

# HESSE FLATOW

Monte, Julia. "Sarah Slappey: Lurking in the underbush." *Two Coats of Paint*. Online. April 3, 2019.

## TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning blogazine, primarily about painting

### INTERVIEW

## Sarah Slappey: Lurking in the underbrush

April 3, 2019 1:41 pm



*Sarah Slappey, Tan Cloud, 2018, oil on canvas, 25 x 28 inches*

Contributed by Julia Mont / After "Night Feeding", **Sarah Slappey**'s first solo exhibition in NYC at **Crush Curatorial**, I caught up with her to discuss her new work, a borrowed baby, and the shadows lurking in the lush, sometimes haunting, environments of her recent paintings. Tangles of arms, legs, and dripping breasts seem to nurture their surroundings, with pockets of light catching evidence of the living amid a sometimes sinister stillness. Slappey describes how the series developed after an intense (but temporary) experience of motherhood. Just as her figures appear in the dark to tend and feed, Slappey focuses on the strange way that details emerge from the chaos.

**Julia Monte: This approach is new for you.**

Sarah Slappey: Definitely since within the past year it sort of grew from small paintings on paper of hands, because I wanted to apply for a flat file program and I needed paintings on paper. Then I started making these paintings; I wanted to make some small, quick works. Instead of trying to fit the whole figure into a small space, I thought, well what if I keep the figure essentially life size, but just use the hands as a substitute for the entire body? I kept going with because I realized that to say what I want to say I didn't need the whole body. It might actually be a distraction.

**JM: I think that's a smart move. This is something I think about as well, the scale within a drawing or sculpture and how you can manipulate that. So prior to this work you were painting full figures.**

**SS:** Yes, some full figures, some pieces of bodies, but they were all nearly life size. In hindsight I realize I

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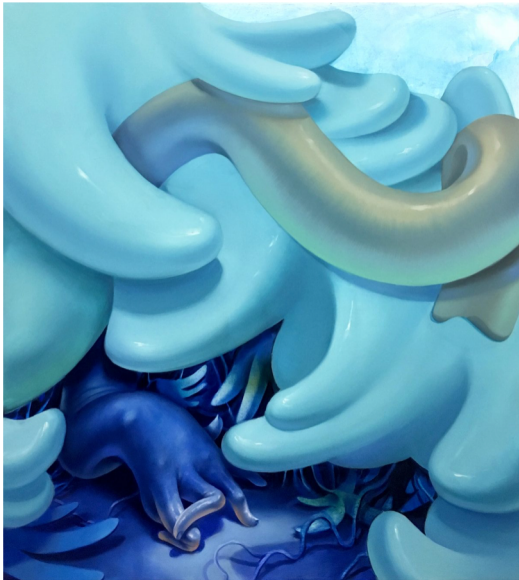
was paying more attention to the environments than what the figures were doing in them. Now its much more important to have the figure in the environment, both acting and reacting with each other.

**JM: I am enamored with the different usages of material within the environment and bodies.**

SS: They are all oil on canvas, some panel All [works on paper] are oil, just heavily gessoed. You know, one of the nice things about painting on paper, which I have translated to canvas, is that you start with a really smooth surface and the paint kind of flows over it. I think that is especially helpful for me since I am the kind of painter where flow, movement, and things that seep are very important. So, in that sense the support makes a pretty big difference

**JM: The movement and flow in the work are definitely evident in the work. Sometimes the figure becomes enmeshed with the environment. At other times the plants seem to stand in as a figure.**

SS: Totally. I like to think about these environments where everything is living in a way that you can feel it all breathing at the same time, and it is pulsing, and the flowers and plants might have the same level of awareness of a hand that you find laying in the woods. Also, leaves and tree limbs there is a reason they call them limbs I think they are all very close to bodies, anyway. I think finding that connection between the living-ness of nature and the living-ness of a human body is very interesting.



Sarah Slappey, Blue Cloud, 2018, oil on canvas, 40 x 36 inches

**JM: Limbs was definitely stuck in my head, describing both plant and body. The ones that referenced that of a human were very slippery or glossy and shiny –**

SS: slimey, yes.

**JM: There is a dichotomy between the two. Not that the plants dont always read the same way, but they seem to have more evident brush strokes, while the marks in the hands or breasts and nipples are subdued, They are more realized and stick out in a different way.**

SS: Well, the foliage backgrounds, to me, feel much more abstract because they are quick. It is like I am finding the spaces as I go along, usually. Whereas the limbs and the breasts are really, like you said, highly rendered and kind of shiny and slimy. I like the paradox between the two as this kind of puffy body that lives in a world that is fast and sketchy, at times. And then, at other times, maybe it is just a

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series of abstracted shapes that feel Matisse-y. If it were all done in one style or the other that space between the two types of representation would be lost.

**JM: In your statement for the show at CRUSH Curatorial you reference building a world from the ground up. I think about the surface building from the ground up, from the environment to the foreground of the figure, but I am curious about the process how you find the world within your composition.**

SS: There are a few different meanings to that sentence. From the sort of nuts and bolts of it for making these nature paintings, I don't plan the natural spaces out, I let it kind of flow and I find out what works and I will then wipe or sand it down. It is a sort of natural building process in that sense, and then the figure is built in a totally separate way. Its built in a more traditional and planned way, like all this scaffolding that has to be woven together with different types of making. So, that's how the paintings come together. But building a world mentally comes out of this need to find a space that interests me, that I can still care about a year later, that I can let my mind wander around in without knowing too much. A natural dark, colorful world where everything is sort of living but sort of dead. The later paintings have cloud, slime, ectoplasm shapes that came along as I had built this world on the forest floor, in my mind, and then eventually as a cloud cover. I started thinking, well what happens above the clouds? Something has to happen in this world. So that is the environment that I have built in my mind, like a story, about what this place could possibly be. Can I go in and out as I am making a painting and think, does this fit in this world? Or does this not fit? It helps me cultivate and add to the world, but formally it just helps me make decisions.



Sarah Slappey, *Yellow Touch*, 2018, oil on canvas, 44 x 42 inches

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Sarah Slaphey, *Reach*, 2018, oil on canvas, 32 x 30 inches

**JM: Some worlds within the paintings are almost desolate feeling. They do feel full of life, and I think there is an idea of nurturing, as well. Of course, nature is evident, but the other side of that is nurture; especially with the dripping breasts that present as if they were watering their environment. There is a directness. Perhaps the misshapen figures don't represent something dead, but something not living.**

SS: There is definitely something sinister. Any time an artist takes apart a body in a painting, there is going to be a sense of disturbance. Which I like because they are all so lush and sexual, but each of these figures, in not connecting to a torso or a head, feel threatening to a viewer. But, again, I am all about the paradox, so I like to undermine that threat. Maybe it was a living person and it is not any more. That sort of dead feeling, like you said, presents something gentle and caressing, but is it also pulling something apart. Or holding it together? The painting with the hand reaching for a butterfly which seems I am even surprised that I put a butterfly in a painting because it is so twee and yet, I put it in there because it seems sweet. Also I always want to touch butterflies and you're not supposed to because you will damage their wings. So, essentially, by touching their wings you are murdering them. Impulse control, or lack thereof, and the feeling that things are teetering on not being ok is something that I am interested in. But I love what you just said about the dripping breasts nourishing the environment. I feel like the moment you said that I got four paintings in my brain.

**JM: Hey that's great. This is what conversations should do. The title of your exhibition, *Night Feeding*, is also curious. We talk about nourishment, and of night, and some of your paintings are more obviously set at night. I wonder about the notion of the nocturnal or dreams. Both happen at night. I also see evidence of lurking.**

SS: You hit the nail on the head with every single one. The title has two different lobes of where it came from. One is from what you have just described, thinking about beings and things in the forest that feed in the night, and the sense of lurking or prowling, things that happen in the shadows. There is a space that gets caught with a flashlight and reveals all of these things happening within a small space. The other side, where the words came from, happened in late summer [of 2018]. I was visiting my sister who has three kids and one of her children was ill. So I told her, ok, let me help, let me do the babys night,

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bottle feedings. I am not married, I don't have kids. So, this was a brand new experience for me, and it was so eerie, and very emotionally charged, and hard, and it was scary to be on-call for this baby. But when I came back, that was when I started to put breasts into paintings, especially dripping breasts, because though I did not go through the experience of being pregnant and giving birth, suddenly I had the experiences at 3am for two weeks straight of holding a baby. Of course I had a bottle, but having a baby trying to latch on to me and feeling like my body was so different, even though I didn't have the giving birth experience, suddenly it is just different.

So, I was having a conversation with the gallery about the paintings and what was going on, talking about how I had just started working with the idea of breasts and dripping breasts, and we just said "Night Feeding" totally pulls from both sides of what I have been painting, but also what has been on my mind.



*Sarah Slappey, Pink Cloud, 2018, oil on canvas, 64 x 58 inches*

***JM: I see a healthy amount of vulnerability in the work. Between moments of nakedness and nudity in a natural environment, a balance occurs, and vulnerability could be interpreted as either weakness or strength. After hearing about the nights nurturing your nephew, and learning more about the title of the show, I'm curious whether or not this notion of exposure plays a role in your work. Though your experience of motherhood was secondary, and your paintings are not a baby, the role of nurturing seems pervasive.***

SS: I think being in a human body is to be in a constant state of vulnerability. The action in my paintings underscores this. I like to play with different kinds of touching that straddle the line between comfort and discomfort. Squeezing, grabbing, poking, prodding. They are actions that could feel menacing or delightful, depending on the context. And in my paintings you never really know what this context is, so they flip-flop between dangerous and silly—and to me, that's vulnerability. The level of exposure works in the same way. A purposefully exposed pinched nipple could be playful but a nipple that's painfully squeezed without consent is obviously threatening.

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This also goes back to ownership of our bodies, specifically as women. For example, in the process of pregnancy and birth, our bodies take charge without us knowing what's going on in so many ways and breast feeding is a particularly poignant example to me. Very suddenly seeing my body in a different context was jarring and odd, and it throws the ideas of consent, self-awareness, and control into a very murky territory. These nebulous and confusing feelings about the female body are what I'm still interested in exploring in current work, though I'm not explaining or aiming to find a resolution.

**JM: Do you locate any parallels between vulnerability and risk, or find that one affects the other?**

SS: Absolutely, especially with the direction my work is moving in now. I've been mixing up my mark making and playing with layering paint in increasingly abstract passages. This is scary! I feel confident in rendering because of the time and care it takes, but to try to nail a section with one or two strokes of paint is extremely risky and difficult. If that part doesn't work out, it's often impossible to go back and start over, because the layer has already become disrupted or too thick. In this way, the paintings change in speed and level of detail, which I think is important for the image to remain fresh and active, which also underscores the playful/dangerous content.



*Sarah Slappey, Yellow Field Figure, 2018, oil on canvas, 42 x 42 inches*

**JM: The reason I ask is because it seems so on point with the work, and I feel like that can be the hardest thing sometimes. I go through weird and stupid titles, especially in group shows, and I feel like you might as well just title it**

SS: Group show.

**JM: Yes basically. Did the title give you any sort of direction for future work or give it more meaning?**

SS: I would say so, because it is something that I voiced really briefly. I hadn't really talked about it I was just painting these images based on that idea of night feeding in both senses. Putting words to it made it into something concrete that I could get my mind around a little more and grow from there.

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***JM: One last thing I am thinking about is when you were talking about this idea of pacing, the pace of the drawings and works on paper. I know they are a bit smaller than your paintings, and the pacing of the background versus the figure, but is that more intuitive? Is there something about the process that is wrapped up into the ideas of your work?***

SS: Well, in the paintings that have more flora backgrounds, for those there must be a certain amount of chaos. Anytime I paint something so smoothly and tightly and thoughtfully, I lose that speed and chaos and frenzy of what it would feel like to be in a tangled place. Having that tension between control and a total lack of control helps the painting feel unhinged. In a good way.

**Artists bio (from gallery website):** 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, and Denmark. In 2015, Slappey was awarded a Kossak Painting Grant and a Hunter MFA award for Outstanding Achievement. Her work has appeared in such publications as *ArtMaze Magazine*, *Social Life*, *Long Island Pulse*, and *Hamptons Art Hub*.

**About the author:** [Julia Monte](#) is an artist and writer in Kansas City; she has a studio at Vulpes Bastille and is the Senior Editor of an arts and culture blog called [Informality](#).

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