

ARTFORUM

"Loie Hollowell on painting, pain, and her second birth"

By Osman Can Yerebakan

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View of "Loie Hollowell: Sacred Contract" at König Galerie, Berlin, 2021.

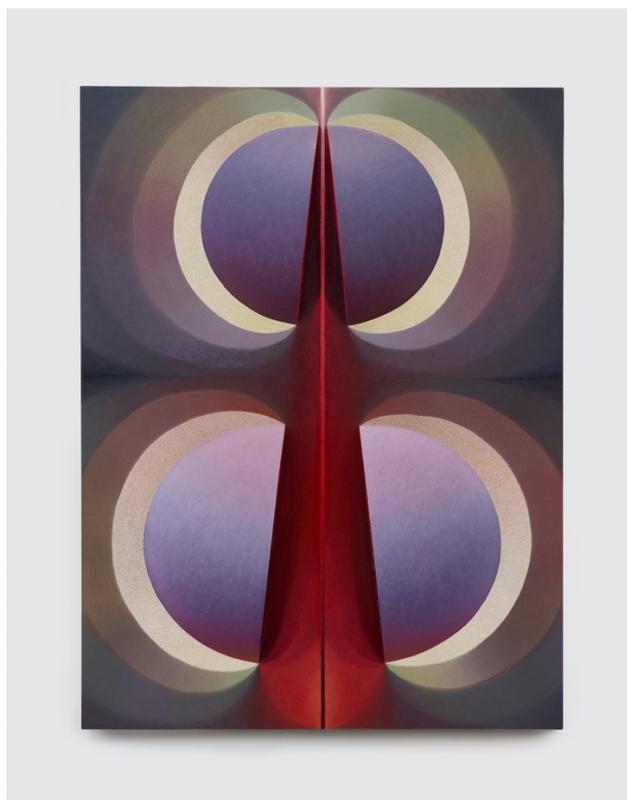
Loie Hollowell delivered her second child a year ago—and her new paintings at König Galerie's nave of St. Agnes, an imposing former Catholic church in West Berlin, reflect on the experience of her three-hour home birth. Built in 1967 by architect and painter Werner Düttmann, St. Agnes was named after the patron saint of virginity and is arrayed in Brutalism's austere, rectilinear geometry. Hollowell's so-called Split orbs, by contrast, are carnal, wet, and radiant. Suggestive of vaginal openings and cosmological symbols, the nine large canvases on view in "Sacred Contract" visually abstract the physical pain of labor. The irrepresentable quality of the experience evokes Elaine Scarry's observation that "to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt." I met Hollowell at her Brooklyn studio, which she shares with her cat, Felix, and we talked about childbirth and the exhibition, on view through June 13.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

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

LABOR IS A GREAT WORD to describe the process of delivering a baby. Like any form of labor, you get better with practice. In my second birth, I was technically skilled at my preferred breathing method and knew what to expect with the ins and outs of contractions. The rest periods between contractions were easier to take advantage of. I took deep breaths and zoned out; the white lines in my paintings refer to those moments of relief. It seems like we generally think of the baby popping out as being the end of labor, but no one tells you that after the baby comes there is more labor to be done—contractions that push out the placenta and huge amounts of bloody goo. These moments of climactic pain are hard to put into words or depict visually, but it feels like leaving one version of yourself behind and moving toward another.

Coming from figurative painting, I decided to work through how to use abstraction to illustrate the most personal experience of my life. Visually, the "Split Orb" paintings are abstractions of my head and belly-vagina region, as those are the areas of my body most affected during labor. *Split orbs in mauve, yellow, and teal, 2020*, is the first pairing of orbs in the series—with the top orb as my head, bottom orb as my belly and vagina. Both are split open one inch, symbolizing the beginning of labor. The last painting in the series, *Split orbs in blood and sunset, 2021*, is split almost ten inches, representing the ten-centimeter cervical dilation needed to start pushing out the baby. As the orbs open the central spine of the painting alternates between the white light of rest and the dark light of contraction, until those final ten inches, which I decided should just be pure red. The color radiating from the orbs fluctuates between saturated and muted in response to the shifts in consciousness during labor.



Loie Hollowell, *Split orbs in blood and sunset, 2021*, oil paint, acrylic medium, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel, 48 x 36 x 3 3/4"

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Giving birth feels like an explosion. To me, it felt like the earth was shattering and I imagined that my screams could be heard from ten houses away. When I looked at the footage my husband had taken, however, I was surprised to see how still I was. As my cervix opened the contractions became more intense; my conscious mind was unable to process the pain. I turned completely inward and the outside world vanished. Thus in the paintings that depict these moments I used muted tones like mauves and beiges for the orb's radiations.

I decided to hang the paintings in two groupings of four along each long wall. At the end of the nave hangs the final piece with its ten-inch split. At first, I was concerned about situating this body of work in such an overpowering space, but the devotional context of its past life as a church made so much sense that now I cannot imagine it installed anywhere else. The walls have a thick stucco texture that is beautiful but intense. Once I gave up on the idea of "filling" the space, I was able to embrace the nave's texture and its spaciousness. Fighting against that space was futile, just like fighting against the contractions of labor. Once I embraced it, everything came out smoothly.

The protruding orb shapes on my paintings are first modeled in Rhino (a digital 3-D rendering program) and then CNC milled out of a high density, closed-cell foam and glued down with epoxy resin. I use these materials because they won't expand and contract based on changing environmental factors like other materials might. I then cover them with layers of acrylic paint to give them a thin shell on which to start oil painting. I'm interested in the blurring of painting and sculpture, enhancing the actual light and shadow created by the orbs with painted light and shadow. The nave space, with its skylight, is a perfect setup to experience this mixing of reality and illusion.



Loie Hollowell, *Split orbs in flesh and blue*, 2021, oil paint, acrylic medium, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel, 48 x 36 x 3 3/4"

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In Northern California, I grew up surrounded by laser-leveled farmland. The sun there is oppressively bright. Perhaps that is why, in my undergrad art education in Southern California, there was an emphasis on Light and Space artists like Robert Irwin, Mary Course, Helen Pashgain, and James Turrell. My parents are artists and also interested in light as a subject matter in their work. My dad is a painter and taught me all I know about painting. One of his favorite artists is Vermeer, arguably the best painter of light. My mom is a Burner, meaning she goes to Burning Man, where fantastic neon light and fire sculptures are set up every year. My mom specializes in making clothes that look especially great under black light, which seems to be the standard form of lighting after dark at Burning Man.

The colors I use in my paintings always fluctuate between the intensely saturated neon hues inspired by my mom and the natural tones my dad prefers. My biggest challenge is finding the right colors to emote the physical or mental space I am trying to depict. Recently I've been looking at monotone sculptural wall works of Ruth Duckworth and Isamu Noguchi. Perhaps, in the near future, I will explore purely sculptural form.

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