

## Susanna Starr by Stacey Gottlieb



Susanna Starr  
From left: *Mermaid* and *Folding Over* (2002)  
Synthetic sponge and acrylic paint  
Susanna Starr is a NYFA Fellow in Crafts and Printmaking/Drawing/Artists Books

In a sun-filled studio in Long Island City, Susanna Starr is talking sponge—the material that the artist discovered back in the late '90s when she was casting about for a way to “work with paint as a sculptural material” rather than simply as a surface, the way painters (herself included) do. It turned out—at the time, anyway—that industrial sponge was the answer to Starr’s inquiry, initiating a body of work that garnered her unanimous critical praise.

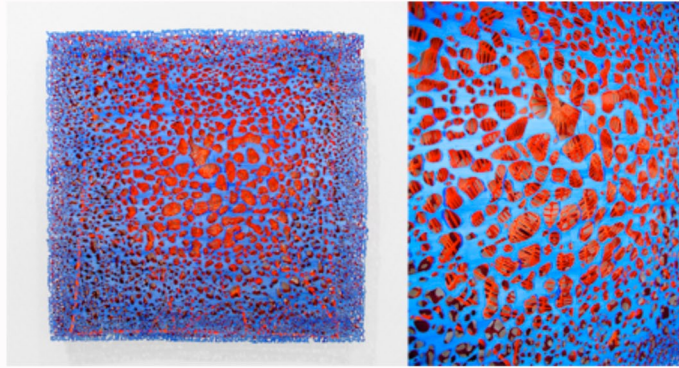
Sometimes thin and porous, sometimes thick and smooth, Starr poured gallons of vibrant, lurid, and sultry acrylic into blocks and folded towers of the sponge; the rich paint administered past the point of absorption to bulge, spill over, or otherwise leak telltale pools—the connection to the human corpus impossible to hide and, in highly charged tonal combinations, eerie to behold. In all, sponge served its purpose as a mechanism by which Starr could *contain* paint, and thereby contain *color*.



Susanna Starr  
*Sponge* installation (2004)  
Synthetic sponge and acrylic paint  
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Further along in this series, Starr became interested in “building with color in space”—evident in the stacked, freestanding sponge pieces she’d moved on to by 2003: square and rectangular slices saturated with paint and stacked in varying heights, from head-toppingly high to mere centimeters off the ground; installed alone or en masse; the minimalist constructions turning the conversation ever toward the question of color in and of itself; the “vibrations,” as Starr calls them, between palettes in a single piece, between the pieces themselves, and in relation to the viewer walking among them. (She has likened the tonal breakdowns to stop-action animation and the association is keen).

Still, the work remained undeniably earthbound at this stage: less so than the wall- and ground-hugging early works, but still tethered in way that would become a sticking point for the artist over time. Indeed, Starr was looking for a way to further liberate color when a great revelation occurred. She notes, “I thought, ‘What if I sliced the sponge *really* thin and hung it from the wall?’” and with that notion came a new and newly compelling body of work, beginning with a new medium: namely, mylar.



Susanna Starr  
*Blue & Maroon with Red Web* (2006)  
Hand-cut mylar and acrylic paint  
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Mylar offered a way of working with pigment in its purest form, each sheet like a single brushstroke of paint, layers of which, when hung together in her trademark, cunningly calculated tones, also opened up a previously unseen, inner dimension to the work. In addition, transferring the lacy pattern of porous sponge to the new material necessitated a cutting device to hollow out the holes and so the pen-knife and meticulous handwork the cutouts required became a vital part of the process as well.

Today, those first sponge-patterned cutouts—and the spider-web patterned pieces that followed on their heels—offer a wonderful reference point when contemplating the startling works that fill Starr’s studio space on the eve of several summer shows: stretched, pulled, and supersized mylar cutouts in the form of antique doilies and handkerchiefs, hovering along each wall and bifurcating the room, ceiling to floor: still layered and distorted and distended but in some important way, wholly *other* from the prior work. Starr describes these nearly neon, candy-colored pieces as “mere skeletons, whereas the sponge was all flesh.” As Starr notes, the doilies and handkerchiefs are no longer “sweet and demure or harmless and hidden,” but “slightly menacing”—threatening not only for their outsized stature and hue, but for the witchy, webby quality they project; their domestic, decorative past now a striking call to the power of She.



Susanna Starr  
*Under The Influence* (2009)  
Hand-cut mylar, acrylic paint, and wire  
Susanna Starr is a NYFA Fellow in Crafts and Printmaking/Drawing/Artists Books

And it is at this point that Starr shares a story harkening back to 2003, when she was a fellow at the Edward Albee Foundation, in Montauk, NY. That July, Starr’s bedroom was on the top floor of the converted-barn residence and on the first evening of her month-long stay, she noticed a spider sitting in its web, positioned just above her bed. Instead of running for a broom—most urban visitor’s instinct, no doubt—Starr sought, in the quiet of the night, to strike a deal. She explains, “I said, ‘Look: if you stay where you are, and don’t bother me, I won’t bother you’—and she was very well behaved. In fact, on the last day, I left a note for the next resident, asking them not to swat her down, explaining that she really kept to herself”—even, that is, as she caught and ate her prey.

Seeing the glimmer in Starr’s eye as she recounts this tale, it’s evident that the same might be said of the artist herself: seeming, at first glance, to be crafting—in a solitary, artistic corner—a set of benign, labor-intensive decorative works, she’s actually capturing her viewers, one at a time, in a complex and sticky web—without the slightest pretense of letting them go.

*Susanna Starr’s work is included in the following current and forthcoming shows: In Bloom, Islip Art Museum, Islip, NY (through May 29); Made In Long Island City, Jeffrey Leder Gallery, Long Island City, NY (through July 15); 2 + 2 = 4, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY (June 16–July 29); and Salon des artistes, beta pictoris gallery, Birmingham, AL (July 28–August 27).*

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Susanna Starr  
Detail from *Under The Influence* (2009)  
Hand-cut mylar, acrylic paint, and wire  
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