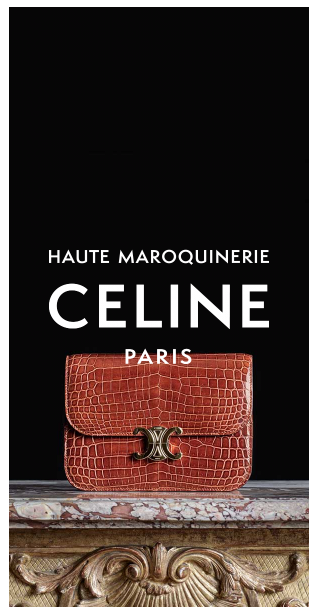
Studio Visit

How Does Rising Artist Sarah Slappey Stay Mellow While Painting Scenes of 'Quiet Violence'? A Soothing Studio Soundtrack

The artist's newest works are currently on view in "Self Care" at Sargent's Daughters in New York.

Katie White, September 21, 2021

Sarah Slappey, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



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Long-fingered hands and sensual tangles of limbs jut in from all angles of Sarah Slappey's luscious and unnerving paintings and drawings. The South Carolina-born, Brooklyn-based artist's mesmerizing new works are currently on view in "Self Care," her second exhibition with Sargent's Daughters in New York. Here, fingers twist strands of pearls while blood drips from sewing pins that affix ribbons to flesh. Tropes of girlhood—daisy chains, phone cords, braids—meanwhile act as deceptively sinister objects of restraint and bondage against these bodies.

Though Slappey paints these appendages in shades of pastel pinks and baby blues, they are imbued with a fleshiness that is at once decidedly feminine and oddly grotesque. They may, after all, be attached to no one. Her works conjure a kind of new Mannerism; elongated, unfurling fingers call to mind those of Parmigianino's 16th-century *Madonna with the Long Neck.* Other times these searching hands and pointed toes conjure up the mythological transformation of Daphne, who, feeling Apollo's grasp, transforms into a tree. At other times the motifs suggest depictions of the risen Christ's presenting the nail wounds on his palms inflicted in the crucifixion. "All of the paintings have a kind of quiet violence," Slappey has said of her work.

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On the occasion of her new exhibition, Slappey invited us into her studio, where she told us about painting to the sounds of acoustic guitar and the palette knife she's whittled to perfection.

What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?
My palette knife. Everything else could be easily replaced, but I've had this particular knife for nearly a decade, and over time the blade has whittled itself down to the perfect curve for scooping up large piles of paint all at once. It's also become so thin that it has the perfect bounce on the glass. It's small, but (phone aside) it's the object I hold most often in my daily life.

Is there a picture you can send of your work in progress?

A work in progress in Sarah Slappey's studio.

What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?
Sitting down with my sketchbook in front of the studio window. I just opened my show with Sargent's Daughters, and after a body of work is complete, I spend several weeks with my sketchbook mulling over new ideas and compositions. It feels like molting your previous carapace and seeing what unexpected, novel things emerge. It's a completely different mindset from painting. I need to be quiet, still, and contemplative; painting is active and busy. I cherish this time between projects when it's just me and my thoughts, and there is no pressure to make each one great. I can just relax and discover.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?
All three. I most often listen to podcasts, especially if I'm in a groove and can work for several hours at a time without interruption. I start my day with The Daily and PBS Newshour. When I really need to slow down and think, I put on music, particularly classical acoustic guitar. My dad plays the guitar and often played Harvey Reid's music in our home, so I think that's part of why I find it so peaceful. If I'm really in a painting jam, it has to be silence.

What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?
I admire rapid-fire and confident decision-making. When I see people taking the plunge with big moments in a painting, I am in awe. And moments when paint's materiality alone is used to render something perfectly—that is exceptionally difficult.

I really dislike the thin, dripping effect from the overuse of thinner or water.

What snack food could your studio not function without?
I drink tea almost all day. Hot in the winter, iced in the summer. It's the right amount of caffeine to keep me going.

Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?
I always like seeing what the Aldrich and the Drawing Center are cooking up. Nicholas Cullinan, director of the National Portrait Gallery in London. And DecorHardcore's Instagram for camp delight.

Sarah Slappey, *Girl Talk* (2021). Courtesy of Sargent's Daughters.

When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get un-stuck?
I have a few strategies. I keep an image folder on my phone with things that are striking to me, so I'll cycle through that and see if anything jumps out. Sometimes it's just a tone that I'm looking for. I also go back through old sketchbooks to see if there's something I wrote down or drew weeks, months, or years ago that resonates. Lastly, I put it off until I'm in a very relaxed state outside of the studio where I can let my mind wander (before sleep, walking around the city, etc.) If all else fails, I just pick something and DO IT. It's uncomfortable, but once I've forced myself to make a decision, I usually know where to go next.

What is the last exhibition you saw (virtual or otherwise) that made an impression on you?
"The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512–1570" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Sumptuous.

If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?
Clippings from 1990s *Southern Living* chintz interiors, surgical and anatomical drawings, paintings of silk taffeta ribbons and curtains, and horror movie stills.

"Sarah Slappey: Self Care" is on view at Sargent's Daughters, 179 East Broadway, New York, through October 2, 2021.

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