

Lafayette Spotlight: Isabel Sorrells '23 Makes Empowering Art That Blossoms

By By Isabella Gaglione, Editor-in-Chief Lafayette College

EASTON - Isabel Sorrells '23 arrived at Lafayette College with art as her "great love." "I had always been really into art," she said. "But I had kind of convinced myself that it had to be a hobby and not a career."



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Sorrells began working in oil paint her senior year, concurrent with the arrival of oil painter and professor Sun You, who



That was until her junior year when she took two studio art classes that were "life-changing." "I think those two classes just woke me up out of the mental space I was in and gave me a new sense of purpose and just like interest in studying and working," she said.

Nester Gil, a professor of art who taught one of those classes, said that it was apparent that Sorrells was gaining more from the class than just an opportunity to learn a new art material.

"Little bubbles sort of pop up from the head of someone who's kind of getting excited about a new possibility," Gil said.

Sorrells graduated from Lafayette with honors in studio art. In January, she was a part of her first public art exhibition — "Personal Effects" — as part of The Canopy Program, a three-semester-long art mentorship program in New York City.

The showing was "a little surreal, but in a good way," she said.

As an artist, she said that she draws from her experiences as a sexual assault survivor.

"I started thinking about how I could process my own life experiences through art in a way I hadn't really before," she said.

In her work, Sorrells investigates the way her experiences have impacted the relationship between her body and her sense of identity. She uses images of herself as inspiration for her pieces.

"A large part of that is kind of about self-preservation and thinking about like, what does it mean to be seen as a sexual object, and how can I change my appearance so that I'm frightening or intimidating or grotesque," Sorrells said.

A common theme in her work is disjointed body parts mixed with flowers, drawing from the tradition of women being expected to create still life paintings of flowers while their nude bodies have historically been used as the subject of paintings done by men.

"She jumped from acrylic to oil within a year, she jumped from 24 inches painting to 96 inches painting," You said. "That's an extraordinary growth and that is coming from her dedication and her work ethic."

Sorrells pursued The Canopy Program because she wanted to be in a space where she could receive critiques, like at Lafayette.

"I need to be in a group of people who are equally motivated, more genuinely interested in talking about each other's work, and who are willing to give me really constructive, critical feedback," she said.

In The Canopy Program, Sorrells got the opportunity to dive deeper into her work. In one assignment, she was asked to narrow in on one small section of a painting she had already done — which had every inch of the canvas covered with a fully rendered subject — and see how that could alter her interpretation of the piece.

"It ended up being really helpful because it was super uncomfortable for me," she said.

Two additional Lafayette graduates are now in The Canopy Program — Lily Dineen '24 and Emily Mackin '24 — per Sorrells's recommendation.

"It allows your work to be considered in the context of what is important and successful in the art world, and it sort of allows you to be part of that conversation," Dineen said of the program.

"I was definitely tearful seeing her work," Mackin said. "Just knowing the context and the strife she's gone through as a person and an artist to get into these spaces that she's gotten to."

Sorrells believes her Lafayette-student-self would be shocked that she was doing something she was passionate about as a career.

"I would love to have the opportunity to tell that version of myself like it was always a real possibility," she said of pursuing art. "And it gets better."

Dineen and Mackin supported Sorrells at the "Personal Effects" exhibition.

