

# Interview

## KELTIE FERRIS, PEOPLE PERSON

By Angela Ledgerwood

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"Sometimes I think of my paintings as people," says the Brooklyn-based artist Keltie Ferris, whose solo show runs Nov. 29–Jan. 12 at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York. "Like I'm sending them out into the world and they'll have their own relationships to people and writers and cameras. You make them the best you can and then they go on to have their own lives."

Indeed, Ferris's paintings greet the viewer as living and breathing entities, pulsing and throbbing beyond the limits of the canvas and humming with energy. It is as if Ferris has glimpsed an infinite force field and captured what she's seen in each painting. Bold patterns and electric colors jostle for attention, while in other works, subtler, radiant pastels zigzag diagonally to evoke further dimensions. Ferris's teacher at Yale, Peter Halley, once said that her paintings are not expressive of emotion in the typical sense, but are expressive of energy.

Born in 1977 in Louisville, Kentucky, Ferris was exposed to art from an early age. A friend's family owned an extensive art collection and Ferris recalls frolicking under Picassos and Legers as a preschooler. In her own family, Ferris had a legacy of painters on her father's side, the last of whom died in the Holocaust. Meanwhile, her mother is an avid amateur painter, who presented her paintings at the dinner table for critique throughout Ferris's teenage years.

For three years Ferris worked for the sculptor Kent Bloomer in New Haven, CT, after her undergraduate years at Yale, making architectural ornaments and designing large-scale animals for buildings and bridges. Ferris then moved to New York and worked at Izquierdo Studio, a prop shop in Manhattan, where she made, among other things, the wings for the Victoria's Secret models and elaborate displays for Ralph Lauren with

painted flags and light bulbs.

"In my early twenties I felt like I was entirely too strange a person to function in a normal job. I don't feel as strange anymore, but I think that's partly because the world has changed and I might also be in a world that accepts my strangeness," says Ferris. "I just had a small little bedroom and a desk and that was where I drew and I was so depressed by that and then I got to grad school and my teachers were like, 'these drawings are so amazing.' Those became the basis of everything." Ferris spent a year in Canada painting full-time earning her second BFA from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design before returning to Yale for her MFA.

Ferris describes her painting process as "trying to keep all the paths alive." Each work leads to the next as she chooses one path at the expense of another. The unexplored avenues quiver with potential and brim with possibility—this may be one of the reasons why Ferris's work is so successful.

Within the abstraction, Ferris admits, there is a representation of something very specific from within her own mind—a monster, tower, an emanating ray of light, often a reference to another artist's work: Mondrian, Stella and Matisse. "I don't really intend for them [the viewers] to see it, but I have to see it. I feel like I'm almost spilling my secret when I say that. I love the fact that people will walk away from my work with whatever their imagination brings to it."