THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

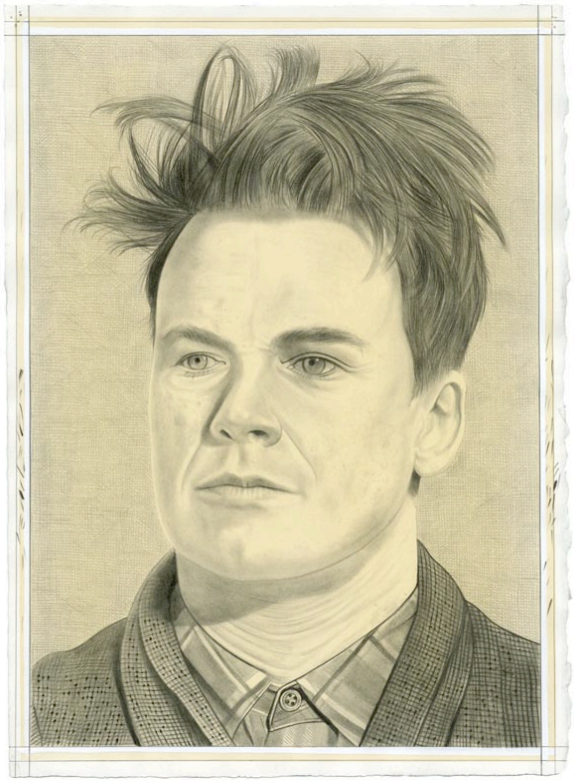
INCONVERSATION

KELTIE FERRIS with Jarrett Earnest

Keltie Ferris is known for large paintings that lap, layer upon layer, into glimmering pictorial spaces; like her, they are utterly debonair. Last month she debuted *Body Prints* at Chapter NY, surprising new works which, as the title suggests, are impressions of her body on paper. Ferris's paintings can also be seen in the 2014 *Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts* at the American Academy of Arts and Letters (March 6 – April 12) where she received the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award in painting. She met with Jarrett Earnest in her studio to discuss bodies, abstraction, and color-feelings over beer and mint tea, respectively.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): I'd like to start by talking about scale. How did you arrive at your large canvases?

Keltie Ferris: For quite a long time I made paintings that were 80 inches squared and 80 inches is exactly the height of me and my vertical reach. I've never measured the cardboard that break-dancers put down, but it is like a perfect stage made for one person and one person's reach on the ground. I think of my paintings like that: a stage built just for me. When you start going up and down on ladders things change, it's a different process. Then I wanted to make more vertical paintings and things that tower over people more and find larger gestures. I paint from the shoulder not from the wrist, so I'm more at home with big movements.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: At times your paintings seem involved with architectural, or astronomical, or interior space.

Ferris: Often I think of my paintings in terms of theater sets—a fake world surrounded by a larger atmospheric light world—you only glimpse the stage through this light construction that permeates and creates the physical space. Then, of course you have actors that are so tiny compared to this larger space. The stage is also strangely much more shallow than the space around it. I like the feeling of looking through things to a world you can't quite access, or a residue of a former world that you can't quite get to, and I try to have that in my paintings.

Rail: In the past you've talked about dance: does the theatrical stage relate to dancing too?

Ferris: I like the idea of my paintings being actors—I don't know that I've ever thought of them as dancers. I think of them as people walking down the street, they have a personhood or selfhood that is visible in their smallest actions. Each of my paintings has its own personality, in a way that the best dance uses the unnamable stuff of the dancer; it's not just the choreographer placing everything onto them, they are not just drones that enact this perfect score in a choreographer's mind.

Rail: One of the things I'm interested in is trying to see the continuities between your new body prints and the paintings you are known for. The way you described your scale as a stage fitted to your body is a beautiful equivalent to the aesthetic and conceptual form of the body prints because the paper is just big enough to fit the impression. How did you start making them?

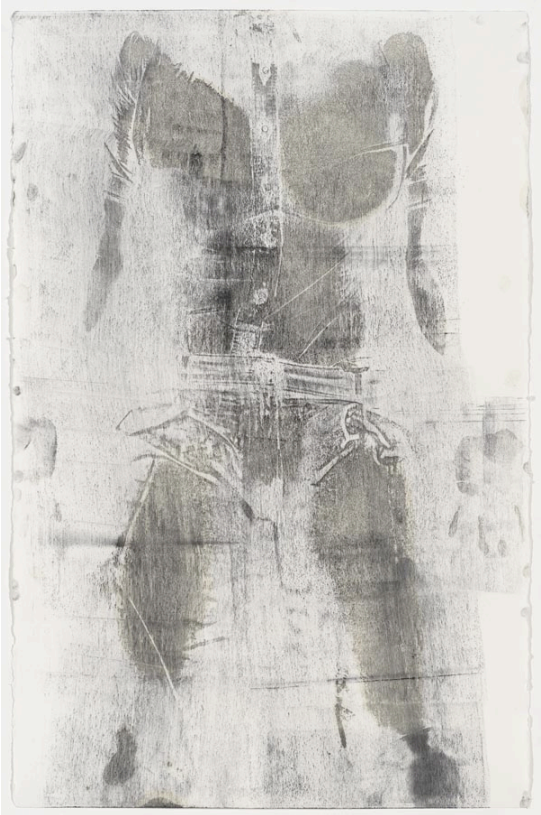
Ferris: It's something that I've tried several times over the last seven years. I tried after I saw Jasper Johns's *Gray* show at the Met. I tried them in acrylic paint that I made out of graphite and I was very disappointed. I did them on canvas and my body came out very small in comparison to the vastness of even a moderately sized canvas. I didn't like the gooeyness of the acrylic paint, but I wasn't sure what else to do. So I threw those out. Then when I saw some David Hammons prints at MoMA PS1 I understood how it could be done—and I thought David Hammons and I have different enough bodies and it is a different enough moment. But when I made these last summer, I was at a solitary

residency out in the country and I was heartbroken, and it was the perfect place and time for me to throw myself, literally, into something new and introspective.

Rail: A "body print" seems like it should be the most direct way of image making, and that is how you started, by covering yourself with paint and then pressing it onto a canvas, but you thought it wasn't working. What you then did, which is what I think both Johns and Hammons did, was to cover yourself with oil, pressing that onto the surface, and then powdered pigment over the top. What is interesting is that it goes from being very direct, to strangely indirect. The act of brushing the pigment enacts a second touching—a tactile sense. The language you have been exploring in your paintings includes the spray, which seems to be about textures that burst open and at times create a similar atmospheric sense of touching, or a haptic experience, as much as it is visual. The paintings have a bodily appeal.

Ferris: Around 2004 I wanted to make gestural paintings—I was already working abstractly but I wanted the gesture to be more bodily. Yet I didn't want the cheesy feeling that often comes with brushed gestures, and I didn't want to be burdened with that history. I was just looking for any new tools that would take me away from that. I went to Home Depot to buy all sorts of new painting tools and left high art tools behind. At that moment it seemed taboo for me to spray paint on a canvas in a way that it doesn't feel right now. The spray paint produces marks distanced from my body but still tied to it, they are mechanical and yet they are still my own movements—full of new energy and possibility. It fuses drawing and painting immediately in a direct and honest way.

There is something similar with the body prints. In those first cave paintings they sprayed pigment over their hands, leaving handprints. It's maybe the most ancient way of painting, spraying pigment and intervening with your body, and there is something fascinating about that, which I think is at the heart of all this that I can't quite put into words. Maybe this is the other side of the coin—spray paint is a distant, mechanical mark that you can hold in your hand, but the body print is a stamp of you with a mechanical feeling of remove. Furthermore, the paint is atomized in both of them, broken into bits.



Keltie Ferris, "Echo," 2013-14. Oil and powdered pigment on paper, 401/4 × 261/8". Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY. Photo credit: Mark Woods.

Painting of hands, Foggini-Mesticawi Cave, Gilf Kebir, Western Desert, Egypt. © Roland Unger, March 11, 2011. Reproduced under Creative Commons.

Rail: The thing that is profound to me about those sprayed handprint negatives as the birth of representation is that they are both absence and presence at the same time. The pigment delineates the hand and shows you what isn't there: the person who made it. And that is what representation is in some deep way, trying to show you something that is *missing* by showing you exactly what is *materially present*. Looking through the body prints toward your paintings helped me see the ways they disclose the presence of the painter, even though they don't do that in the painting language that taught us to read presence in the gestures of Pollock, for instance. In what ways are you engaging or evading the legacy of Abstract Expressionism?

Ferris: I love what you are saying here. I am very interested in creating illusionistic space, which is one of the ways I'm very distant from the Ab-Ex people. My paintings are very pictorial, they are not just about marks, but on the other hand I am very invested in the meanings and associations of every mark on my paintings.

Rail: To go back to the body prints for a moment, some of them are clothed and some are naked, but they are all of your own body. Hammons is clothed and is wearing almost the same thing as you: a button-down men's shirt and trousers. At times your breasts show through the clothes, while at times the gender is ambiguous. This feels like representing a queer body. How did you come to printing both clothed and naked?

Ferris: First I did them all naked. The idea was always that I wanted to make work just from me and from as little else as possible, powdered pigment, oil, and paper, as little as I could use to make a drawing. No tools, no props, no narrative, no justification, no abstraction: literally just "me." There was something in it that seemed like it should be me naked, but that isn't me—well, it is and it isn't. So I added what I wear in the studio, my summer studio outfit: chinos I got from a second hand store and a white button down shirt that fit the climate in the summer, very light clothes. In a way, clothed seems most like me—the most raw—and you can practically see everything anyway once you press onto paper so I'm still naked, but I think it captured my queer self more accurately. More particularly me, but also something broader. We're large and contain multitudes, and I wanted to capture different sides or aspirations of myself.

Rail: What did you learn about the physical realities of your body through doing this work?

Ferris: So much! It's really interesting. For instance it's so hard to get certain parts of me onto a flat surface, mainly my collar bone because my breasts were in the way, or latts, because my shoulders and hips were in the way. There were parts of me I desperately wanted to get onto a print, and I achieved it in some by raising the surface off the floor so there was an edge to hang off of. Then I was able to make body prints where my breasts weren't overly enlarged. Fat parts of you become enlarged in a print because they flatten, they squish to cover a surface, whereas muscular parts of you, like legs, are hard to get to the paper at all because muscle goes in and out and you can't bend your legs backward.

Rail: I had a similar experience where I covered my entire body with cheap blush and then rolled on paper. When you do that, you see very clearly that there are parts of you that never needed to be covered with blush because they are not going to touch the surface. Just like you I saw those Johns "Skin"pieces and I had to go home and do it. I

thought they had to do with queer identity. When he did it, it connected to certain discourses of being a gay man, about encrypted disclosures of desire, etc. There is a visceral pull to personally come to terms with that kind of image, what do you think that is?

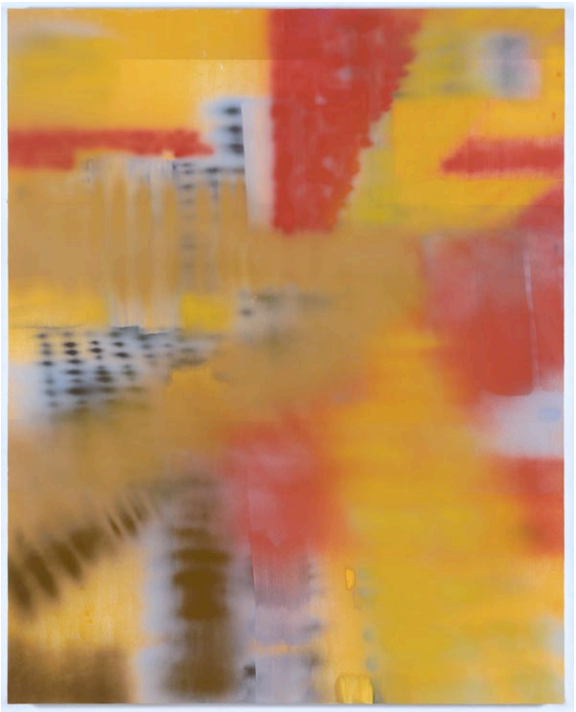
Ferris: There is something about disclosing and not disclosing, or revealing or not revealing: the unfolding. In my work sometimes people cannot tell which ones I'm naked in and which ones I'm not, which was mind blowing to me. They look like you have x-ray vision, like the fantasy of being able to see through people's clothing, but in this dark coded way where everything is one color. You see everything, but you don't. That kind of controlled unfurling is queer.

Rail: Your paintings do a similar thing; between what they show and what they cover, parts rip open.

Ferris: That's true. But in the paintings, when it is so divorced from the body, it doesn't feel so much like queer performance art. The idea of unfurling and hiding is important in that it feels like there might be a world beyond the distance. With the body prints, it's all about inside versus outside, the possibility that there is a vastness on the interior that you see the glimmers of.

Rail: One thing that is striking to me about both the body prints and your paintings is that people really want to grasp for photographic and technological metaphors to describe what is visually going on. So the body prints are maybe medical imaging, or some xerox process.

Ferris: People say mammograms a lot.



Keltie Ferris, "Free Fall," 2014. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 77 × 96".
Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY. Photo: Mark Woods.

Rail: Right, some kind of imaging technology. The way a lot of people describe your paintings relates to pixilation—low resolution digital, computer screens—as though they can't see the work except through digital eyes. The aspects of your paintings that are referred to as pixelated could just as easily be discussed through textiles and the weave. How do you engage with those discourses, in your formal choices?

Ferris: I was definitely thinking about textiles before I was thinking about digitalization. I'm really interested in Impressionism and the way small marks build up to make a whole, which is a lot older than anything digital. I struggle talking about this because I don't want to shoot down other people's readings of my work, because I think they are valid and important, but it is not what I think about in my day to day studio experience. On the other hand I do think it is important to look at all kinds of imagery, and I do. I try to be open and let them infuse my consciousness, and not just have art history influence my painting. I'm in a long lineage of people who have been affected by various types of media, but I am not sitting here trying to make digital paintings. The digital image is just a way of breaking an image down into a grid, which is a micro-moment in a larger issue. So far with the body prints I'm still taking in people's readings. I was really drawn to the non-goopiness of this method. Again, I'm constantly trying to move away from painterly weight.

Rail: There is a very ham-handed way that some people, to oppose the threat of screen culture and Internet image culture, are making overly material gooey paintings. Most of your surfaces are very flat.

Ferris: Spray painting is a very thin way of painting, and there are many layers of thin paint. There is a particular thing I'm interested in. I want to break paint down to its parts. The body prints divide the paint into oil and pigment, rejoining them in the moment of the image.

Rail: How did you start using silver and metallic paint, which almost all your paintings use?

Ferris: I did that because I wanted the most glam paint I could find. There was a moment when I wanted my paintings to be like a gay pride parade; I wanted them to be confetti—shit in the air that is reflective. I've dialed that back. Graphite has become my new silver.

Rail: Graphite is a dark mirror, tarnished silver. Do you feel, as a queer person living in the world, that there are aesthetic or conceptual aspects of what you do that relate to a certain type of queerness? Or do you think that is an irrelevant question?

Ferris: I don't think my paintings are about the fact that I'm gay, but I am gay and they come from me. I think there is a lot in here including the fact that I'm white and from Kentucky. Let's not just pick and choose the interesting, more marginalized parts of me—there are parts that are not marginalized and those are in the paintings too.

Rail: Are there paintings with silver underneath? And does the underlying silver change the way the paint relates to light?

Ferris: For years almost all my paintings began by being drawn out with silver dots that shimmer—that's a secret. There are a lot of silver under-layers in my paintings that get covered up and they change how light magic happens.

Keltie Ferris, "Prince," 2013-14. Oil and powdered pigment on paper, 401/4 × 261/8". Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY. Photo: Mark Woods.

Rail: I wanted to talk with you about something you wrote for *BOMB* about abstraction. You begin by saying: "A big question now is the sincerity/irony problem in abstract painting." How do you feel about that now? Has it changed for you?

Ferris: It doesn't seem to me to be the thing that everyone is struggling with now. There was a time when asking if something was ironic or sincere seemed like a big question—or at least it was a big question in my mind. Now we're more at home with sincerity, but I think to be sincere you have to know how your sincerity works. It can't just be a näive sincerity, and I'm still trying to figure that out.

Rail: You are invested in the discourse of abstraction, but for many artists I talk to the boundaries between abstract and representational or figurative are very unclear.

Ferris: I had to go to grad school to learn that I was an abstract painter because what I paint is so real to me. I was always making abstractions but I saw them as symbols, or things, or networks, or air, or star constellations. This differentiation between abstract and figurative is an extreme oversimplification; I am interested in a lot of figurative painting but I am placed in a lineage of abstract painting. I think that is because at heart I don't care about the way people interpret my paintings. I'm very open to someone seeing a hat in my painting when I might see it as an elephant. I'm open to them being completed by the viewer, which puts me in a certain lineage of painting.

Rail: I've heard you say before that you begin with a very definite "color feeling," and I want to know more about that.

Ferris: It's often as simple as dominant colors. For instance, wanting a painting to include a red and purple and maybe a green, which for me, spells children's finger paintings from the early '80s. I often think of something very specific from my life or my memory. There is a blue and an orange that I associate with my brother's bike. Certain colors go together, from my life and cultural experience, and that often becomes the main color dichotomy in my painting. Then maybe a third or a fourth color is added to boost or complicate. It's very specific, and each one is different, but it never really changes that radically—the color feeling always sticks more or less throughout the painting. Once it gets going it shapes the whole painting into a mood.

One thing about the body prints is how people are obsessed with the maker. The biographic thing where women painters are paired together, young are separated from the old, all of that is so anti-art to me. There is an element to the body prints that was just like, "If you want to know about me, here I am." A literalism to feed that biographic impulse.

Rail: I really loved the title of one of your paintings "Bonjour Monsieur Ferris" (2012). And to think of the way the artist is being represented in the Courbet painting you are referencing is relevant to what you are saying here.

Ferris: Yes! Everyone acts so embarrassed about the title of that painting. You are the first person to say it's hilarious. It's a gigantic painting called "Bonjour Monsieur Ferris!" That is what people called Courbet's painting "The Meeting" (1854) to make fun of it, and I loved that it was about him meeting his audience.

Rail: The titles of your paintings are great and I think they are important to understanding the work, in the way that John Chamberlain's are. How do you think of them?

Ferris: Thanks, I really sweat over them! I'm always looking for titles. I keep lists of potential titles and try to match them with paintings after they are done. I prefer to do it

this way rather than the other way around, because if you look at something and think "that looks like a bird" then you give it a bird name and it limits the painting. Birds are fresh in my mind because I just named some pieces in the body print show "Heron" and "Warbler," pieces that emphasize bilateral symmetry.

Rail: Most of your paintings have that kind of symmetry.

Ferris: There is a lot of symmetry in my work and that comes from the body. The body prints emphasize that. It is a straightforward and honest way of getting around that thing in painting where you are trying to make it artfully unbalanced, yet balanced. Just make it symmetrical if you want it balanced!