



Ilana Savdie

Born Miami 1986

Ilana Savdie was born in Miami and raised in Barranquilla, Colombia, in the far north of the country, on the Caribbean Sea; today, she is based in Brooklyn. The artist received a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2008 and an MFA from the Yale School of Art in 2018. Before gaining her MFA, she was employed as a graphic designer at Calvin Klein Fragrances and as the creative and editorial director of the tech start-up Bib + Tuck, a member's-only women's clothing marketplace founded in 2012. Performing these jobs gave the artist a sense of structure: "I've always been a believer that while you live like an artist, you definitely also have to give yourself deadlines and responsibilities."¹

Savdie's vivid, large-scale paintings are inspired in part by her upbringing, particularly by the Carnival celebrations that take place in her hometown every year (Barranquilla hosts the second-largest Carnival in the world, after Rio de Janeiro). "Color has been this way to work from a place of instinct, rather than thinking too much about the 'why,'" she told the curator, educator, and activist Jasmine Wahi in 2021. "I root it back to growing up surrounded by the Colombian *Carnaval*. Queer spaces tend to be extremely colorful. There's just something about the excess of color that feels like seductive subversion. I think about color as this way of getting to seduce."²

Barranquilla's weeklong explosion of dancing, music, and parades leading up to Lent revels in the surreal, the extravagant, and the capricious and is thus a fitting lens through which to view the works shown in Savdie's solo exhibition *Entrañadas* (literally, "innards"), which opened in 2021 at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles. There, the artist presented eight paintings of otherworldly figures—some relatively intact and recognizable as human, others dismembered or seemingly assembled from multiple donor bodies—against colorful, atmospheric dreamscapes. In the center of *The Enablers (an adaptation)*, for example, is what looks like a bare torso, with pronounced ribs grotesquely emerging from the back; above and to the right is a pair of pendulous breasts, at a much larger scale. Sometimes, the artist makes reference to Marimonda, a Carnival character invented in Barranquilla that is a cross between an elephant and a monkey but whose mask, worn by many revelers, is formidably phallic. Overall, Savdie's fluid body parts defy prescribed shapes, and the result is a brash merging of figuration and abstraction, often, as in

The Enablers, in a cacophony of textures and fluorescent hues.

The artist begins each painting with ink drawings that she scans and manipulates with Adobe Photoshop software to create new compositions. The original analogue drawings are essentially black-and-white doodles (though typically "fairly figurative . . . I look at a lot of religious Baroque paintings"), and the altered digital designs (where "bodies start to dissolve and undo themselves") provide a point of departure for further handwork on the canvas.³ "I play with different applications of line and paint and mark-making in different ways. That's when bodies start to dissolve and undo themselves," she says of her process.⁴ After laying down a ground of vibrant pours and brushstrokes, Savdie builds a composition by layering intricately painted body parts, bright fields of wash, and corpulent sections of brushed beeswax on the canvas. "All these paintings have large sections that have wax-like paint, so there's this combination of these rigid boundaries and different ways in which I can infiltrate those boundaries," she observes. "It all becomes leaking, spilling, sagging, or transgressing. All these different terms start to dictate actions of how I apply paint and then respond to how that's happening. Sometimes even images of my work will go into the collage."⁵

The results are ecstatic and outlandish and recall the visceral, twisted bodies of the twentieth-century painters Francis Bacon and Kay Sage. "I use violent language and the language of horror because it feels like the grotesque caricature of something," the artist has remarked, adding, "There's a mockery within that. It's this thing about access that feels like a way to end the abundance of something, to allow these subjects to take up as much space as possible and then leak into their environment."⁶ LOB

1. Ilana Savdie, "Exploring Depth of Self," interview by Inny Taylor, *Metal*, February 24, 2015, <https://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/ilana-savdie-exploring-depth-of-self-inny-taylor>.

2. Ilana Savdie, "'Euphoric and Grotesque': Ilana Savdie on Painting Parasites," interview by Jasmine Wahi, *Interview*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/euphoric-and-grotesque-ilana-savdie-on-painting-parasites>.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

122. *The Enablers (an adaptation)*, 2021
Oil, acrylic, and beeswax on canvas over wood panel
10 ft. × 8 ft. 4 in. (304.8 × 254 cm)