



ABSORBED
Susanna Starr



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CynthiaBroanGallery

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More than anything else, art in the twentieth century will be remembered for the expansion of art space or the breakdown of the distinction between art space and the real world, and the increase in art materials to encompass virtually everything. Susanna Starr, as an artist of the late twentieth century and beginning twenty-first century, is interested in the inherent quality of the materials she uses and the space they occupy. She uses sponges, a non-traditional art material, and acrylic paint, a traditional material, to create paint-saturated sculpture. Both the paint and the sponge material are sculptural matter with volume and texture. Starr's pieces occupy the floor and expand horizontally as a natural consequence of the act of making her art.

Starr began as a painter and worked a lot with paper. She found herself more interested in the tactile pigment of the paper than its use as a surface on which to make marks. At the same time, she became fascinated by the drawing materials and pigments, and invented, and patented, a crayon which she marketed for several years. The crayons were made by melting pigment into molds which led her to focus her attention on the colors and the containment of liquefied paint. Her experimentation into the liquidity of the paint led her to the conclusion that paint was more than just color, rather it can take shape and form in a variety of ways.

Her choice of sponge as surface was not arbitrary either. It was chosen because of the function it serves of absorbing liquids to a point at which the excess seeps out. What stands out about sponges are their organic quality as well as their porousness. Starr's surfaces range from openly porous to smooth. She creates shapes, digging out centers of round or square sponges, stacking or overlapping flat rectangular sponges and then pours the paint into the sponge and basically lets nature and physics take their course. During the process of pouring pigment to create sculpture that acts as painting and painting that acts as sculpture, the sponges act like a vat, containing the liquid, and eventually seeping. Then the flow of paint commences as surely as the laws of physics exist. Much as in chaos theory, there is a point at which the leakage and expansion of the paint will cease, but that exact point is an unknown consequence due to the tension between control and chance.

The process of the creation of these objects flows naturally from the roots of modernist formalism. Pouring, staining, stacking and striping are all actions consistent with the gestures of the last 50 years. In her sculptures, though, Starr works towards breaking down the formal barriers between painting and sculpture and between figure and ground.

These are not merely formal objects, rather they refer symbolically to a host of human bodily functions as well as to evolution and to the passing of time. In general, the pieces revolve around a psychology of containing and spilling. In the broadest sense this reflects how our bodies are sponges constantly cycling between taking in, absorbing and excreting. Much the same could be said about our minds which can only accommodate so much before we become flooded, overwhelmed and overflow.

Starr's choices of texture, color and composition give each piece its own personality. In *Press*, the sheer weight of the stacked sponges pushes downward leading the eye to the flow of paint which has left a lava-like trail behind (or is it in front?). This work seems to allude to the landscape more than the body. Interesting is the contrast between the neatly stacked sponges with their discrete colors and the amalgam of paint created by the seepage and flow. The resulting harmony seems like a paradox as it emerges from the rectilinear order of the stacked sponges and becomes integrated into the once flowing pigment. On the other hand in *Drunk*, the paint is contained to the gills, forcing the sponge to bulge at its sides, yet staying confined within. Here Starr has seemed to add a new twist to the realm of geometric abstraction and its relationship to organic form. The bulges create the same kind of idiosyncratic glitches consistent with mark making on a painted surface.

What stands out about Starr's objects in this exhibition is how with each one we can identify different human conditions. She has a keen conceptual awareness that as our eyes lead us to a verbal description of how the objects were created, we become aware of their similarity to us and how we function in our everyday existence. One can become absorbed in looking at Starr's work and imagining – almost feeling the physical gesture of the artist in the action of pouring the paint and stopping and then watching as the process of absorption and flow occur. In their final state, Starr's sculptures allude to action, to a state of aliveness which gives them a metaphoric meaning that ultimately transcends and enhances their material make up.

– Douglas Maxwell, New York 1999

SPONGY 1998
sponge/acrylic paint
60 X 53 X 12 inches
(Private Collection)



DRUNK 1999
sponge/acrylic paint
33 X 20 X 17 inches



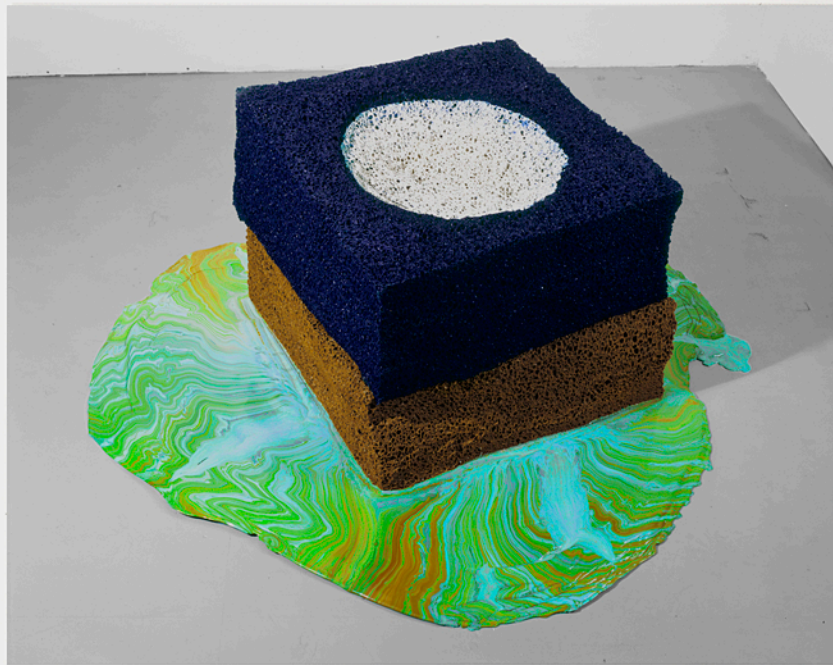
VIOLESCENT 1999
sponge/acrylic paint
76 X 76 X 3 inches



BETWEEN GREEN & ORANGE 1999
sponge/acrylic paint
44 X 18 X 19 inches



SOAKSTACK 1998
sponge/acrylic paint
21 X 53 X 50 inches



PRESS 1999
sponge/acrylic paint
51 X 60 X 144 inches

