

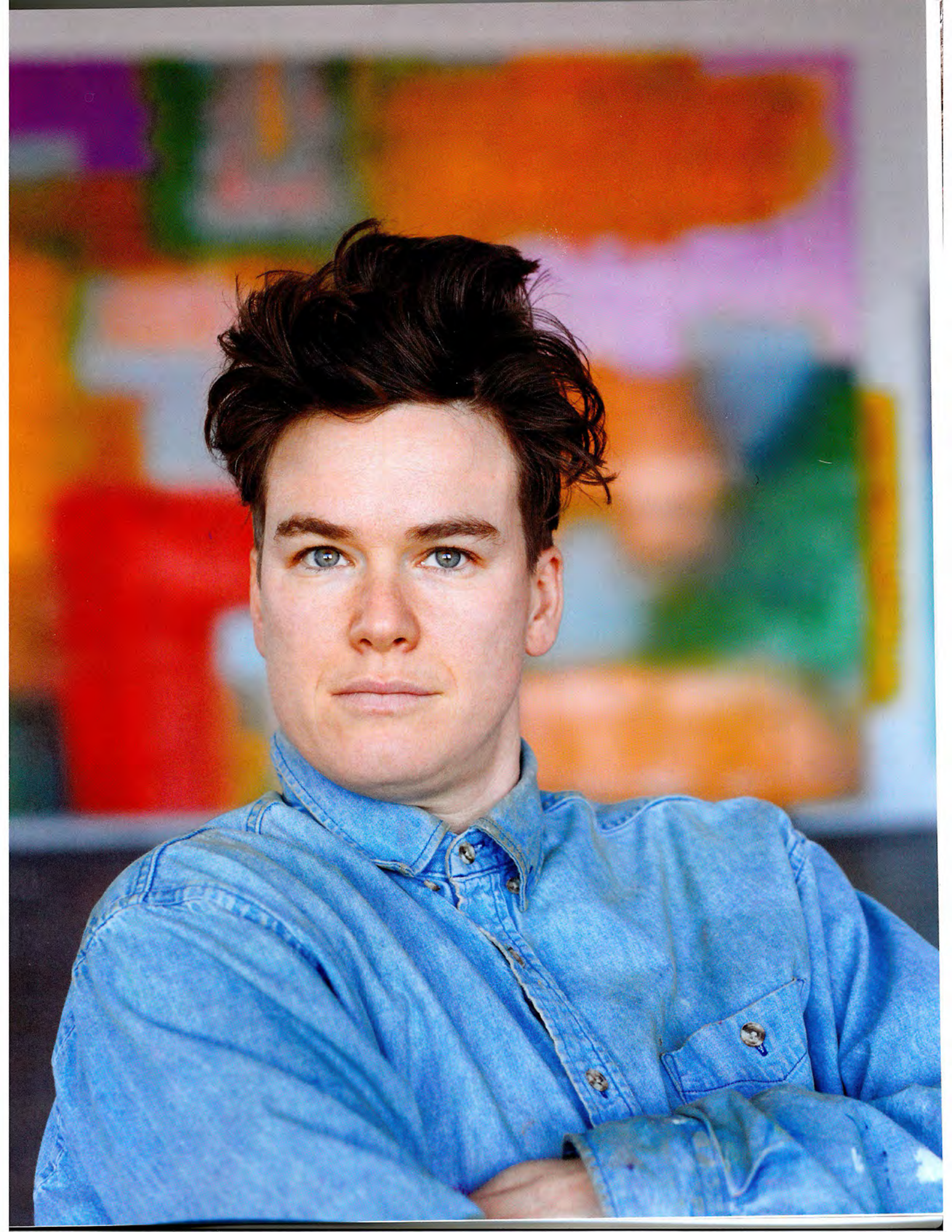
KELTIE FERRIS

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Keltie Ferris:
Body Prints and
Paintings," at the
University Art
Museum, Albany,
N.Y., through Apr. 2.

Interview by Daniel Belasco
Studio photography by Grant Delin

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Contributors page.

IN THE STUDIO



Keltie Ferris:
Marksman, 2015,
acrylic and oil on
canvas, 72 by 60
inches.

Images this article
courtesy Mitchell-
Innes & Nash,
New York.





Ferris's studio,
Brooklyn, N.Y.,
December 2015.

KELTIE FERRIS BUILDS her abstract paintings through complex and layered applications of oil and acrylic with brushes, spray guns and palette knives. Born in 1977 in Kentucky to a Canadian mother and Croatian father, Ferris shares her generation's interests in graffiti, decorativeness, performance and coded assertions of identity. Yet she channels these tendencies with a distinctive formal vigor, manifesting a faith in the communicative power of abstract painting.

In the last two years, Ferris has asserted the primacy of her own subjectivity through body prints. Pressing her oil-covered body—at first naked, now usually clothed—on paper, the artist leaves marks that she then elaborates with applications of dry pigment. The body prints engage the history of postwar and postmodern painting, mining the vein of formal experimentation also worked by mavericks like Helen Frankenthaler and David Hammons. Gender, sexuality and race are both directly transcribed and tantalizingly illegible, as mutable as the artist's own clothing and body.

On the heels of a critically acclaimed solo show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery in New York last September, Ferris is at an important inflection point. She recently moved into a new studio in Brooklyn, and her third solo museum exhibition (and first on the East Coast) opens this month at the University Art Museum in Albany, N.Y. The following interview was conducted on a chilly afternoon last November. There were four works in progress—three paintings and a body print—in various stages along one wall. Several finished canvases were wrapped and propped.

Our conversation revealed Ferris's concern for the integrity of painting in a world of deep-seated irony and commercialism. Our exploration of how her process integrates this tension took an unexpected direction toward her interest in the potential for painting to be both autonomous and accessible. New York is a painting town, and Ferris's words recalled those of abstract painters of earlier generations. As Abstract Expressionist artist Bradley Walker Tomlin

wrote in 1950: "One can believe in paintings, as one can believe in miracles, for paintings, like miracles, possess an inner logic which is inescapable."¹ With a more inclusive and self-reflexive attitude, Ferris is transforming this legacy on her own terms.

DANIEL BELASCO I'd like to begin by talking about composition, and facing the blank canvas. Do you start with preconceived notions of what you would like to do, and are those notions worked out on paper, in photographs or with some other medium? Or do you compose directly on canvas?

KELTIE FERRIS I've gone through phases of planning out my paintings. Now they are fairly unplanned. However, I think of my works as belonging to family trees. Each one comes from a specific family or predecessor. No painting is a huge leap from the one that came before it. It can be very simple: this painting was made with X, Y and Z. Could I take Y out? Could the painting stand with just X and Z?

BELASCO When you say X, Y and Z, what do you mean? What might these variables represent?

FERRIS I am thinking about compositional components or layers. There was a painting in my last show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash with a bunch of black lines, a target and white marks that everyone reads as digital [*Marksmen*, 2015]. Those three components are almost combating each other. In another painting I might take out the target. How would that painting move forward? With less happening in the painting would there still be a tension to build from? Compositionally that's how I think things through. I have a pretty complicated plan in my mind. There's not a sense that just anything can happen. I sort of wish sometimes that anything could happen, but a painting with the dense imagery of *oRiOn* [2015], from the constellation series, is not going to turn into a more reduced painting like *Clocked* [2015].

“Painting’s fall from grace is really great, because it’s freeing for painters to not be working in *the* art form. That has actually helped it stay alive and vital.”

BELASCO You don’t quite establish rules, but you work with parameters or limitations.

FERRIS I don’t like the word “limitations”; that is a negative way of looking at it. To me it’s more about lineages. Your children can only differ so much from you.

BELASCO There’s a certain genetic coding within the form.

FERRIS But over time, or through painting, that might change.

BELASCO That metaphor offers the possibility of hybridity, where you might take two family trees and interbreed them.

FERRIS Yeah. Though right now it’s not about bringing things together. It’s more about taking things apart. Three or four years ago my paintings were layered and baroque. It took weeks and weeks to finish one painting. Since then I’ve been working with fewer layers. It’s like I’m unweaving a tapestry.

BELASCO Now that you are two years into making body prints, do you see them as a distinctive family tree that you plan to continue through future generations?

FERRIS I hope so. There are a lot of logistical problems with the body prints that make for a very slow-moving process. I have no control of the heat in my studio yet. The idea of covering myself in oil in cold weather is not that inspiring. So far with the body prints I have been using strict limitations. It’s just me. I started off naked, now it’s me in my studio outfit, my work wear. There are no props.

BELASCO Your body prints seem to involve a form of double consciousness. When you are making them, are you thinking about the image that you are trying to achieve, or about the experience of your body?

FERRIS That’s an interesting question. I try to control the image, but often it doesn’t work out the way I planned. The most recent body prints are heavily pigmented. The earlier ones were more image-based, with a recognizable figure, but the new ones are getting more painterly, more layered.

BELASCO I don’t think you’ve talked about Warhol in your interviews. Some of your images, like *Echo* [2013-14] or *King* [2015], are reminiscent of his *Double Elvis* [1963]. Warhol is an obvious reference point for lots of artists, but those prints, especially when they are hung alongside similar prints, seem particularly Warholian.

FERRIS Any double print, particularly one featuring that stance, reads as Elvis. There’s a discomfort to lying on your stomach that creates an aggressive, getting-out-your-guns kind of position that I’ve been excited by. It seems to be a happy accident.

BELASCO It appears more “masculine.”

FERRIS Other body prints are very Venus-y. The ones that were in my show downtown at Chapter NY are voluptuously feminine. I wanted to have that range in them. I am always really interested in how people read my work and what they see. I hear a lot about the process and *Double Elvis*, but I would like the responses to range more widely.

BELASCO What do you mean by more widely? Do you want a more diverse group of people responding to your work?

FERRIS Having not made a lot of imagistic work before, I’ve been surprised by how specific the reads have been. In my first show of body prints [at Chapter NY], I thought one image looked like a black man, and one looked like a bird, and another like a fertility sculpture. In my editing process I tried to produce a diverse range of imagery. But most people seem to see only the process, and compare the works to X-rays, mammograms or degraded photographs.

BELASCO You are getting at something. People tiptoe around content. What are the associations that you and others have with these images, and how important are they?

FERRIS It surprises me how little others see subject matter, even if it’s an asterisk, or something really basic like a windmill. In my paintings and in my body prints I see more specific subject matter than other people do. And I accept that that’s life.

BELASCO I’m also interested in exploring the role of memory in your creative process. Let me offer a personal example. I’ve always appreciated seeing your work within the dizzying experience of the art fairs. I realize now that it is because your paintings trigger my own nostalgia for the 1980s, especially graphic design and some of the core features of the look that was prevalent then that is not prevalent now, such as bold colors, asymmetry and an aggressive style. What is in the soil that nourishes these family trees of your paintings and body prints?

FERRIS Definitely color, but color is hard to talk about. The only way I can verbalize it is with cultural or historical resonances in my life. One painting [*La Estrella*, 2015] has the color of my brother’s bike when he was nine and I was five. My childhood bedroom was purple, hot pink and green. I did not choose those colors.

BELASCO They were imposed upon you.

FERRIS It was very ’80s, looking back on it. I was born in ’77, so that era has to be deep in my psyche. I don’t really have nostalgia for it in the sense that I think it was better than the present, or that I particularly liked that time. The main way that I relate to it is through colors. The world is just very colorful to me.

BELASCO So color is connected to particular memories.

FERRIS It seems so subconscious. I don’t feel like my use of color has been influenced by anything I’ve seen in the last couple of months. I feel like it’s older and deeper, from the last 38 years. My current show was painted in California. People ask me whether the light there influenced me. But it didn’t, at least not in a conscious way.

BELASCO Are you describing a self-sufficiency in your own work? You are continually feeding it everything you see and think, so there comes to be an independent self-sustaining quality to the work.

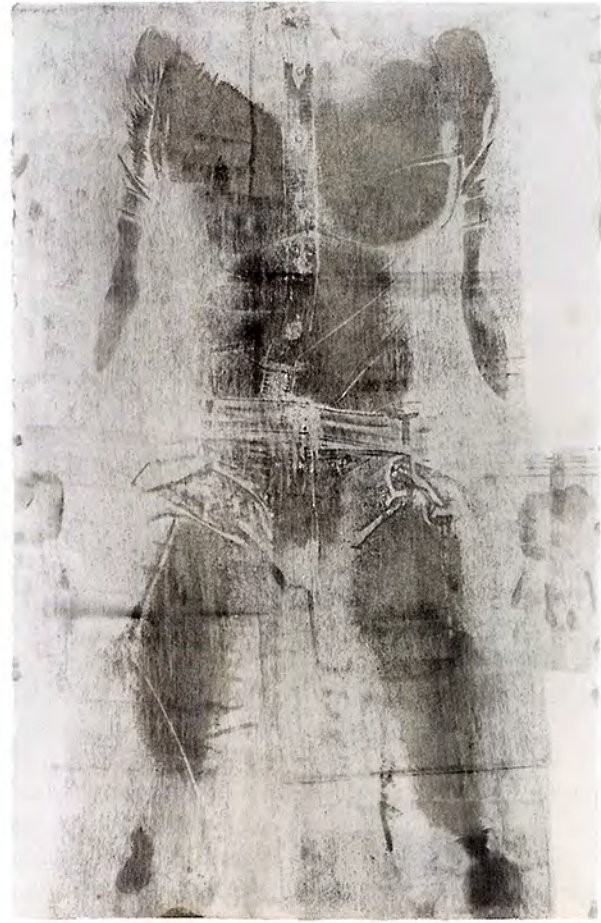
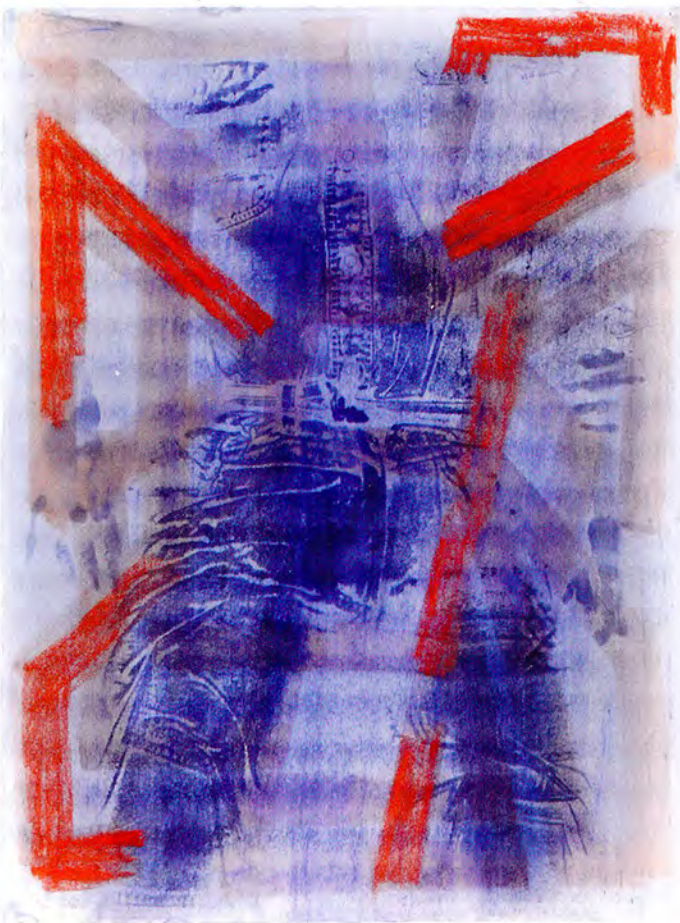
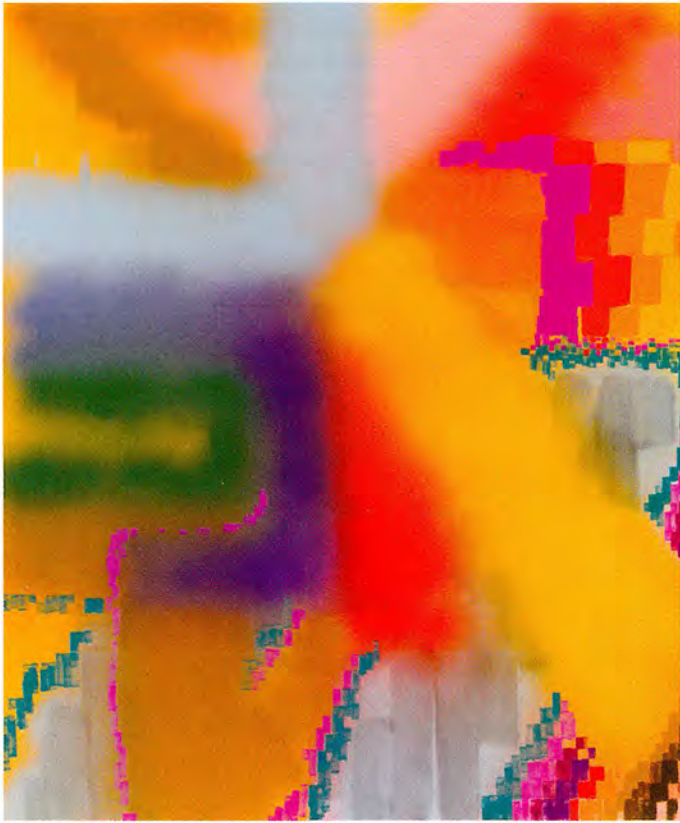
Opposite clockwise from top left:

Clocked, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches.

oRiOn, 2015, acrylic and oil on canvas, 72 by 60 inches.

Echo, 2013-14, oil and powdered pigment on paper, 40¼ by 26½ inches.

Bluet, 2015, oil and powdered pigment on paper, 30 by 22½ inches.





Opposite,
La Estrella, 2015,
acrylic and oil on
canvas, 80 inches
square.

FERRIS The more you paint, the more you feel that you are just guiding the work, or setting up the right kind of world where it can flourish, which is so romantic. And of course it doesn't just happen, but it definitely feels like that. It happens when you accept the kind of artist you are. I cannot make an argument that this art should be in the world or is what history has led to, but it seems to come naturally from who I am, and I have allowed that to happen. It's a little embarrassing to admit. I don't feel like the most hip person saying this.

BELASCO It's not carefully couched in theory. David Joselit wrote a piece a couple of years ago about networked painting.² He argued that in our post-postmodernist period there is no such thing as an autonomous painting. Every painting is networked with the world around it, the architecture of the gallery, the performance of the artist or some participatory mode of the audience. Postmodernism hammered most of the nails into the coffin of the autonomous painting, and I think Joselit is trying to finish the job. But in my experience of your work, there seems to be a need or a demand for it to be autonomous—an impression that has been borne out in our conversation.

FERRIS I do feel like I am trying to make autonomous work, but I do so knowing it's a venture that is probably going to fail, because the world is too contingent and networked and strategized. I know what you're talking about. I read that essay, and I felt alienated by it.

BELASCO When I've seen your paintings at art fairs, I've always thought they stood alone. Art fairs are relatively pluralistic situations these days, and it's not like you're the only abstract painter. So I had a purely aesthetic response to your work as being autonomous. But maybe it's not politically correct to talk about.

FERRIS Yeah, I feel uncomfortable admitting this. I am drawn to autonomy because it seems more populist. An autonomous work of art is something anyone can look at. Everything you need to know to "understand" it is right there. It's about you and your experience of looking at it. It's not about knowing the backstory of the artist, or the backstory of this work's relationships to other works. I'm hoping

that anyone can see it and think: I love it, I hate it, I get it, I don't get it. That's the hope for the autonomous artwork. That said, I do understand that this is not possible. You were at an art fair when you saw the work, or someone else saw the work in the gallery. . . . There is no such thing as a contextless work. I am not ignorant of that fact.

BELASCO There is no purity.

FERRIS There is no purity of autonomy. But that doesn't mean you can't try.

BELASCO I think we see that in how you pick up certain tools and make them your own. The spray gun is now so central to your practice that you've created a separate ventilated space within your new studio to continue using that tool. You've also used your body as an implement, which it seems you will employ for the foreseeable future. What are the other potential tools of creation that you are interested in, but maybe not yet ready to adopt?

FERRIS I want to add that the palette knife is essential; it's the fundamental tool. I am really interested in general in powder pigment, but I don't quite think of it as a tool. I work with powder pigment in the body prints, and with spray paint, which blows paint in the smallest bits. I like working with paint in its elemental form.

BELASCO Artists like Berni Searle and Anish Kapoor have used pigment as a sculptural medium.

FERRIS I've always wanted to do that. But I haven't. I think all my work has something to do with alchemy. I tend to break down the paint into its parts. I don't want to be just deconstructive, I want those things to all add up to a picture with imaginary space and illusion. Warhol was interested in cast-off parts of society that were ugly to the mainstream and the powerful. He elevated them. All that has definitely influenced how I paint and how I think of various tools. Spray paint still has a criminal, defacing association to it.

BELASCO It's subversive.

FERRIS Yeah. But other parts of my paintings aren't. The palette knife is the squarest way to paint there is.

BELASCO Straight out of Courbet and French Impressionism.

FERRIS I'm really interested in the class associations with painting on canvas.

BELASCO Absolutely. For centuries there was a hierarchy of mediums, and painting was at the top. With Greenberg, formalist abstraction became the preeminent form of painting.

FERRIS The medium is popular now but it's not preeminent, it's not the most haute. Painting's fall from grace is really great, because it's freeing for painters to not be working in *the* art form. That has actually helped it stay alive and vital. It has taken in effects and ways of seeing from other mediums. Connotations from outside the realm of high art are really important. I want my paintings to take us to other places, to make associations that are not about art history. But I also want you to be able to get to those or any associations without any backup or explication or excuses from me or the gallery or something you read. I want the painting to get you there on its own. ○

1. Quoted in John I.H. Baur, *Bradley Walker Tomlin*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1957, p. 15.

2. David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October*, no. 130, Fall 2009, pp. 125-34.

