotional," says Hollowell. When she gave birth last April, [Covid-19](#) was tearing through New York City. "There were sirens outside day and night and [helicopters](#) overhead bringing people back and forth to the different emergency rooms," she recalls.

Through it all, Hollowell found solace in the waves of pleasure and pain that come with being mother to a new-born, and the comforting physicality of her body, which remains her greatest source of inspiration. "During the pandemic it has been useful to be able to focus on my body. I've been able to make a gazillion of the casts of my body from the originals and paint them in a million different ways," she says. "There is so much more I want to try. There is so much more to be discovered."

Loie Hollowell: Recalibrate runs from April 24 to July 11 at the Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai.

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SILVERMAN**

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