

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Risky Business: Keltie Ferris' Collisions of Improvisation and Decay

by [John Yau](#) on December 16, 2012

At some point while I was walking around the spacious exhibition space of Mitchell-Innes & Nash, it struck me that Keltie Ferris's paintings no longer seemed to be making obvious allusions to Joan Mitchell, Frank Stella, and Piet Mondrian. This may have been due to the order in which I looked at the paintings, but as I went from one to the next I could sense her increasing confidence.

The other thought that I had was that she hadn't actually been referring to these and other artists — in the sense of looking back and being nostalgic — in her earlier paintings. Instead, she was imagining what it would be like for them to look forward and see what had become of the world most of them had left.

When Ferris uses a spray gun to make stepped rows of blurry blue, red and yellow spots, as she has done in a number of paintings — none of which are in the current exhibition — what she really seems to be doing is time traveling Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" (1942–43) into the present. I am advancing that Ferris is literally presenting us with what the Dutchman's painting would like if it were done now — in the age of America's material decline, with its blocks of crumbling infrastructures and rows of glowing computers. Instead of coming across as another updated version of Mondrian's synthesis of improvisation and order (in an institutionally approved, postmodern citation, complete with the requisite dose of irony), we encounter Ferris's edgily orchestrated collisions of improvisation and decay, order and randomness.

Ferris doesn't try to tie a painting together or ally herself with an approved of authority — be it high abstraction (Frank Stella), Pop references (Andy Warhol) or ready-mades (Marcel Duchamp). In fact, she consistently undermines her allusions to Stella by embracing blurred forms, such as in "Manuscript" (2012), where a hazy shape hovers between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible without becoming one or the other. Ferris achieves this experience of confounded looking (or reading) at a high level, which is rare in painting, but is more commonly found in wildly innovative, non-storytelling poetry. And just to be clear, it is certainly not an experience that exists solely in the realm of abstraction, as a number of recent paintings by Sangram Majumdar make evident.

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Moving away from historical allusions is an important step both in Ferris' development and in the larger circumstance. By breaking out of a context in which past antecedents are evoked, cited or parodied, the artist extricates herself from the postmodern impasse many of her peers find themselves in, where they can't figure out how to stop looking back, how to gain their own authority. As Frank O'Hara pointed out, being a track star for Mineola Prep (or an art star at Yale) is meaningless. Showing how smart you are — look who I can refer to — doesn't improve the viewer's daily life either. It most likely doesn't even give anyone pleasure, which is the very least you should do.

(Frankly, I am tired of hearing about artists who are the true heirs to Hannah Hoch, Philip Guston, or Frank Stella. You wonder if there will ever be a day when lineages aren't mentioned, signifying that these artists have finally become themselves. Or are we always supposed to think of them as heirs, even when they are over sixty? Whatever happened to the idea of not wanting to make work that looks like someone else's? Have we really bottomed out, as some theorists would like us to believe, stuck in a minefield of proper citations and hipster cross-references?)

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Ferris isn't a purist. She uses pastels, oil paint and acrylic. She applies paint with a palette knife or a spray gun for which she mixes her own colors. She builds up her paintings with thin washes and layers. She is not methodical, leaving some areas uncovered. Looking takes the form of scrutiny — we move around the surface and examine what the artist has done as well as how she did it.

There is a rather aggressive dance in these works between the optical and the visceral, legibility and illegibility, crisp and blurred, the solid and the atomized — the visual cacophonies of urban life, which I am betting most of us don't luxuriate in. But that's exactly what Ferris's paintings do — they delight in clashes of color and spatial incongruities.

Ferris' broad palette includes high-keyed, hothouse colors (deep reds, thumping pinks, lemon yellows and lime greens) and somber earth tones (umbers, ochers, blacks and grays). She likes to edge a cool color with a searing one, a deep blue ringed by a reddish-pink. I am reminded of heat sensitive tracking devices looking for life forms. "SIASEC YEM" (2012) is a good example of what I am talking about. In fact, there are many parallels one can make between Ferris's paintings and the computer screen and the digital universe with its multitude of visual languages overlapping, interfering, intersecting, and burning through each other. But these analogies are superseded by something far more crucial in the work, namely the complex, often contradictory painting space that Ferris carves out in her strongest paintings.

The multiple, interpenetrating layers and constantly shifting figure/ground relationships are inseparable. One layer covers another, and, in turn, is partially covered. Ferris's paintings are akin to urban archeology — the walls of buildings that are covered and recovered, even as time and weather eat away at them. She is part of a group of painters

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that includes Mark Bradford, Wendy White and Joanne Greenbaum — artists who bring together unlikely materials and processes in work that gets at the heart of urban experience. Ferris wants to make a space that is turbulent and open. She doesn't want to know her destination when she sets out. She uses different means, but she hasn't tried to brand herself with a style. She wants to make something fresh out of the ruins she both inherited and inhabits, which means she rigorously ignores the maps that various institutions and authorities have provided for her and others of her generation. I believe this is what Ferris has in common with Joan Mitchell, and not some similarity of mark making.

Keltie Ferris continues at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until January 12, 2013.