

Ilana Savdie's *Carnaval* of Existence

by Ricki Morse



Carnaval

Ilana Savdie was born in 1968, in Barranquilla, Colombia, home to the second largest *carnaval* in the world, celebrated in

the four days before Ash Wednesday. *Carnaval* filled her life with the grotesque, flamboyant, exuberant world of masked protest which both frightened and excited her, particularly the images of Marimondo, the spirit of the Barranquilla *Carnaval*, said to be a cheerful local man, half



monkey/half elephant, dressed in mismatched colors noted for his phallic nose, mocking the ruling class. The indigenous Colombians celebrated by turning their clothes inside-out, wearing clashing colors, and dancing in the streets to their drum ensembles in their "rags," establishing the power of their presence, making fun of the wealthy Spanish invaders/land owners.

Though *Carnaval* was brought to South America by the Spanish conquistadores as a Catholic Lenten festival, the slaves they brought with them, who were forbidden their native languages and rituals, soon introduced their music, dances and costumes into the parades. Thus *Carnaval* became a Catholic, African, indigenous festival celebrating the identities of the disenfranchised.



Savdie lived in Colombia until she was 13 and began collecting masks and with them the exuberant individuality of the dancers. She was also collecting tempos, swirling lines, flashing bodies. We see in her paintings the throb of *Carnaval* drum beats and the flowing path of the parade, the rejection of decorum, the identification with society's misfits.



The Outsider



Ilana Savdie was born into a family of immigrants. Her father was a Lebanese Jew, born and raised in Egypt before fleeing Europe during WWII, and her mother moved from Venezuela to Colombia where they met. Their neighbors included many European Jews, and as a child Savdie experienced the separateness of the Jewish community and stories of their escapes from the death camps. Being different was inherent in her world. Their move to Miami added more layers of difference. Now her mother was a brown woman in a white world and Savdie recognized herself as gay. Her art takes us farther into difference, displaying all the disparate aspects of life, from repulsive to seductive, from bizarre to tender, from grotesque to beautiful, stretching our capacity for repugnance and acceptance. This self-portrait wearing the Marimondo mask of the protesting commoner asks that we see her as unique, unconventional.

Ilana Savdie as Marimondo, the Spirit of *Carnaval* figure, 2022, in her studio.

RISD and Yale

At 20 Savdie entered the Rhode Island School of Design, though she was very conflicted about pursuing art as a career. Painting seemed impractical, yet her skills were apparent; so she enrolled as an illustration student, denying her lifelong dream career of painting. In the process she was able to pursue her interest in Baroque art. A student of how art repeats itself through time, she later incorporates the age old aggressions of man against man embodied in the 16thc by Peter Paul Rubens, in the 1800s by Francisco de Goya, into her colorful processions. Upon graduation from RISD in 2008 she took jobs in graphic design, re-touching images of models for Maybelline and similar companies.



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, c. 1610, oil on panel, Art Gallery of Ontario.



Francisco Goya, *The 2nd of May 1808 in Madrid or "The Fight against the Mamelukes,"* 1814, oil on canvas, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Though it provided her with a living, the

task of purifying images came to feel so toxic she was consumed with the impulse to distort and destroy. The urge to paint full time became a necessity. Her evenings were consumed with trying out various painting mediums, sorting out what felt right. Once clear about her direction, she enrolled in graduate school at Yale, completing her MFA in 2018 and accepted a yearlong fellowship and residency at the NXTHVN Foundation in New Haven. She knew what she wanted to explore: "perversion, identity and the confines and expanses of the human body."

Exploiting a Suitable Host

Savdie's work was already drawing attention. With the support of fellowships, residencies and sales of paintings, she was now painting full time and moved into a studio in Brooklyn. In March 2022 she signed up with



White Cube, a prestigious international contemporary art dealer with showrooms around the world. That same year we acquired our painting, currently on view in our *Inside Stories/Outside Tales* exhibition in the Contemporary Gallery. Standing before the painting, we are drawn in and repelled. The open spaces are gracious and inviting, the sky a little cloudy. The predatory figure of a giant sperm-filled insect looms over the naked woman and her companion, her face fragmented as she leans against him. The insect, the woman and the blue man share and exchange limbs, as the figures interact. The flow of the design appeals while the grotesque content repels. Is the predator also the seducer and which role falls to the artist? Savdie challenges us to accept these complexities as the constants of our world—to know the world as it is, not as socially reconstructed into fixed identities and roles.

Ilana Savdie, *"lágrimas y mocos (exploiting a suitable host),"* 2021, oil, acrylic, beeswax on canvas stretched on canvas, SBMA

Drawing and The Process

Savdie collects scientific drawings of insects, incorporating these images into her own work. The insect world widens her image vocabulary into unseen, often unknown, manifestations of our life on earth. She says, "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." In combining the insect world with the human body Savdie invents something new, an insect antennae drifting through an eye socket, a human couple holding insect appendages, a human dancing on insect legs.



Ilana Savdie, Ilana Savdie, "Ojos, mis ojos (eyes, not eyes)," 2021, ink and acrylic on paper.



Ilana Savdie "Me meneaba la cintura (shake your waist)," 2022, pen and acrylic on paper.



Ilana Savdie, "Nice and tight, everyone's happy," 2021, ink and acrylic on paper

Each of her paintings begins as a drawing. Sketches turn into works on paper which are then moved into Photoshop where she adds color, often expanded and evolved into a roughly 70 x 60 inch image. Materials are noted on pieces of tape stuck to the canvas. Paint and beeswax are melted in a crockpot and poured onto the canvas spread on the uneven floor of her studio or a table which she describes as a "power struggle" between giving the materials their way and conveying the images. Next is encaustic painting, smoothing the beeswax, which she limits to preserve the wrinkled surface of naturally dried wax, and finally detailed retouching on a vertical mounted canvas.

Savdie's first solo exhibition was mounted by the Kohn Gallery on Highland Ave. in Los Angeles in November 2021. Her work burst on the art scene early and rapidly. Not only did we acquire a painting in 2022, but the Whitney Museum of American Art in NYC opened her one woman show in their lobby last July. It will be closing November 5, 2023, so there's still time to get there.

Ilana Savdie, "(Buen provecho), Occupy the Mouth," 2021, oil, acrylic, and beeswax on canvas over wood, Whitney Museum, NYC.



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