

# OCULA

"Loie Hollowell's Shanghai Recalibration"

By Hutch Wilco

May 26, 2021



Exhibition view: Loie Hollowell, Recalibrate, Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai (24 April–11 July 2021). Photo: Courtesy Long Museum West Bund.

On entering Recalibrate, [Loie Hollowell's](#) debut solo exhibition in China at the [Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai](#) (24 April–11 July 2021), a succession of references and thoughts abound.

There are the associations with Transcendental and Tantric painters, such as Agnes Pelton; the spiritualists and abstract artists, like clear visual precursor, [Hilma af Klint](#), who is experiencing a deserved reappraisal of late; and the Orphism of [František Kupka](#).

But for anyone who grew up in the seventies and early eighties, there are also more prosaic associations to be triggered: the funky animations of the Electric Company television series, the trippy psychedelia of Wes Wilson, high school technical drawing exercises, and Barbara Brown wallpaper.

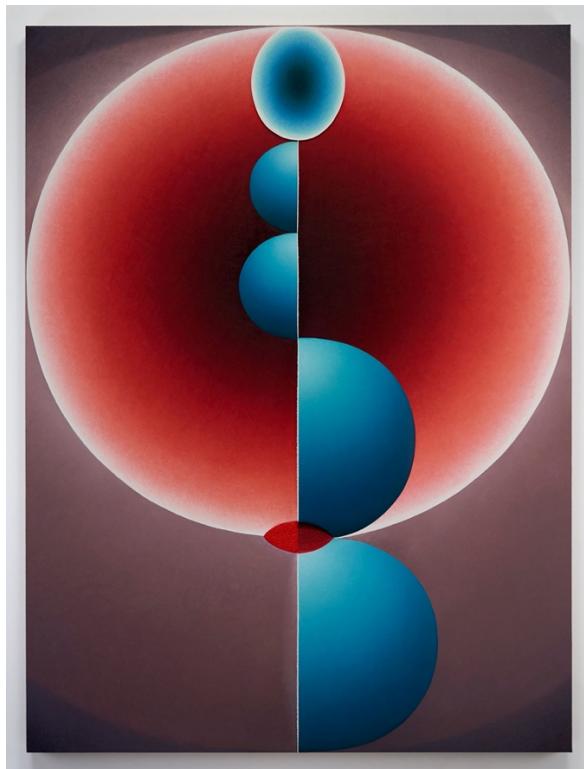
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Exhibition view: Loie Hollowell, Recalibrate, Long Museum West Bund, Shanghai (24 April–11 July 2021). Photo: Courtesy Long Museum West Bund.

Originating in autobiography, Hollowell has explored themes of the human body, in particular her own, touching on sexuality, her pregnancies, and birth. The works in *Recalibrate*, belonging to the 'Plumb Line' series (2018–2020), have their genesis in the artist's pregnancy with her first child in 2018, her observations of her physical and psychological transformation postpartum, and her journey into her second pregnancy in 2020.



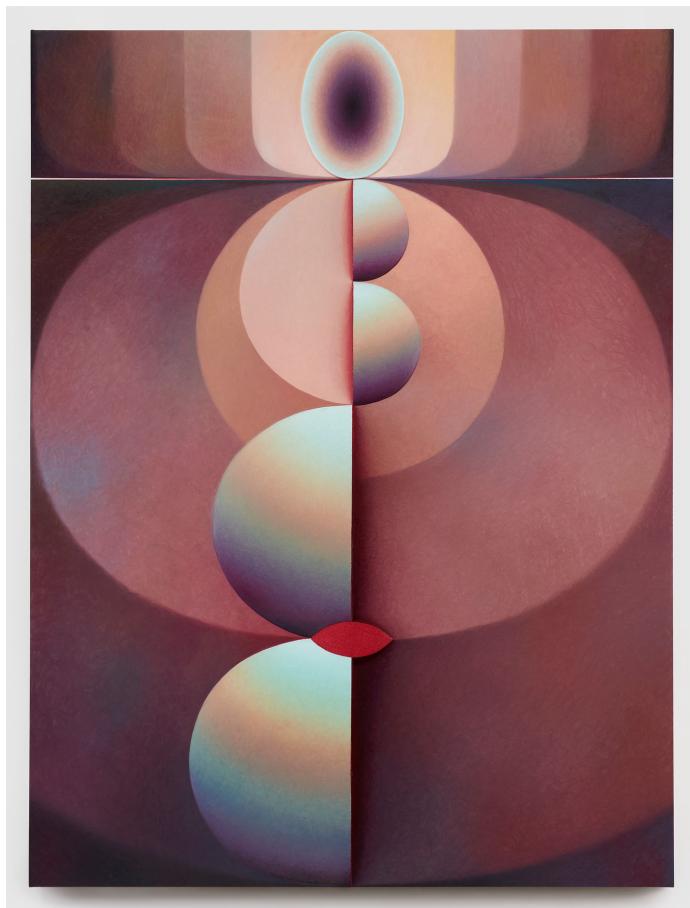
Loie Hollowell, *Red Hole* (2019). Oil paint, acrylic medium, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel. 183.2 × 137.2 × 8.3 cm. Photo: Courtesy Private Collection.

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Hollowell's geometric compositions use a personal lexicon of symbolic forms derived from religious iconography and architecture. These include the mandorla, a pointed oval form that is used both over doorways and to enclose the figures of Mary and Christ in medieval art; the ogee, a distinctive S-shaped curve; and the lingam, a phallus worshipped as the symbol of Shiva.

In *Recalibrate*, the mandorla and ogee predominate across 15 large-scale paintings, which, for the most part, repeat the same visual pattern of half-circles, like buttocks, breasts, and head cushioned in outward radiating ripples of colour, while the lingam is implied by the vertical arrangement as a whole.

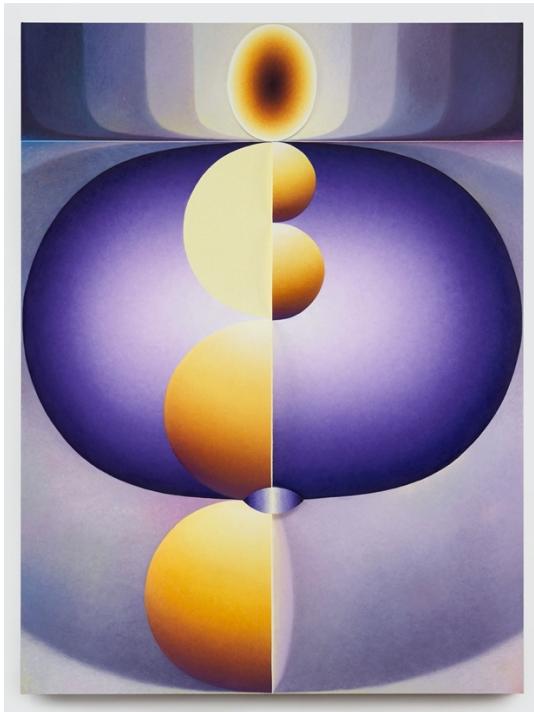


Loie Hollowell, *Standing in a sunrise* (2020). Oil paint, acrylic medium, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel. 182.9 × 137.2 × 9.5 cm. Photo: Courtesy Private Collection.

Despite the spiritual elements and connotations of her mandala-like paintings, Hollowell has previously rejected any spiritual interpretations. 'It's about trying to find a formal language that comes from my experience' she has said in interview with Emily Spencer for *Studio International*. 'It wasn't a conscious decision to pick the mandorla as my vagina shape.'

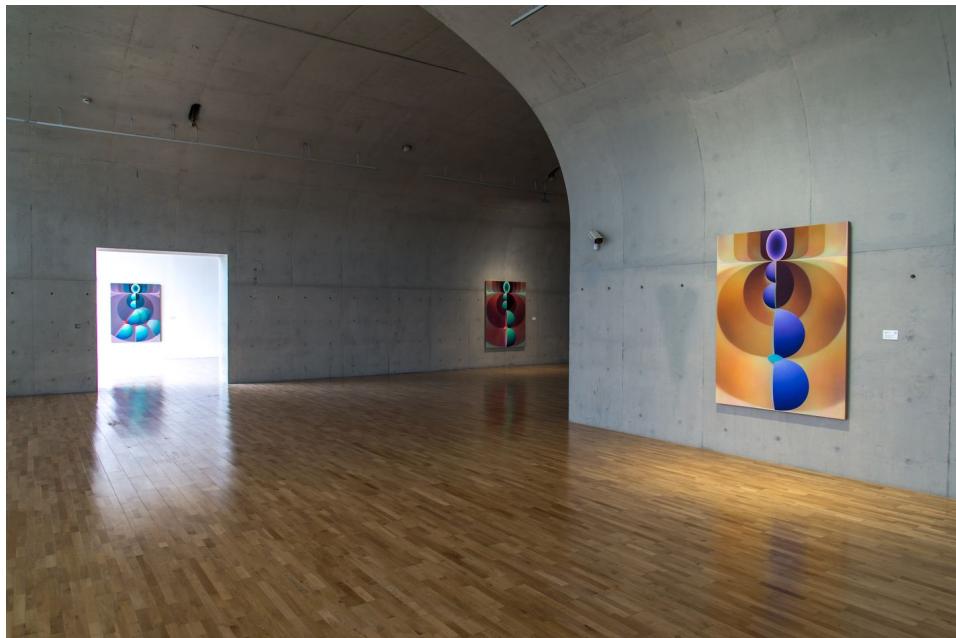
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Loie Hollowell, *Purple Ovum* (2020). Oil paint, acrylic medium, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel. 182.9 × 137.2 × 9.5 cm. Photo: Courtesy Private Collection.

Also dissimilar to her predecessors is the assembled nature of her work. Difficult to tell from an image, Hollowell's paintings are in fact three-dimensional structures, made up of panels on which she identifies positive and negative space that is then removed or built up using high-density foam that is cut, shaped, and glued to a linen surface.



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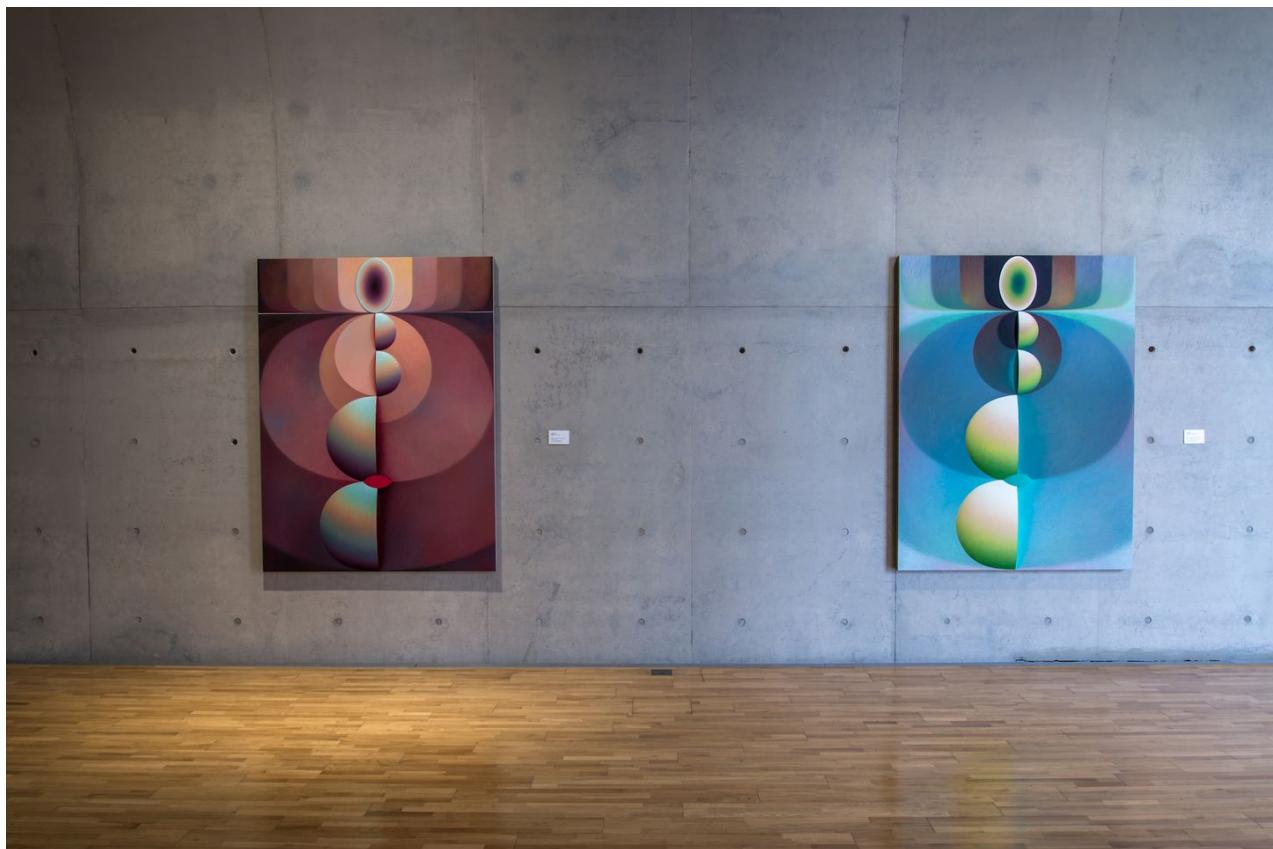
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Once assembled, Hollowell seals the elements and covers the surface with a white acrylic base, then begins to apply a myriad of individuated brushstrokes and sponged paint, building up thin layers to create the tonal effect of light and shade and the subtle gradients of colour, which confound the eye.

**'Hollowell's geometric compositions use a personal lexicon of symbolic forms derived from religious iconography and architecture.'**

This highly methodical and manufactured process, which separates her work from its trippy spiritual precedents, complicates both the painting surface and a casual summation of Hollowell's location in the painterly canon.



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The majority of the works in the show, for example, are exact duplicates in form: two left-facing buttocks, two right-facing breasts, one oval head and a singular, horizontal vagina.

A few are the mirror opposite, with variations in complimentary colours and shading, more akin to the repetitive, cerebral variations of [Sol LeWitt](#)'s wall drawings—with their playful elaboration of structural forms, gradation, and recessive and dominant space—than the mysticism of af Klint.

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Loie Hollowell, *Standing in Blue* (2018). Oil paint, acrylic medium, sawdust, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel.  
182.9 × 137.2 × 8.9 cm. Photo: Courtesy Private Collection.

It is this repetition and sense of a highly manufactured process that tends to topple Hollowell's work ever so gently into 70s kitsch. Panel after panel of identical constructions with subtle variations of colour, featuring titles such as *Standing in Light*, *Standing in Blue* (both 2018), and *Standing in Sunset* (2019), conjure notions of the transcendental for the Ikea Age: Buddha for the bathroom.



Loie Hollowell, *Postpartum Plumb Line* (2019). Oil paint, acrylic medium, and high-density foam on linen mounted on panel.  
182.9 × 137.2 × 8.9 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

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The singularly different painting *Postpartum Plumb Line* (2019) gives off the sense of a hip-swaying, breast-y, confidently Futurist update of [Marcel Duchamp](#)'s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, No.2 (1912). With the departure from the vertical axis in the lower portion, replaced by semi-opaque repetitions of the half-circle creating a sense of movement at speed, the painting has a tongue-in-cheek quality that the *Standing* works barely contain.

One gets the feeling that despite the strictly formal descriptions applied to Hollowell's work by gallery representatives and critics alike, that the mass manufacturing of yoni-abstraction for the Goop set is as much a consideration as autobiography or formal experimentation

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