



Sarah Slappey *IN THE FLESH*

Bodies can often be treated as merely physical objects, separate from our conscious being, identified and catalogued by size, shape and sex. In Sarah Slappey's works, however, the human body becomes a tangled mix of hands, breasts and unidentifiable forms—a collective mass that is barely recognizable, yet resolutely female.

Sarah Slappey's paintings present the human body like never before. Slippery, curvaceous, rubbery forms writhe around among a strange tangle of limbs—all clawed hands and lactating nipples, independent from any anchoring torso. These surreal compositions marry seductive femininity with violent and grotesque elements, replacing any palpable sense of reality with emotional, visceral interpretations of what it means to exist within a woman's body.

Your paintings are filled with seemingly dismembered limbs including legs, breasts, buttocks and particularly curvaceous, almost cartoon-like hands. How did you develop this visual language? Hands were the entry point. I started painting them about three years ago, but back then I was using photographs taken of my own and other people's hands. Then I realized that it was a huge pain in the ass to shoot these images and use them as references, because who has a printer any more? I decided that I could draw them on my own, which actually made them much more interesting.

Although it isn't possible to pinpoint an exact scene in which your paintings exist, there are certainly signifiers, such as tropical foliage and dense shadows. However, your latest paintings inhabit what could be considered a traditionally "feminine" domain, with a pink colour palette filled with pearls, breasts and lipstick. Was this a conscious shift? I had a specific experience with my family that has informed my newest body of work. My two-year-old niece became really ill and I went down to North Carolina to help my sister, because she also had a three-month-old baby. I tried to do all of the night feedings. It was horrible; I don't have children of my own, so it was the most surreal experience to be woken up at one, three and five in the morning and give this baby a bottle, which he would only take if he was smushed against my boob and had contact with the warmth of my body. This situation and the trauma of my niece's diagnosis made me feel very differently about my own body, particularly as I didn't have nine months to think about, for example, my breasts turning into something that could feed a baby, because I was never pregnant.

When I came back to the studio I started painting breasts with dripping nipples, which often transform into pearls. They are these treasures that come from your flesh. It's all tied up in confusing ideas around the sexualization of breasts, which really are just another body part.

Do these strings of pearls and lipstick also allude to the idea of female adornment? They are both markers of femininity, for sure. I'm from the American South, and I'm sorry to say that there are plenty of stereotypes that hold true, particularly about women. So, for me, pearls and red lipstick are real tropes, they are official markers of womanhood. I wanted to turn these ideas on their head, which is why you see these pearls take different forms, as well as the rough lines of lipstick that are drawn on the body, which add a hint of aggression.

*Your painted textures are also strangely suggestive. You might read these smooth surfaces as fleshy but, actually, they are more akin to a rubber glove or a balloon. There's something inherently erotic about them. Of course. My recent show at Sargent's Daughters was called *Power Play*, which I chose specifically because it's an S&M term. It operates as a way of bringing together these elements of lusciousness and playfulness and punishment, which are all part of what it feels like to be in a woman's body. I don't paint with an actual body in mind, but more what it feels like to be in one.*

The presence of all these limbs positioned in such a bizarre manner also seems to remove the idea of one figure, creating a more communal sensibility. I'm glad to hear that because I don't want the works to read as a single person. I'd like them to offer up more thoughts around how it feels to touch yourself, or have others touch you, as well as the way you can feel entirely separate from your physical being. There's also something orgasmic going on, of pulling and tickling and playing with the flesh. It's all very confusing!

The impossibly smooth flesh and bodily contortions, not to mention the pastel palette you have used of late, remind me of mannerist works by the likes of Bronzino. Is it a genre you're interested in? It's one of my favourite eras! I wouldn't say I directly reference mannerism in my own work, but it serves as a thread that has pulled me in to so many different elements of art history and technique. I keep going back to it, because the treatment of the body is so specific and luscious and fleshy. It's clear that Mannerist painters were pre-occupied with many of the same ideas that we remain interested in today.

I have also heard that horror movies, particularly their distinct cinematography, have been a big influence on you? The light and colour in horror movies is what I find really alluring. Colour is used in such a dramatic way, whether through desaturation, or a really intense filter, to make everything a specific hue. The original *Suspiria* (1977) is a great example; every scene is just like a painting. Maybe horror movies can do this because they are so removed from reality. The subject matter gives directors and cinematographers the permission to make something very emotionally beautiful, which stirs the audience visually, because the writing or the content of the scene is so awful!

Would you say suspending reality is also an important aspect of your work? There is something creepy going on, while still being beautiful. You can do a lot that shouldn't be done in a painting—pushing the elements of the grotesque—because it's a fantasy. You can depict so much more emotion, in a safe way that allows your audience to keep looking. I think that if my paintings were more realistic they might be a little too grotesque and lead you to think about say, the model, as opposed to the feeling. Much like horror movies, there's also an absurd and hopefully comical element in my work. It acts as a key that unlocks the door and allows you to step inside. (HB)



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Oil on canvas
122 × 112 cm

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Yellow Droop, 2019
Oil on canvas
112 × 102 cm