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"Loie Hollowell Abstracts the Female Body"

By Jacoba Urist

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Photo by Dana Golan.

In her captivating geometric and sculptural paintings, the feminist artist alludes to pregnancy, childbirth, and reproductive rights.

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On a late December afternoon in the Ridgewood neighborhood of Queens, Loie Hollowell ushers me inside her immaculate studio and introduces me to her tabby, Felix. Christmas is days away, and Hollowell is preparing for her show "In Transition," at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman, opening in early January, followed quickly by the awaited exhibition "Loie Hollowell: Space Between, A Survey of Ten Years" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, on view from January 21 to August 11. "I feel so privileged to do a ten-year survey at my age, but I do feel a little bit self-conscious about it," the 40-year-old artist admits. "My idols are people like Judy Chicago, who fought for decades to have attention paid to them."

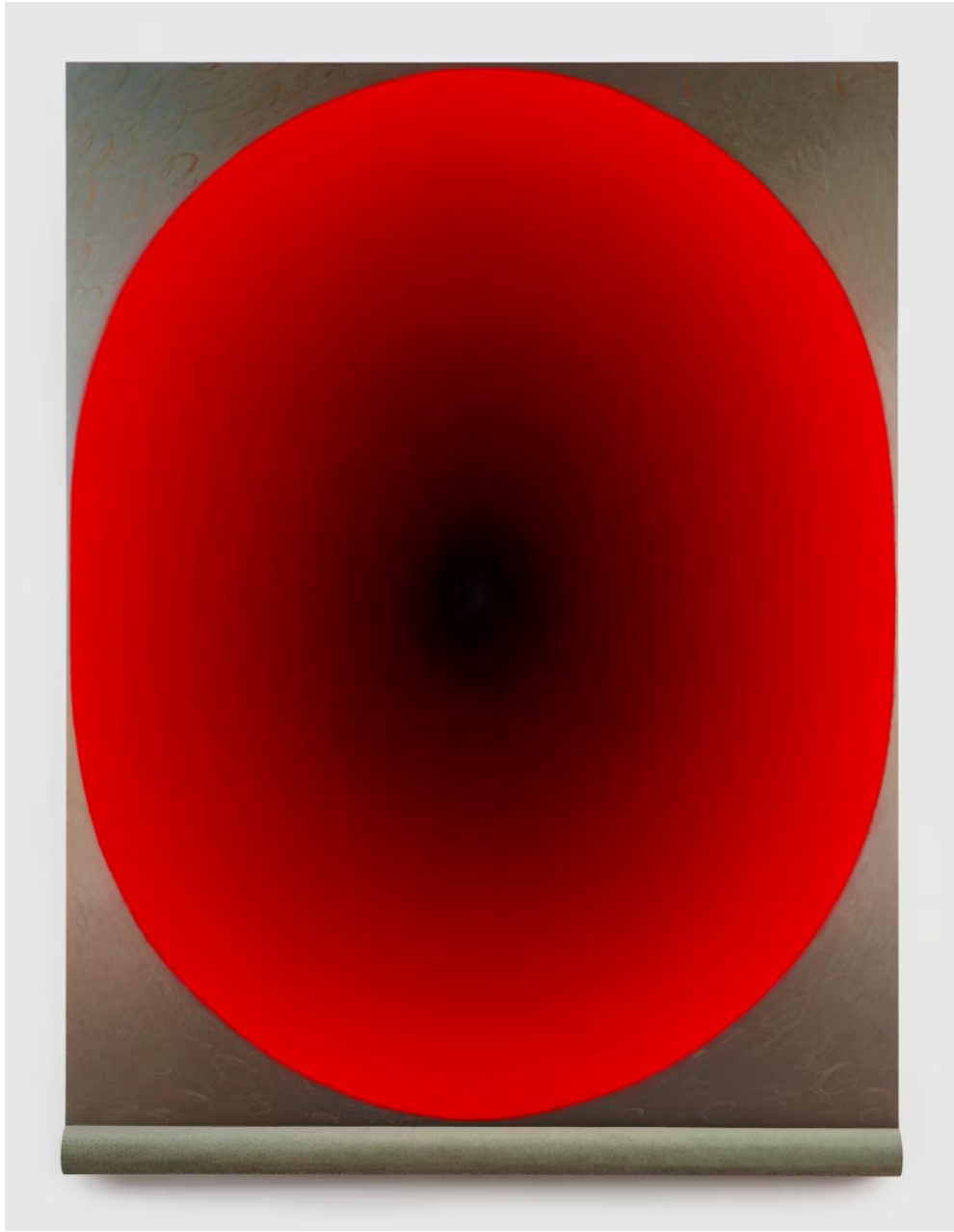


Photo by Dana Golan.

Hollowell's trajectory has been considerably faster. The eldest of four, she grew up in Northern California. Her father, David Hollowell, is a retired UC Davis art professor and painter who renders subjects in photo-realistic pointillism; her mother, Terry Hollowell, is a Burner, who specializes in making clothes that pop under black light at Burning Man. Hollowell moved to Santa Barbara for her undergraduate studies, then attended Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond for her MFA and settled in New York City after graduating in 2012. Her breakout moment, a nine-piece solo show in Brooklyn, came only three years later, with a *New York Times* review that proclaimed: "The next time you see Loie Hollowell's paintings it will probably not be in a small, artist-run gallery in someone's apartment that is open only on Sundays or by appointment, which is the case with this show." By 2017, she was represented by mega-gallery Pace. Today, she has an auction record of \$2.2 million, and her work is in permanent collections like the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

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Loie Hollowell, *Scarlet Brain*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery. Photo by Melissa Goodwin

Celebrated for her large, abstract, symmetrical paintings that sometimes feature sculptural reliefs, Hollowell uses a throbbing palette of reds, blues, pinks, and purples that both reflects light and casts shadows on her three-dimensional surfaces. Inspired by the symbolic meaning of sacred geometry and midcentury Neo-Tantric artists such as Kashmiri painter-poet G.R. Santosh, as well as Light and Space artists like Robert Irwin, Hollowell's canvases radiate spiritual glow. "For me, the mission, if I were to say I have one, is to create visually stimulating work that pulls you in and confuses you," she says. "I want people who would not necessarily be able to approach the subject matter head-on to be seduced into dealing with it."

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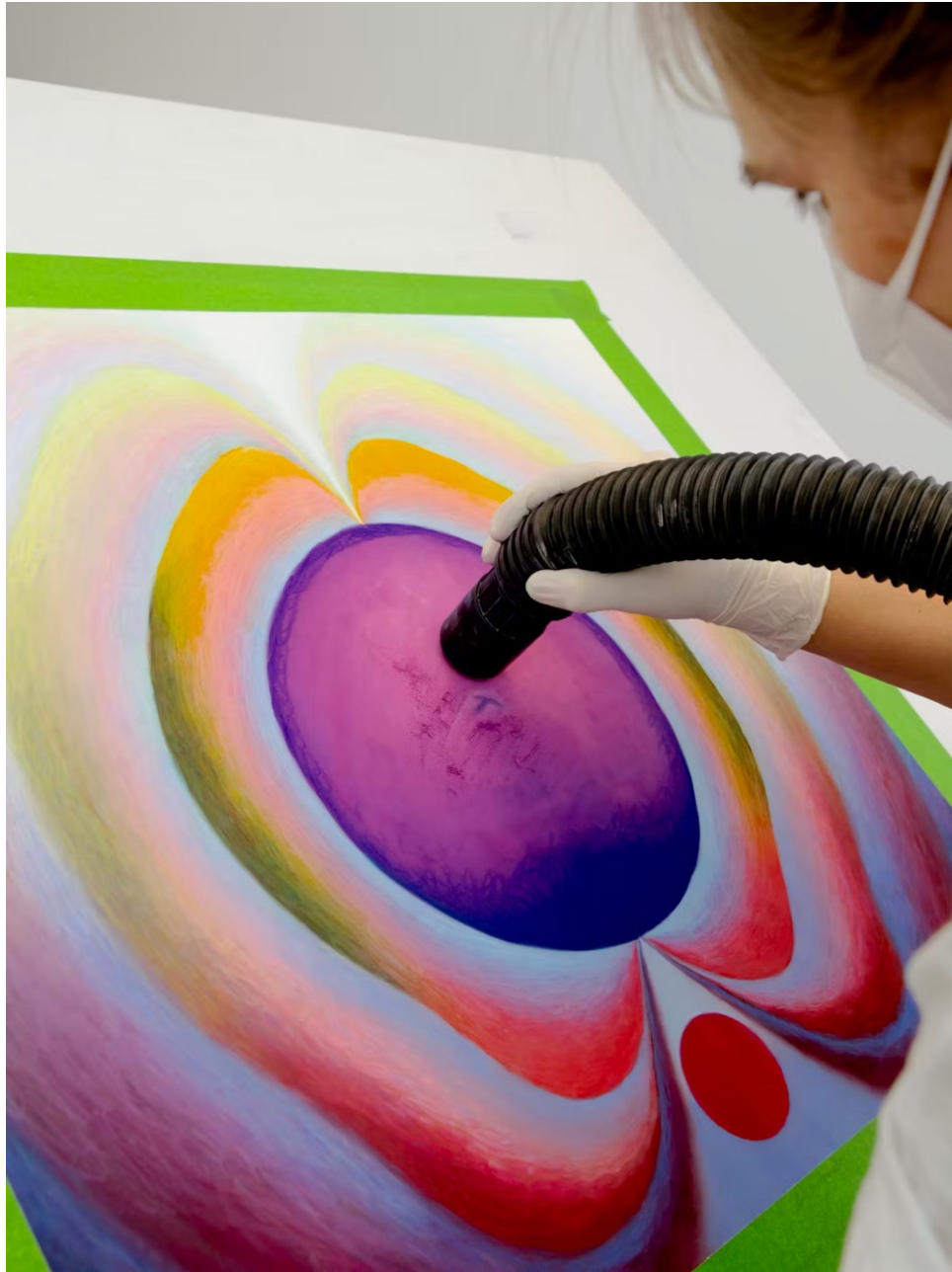


Photo by Dana Golan

The subject matter to which she refers is the primal changes that female bodies experience during the various stages of pregnancy, from conception to breastfeeding and postpartum. For Hollowell, a set of shapes that mimic body parts create a symbolic language that runs through her practice: an almond-like Mandorla, popular in Christ imagery, represents the vulva; an S-like profile Ogee curve from Gothic architecture depicts breasts; spherical reliefs, built from high-density foam, are expectant bellies. Her canvases mine the deeply personal terrain of her own transformation as she birthed her two children, Linden, in 2018, and Juniper, in 2020—an experience that she says left her equally awestruck and depleted. But they also resonate with feminist ideas of sexuality and motherhood.

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Hollowell's new series, on view at Jessica Silverman, focuses on the stage of labor where the cervix dilates from one to ten centimeters, expanding about a third of an inch in each painting. The works are sequential, and all feature a sculptural belly. Waves of color pulse from the center of the composition, which the artist likens to "sonic sound or radiation or biting into an apple." A sponged fuchsia-red or pink circle expands as the dilation progresses. "The one-centimeter piece is yellow for the belly color, because you start sunny and optimistic and full of light. You have a lot of energy," explains Hollowell, who selects oil pigments to convey an emotional moment in time. "I had a water birth with my second child, so I transitioned over time into the birthing tub, and then you're just heavy, and burdened and in deep, deep pain. So the paintings transition through the color spectrum, moving towards red and ending at purple and blue with the belly color."

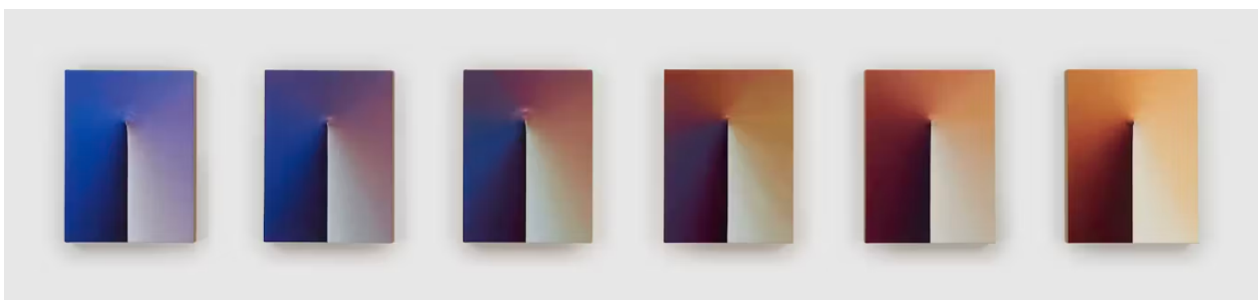
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Six smaller pieces from 2023 that will be on display at the Aldrich, *11pm, 1am, 3am, 5am, 7am, 9am*, are a set of sublimely minimal works with graduated tonal variations that evoke night to daybreak. They are cast from pregnant friends' breasts. "In this series, I wanted to make the nipples utilitarian but also beautiful. Part of the process of bringing the cast body parts into the paintings is realizing how much cultural judgment we put on the nipple and women's breasts in particular," says Hollowell. "I started doing these because I wanted to reinterpret Ellsworth Kelly's spectrum paintings but totally feminize and mother-ize them."



Loie Hollowell, *11pm, 1am, 3am, 5am, 7am, 9am*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery. Photo by Melissa Goodwin

As much as Hollowell celebrates the life force of a mother's anatomy and the mysticism of birth, the female body is also a battleground. In the summer of 2013, the artist had an abortion, and with

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it a turning point away from figuration. "I realized there was something about the experience that I was trying to put into visualization," she says. The first graphite work that kicks off the Aldrich's survey, *Happy Vagina*, captures the emotional aftermath of her abortion in a trippy abstraction. "That experience was so painful, but I also thought about it as liberating my uterus," she says. *Emerald Mountain*, which was made two months after *Happy Vagina*, depicts her feeling of emotional freedom by referencing the Emerald City from the Wizard of Oz, and the sense of hope that it inspires from afar. "How do I take the experience of my own liberation and use the ultimate feminist artist's language? Everything since then has been a portrait of the inside of my body and mind space—and the way the experience within myself emanates into the world."



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