

ARTFORUM

Reviews: Keltie Ferris at SUNDAY

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By Martha Schwendener

Keltie Ferris

SUNDAY

Keltie Ferris—a 2006 Yale MFA who participated in the height-of-the-market, art-department-raiding exhibition “School Days” at Jack Tilton Gallery in 2006—has a lot of good ideas, even if they’re not all fully developed yet. Her debut show in New York coincided with a solo project at the New Art Dealers Alliance fair in Miami and included five medium- to large-scale abstract paintings that employed various techniques. The era of fancy, computer-generated stencils is waning; Ferris, like many of her peers, does things the old-school way, masking areas with tape and then applying pigment with palette knives and brushes as well as by spraying—but not with an aerosol can; Ferris liquefies and then administers oil paint with a sprayer.

It takes a while to determine what is going on in these works. Close examination reveals not only the techniques but also, in canvases including *Sincerely Yours* (all works 2008), “other” paintings lurking below like traces of a palimpsest, and, in *Stritch* and *Boy Wonder*, passages worked on, then covered while the broader area was painted, and then exposed again, creating contrasting textures and palettes.

Part of what’s interesting (although this only reveals itself over time, with prolonged looking) is how much information Ferris manages to conceal. Her approach reminds me of Synthetic Cubism, her compositions hiding in plain sight conceptual-optical tricks akin to Braque’s and Picasso’s *trompe l’oeil* wood grain. The artist’s first show, two years ago at Kinkead Contemporary in Los Angeles, featured paintings whose seemingly abstract compositions, when seen at a short distance, reveal “primitive” masks. The paintings at Sunday contain vestiges of those figures, in the geometric shapes created by masking. Ferris might be considered part of the faux-naïf resurgence that has been in full swing for over a decade, but she belongs to the recent wave of painters who have



Keltie Ferris, *Aviator*, 2008, oil, acrylic, pastel, and spray paint on canvas, 80 x 70".

shifted that dialogue from figurative expressionism to abstraction.

The allusions and references in these canvases come fast and furious. Ferris is closest to gestural mark makers like Joan Mitchell but also recalls totem lovers like Adolph Gottlieb. Her compositions’ colorful dots run the gamut from pointillism and André Derain to Sigmar Polke and Ross Bleckner, with his ethereal, astral markings. They also have traits associated with the 1980s, recalling Peter Halley’s Day-Glo colors (peeking out, particularly, around the edges of *Sincerely Yours*), Keith Haring’s ambling lines, and Jean-Michel Basquiat’s neo-primitivist scrawls. With its sprayed-on chevrons, *Aviator* might be a Kenneth Noland attacked by graffiti artists.

Ferris’s paintings also evoke Albert Oehlen, a similarly restless formalist who uses as many techniques as he can fit into one painting. The difference is mostly generational: Where Oehlen employs a computer mouse, among other devices, to spoof on “expression” and the painter’s hand, Ferris is strictly (on the canvas, at least) postdigital.

This is the dilemma for her generation of painters, who grew up with (and on) computers: Feign ignorance and act like a Luddite, or embrace the knowledge and absorb it into your work? Ferris’s paintings appear as though they originate far from the computer screen, and yet their surfaces seem predicated on a kind of Windows-age logic. Passages with varying palettes and textures hover next to, under, and over one another like different software programs, all open at the same time and yet designed to perform different functions.

In many ways, Ferris’s subject is archaeology, but not Foucauldian archaeology: She treats art-historical traditions as strata rather than as ruptures, embedding them in her compositions. It will be interesting to see what happens when she clicks on and closes a few of those programs, shrugging off her influences and finding what’s left.

—Martha Schwendener