



# THE ART NEWSPAPER

"The experience of giving birth is so abstract and intense": Loie Hollowell on the challenge of painting pregnancy"

By Torey Akers

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Portrait of Loie Hollowell. Courtesy Pace Gallery

**The artist's survey at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum tracks the formal language she developed to depict an essential process in life—one that, historically, has been rarely depicted**

Pregnancy and birth may be a couple of the most common experiences known to humanity, but they are notably under-represented in the Western canon of visual art. Beyond representations of the Virgin Mary, it is hard to identify traces of motherhood's more visceral, profound, powerful demonstrations of the body's capacity for radical healing and animation, such as labour and delivery. Too somatic, too indelicate, too reflective of female subjectivity, the topic of pregnancy in art was broached with kid gloves until well into the 20th century, when visionaries like Frida Kahlo and, later, Judy Chicago dared to centre its corporeal operations in their compositions. These and other women artists insisted on birth's inclusion in the Zeitgeist with edge and relish, mounting a legacy that the artist Loie Hollowell has taken by the reins in much of her recent work,

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including her current solo show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

*Loie Hollowell: Space Between, A Survey of Ten Years* (until 11 August) takes a longitudinal look at the artist's development towards a feminist mysticism, cohering a unique, practically spiritual lexicon that transcends genre. "It's important that we have images of the experience of pregnancy from the inside and the experience from the outside," Hollowell tells *The Art Newspaper*. "It's important to have many, many, many different perspectives on the birthing body, the fantasy of the birthing body, the actual birthing body, what it feels like to really be inside of it. We need all these perspectives to add on to the history. For me, I feel like my contribution can be one of lived experience and abstraction."



Loie Hollowell, *10pm Feeding—Around the clock, December 5, 2022*  
Photo: Melissa Goodwin and Robyn Caspare, Courtesy Pace Gallery

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Hollowell, a New York-based, California-raised painter best known for her plangent, undulating abstractions, has boldly expanded her repertoire beyond the formal to pioneer a figure-forward style inspired by her relationship to reproductive agency and motherhood—including the birth of her two children and the emotional aftermath of an abortion she had in 2013. The newer works, made with cast body parts and expressive, Technicolor pastel, vibrate and pulse with the promise of new life, simultaneously acting as feminist totems and prognosticators of a more expansive future.

"One thing that was coming up for me was how under-recorded in fine art the birth process is," Hollowell says. "The motherhood process is not centered in our visual language, so I had to develop a new one."

### **Picturing pregnancy across time**

For centuries, it was considered inauspicious to portray pregnant women in European painting, as the practice was thought to invite ill wishes and potential miscarriage. While fertility imagery abounded throughout the cultural production of the Ancient Egyptians and Akuba people of pre-colonial Ghana, for instance, the conservative sexual mores of white supremacy ran counter to the celebration of a woman's god-like ability to create life. Karen Hearn, curator of the watershed show *Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media* at London's Foundling Museum, succinctly summarised the issue in [a 2020 interview](#) with *The New York Times*: "The problem with pregnancy is that it defines a sexually active woman, and throughout history, that has always been a problem."

Amy Smith-Stewart, chief curator at the Aldrich, recently told [Vogue](#): "Loie is using her body as a lens to talk about larger seismic issues around female sexuality, feminism, motherhood and reproduction rights ... what Loie is doing, and what a lot of early feminists did, is share their personal stories as a way to counter this very monolithic art canon that would not allow those voices in."

Hollowell's voice—resonant, direct and hypnotic across painting, bas-relief sculpture and works on paper—melds geometry with blooming, organic forms, speaking to an elemental, shared understanding of a most personal undertaking. That has meant abandoning institutional convention. "My work comes out of my personal experience," Hollowell says. "So it's very much an interior investigation of what I've experienced as a birthing body. The experience of giving birth is so abstract and intense, I felt like it couldn't be concretely depicted with a real body."

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Loie Hollowell, *Seated Belly*, December 29th, 2022

Photo: Melissa Goodwin, Courtesy Pace Gallery

She adds: "When I was in grad school, I painted myself a lot. I didn't paint a self-portrait. I found that, for me, they were too didactic and not emotional enough. They were very detached from myself. When I had the experience in 2013 of having the abortion, I just felt like it had to belong to a more abstract space."

In order to access a more affectual manifestation of motherhood, less preoccupied with bloody embodiment than reverberating connectivity, Hollowell amended her artistic process.

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"With the drawings, I was actually taking the cast of my pregnant belly and putting it on the paper and tracing it," she says. "It was pretty oblong and an awkward kind of shape. You'll see that I started rounding it out as I go to make it even more planetary and geometric. Then with the paintings, my studio took them into a digital rendering of a perfect orb shape. It was about trying to pull the factuality of the experience, the physicality of the belly into a more abstract space that I could then play with the colour and the textures to let those speak to the mental experience around what this physical element was that grounds the painting and drawings in the centre."

Part of Hollowell's project of channeling the intimacy of regeneration lies in her fierce, elegant colour choices, which seduce the viewer with strange, piquant beauty. "I've found recently that I've been using a lot of fuchsias (hot pinks and purples), and I actually find that colour to be kind of grotesque," she says. "It functions as a 'beautiful' colour, but I see it as a really aggressive, painful colour. I find it both beautiful and aggressive."

This delicate balance of gorgeous repulsion underscores the personal and cultural complexity of Hollowell's visual world, articulated with a haunting, tantric eye towards narrative inclusion without sacrificing individuality.

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