

ILANA SAVDIE

I like to think about how two things meet: how to create a seam, a joint, a link, and then these two things that are supposed to stop each other from existing form and bend, and become something else.

- Ilana Savdie



My Own Gods Out of My Entrails

By Estefania Puerta

“Where does the visceral incite empathy and where does it incite antagonism?”

Sitting on the floor of Ilana’s studio, I look up and am met with color, movement, fragments; engulfing imagery that extends up the ceiling. I crane my neck up to allow my body to be consumed by the drama before me. Printed out images of the storming of the capitol, parasites flaunting their luminescent horror, Rubens and Goya paintings offering me flesh and gloom, dancing characters adorned with sequins and shiny polyester wearing masks that resemble a phallic butterfly. Painted tape from the canvases hangs from all the walls like a peeled skin waiting for its body. Within this slurry of imagery are Savdie’s paintings, intrepid, bright, fluid, and tough, echoing their environment and spilling forth before me like new-emboldened Frankensteins inviting me into their off-kilter world. Instead of feeling lost, I feel found. I can relate to the experience of being too much, of the way some of us must create our own worlds that have enough space for us to be our unapologetic abundant selves, beyond language, borders, gender, body.

Entrañadas, Ilana Savdie’s inaugural exhibition with Kohn Gallery consists of a series of thirteen paintings and nine works on paper. Taking cues from the carnivalesque and biological forms (including their parasitic disruptions), Savdie’s

work joins disembodied fragments of memory, research, and observation by repositioning them into a new flamboyant landscape. This forced junction creates exuberant visual excess that resists categorization and the histories of exclusion that it has had on bodies that “do not fit.”

Acariciando Monstruos (Caressing Monsters)

Through the extravagance of saccharine hues of magentas, greens, and blues comes the immediate clashing of muted purples, pinks, and beiges. This stirring tension between an electrifying seepage of color that bleeds across the canvas with distinct moments of muted tones that act as a bruised skin destabilizes our understanding of barriers between interior and exterior, of body and landscape, of the carnival and the medical. Savdie is able to take color scenarios from various conditions and bring them into a singular plane. The neon fluorescent lighting of a microscopic photograph is placed next to the cold LED tones of a person being examined in a medical facility. Because of this, our sense of locality bursts wide open; we are simultaneously unable to locate anything in particular and everything at once. We are in the garden, inside the organ, on the surgery table, within the parade, swimming in a tempestuous, contaminated sea.

Within this colorful world, Savdie’s approach to mark making, from the very gestural and loose, to her labor-intensive wax technique, erases the limitations of a specific painting logic or style. The way that the tightly rendered soft wrinkles of a skin can easily slip into the grotesque membrane of a stomach-eating parasite, puts our senses on edge as we grapple with the unfamiliarity of what inhabits us and the visceral materiality that teeters from comfort to threat. Concurrently, there are moments of the body not as an image but as movement that extends across the canvas in swift brushstrokes as a reminder that the world builder is also present.

Carnal Processes: Evisceration as Power

In her compositions, Savdie carves out spaces that are at once suspended and weighed down by revolving forms of figuration that feel both disparate and highly fused together. A manicured finger beckons as it pulls the nipple of a dissolving breast. Tight cellular formations fade into a milky haze of color. A torso becomes a sun glare becomes a torso again. This kind of tension, between what is held together and what falls apart, brings into question who has the agency to take up

space and in what manner. In fact, the who in the work is a theatrical obfuscation that is continuously remaking itself and refusing to ever to be delineated or bound into place.

Through her observations of classical paintings, Savdie has developed a keen eye for compositions that create a tenuous harmony. As in Rubens's painting, *The Massacre of the Innocents* (figure 1), there is a fluidity in the chaos of bodies coming together and an obscuring of boundaries between people, including the dead and those still living. In this blurring of figures, the distinction between victim and violent actor disappears and the drama of flesh frenetically overtaking the picture plane remains. This mass becomes a scaffolding for the tragedy we are made witness to. In all its fragmented wholeness, the violence that holds this structure together is the complete body. Unlike Rubens, Savdie removes a sense of violence and tragedy in her work and instead brings these visceral amalgamations into a self-consciousness. Instead of witnessing a time of death, we observe a moment of self-recognition and are propelled into a serpentine space where the body forms itself over and over again as it observes in repose.



1. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1610, oil on panel. Courtesy of The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014 © Art Gallery of Ontario



3. Francisco de Goya, *Fiero monstruo!*, 1810-1820, etching, drypoint and burin on Arches laid paper. Courtesy of Museo del Prado

She in turn brings us into a sci-fi trope of the cyborg waking up for the first time. We begin with Rubens's *Massacre* and end with Neo waking up covered in a sticky substance with tubes sticking out everywhere and somehow this leap does not feel jarring. The spectacle of the flesh becoming and undoing itself is timeless and Savdie boldly inserts her own agency within it. This agency is full of defiance, humor, gesture, exuberance, and love of process.

In *The Pitch* (figure 2), we get this sense of the push and pull that disorients us and dissolves the center of gravity. What we can hold onto is the visual weight of referential fragments all melded together into a mutating environment. Everything in our visual field is susceptible to becoming conscious despite how flat, cartoonish, or eviscerated it seems. Instead of loss, the eviscerated has potential.

For those of us that have a fascination with painting, it feels inevitable that we return to Goya. In Goya's *Fiero monstruo!* (figure 3), we see the strong kinship Savdie has to Goya's grotesque acts and how she uses this and turns these acts into a sense of becoming instead of ruination. We are made to question what is devoured and made whole, how many parts there are to this whole. What is violence and what is sustenance? Is the animal eating or regurgitating? The repositioning of the visceral into a defiant act that displaces power and celebrates queer potentialities of space is central to Savdie's work and is eloquently elaborated on in the introduction to *On the Visceral!*:

"The logics of desire and consumption in (post) colonial circuits reveal the carnal processes through which our bodies are materialized as queer, through which they are racialized. These processes produce us as subjects and objects simultaneously, and the sites on (and in) our bodies where we negotiate boundaries between subjecthood and objectification are what constitute the visceral... The theoretical pressure that the visceral conjures as the line between subject and object - the line between my shit and your shit - becomes increasingly obfuscated in a neoliberal, post-neocolonial, environmentally apocalyptic world."¹



4. Ilana Savdie, *The Enablers (an adaptation)*, 2021, oil, acrylic, and beeswax on canvas stretched on panel

Along with the potentiality of the visceral, Savdie is an avid observer of how form repeats itself unconsciously throughout time and the kind of narrative (and political) implications these gestures hold. In *The Enablers* (figure. 4), Savdie studied instances of people climbing over walls and the theatricality of pulling people up in order to breach a forbidden territory.

5. Aegidius Sadeler, *Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1600, engraving. Courtesy of The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1949,



From Aegidius Sadeler II's engraving of *the Massacre of the Innocents* (figure. 5), from 1600 to images of right wing rioters storming the capitol in 2021 (figure. 6), Savdie incorporates these repeating gestures of human strife and asks, what spills out that can no longer be contained? Who is the intruder and who is the inhabitant? When something (or someone) is breached, what is gained and lost?

Compadre Silvestre

A grounding figure within the work is the *Marimonda* (figure. 7), a folkloric carnival character with origins in Barranquilla, Colombia, Savdie's hometown. Through the use of the *Marimonda* and carnivalesque colors that saturate the canvases, Savdie locates a cultural memory that has been distorted through distance and time and uses them to point to a jubilant performativity that infiltrates and disrupts normal social order. Savdie is interested in the kinds of transgressions that an exaggerated figure can incite and the power within mockery and ridicule that the *Marimonda* contains as a queer act defying normative bourgeois comportment.



6. Photo credit: Stephanie Keith / REUTERS

Images of the in-your-face dancing *Marimonda* are some of Savdie's earliest memories of an intrigue with a folkloric figure that "horrified and fascinated me as a child and as an adult I can recognize and relate to the underlying themes of exaggerating the body as a form of mockery and ridicule as a form of resistance."

Queer theorist, Jose Muñoz theorizes that the Spanish term *chusmeria* or *chusma*, is a form of behavior that is in excess of normative actions.² *Chusmeria* is "a form of behavior that refuses bourgeois comportment and suggests Latinos should not be too black, too poor, or too sexual, among other characteristics that exceed normativity."³ Through the carnival, Savdie implicitly points to the phenomena of *chusmeria* and the queer potential of a world yet to be. Because of the mockery that the *Marimonda* character enacts, she is also able to express her contempt of a binary world that represses counterpublics.

While we are briefly grounded in finding a type of face within Savdie's work, we are quickly unsettled by the facelessness of the phallic features of the *Marimonda* mask. In turn, what becomes a moment of resolution within the figure shifts into a reminder of the body as a stage and our socialized identities as a mask we all wear with different possibilities in how we perform inside them.



7. Photo credit: Carlos Capella / EL TIEMPO

Eye to Eye: The Parasite Also Feeds

The scale in Savdie's work oscillates dramatically within one small section of a painting from indications of breasts and feet to the microscopic parasites that consume us. Our subject positioning weaves in and out of relating to the host into seeing eye to eye with the parasite. This kind of uncovering and equally bringing to the forefront our biological conditions creates a spectacle out of the relationship of parasite and host. Infection transforms the body and engorges itself with what it has diminished. This method of infiltration and power destabilization is at the core of Savdie's questions around agency and the multiple entities that form and destroy us.

"The following social groups have been culturally constructed as parasites: Jewish people, poor people, people of color, queer people, disabled people, migrant, immigrants, and women."⁴ Through the position of the parasite as a destabilizer, we come to understand Savdie's agency to subvert the parasite as an agent of power and transformative potential that serves as a potent reclamation of a term that has been used to repress certain groups. Again, what (and who) has been historically



8. Paul Thek, *Meat Piece with Warhol Brillo Box*, 1965, beeswax, painted wood and plexiglass. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with funds contributed by the Daniel W. Dietrich Foundation, 1990. © The George Paul Thek Estate, New York

uncontained and deemed as a threat becomes a site of celebration, possibility, seduction, and liberation. “The tapeworm has no mouth or gut: its whole body is a mouth-gut system: its skin absorbs food. To write like a tapeworm is to behave as a consumption machine.”⁶ To paint is also a consumption machine and Savdie creates an infinitude out of the ways in which these systems of absorption, extraction and defecation propose a space in which our multitudes are experienced at once.

How we relate to this type of multiplicity, where we can focus, blur, bound, zoom in, delineate, creates a hallucinatory experience where orientation is a question, not a fixed anchor and who or what we identify with must be disgorged and seen in a different light.

Unbound Parts: Ambient Home

Ilana Savdie has arrived at the same flesh as Paul Thek’s glossy limbs beckoning us through their neon glass worlds. Through her archive of mesmerizing images and their relationship to the uncanny, grotesque, flamboyant, and excessive she reveals the meaty presence of these images in our lives. In a similar way that Thek inserted a juicy slab of latex meat inside Warhol’s Brillo boxes (figure. 8), Savdie reminds us that these images we scroll through, distantly remember, flippantly consume and disregard are heavy with world building possibility if just given a new body to live in.

Along with Thek, Savdie’s kinship to Lynda Bangelis’s wax pieces and their technicolor scaly skins, Francis Bacon’s distorted figures traversing multiple pictorial planes, and Jenny Saville’s fluid bodies all feel alive and pulsing in her work. She is able to correspond to these histories of materiality and the body and bring them into her own language that consists of *manos sucias*, *entrañas exigentes*, *bocas lloronas*, y *piel manchada*. Here too her lineage lies with Gloria Anzaldúa, Lygia Clark, María Evelia Marmolejo, and Tania Bruguera.

I leave Ilana’s studio drunk with this kind of excessiveness of language, echoes billowing in my mind of the many-layered ways in which things loop over and over again. How we begin, how we end, it all feels like fodder for an infinity of new lives that breathe within us. In this storm of words, images, and theoretical proposals, there is an artist who is unafraid to bring seemingly disparate parts together to show us how powerful a leaky body can be and how abundant with possibility our world really is when emptied out and put back together.

Footnotes

1. Holland, Sharon P., Ochoa, Marcia, Tompkins, Kyla Wazana, *Introduction to On the Visceral*. In *GLQ: On the Visceral*. Edited by Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
2. Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999
3. Vargas, Deborah. *Ruminations of Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic*. *American Quarterly*, Volume 66, Number 3, September 2014, pp. 715-726.
4. Milks, Megan. *Itchy Occupations: Toward a Theory of Parasitic Writing*. In *New Theory*, issue 2. Edited by Jayson Iwen. 2016.





