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CULTURE

# Artist Ilana Savdie's Whitney Museum Show Is a Vibrant Response to Dark Times

by Joshua Glass

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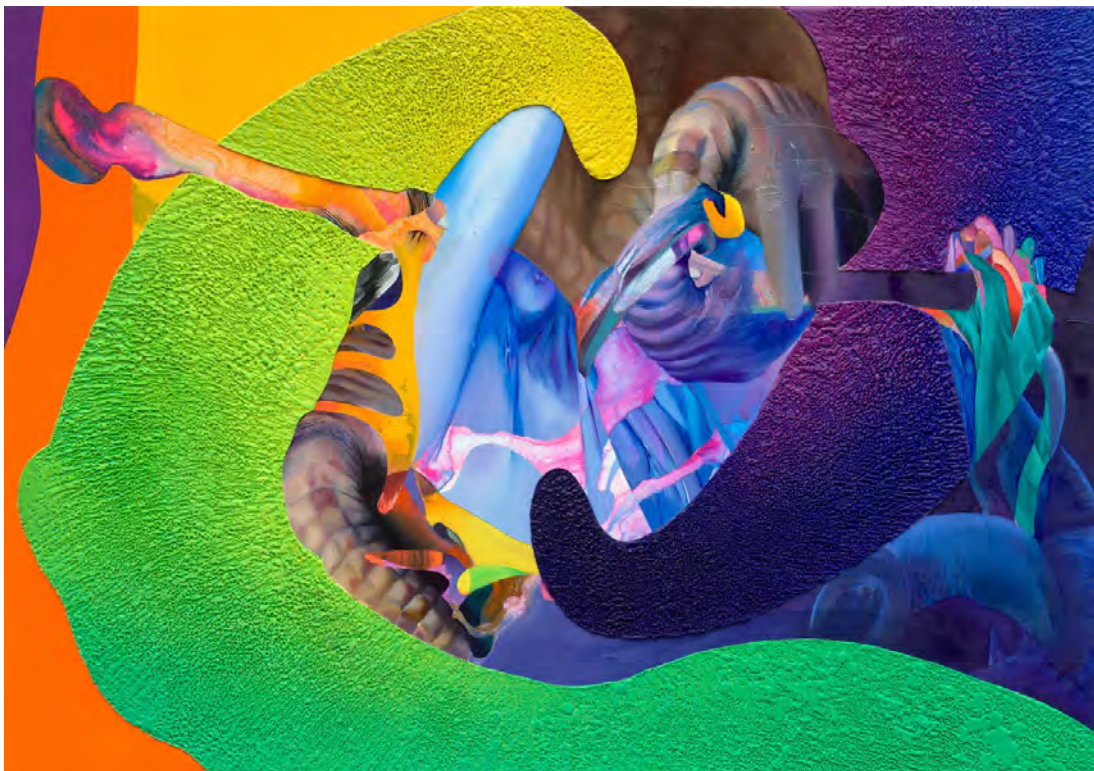


'Anquilosis,' 2023. Collection of the artist; courtesy Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles and White Cube, London. Photograph by Lance Brewer

After over a decade of occupying shared spaces and closet-sized New York studios, Ilana Savdie finally has room to breathe. The painter's new Bushwick loft, just a few blocks over from her last rental, is vast with alpine walls that stretch deep and so much white space it resembles more of a gallery than a place of progress. Sterile yet serene, the studio has been critical for the intense processing that the artist has been going through over the last four months.

"I feel like this exposed nervous system," explains Savdie, who was raised between Barranquilla, Colombia and Miami, Florida, "Especially here." Encircling the deep turmoils of oneself is nothing new for the artist, who renders electrifyingly dreamy scenes in acrylic, oil, and beeswax paint in which fluorescent colors dance around head-scratching illusions of the eye. (Looking through her past work, performance has long been a long throughline.) In these worlds, beautiful bodies melt into one another as tropical-eyed dimensions parade around her layered canvases. Savdie's new series, "Radical Contractions," however, is exhaustively nightmarish, and the impetuses that led to the work have had a clear toll on their creator. They clench their claws into the viewer, too.

"They're my response to the stressors of living in this moment," says Savdie, turning toward three captivating canvases that hang directly behind her. "I'm still digesting the legacies of oppressive power...still dealing with them in this way." Cumulatively, the new works, which will be on view at the Whitney Museum in New York starting July 14, are a result of the overwhelming amount of attacks on civil rights that have occurred in this country over the past year, from the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* and the rise of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation to the return of book banning. "I'm of the belief that if the most vulnerable group is

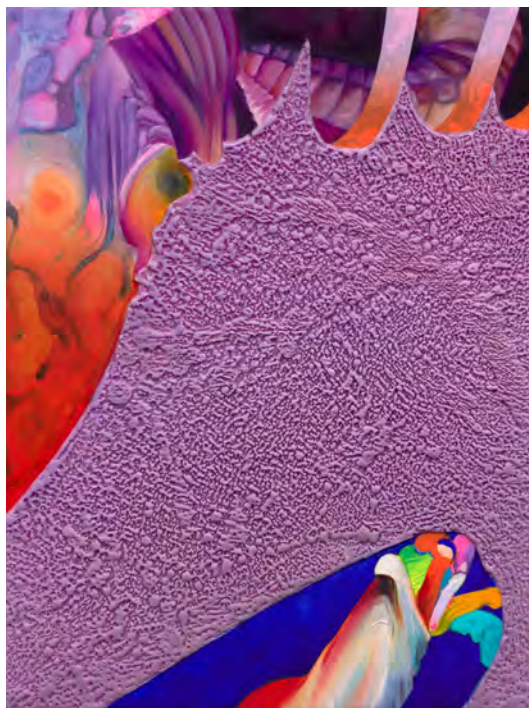


*Out with the Bathwater*, 2023. Courtesy Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles and White Cube, London  
Photograph by Lance Brewer.



suffering, then all other groups are going to be affected,” explains the artist. “We’re all at risk.”

Chaotic and seductive, the eight paintings and several works on paper are challenging to engage with and yet impossible to turn away from. To garner such an effect, Savdie spent a lot of time researching predator-prey biological forces that exist in the natural world, everything from active hunters to unseen parasites. “I got really excited about animals that fall under aggressive mimicry, specifically when an animal shifts its form to mimic another in order to seduce it into a trap,” says Savdie, acknowledging her series’ intention to do so as well: to become the predator of its own predator. Where Savdie fits into the dynamic has still yet to be determined. As a queer woman of color, she is certainly prey to the larger systems of oppression which her works respond to, and yet—as an established artist staging a new show at a major New York museum—she’s in a position of power. “My behavior can become predatory if I’m not careful,” she admits. Power play scenarios of the bedroom add another layer of intrigue, too. “All of these intertwine in a space that for me feels like it’s always vibrating; a space that’s always kind of shifting. It’s in a state of flux, and somehow this work lives in that space—that vibration where everything intersects.”



*Perpetual Revenant*, 2023. Courtesy Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles and White Cube, London. Photograph by Lance Brewer



*Pico y Placa*, 2023. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph by Lance Brewer.

*Ilana Savdie: Radical Contractions* will be on view in the lobby gallery of the Whitney Museum through October 29, 2023.