

REVIEWS NEW YORK

**Sarah Slappey**

Sargent's Daughters

By Max Lakin

Sarah Slappey, *Blue Gingham*, 2021, acrylic and oil on canvas, 80 × 100".

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It's an accepted idea that unrealistic standards of feminine beauty pushed by fashion magazines and beauty conglomerates have a deleterious effect on society. Most of us enter the prison willingly. Self-care, which emerged as a loosely defined concept of coping with the pressures of modern life (of which looking good is a big one) presents itself as a saner alternative, but has by now been revealed as another trapdoor—a ten-billion-dollar industry that folds beauty into woozy affirmation and pseudo-psychology while reinforcing a kind of solipsism that foists a parallel set of things to buy and feel bad about.

Sarah Slappey's show of new paintings and drawings at Sargent's Daughters, "Self Care," evoked the phrase, which curdles in the mouth, tartly. Limbs fill the frames of Slappey's compositions, and so does a faint scream. It's unclear where these phantom appendages originate. They are dismembered from their torsos, and their owners' faces are never pictured, this choice contributing to the unyielding sense of dread. Pricked and prodded with bows and bobby pins and washed in soft pinks and gingham patterns, they're feminized to an oppressive degree, a finely rendered pastel nightmare. *Girl Talk* (all works 2021), a large, rectangular canvas of torqued arms and legs, is cast in a uniform powder blue, making the limbs bound up in a landline telephone cord difficult to parse. More clearly defined is the shower of pills that floats across the picture, a fever dream of self-medicated excess.

Slappey's work flirts with eroticism, but it's shot through with a visceral cartoon menace. Even as body parts crowd into orgiastic tangles, they remain unreal, out of reach. In *Shower Scene*, four alabaster hands reach for calves and toes as a suggestive spray of shaving cream wends itself through the fray. But the piece, less bawdy than reverential, seems more like a campy take on Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, ca. 1508–12, where heaven is subbed out for a speckled tile stall.

Shaving cream figured in several pictures, to various degrees of grisly effect. In *Shaving Cream Maze*, the titular product looks closer to lengths of intestine, unraveled and woven through with electric-blue hair braids (in the *intrecciato* style) that gives the work the overall feel of a gruesome Bottega Veneta handbag. It was a neat coincidence that this show overlapped with New York Fashion Week, when unearthly models descended upon the city, occasioning fits of preening and debilitating self-consciousness as the gears of the image machine whirred at a stupefying speed.

Slappey is interested in depicting what happens when beauty implements become instruments of torture, and she has a high tolerance for pain: Bows are tacked to palms pricked, stigmata-like, by pins as rivulets of blood trickle down the wrists, or are safety-pinned to the back of a hand, like deranged corsages. Plump, rosy buttocks are stuck with a ribbon, as if they were a prize-winning hog, as chalk-white ankles are stabbed by door-knocker earrings. The body horror went on like this across twenty-six pieces, including pencil drawings and studies, that made the most banal parts of a Duane Reade appear unremittingly sinister.

Why do we do these things to ourselves? Slappey's pictures don't say, content instead to offer new and inventive forms of suffering. Resignation curls into the paint's flat finish. The berth of what's considered beautiful may be wider now, but the ways we experience it are only getting more unreal. Night-oil regimens can only help so much.