

ARTSY

"Loie Hollowell on Abstraction, Making the Grotesque Beautiful, and Her Latest Work"

By Casey Lesser

March 14, 2023



Loie Hollowell in her Ridgewood, Queens, studio. Video still by RAVA for Artsy.

[Loie Hollowell](#) has long pursued her own singular twist on abstraction. "From the beginning, when I started incorporating sex into the work, I wanted it to be obvious and kind of assertive," she said during an early March interview at her studio in Ridgewood, Queens. "At the same time, through the abstraction, it was hidden under the guise of formal decisions, like the color and the composition."

That approach has yielded more than a decade of beloved paintings that deftly balance abstract forms and visceral portrayals of the body and bodily experiences, including sex, abortion, pregnancy, and childbirth. Carnal forms like almond-shaped mandorlas, sensual semicircles, luminous orbs, and smooth shafts dance across Hollowell's canvases, painted in a host of pleasing, pulsing hues, and amplified by sculptural casts that jump out from the surface.

In the past few years since becoming a mother, Hollowell's work has featured casts of pregnant bellies and breasts protruding from the canvas. "With my recent work, it's been much more assertive," she said.

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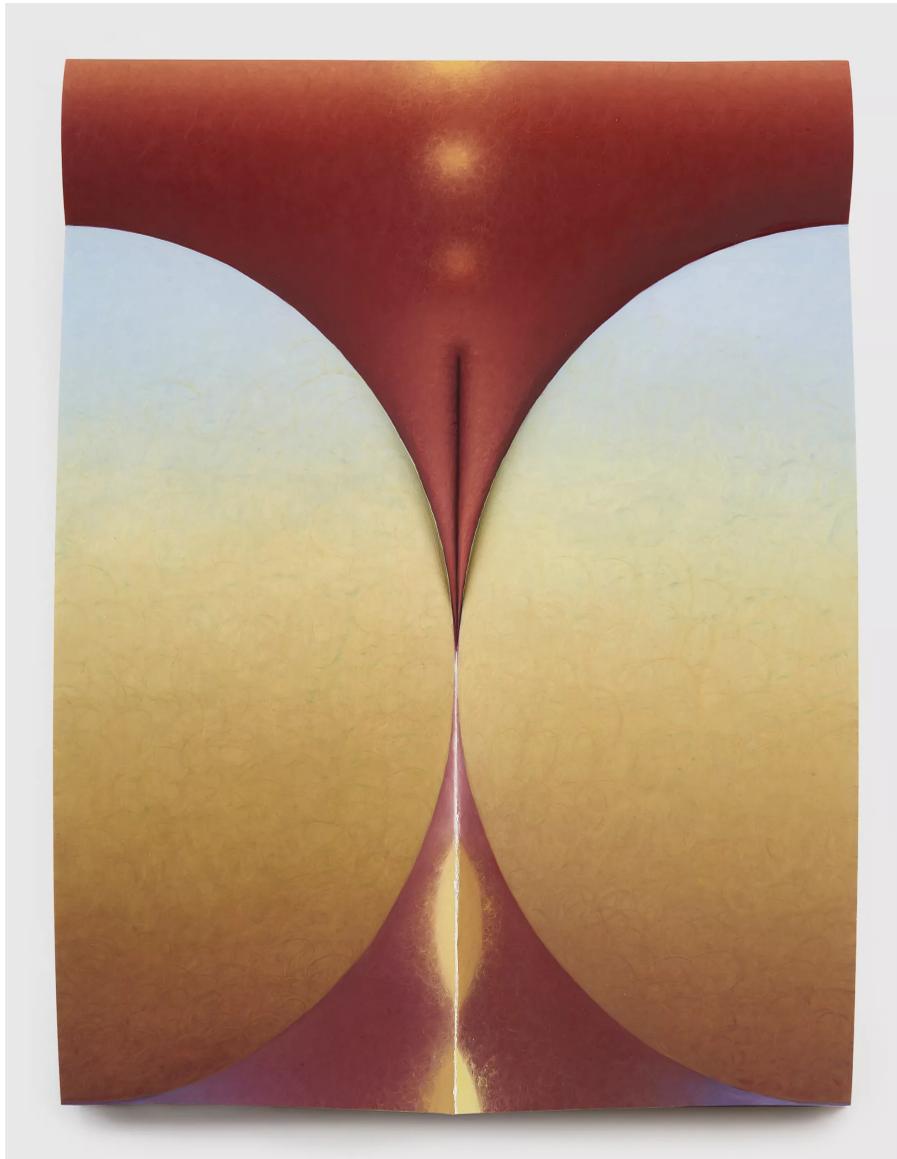
With the new work she's making now, though, Hollowell is finding a fruitful middle ground. "I'm really wanting it to be a little more didactic, kind of sharing my experience with giving birth and breastfeeding, but I feel like the most recent work is trying to toe the line between that really descriptive work of the body casts with a more kind of abstract layer to it so that it becomes a little less direct," she explained. What remains consistent is the ever-intriguing feeling of the work—the genuine emotion that Hollowell can elicit with just the right combination of color and form.

Take, for example, *Pressure in yellow-blue and mars violet* (2022), a striking symmetrical painting made up of two pale blue-and-yellow half-moons that meet at the center of the canvas, amid a velvety red background. Combining abstraction with clear allusions to the body, the work exemplifies Hollowell's ability to channel personal, physical experiences into mesmerizing paintings.

Hollowell is selling this painting in a single-lot Impact auction on Artsy, in partnership with Pace Gallery. Proceeds will go to One Acre Fund, a nonprofit organization that supports smallholder farmers in East Africa. Bidding is open from Tuesday, March 21st, through Friday, March 24th.

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Loie Hollowell, *Pressure in yellow-blue and mars violet*, 2022.

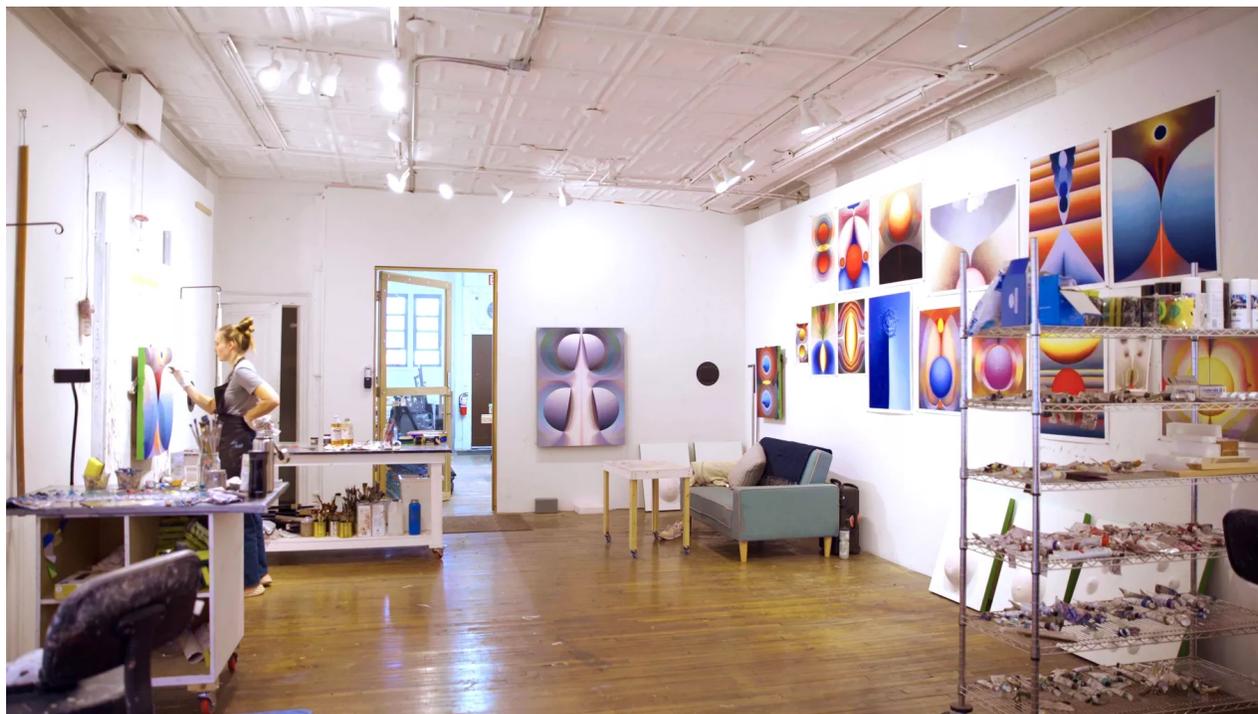
"I really like doing this kind of auction work for organizations that affect the most people," Hollowell said. "[One Acre Fund] provides equipment, seeds, and other kinds of farming necessities to people in sub-Saharan Africa, and that's just an essential aspect of people's lives there."

The cause also resonates personally with Hollowell, who grew up in a farming community in Northern California, near fields that would cycle through corn, alfalfa, tomatoes, and sunflowers. "It's all laser-leveled flat fields, so from the house I grew up in, I can see for miles and miles in every direction; huge open skies," she explained. "I think that that, including the color of the sky, being so bright, has definitely influenced the color of my work."

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A bold cobalt blue recurs throughout Hollowell's work, though her palettes have changed often over the years. She recalled a 2018 show at Pace in London that was almost entirely focused on primary colors, in strong contrast to her recent work. "I've really been pulling from the colors of my body, like fleshy pinks and salmons and muted purples, like mauve," she said of her current practice. "Then again, even more recently, I'm trying to bring bright colors back into the body spaces."



Loie Hollowell in her Ridgewood, Queens, studio. Video still by RAVA for Artsy.

Color relationships are specific to individual paintings, as well as Hollowell's emotional state at the time. "The different experiences we have in our bodies become different colors," she explained. "For example, your emotional headspace can be heavy and blue and watery—or it can be really light and airy, like a pink.

"From the beginning, it's clear to me what the central character's color has to be, and then the rest of the painting will kind of feed off of that sensation of that color," Hollowell continued. "With [*Pressure in yellow-blue and mars violet*], I really knew the colors of the semi-circles before anything else—I knew I wanted them to be a yellowish dusky skyscape."

Those semi-circles, which are rounded, sculptural forms, are couched between triangular forms that are also three-dimensional, awash in a lush orangey-red with hints of gold. The origins of the work can be deciphered through the form above the orbs, which clearly resembles a vulva, as well as the titular nod to "pressure."

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The painting is part of a new series that speaks to Hollowell's experience with what she thinks is interstitial cystitis, a chronic condition that places debilitating pressure on the bladder. "It can happen to anyone. It doesn't have to be after you give birth, but I think that giving birth twice within two years really contributed to a lot of the health issues that I've had postpartum," Hollowell said. "And this experience, in particular, is the most painful, imprisoning experience I've ever had in my body."

Hollowell had already started working on this new series of shaped canvases when she realized they could be manifestations of this chronic condition. "When I looked at them, it felt like the pressure," she recalled. "This painting is very clearly about that experience, this interstitial cystitis. And I'm interested in doing more like it, but it's hard to incorporate this content...and have it still be beautiful, and not kind of grotesque."

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The work is far from grotesque. Another work from the series (there are three so far, out of 20 in total), *Pressure in Blue and Red* (2022), was recently featured in "Love Letter," a group show that Hollowell co-curated in January with fellow artist [Harminder Judge](#) at Pace in New York. The exhibition featured the two contemporary artists' works, as well as pieces by two forebears they admire: [Agnes Pelton](#) and [Ghulam Rasool Santosh](#).

Though the aesthetic and spiritual connections between the four artists are abundantly clear, "Love Letter" also spoke to the current mood, in which abstraction feels particularly hopeful. In an [essay](#) for the show, the writer Charlotte Jansen captured this sentiment: "The confines of our mortal existence have been translated into symbols, represented in color and light for centuries, all over the world—but facing the infinite inexplicable...is a particular kind of pursuit in abstraction."

In the wake of several years of enthusiasm surrounding figurative painting and endless news cycles of doom and gloom, the potential for abstraction to offer up alternatives to reality, and to inspire new ways of thinking, is refreshing. And though Hollowell's work is perhaps less abstract than before, these same ideas still ring true.

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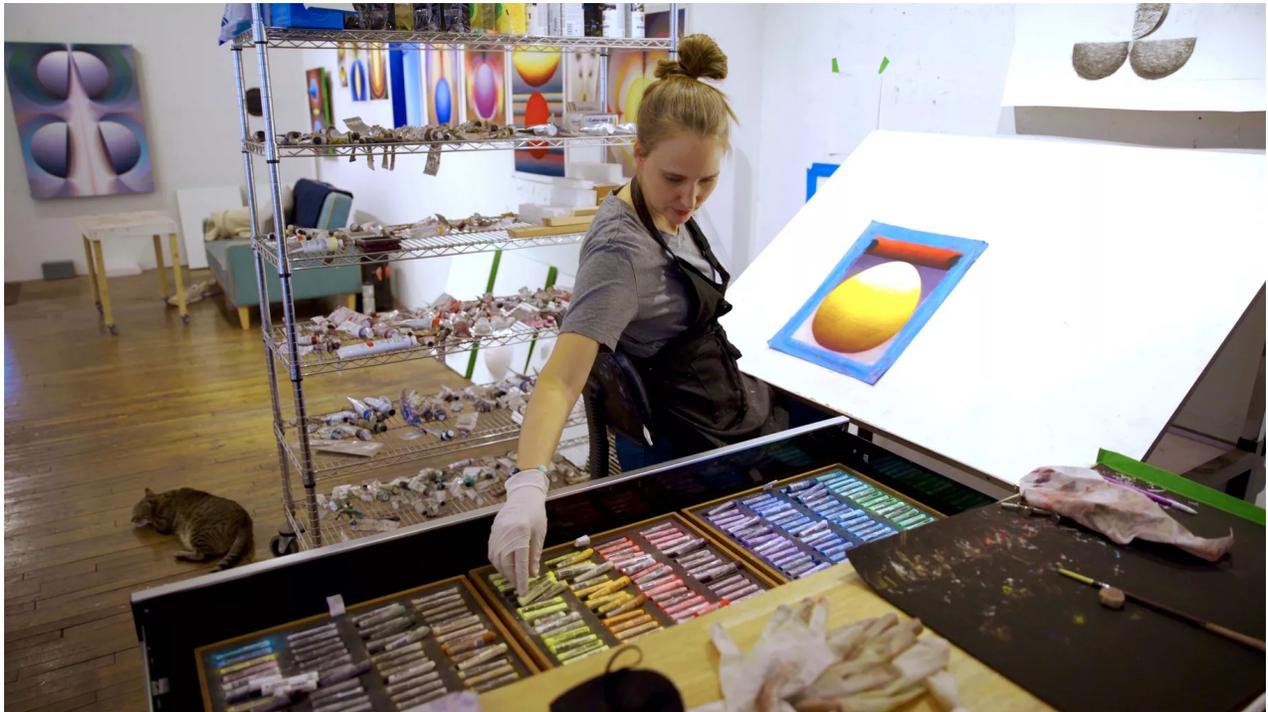
"Love Letter" also featured Hollowell's *Fully Dilated* (2022), a canvas featuring smoky gray and mauve halos surrounding a bright blue pregnant belly cast. "I think the body cast work of the pregnant breasts and bellies—all cast from five different friends of mine in their third trimester—just had to happen because giving birth was such an informative and transformative experience," Hollowell said. "I couldn't not talk about it really directly. And I also just felt like it hasn't been present in art.

"I don't see the grotesqueness and the beauty and the pain being discussed in contemporary painting," she continued, "and so it just felt like there was room for it." She pointed to [Judy Chicago](#) and [Clarity Haynes](#) as among the few who have done this work.

Hollowell noted that creating figurative sculpture has been daunting, though she plans to continue to create with these cast forms. She's particularly inspired by the bellies, which hold the potential to become abstracted, oblong forms.

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With the support of Pace as well as [Jessica Silverman](#) (which also shows the artist), Hollowell is at a point in her career where she is able to pursue this more experimental work alongside the paintings she's become known for. Earlier this March, Hollowell's *Split Orbs in purple, ochre, and brown* (2021) sold for £635,000 (\$758,819) at Phillips, surpassing its high estimate; and her auction record was set in 2021, when *Linked Lingams (yellow, green, blue, purple, pink)* (2018) sold for HK\$16.51 million (US\$2.126 million) at Sotheby's Hong Kong.

The body cast works have already been making the rounds at art fairs, though, as well as exhibitions, including a current solo show at the Manetti Shrem Museum in Davis, California.

"I've transitioned the work a little bit with the body casts," Hollowell said. "It's been really interesting to see a different set of comments from people—women and birthing people have reached out a lot and commented on how it's affected them and what they feel about it in really positive ways.

"It's interesting to realize that I'm kind of really thinking about a specific audience," she continued. "I think it's turned some people off, but it's nice to reach a place in my career where I feel like I can have these two distinct bodies of work."

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