

OBSERVER

"Her Life in Art: An Interview With Painter Loie Hollowell"

By Christa Terry

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Painter Loie Hollowell. Courtesy Loie Hollowell and Pace Gallery

The artist, best known for her highly autobiographical works, opened up about her process, how people respond to the themes she chooses and the artists who've influenced her.

Paddy Johnson, writing about Pace Gallery's 2019 expansion and its inaugural shows, said: "Loie Hollowell's abstract paintings of blobs have vibrant color going for them and that's about it." Johnson was, I think, grasping for ways to heap criticism on the gallery—which she describes in the same article as primarily attracting "young financial bros, excited old women with plastic surgery, financially motivated collectors and High Line tourists"—and Hollowell's work simply got caught in the crossfire. The artist, for those unfamiliar, does not paint 'blobs' and her canvases' vivid hues aren't even the most enchanting things about them.

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What is so interesting about Hollowell's work beyond color is how her paintings and pastel drawings seem to glow from within, casting their own painted light onto curves and mounds that anyone with a human body should feel some kinship with. Hollowell, whose work is very much rooted in the experience of physicality, isn't particularly coy with her titles, so if you're unsure whether the breast or the penis or the mons pubis your brain has found in what looks at first like a straightforwardly abstract image, chances are very good that what you think you saw is what you saw.



'Loie Hollowell: Dilation Stage' at Pace Gallery, 540 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001; March 8–April 20, 2024.
Courtesy Pace Gallery

If you miss seeing the selection of Hollowell's new large-scale drawings closing in just a few days at Pace, there's still "Loie Hollowell: Space Between, A Survey of Ten Years"—her first-ever museum survey now on at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The latter, of course, offers up a more complete picture of her artistry, but there's something compelling about the extreme focus of the Pace show, "Dilation Stage," which puts the adaptability of the female body—Hollowell's body in particular, the ur mother in the abstract—on full display, telling a story as old as humanity itself through changing colors.

Observer recently connected with Hollowell to ask about her process, how people respond to the themes she chooses and the artists who've influenced her.

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A lot of people talk about abstraction in your work, but I think for people who've had certain experiences—myself among them—it doesn't feel abstract at all. What do you think accounts for that?

That is the ideal interaction that I hope viewers have while looking at my work. I have never considered my paintings fully abstract because they are about visceral lived experience. While the impetus for making an image always comes from a specific circumstance I've lived, I want the painting itself to function on multiple levels and not solely illustrate what I have experienced. I am interested in all different types of people having their own distinct read or connection, and my hope is for the viewer to fluctuate between seeing something that is abstract and simultaneously making out elements of the figure. I've actually found it's impossible to completely eliminate the presence of a body.



'Nine Centimeters Dilated,' September 21, 2023, WORK ON PAPER, soft pastel on paper, 26" x 30" (66 cm x 76.2 cm) framed, 29-15/16" x 33-15/16" (76 cm x 86.2 cm). © Loie Hollowell, courtesy Pace Gallery

Form often stands out in your work, but what role does color play in your themes? How about light?

Color and intensity of light are typically the first elements I think about when composing an image. Often, I know the color experience or overall mood that I want to achieve to express a situation before figuring out how to shape the image. In this way, color and light are the guiding characters in my work.

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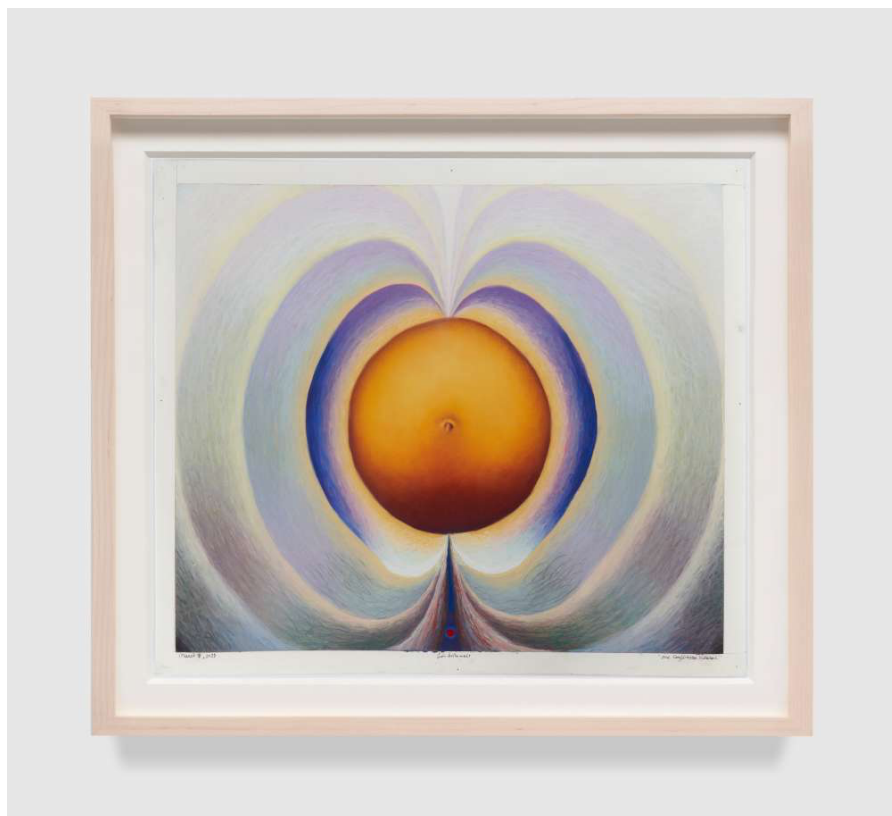
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At Pace, you're showing drawings that are intensely biographical—how biographical is your body of work overall? And why?

All of my work is autobiographical. It all comes from personal experiences I've had in my body. I've been making work about my own experience in the world, from the moment I wanted to be an artist. It is the content that I know best, that I can explore the deepest and that I can speak to with the most authority.

One thing that struck me about a lot of your pieces is that they render the female body in a way that's distinct from the male gaze—which is still unusual in 2024. Was that intentional?

My work often explores my experiences from an inside-out approach, specifically situations I've experienced from inside of my body and brain. Given the origin of that content, it is impossible for me to analyze my work from any perspective other than that from which I experience my life, housed within a female-identifying body. While a majority of my compositions look closely at my internal self, I have also made images looking at myself or, more specifically, my genitalia in relationship to my partner's genitalia. For me, that work is the most pornographic and more closely placed with the idea of a gendered gaze.



'One Centimeter Dilated,' March 6, 2023, WORK ON PAPER, soft pastel on paper, 26-1/2" x 30-1/2" (67.3 cm x 77.5 cm) framed, 29-15/16" x 33-15/16" (76 cm x 86.2 cm). © Loie Hollowell, courtesy Pace Gallery

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People have compared your work to that of Georgia O'Keeffe—is that comparison apt, or is there an artist (or artists) from the past you feel a more potent connection to?

If I had to pick one artist that I feel the most connected to from the past it would be Agnes Pelton, due to her exploration of light and color, and the way she blurred the line between abstraction and figuration. Georgia O'Keeffe was indeed an early, and perhaps my biggest, influence at the time when I started making this style of work. When I first delved into my current body of work, I was actually making flower-shaped vaginal portraits and using O'Keeffe's color palettes for inspiration. But as my practice has evolved I've found that Agnes Pelton and other Transcendental painters, as well as Neo Tantric painters like Ghulam Rasool Santosh, have been extremely influential in helping me to abstract my body while at the same time preserving the essence of a lived experience present in the work.

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