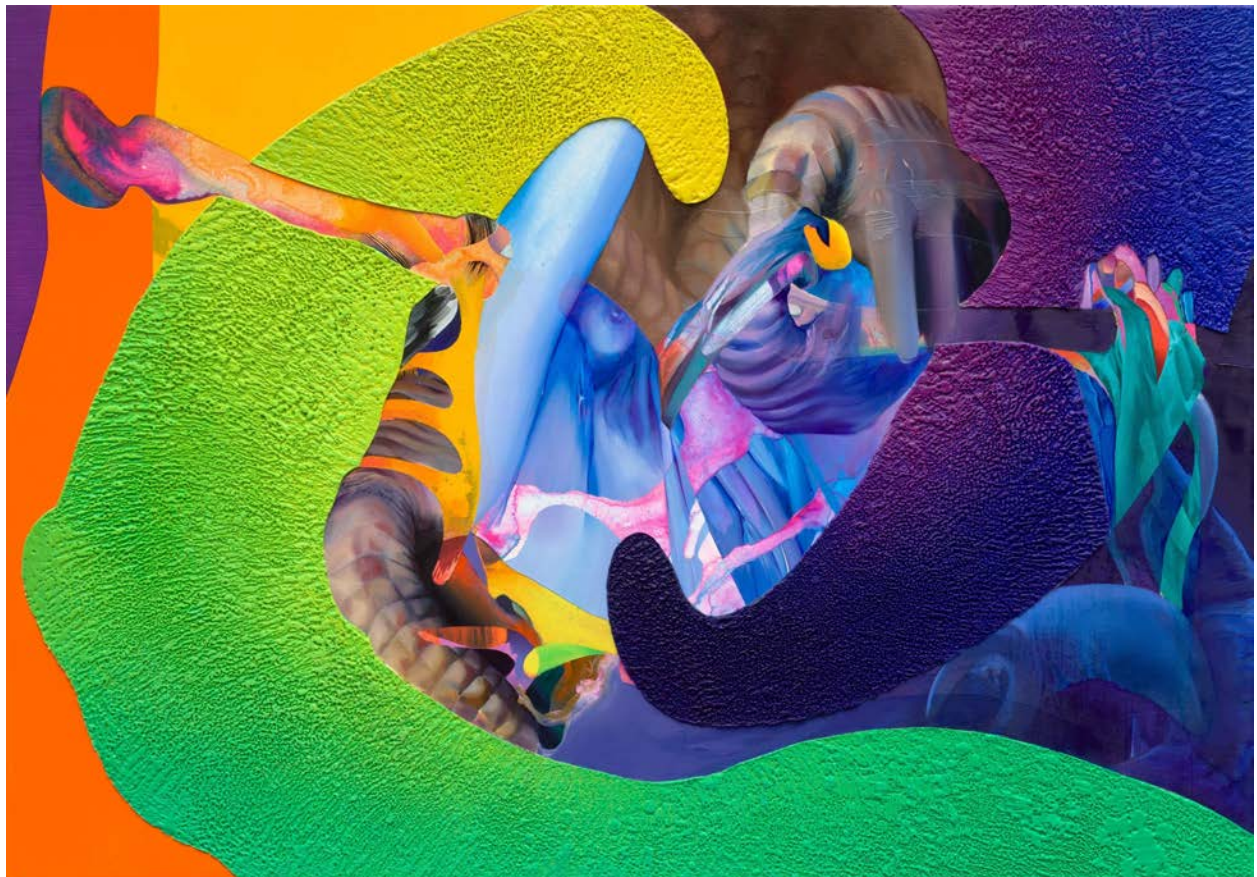


Like an ‘Exposed Nervous System,’ Ilana Savdie’s Whitney Show Captures Collective Dread

BY **FRANCESCA ATON**



Ilana Savdie: *Out with the Bathwater*, 2023.

COURTESY KOHN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES AND WHITE CUBE, LONDON. PHOTO LANCE BREWER

If you're wishing to connect over a barrage of disparaging news and a general feeling of tumult, look no further than the paintings and works on paper in **Ilana Savdie's** exhibition "**Radical Contractions**" at the **Whitney Museum of American Art** in New York. Growing up between Barranquilla, Colombia, and Miami, Florida, Savdie's electrifying tableaus take up the current moment, while continuing to highlight themes of the carnival and the grotesque. As the United States has seen the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, the works pick up on power dynamics, teetering somewhere between fantastical dream and hellscape. Here, Savdie discusses how the works came together, including her studio practice and environmental inspiration.

How did you go about choosing the works for the show?

Originally, I started with the idea of making a few new works and primarily having some loaned pieces, as the show is a continued investigation of themes I have been working with. But I started to realize that there was a slight variation and something new was happening. I decided to let it pour out and ended up making all new works for the show within a few months' time.

The new works continue to prod at the ways structures of power can be resisted, transgressed, and dismantled. We've felt a swift lockstep move collectively that has permeated this work. I conceptualized this show as I was making it in response to the vibrations of our collective psyche.

How do you see these new works as different from previous ones?

They are still dealing with themes of radicalization through the transformative powers of performance, but that sort of resistance to legibility has gotten a bit stronger. There's a more focused force constantly at play that feels like a response to an immediate threat. There's a more urgent bodily response to the way the forms are moving in this work.



Ilana Savdie: *Las Tinieblas*, 2023.

COURTESY KOHN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES AND WHITE CUBE, LONDON. PHOTO LANCE BREWER

How did you conceive this show?

I usually start with rough sketches. Sometimes they focus more on form and other times they're more concentrated on a specific moment of tension. Some are more figurative, while others are more of a general form. From there, I tend to turn them into works on paper.

This is where things start to get more interesting as I think through mark-making and through moments where forms come together and dissolve into the next. There's a kind of choreography that I figure out in these works. They're usually monochromatic and I don't tend to finish them. Once I've made some general decisions that I think will get me to the painting, I turn those works into digital sketches where I then begin to think through color.

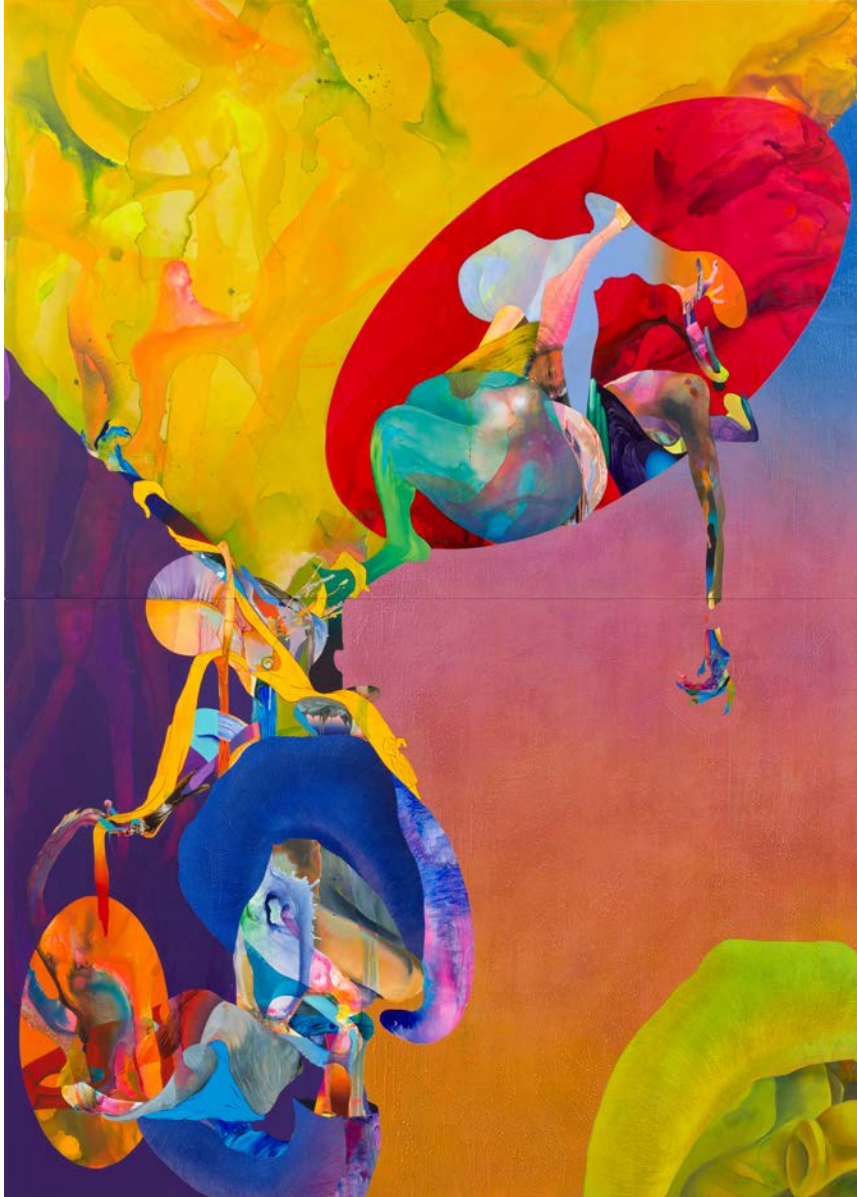
In these digital sketches I collage in my reference imagery. I conceptualize the work by bringing in images from the world, akin to a blueprint of what the paintings will be. The works on paper and paintings are finished separately. The paintings usually become more about responding to the materiality of the medium, though I usually color match on a screen, which can create a kind of flatness in the paintings. Utilizing a different set of tools has helped me invent my own world. There tend to be a lot more process-based decisions in the paintings than in the works on paper.

It's interesting to get a better sense of your process because even though the paintings have this flatness to them, they are also quite tactile.

I'm really interested in having multiple things that aren't meant to be together coexisting within the works. The varied lighting conditions, for example, stem from my research into microscopic photography of organisms such as parasites. When I collage all these disparate elements together in the digital sketches, these different sets of conditions are brought into the work.

Yes, you draw from a range of environmental sources. How has that influenced your work?

That answer is always shifting because it's so subjective to each piece and any given moment of time. But a lot of the works really pick up on how we contend with the monstrosities of being human. I'm interested in inducing a sense of the uncanny in this work and this theatricality as it relates to the carnivalesque. The works deal with this release of impulses and inversion of social norms, where distortion and the grotesque exist as forms of mockery. I come from Baranquilla, Colombia, which is home to one of the biggest carnivals in the world. I grew up surrounded by the carnival and, though each have overlapping themes, those in Latin America have come to respond to colonization. This brought a whole different kind of conversation to the carnival around death, horror, and resistance. These are also looming and inspiring aspects within my work.



Ilana Savdie: *Tickling the Before and After (Cosquilleo Interior)*, 2023.

COURTESY KOHN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES AND WHITE CUBE, LONDON. PHOTO LANCE BREWER

There's a quality to the works that is simultaneously enticing and sickening—these flamboyant color palettes and moments of tension and release that are at play.

Color has become this interesting way for me to seduce a viewer into looking at something they might not quite be looking for or that they're not expecting to look at. It is situated in the space of the uncanny where something is both familiar and unfamiliar and has never quite resolved. There's an agency and power in the ability to provide a sense of desire and longing that can never be resolved. These feels are induced through both so much excess and lack. This drives a lot of formal decisions in the paintings.

How do you see this in relation to the present moment?

We are in a moment—and we've been in this moment—of knowing that there is an underlying threat. There's a plan at play by people with intentions that aren't benevolent. There have been so many attacks against marginalized groups of people that form a kind of chokehold. All signs are pointing to an impending threat that isn't impending anymore because it's here. It's wrapped its tentacles around us. There have been attacks on pretty much every group that could potentially come together to expand the potentiality of this country and of the people, which poses a threat to those in positions of power.

We are living in a time of collective dread and anxiety about where things are going politically, environmentally, socioeconomically, and there's exhaustion in the collective psyche. We're all struggling to find a space of vulnerability in our rage. I've been channeling this into painting. In the studio, I'm an exposed nervous system and it comes out in this work. But we're all experiencing a sort of similar exhaustion. And I hope that I can connect mine to yours through the work.

There's a kind of entanglement and an inability to resolve a single form from start to finish. Each piece is always kind of in a state of becoming, in a state of flux, in a state of growth and shifting form that speaks to a very tumultuous way of existing.

“Radical Contractions” is on view at the Whitney Museum through October 29, 2023.