

## Sarah Slappey

Sarah Slappey lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. She received her MFA from Hunter College in 2016 and BA from Wake Forest University in 2006. Her paintings have been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in New York, Italy, London, Denmark, and Switzerland. In 2015, Slappey was awarded at Kossak Painting Grant and a Hunter MFA award for Outstanding Achievement. Her paintings examine the paradoxes of aesthetic pleasure and discomfort through the human form. Her work as appeared in such publications as The New Yorker, Flash Art, Two Coats of Paint, ArtSpace, ArtMaze Magazine, Social Life, Long Island Pulse, and Hamptons Art Hub.

### Statement

Sarah Slappey's paintings are worlds made of dark humor, delicacy, subtle horror, and vulnerability. Paradoxes within both the natural and human world ever present: softness is counterbalanced with aggression, comfort with vulnerability, banal with the uncanny, and masculine with feminine. Slappey often reduces the figure down to only hands, feet, and limbs; it is unclear if they are attached to anyone at all. Beings within the works both caress and torment one another, and the paintings border on a razor-thin edge between sweet and sinister.



*Pink Pinch*, oil on canvas, 2019, 48 x 43 inches

## Interview with Sarah Slappey

Questions by Emily Burns

**Hi Sarah! Can you tell us about how you became an artist and the story behind finding and supporting that interest? Did you always know that you wanted to be a painter? Do you have any early creative memories?**

I feel lucky in that I always knew I was going to be an artist. As a kid, my mom enrolled my two sisters and me in lots of creative activities and supported our interest in the arts--we now all work in creative industries. I remember skipping play activities in school and with friends so I could finish art projects by myself, which is a pretty good sign I had a burgeoning obsession!

**You're from a small town in South Carolina originally. Did you ever think you would live in New York? Was that always a goal of yours?**

It was always a goal of mine to live in New York, but I was so terrified of this city. From the outside, New York is a very intimidating place. When I finished my BA in 2006, I moved here temporarily and sublet a room from a friend for 3 weeks. I figured I'd see what it was like, and then go back to the South and build up some confidence to make a permanent move to a larger city, maybe Atlanta or DC and one day, NYC. Instead, I found a job, apartment, and never left.

**Can you tell us about your current studio space in Brooklyn?**

My studio is in Red Hook, Brooklyn, which is a little isolated from the rest of the city, and I like that about it. The building is on the East River, and the air smells like the ocean. It's less compact feeling than other areas, and the open sky lets me have some mental breathing room.

**Do you have any daily rituals or routines that help you get into the groove?**

I have a half hour walk to/from the studio, so I use that time to think about what I need to do that day and create mental checklists while I sip some coffee. I get in, do some computer work, and then turn on a podcast and start mixing paint. Mixing a paint is relaxing and automatic, so it's always a great way for me to transition into a painting mindset.

**What are your 'must-haves' in the studio?**

My huge palette table with freshly mixed paint, clean brushes, blue shop towels, Pilot Foam Erasers, mechanical pencils with soft lead, my favorite worn down palette knife, and lots of funny and dark podcasts to listen to.



*Grey Cloud*, oil on canvas, 2019, 64 x 58 inches

**Your work has changed stylistically in the past couple of years. How did your recent bodacious curvy figures and body parts emerge initially?**

I've always worked with the human figure and used photographic references in the past. At some point a few years ago, I needed a hand, and I thought, "I don't have time to take photos, why don't I just draw it from my imagination", and it was leagues easier and more interesting than I anticipated. So I started making small hand paintings and drew the fingers the way they felt, rather than anatomically correct. Eventually the hands became arms or legs, and connected to torsos or breasts. I had to grow my own figure from the fingers out, and now I know this body intimately and can morph and develop it as the work develops.

**What is foremost on your mind in the work you are making now? Have the themes and conceptual focus of your work stayed constant or morphed and changed over the past few years?**

The most general concepts in my work have stayed the same since I was very young. As a kid, I always drew people, and I've just never stopped. In undergrad, I made paintings that were about darkness, sexuality, and the female body. These are still three really important concepts to me. In 2018, I was making work about the body in a natural space where arms and body parts slithered around underbrush. This past year, I've taken my figures out of this world and into the daylight where they are overexposed, poked, and prodded. Right now, I'm thinking about and exploring what I call "hyper-femininity", where I imagine bodies as so overtly female/gendered that they become aggressive and threatening.

**Can you give us some insight into your process? Does drawing play a role in your work? Do you look at any references before you begin?**

Drawing is a huge part of my process. I have a large sketchbook that I keep private where I can dump every good, bad, really bad, and potentially great idea. Unlike painting, drawing is so immediate, and it's a very fast paced way of thinking and making decisions. The drawings are my only references for the final paintings. If I'm unsure of an idea or want to try something very new, I make small oil paintings on paper or a small painting on canvas to work out the kinks. Sometimes these are scaled up, and sometimes they are best as a quick, immediate idea.



*Yellow Droop*, oil on canvas, 2019, 44 x 40 inches

**You are an exceptionally skilled painter—do you ever feel that your technical skill gets in the way of your ideas?**

This is a very complimentary question, and I should thank my undergrad professor Page Laughlin for teaching me! But yes, I will polish a turd of a painting with technical work, so that's something I have to pay attention to. I also fought my inclination towards refinement a lot in graduate school because I thought it undermined the concept (which is not true.) It was only in the last semester that I realized "Hey, this is what I enjoy and it's what I think I'm good at, so why am I fighting it?" It's easy to think that everyone can do the thing that's easy for you, but in fact that's not true. Lean into what comes naturally to you!

**You spend upwards of 60 hours a week in the studio. How do you negotiate with the potential for boredom or battle distractions? Is there anything that helps you put in the time?**

I spent so many years working in a corporate office that just about every day I get to spend in the studio working for myself feels like a gift. I usually wake up and practically run to the studio. That said, there are slow, distracted, and frustrating days. I try to take at least one day off a week, because when I work too many days in a row without a break, my productivity suffers. I have between 2-3 paintings in work at all times and in different stages. Because some stages are easier and quicker than others, I can switch up my pace if I get stuck. If a large painting is in a really frustrating or labor intensive stage, I'll switch to a small painting on paper to get a little immediate gratification and energy back. Or I'll tell myself to just mix paint, or just do *anything*. I usually end up getting something surprisingly helpful out of it.

**You have attended a number of residencies recently, congrats! How has working in a new environment impacted your practice currently, in particular as someone who spends quite a bit of time in your primary studio in Brooklyn?**

It's been good to realize I'm not as inflexible as I feared! I have a private studio in Brooklyn, so I was concerned a shared space would be too distracting, but I found the social aspect to be a fun change in my routine. I also discovered the tools and paint that I really rely on, and those I thought I needed that actually aren't so important. I also love seeing how other people work and the little things we all do to keep our sanity in the studio.



*Yellow Touch*, oil on canvas, 2018, 44 x 42in

**Who are a few artists whose work you love?**

I follow the Charles Burchfield hashtag on Instagram, and love seeing his crazy-wonderful works come up between pictures of art openings and people's food/dog/baby. There seems to be a growing group of women working with the figure and surrealism, and I like seeing how this theme is developing. That said, I've found myself not looking at other's work too much, because I think too much outside influence can get in the way of developing your own unexpected and truly novel ideas.

**What's up next for you?**

It's going to be a busy year! I have a two person show in London in November with Carl Kostyal Gallery, a solo show with Sargent's Daughters in February, Various Small Fires in LA in the Spring, and Maria Bernheim Gallery in Zurich next summer. Then hopefully a vacation!

**Thanks so much for talking with us!**

To find out more about Sarah and her work, check out her [website](#).

- About
- Submit
- Contact
- Store
- Maake Paper
- Maake Projects
- Exhibitions
- Events
- Issues
- Reviews
- Resources
- Stockists
- FAQ