

KÖNIG GALERIE

"LOIE HOLLOWELL | THE SACRED CONTRACT"

By Anneli Botz and Iris Cushing

2021



Photo: Alex Lockett

Loie Hollowell explores physicality and sensuality in large-scale, color-intense paintings that oscillate between abstraction and figuration. In her text, Anneli Botz describes the artist's process in articulating the paintings' expressive forms, as well as the intimate physical experiences underlying her new works. Author and poet Iris Cushing translates the artist's works into words. In addition to their shared history, the two women are connected by the transformative experience

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of becoming a mother. Furthermore, photographer Alex Lockett has taken portraits of the artist and her family in Ridgewood, New York.

Nine canvases, nine meditations: in her most recent series, New York-based artist Loie Hollowell dedicates herself to the process of birth. It's a recurring theme for the artist, whose abstract and energetic canvases are charged with energy highly aligned with the body and the core themes of life: pregnancy, birth, relationships, sexuality, motherhood. Science fiction also plays a significant role. Loie Hollowell works in a studio on the ground floor in Ridgewood, a neighborhood of Queens, New York. The streets are fenced in by rows of spartan, brick-row houses with narrow windows, and it's a bit quieter than neighboring Bushwick. Hollowell and her husband, the artist Brian Caverly, live nearby in the "nest," as she calls it, with their two children.

The 38-year-old is known for her expressive canvases playing with geometric shapes that subtly revere the body. Once described as a modern-day Georgia O'Keeffe, her humor and healthy self-assertiveness is definitely in keeping with the zeitgeist. While O'Keeffe has always resisted feminist interpretations of her vulva-shaped flora and organic pictorial landscapes, Hollowell's works take a more explicit stand. Originally from California, she has lived in New York City for many years, consistently working to redefine representation of the feminine. Hollowell's desire to depict her emotional processes like a landscape matured early on. She painted traditionally figurativ, oftentimes self-portraits, preferably in conflict with her ex-boyfriend.

"In some paintings, I'm strangling him with both hands," she says. "Back then, I didn't know why. In retrospect, it turned out that he was cheating on me, and maybe, at that time, I was somehow unconsciously aware of that." The canvas became a surface for expressing intuition. Over time, Hollowell began rethinking how to represent the figure. The concrete image of the body was no longer sufficiently adequate to express her perception of femininity. The human being would be depicted as a subject, but not in a traditional form. Hollowell abstracted the classical figure in a cartoonish way initially, then turned to landscape painting through the fantastic paintings of Charles Burchfield—and, more precisely, to the aforementioned evocative flowers of O'Keeffe. Color and composition came increasingly to the fore, figures became energetic forms. In addition to the almond shape, which in Hollowell's art stands for the female sexual organ, a kind of cactus also appears again and again in some series, as a self-portrait. "The cactus became symbolic of myself: prickly, with spikes, beautiful but dangerous, self-defensive, self-sustaining," she says. Thus art becomes a means of assertion. The artist occupies the general imagination of the body through her own original concept of figuration. The position is a strong one: here the artist makes the rules, well beyond the patriarchal gaze of art history. As for the inspiration behind her forms, Hollowell cites the aesthetics of science fiction novels, her favorite books. "It doesn't really matter if the exaggerated form in my paintings is a penis squirting sperm on a vagina or if it is a Star Wars ship at war."

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As in science fiction novels, Hollowell's art also gradually transcends dimensions. Her canvases begin to emerge from their painterly form. Looking at them closely, bulges begin to physically transcend the canvas, bending toward the viewer. These protrusions are cut out in advance by the artist from a kind of hard foam and then applied to the canvas, colored with acrylic and oil. The painting is here both sculpture and gesture: the haptic translation of inner processes.

In recent years, the feminine processes have taken on even more concise configurations: beyond conception and pregnancy, the focus has shifted and honed in on the subject of childbirth—an experience that she describes, even after the birth of her second child, as “one of the worst experiences” of her life. *Sacred Contract* is a detailed examination of the actual hours of childbirth, or more precisely, the labor pains. Art becomes a journey into the epicenter of pain. On nine large-scale canvases, called *Split orbs*, the artist translates the physical experience of labor into color and form. Above all, this is an encounter with pain, a meditative contemplation in an almost spiritual sense. As you wander about the space, the canvases should alternate: light and dark—contraction and relaxation. The artwork uses a color-phenomenological metaphor for the birth process. It appears, thus, that the color flows out of the form, simulating the flow of energy, pain, and blood making their way out of the body. The cleft in the core of the spheres seems to

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widen more and more in this process, a meticulous analogy to the opening of the cervix, to the opening of one's own body. "The very dark, almost black images are closest to the moment of birth," Hollowell says. The soft, smooth and velvety textures of the canvases find a counterpart in the rough spots which repeatedly appear at the core of the paintings.

Here Hollowell also picks up on the texture of the surroundings, the *béton brut* with which the former church of St. Agnes of the KÖNIG GALERIE was built in the post-war years. The expansive space of the nave, with its very particular spirituality, inspired her, the artist says. Where others attack with the grandeur of large-scale works, Hollowell opted for the opposite. "The former nave of the KÖNIG GALERIE in Berlin is incredibly impressive. How should I deal with it, I thought. I felt the urge to bow before this expansive place, before the high walls and the sublime. My paintings should have space here, air to breathe, space to think." It occurred to her that some visitors might find it strange if the large space was occupied by only a few works. But it is exactly this dialogue between the works that concerns her. "I see the distances between the canvases as a kind of meditation. You step from one to the other, from one contraction to the next. There's this infinite pain, the contraction, the focus, the scream, then something akin to stillness occurs. There is the brief moment of relaxation. An echo of nothingness in preparation for the next wave to roll in, the next contraction, the very pain required to mobilize all forces for the next push." The artist says that something animalistic is released in women during birth. Time and space are unleashed from reality. In fact, it almost doesn't matter where the child is born, because at that moment the spirit is so completely immersed in pain and determination.

The perception of the outside world no longer plays a role here. It is precisely this intense and detailed confrontation with the physical corporeal process that distinguishes Hollowell's work. Her forms, which adopt the universal language of geometry, seem to mirror the archaic birth process, in which a seemingly latent collective consciousness is accessed, beyond anything previously empirically experienced.

"There seems to be the universal knowledge that between the moments of absolute tension and expenditure of energy, there must also be the moments of relaxation," she says. "You almost go insane with pain. The cervix opens, the vagina tears open, everything pulsates towards the one place in the body that is now to open up. The back, the legs, the arms, everything is under tension." A body on the verge of bursting—this is how *Split orbs* can be seen as representative of the female body. Head and belly, physically separated, united in color. Contraction and relaxation, body and spirit. At the same time, the shifting colors function like aesthetic gradations of the experience of pain. With each contraction comes a new form of pain, she explains, as the head pushes toward freedom. Once again, everything comes into focus; the shoulders slip through, and a flood of endorphins envelops the many layers quivering inside her.

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What Loie Hollowell describes here with such great attention to detail is a truly courageous event that in many ways invites one to recoil. Too bloody, too traumatic, and much too distant for the man. Initially, she herself was not entirely clear about what she was working on. The final realization is the result of the artistic process itself. "I didn't see the connection between the individual paintings right away, I was just working on them. They just seemed beautiful to me, as if they radiated a special energy. I was unsettled by that beauty." For Hollowell, the event should not remain too abstract, for otherwise the concrete motivation, the essence, would be missing. The elephant in the room: quite possibly, a painting could simply be beautiful and too pleasing.

But she just kept going, repeating her preliminary studies over and over again. "All of a sudden, everything was clear. I saw the round shapes, a head, a belly. And then I suddenly knew that this series would be limited to the very precise period of maybe two hours. Two hours of pressing, pain, relaxing, and pressing." Her paintings bear the weight of all that energy, the pain, the strength, the power of the woman. "I imagined what it would look like, the last artwork in the series, depicting the climax of childbirth. The moment when the pain reared its head one last time. Maybe everything would be black, with a red line around it. In any case, I wanted the visitor to understand how it's all connected. Or how it feels."

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In keeping with Walter Benjamin's theory of art, something of an aura can be witnessed in the work of Loie Hollowell. Her works capture what cannot be described in language. They possess some otherworldly, transcendent quality; they take us to a cosmos of universal knowledge and deep introspection. There's the quiet echo of those traumatic hours in the exhibition space, the echoes of the origins of life and the beauty therein.

Here, color becomes a form at the forefront of all experience, a proxy for the feminine processes. Her art is a feminist statement, a means of self-assertion and destigmatization. While the taboo surrounding the birth process is dismantled formally and aesthetically, the immediacy of the experience approaches the viewer without overwhelming them. They can linger, meditate, and, somehow, empathize.

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