

KELTIE FERRIS

IN CONVERSATION WITH ISABELLE GRAW



BLIND DATE ON PAINTING: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ISABELLE GRAW AND KELTIE FERRIS

Isabelle Graw: First of all, I have to admit to you that I haven't seen your work in real life. I've only seen your paintings in digital reproductions, which is very...

Keltie Ferris: ...inconvenient.

IG: Indeed. And this situation gets intensified now by our skype conversation, since we haven't met in person either. So we are dealing with a set up that is highly mediated by technology. When reading the interviews that have been conducted with you as preparation for this conversation it struck me right away that you seem to argue for an ethical position vis-a-vis painting. You often insist on the fact that "great abstract painting", as you call it, has to come "from a sincere place" or from an "honest internal spot." Now this is very different from the attitude towards painting that I've basically grown up with, which has been often summed up by the label "Bad Painting". For artists like Martin Kippenberger or Jutta Koether or Albert Oehlen or Michael Krebber it was crucial, at least in the early 1980s, not to believe in Painting with a capital P. They approached it without respect and opted for an attitude that was not based on honesty or sincerity at all, but on what I have termed a "second order expression"—inauthentic gestures, make-believe, index-effects and pretentious poses. How did you come to this place where moral categories like honesty and sincerity matter again?

KF: I guess eventually, irony turns in on itself. I believe that true sincerity in painting exists now—after Kippenberger and Koether etc.—

coming from a place of understanding your own sincerity and its pitfalls.

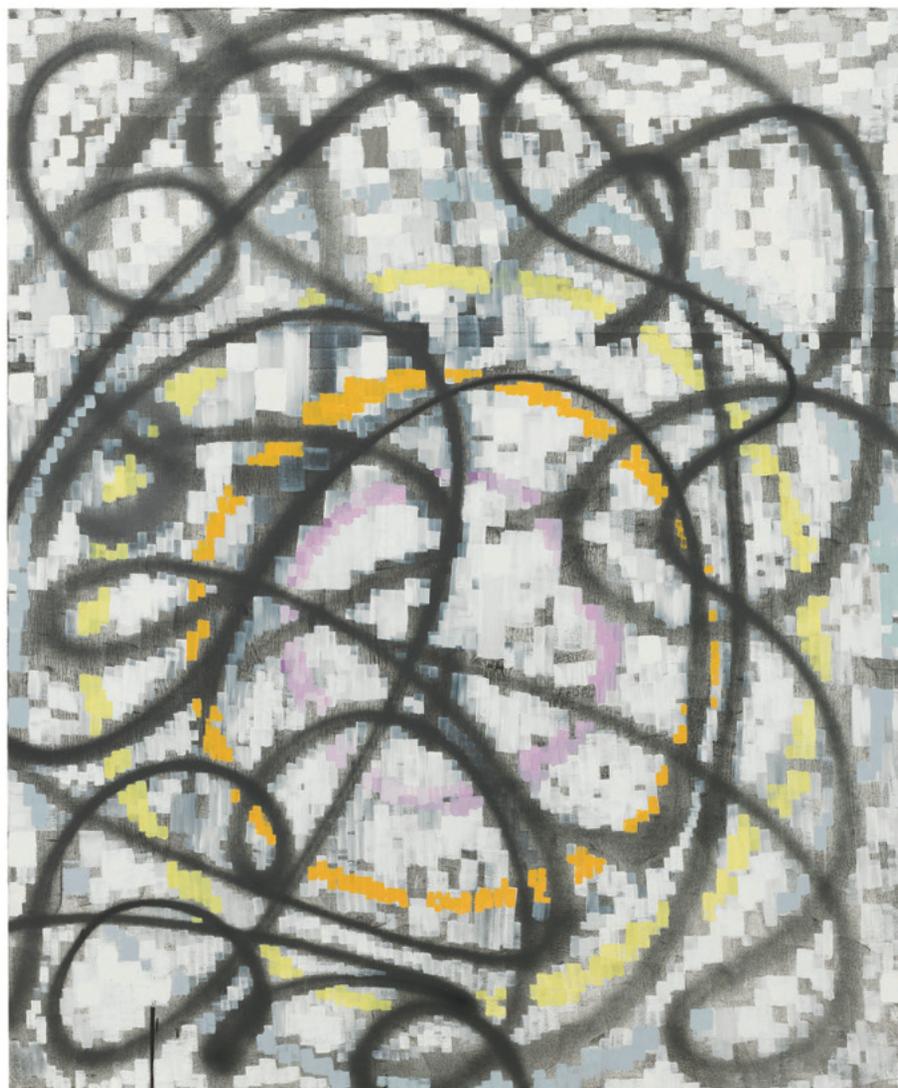
IG: Can you elaborate what you mean by "true sincerity" and "its pitfalls"?

KF: Learning from what you are calling "second order expression"—the looking back at yourself from a place of criticality—this can also be a way of searching for sincerity. To make something with real expression you have to understand how something maudlin or over-wrought can become a cliché. Or how repression and performance are just as much a part of authentic emotional feeling as is desire or anger. You have to understand that painting is based on a constructed language or is a constructed reality. Once you start to understand the pitfalls and the problems of your language, only then can you begin to build a language that is more honest and real. Sincerity doesn't have to be built on naïveté. In fact true sincerity is even more real if it comes from a place of understanding.

IG: But second order expression was a way of rejecting concepts like "sincerity" or "authentic emotional feeling"! Could one say that your honesty is one that is aware of the limits and pitfalls of such a concept?

KF: Yes, exactly.

IG: Since the turn of the millennium I have observed that painting is considered the medium of the hour by many art students. Young artists most naturally resort to painting without feeling any pressure to justify this decision anymore. This was very different up until the late 1990s where artists were under pressure to legitimize their choice. But since then painting managed to incorporate



the lessons of painting-critique (coming from Conceptual Art or Institutional Critique for instance). It thereby revitalized itself and seemed to lose its problematic status. Do you feel any pressure to justify your practice or do you assume painting's acceptance as a given?

KF: I'm very surprised how painting is so shamelessly embraced right now, so no I don't take it as a given. As a painter, I'm thankful for it, but I'm also frightened by how blind that acceptance can be. That said, I would never ask another artist of any sort to justify their choice or drive to work in a certain medium. Getting up each day, surviving each day, and bestowing as much care and love into what I do, that's the best I can do to legitimize it or justify it.

Now the problem of painting seems to operate in the opposite direction. If a painting, no matter how bad it might be, is always regarded respectfully as art, because painting is always art, how can it act discursively? And how can it question and explore the world we live in?

IG: For a long time in the history of art, painting was equated with art, art was painting.

KF: Yes and because of that painting doesn't possess the same insistent questioning powers that other mediums can have—say like performance. I'm envious of other mediums for that reason. I've accepted the limits of painting, its conventions, but I still see a glimmer of possibility for painting within this. Painting has been used to express such a range of emotional tenors—across a spectrum of sincerity and irony. Maybe I'm trying to find an expressivity that feels honest and appropriate for right now, not

corny or jokey. I don't know if I'm achieving that or if anyone can achieve it. Talking about it doesn't make me feel like it's possible, honestly.

IG: Painting in your case not only means aiming for an honest expressivity, which seems problematic to me considering that painting is a highly mediated and therefore by definition dishonest language. Painting in your case also means accepting a lot of conventions, starting from the picture on canvas as a format up to the historical connotations of spray paint. Historically the use of spray paint doesn't only evoke Graffiti Art, but also has been understood as an attempt to undermine authorship as in Ed Ruscha for instance or more recently in the works of Avery Singer. But every attempt to undermine authorship by opting for more automatic methods restores authorship at the same time. You too have used spray paint as a “distancing technique”, as you put it, but you insist on using oil paint for it. For me this is a way of reintroducing a sense of earthiness or vitality in the midst of a quasi automatic procedure.

KF: Your questions beckon another: does anyone really want to undermine authorship? If they did, they might do it more effectively. Or maybe the fact that it's so un-underminable, that's what's so fascinating about it.

In my work, I use a spray gun as a distancing tool, but I'm also using it gesturally. With a gun, you don't touch the canvas to make a mark and thus it provides a mechanized emotional distance. But in the end I'm making bodily, gestural paintings with drawn forms. I am interested in this dichotomy: the gesture of the body versus this mechanical distance. Also, for me there's



something freeing about using spray paint, because you can move; it's frictionless. It frees my movements, to run wild with the history of painting, but with a kind of disconnect—my marks do not become loaded with that gooey stickiness of say an ab-ex mark.

Originally, when I started spray painting ten years ago, spray painting on canvas was a “bad painting” technique. It felt extremely cheesy, like poor appropriations of graffiti, but now it's amazing to see how in ten years that's completely flipped, it's everywhere.

And yes, back to your question, I mix my own oil paint to spray through a gun because I love the lushness of oil, and I can control the color, and the color is so much more intense, and yes, earthy. There's a richness to the metal pigments in oil that just doesn't exist in spray cans. The color is heavy, the paint more opaque, but the application by spray gun is light.

IG: When I looked at your early paintings from 2012 which you showed at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, I felt that the zones of spray paint created more blurry surfaces on the canvas as if you wanted the painting to partly withdraw. Next to these pale, blurry zones we find paint that seems to have been applied with a brush or a squeegee...

KF: It's not a squeegee, it's a large palette-knife.

IG: Spray paint and the palette-knife—an anti-subjective device next to a device that has been historically used in order to create an impression of roughness or deskillling. But you use both techniques in a way that establishes a link to your body since its movements are traced. Maybe some zones appear to be withdrawing in order to withhold

this body that is evoked?

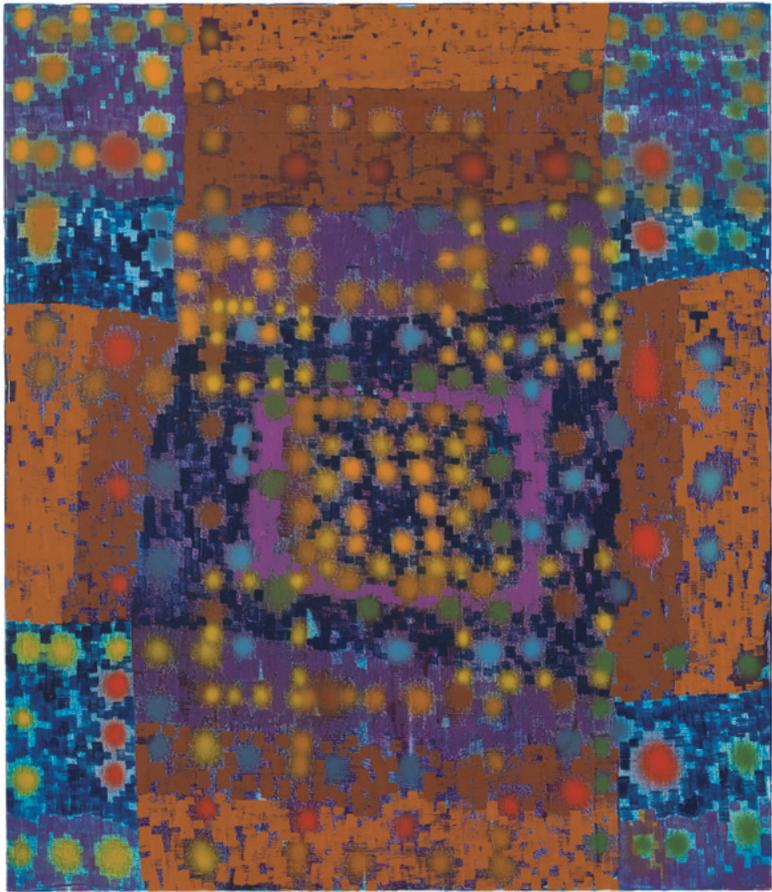
KF: Yes, I always thought the thinness and fine quality of spray paint needed some sort of antidote, a rougher texture. The palette-knife with its hard edges is the spray gun's alter-ego. To me the palette-knife evoked a workman-like, sculptural quality—like brick laying. If spray paint is part criminal, then the palette-knife is law-abiding working-class. A few years ago, I was more interested in the spray paint dot as a found mark, with no indication of human touch. In contrast to each other, both marks are amplified. With all that touch against lack of touch, you feel my residual presence (and absence) but I hope in a relatively dead-pan, emotionally distant kind of way.

IG: Could one say that formerly anti-subjective devices such as spray paint bring the subject in through the backdoor in your work?

KF: Yes absolutely.

IG: We have so far only addressed the internal dynamics of your paintings which often happens when your work is discussed. However, modern painting doesn't end at its frame and the idea that its borders would be clearly delineated is illusionary to my mind. I feel that we run the danger of perpetuating this illusion of an internal life of painting. By speaking about what's going on inside your paintings we hold on to the idea of an absolute divide between the internal and the external that is imaginary...

KF: By internal versus external do you mean imaginary versus real, or do you mean the actual edges of the painting?



IG: I mean the edges of the painting—both literally and metaphorically. Many postwar artists—think of Ellsworth Kelly or Robert Rauschenberg—have insisted on going beyond them.

KF: Many of my paintings present a centralized figure or form that is pulsating and vibrating absurdly in the center of the canvas. Its energy is robust but bound by those edges. So compositionally speaking, the form is not coming in from the edges, it's not bursting forward yet, but it has this sense of a potential energy, like something is about to happen, like a rock on the top of a hill. This is how the edges get questioned and exploded. Or at least this is what I am trying to do.

IG: Are you referring to a breathing and pulsating effect similar to what we find in a Rothko painting?

KF: Yes! Like in a Rothko. But there is also an absurdity to this animation/stillness-effect that I hope is Gustonian—like a late Guston. Maybe I'm speaking more literally than you are, but there's a containment and a potential of movement in the forms that I've been hoping to break more out of, in my future work. I would like my newer paintings to have more of a feeling of expanse, like this is a world that you could enter and see all around you. It's a long journey from one place to the other.

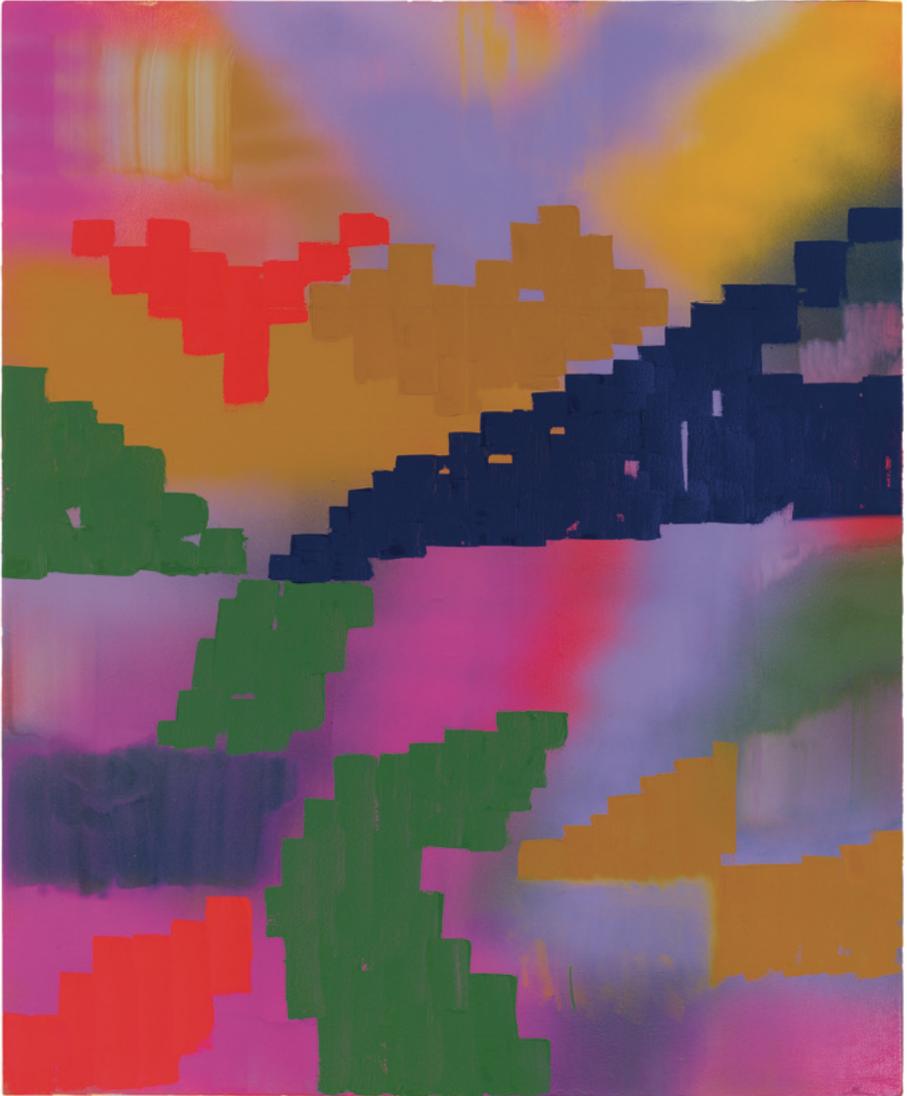
However, if by containment—you mean my work operates autonomously, well then this is another matter. Thus far, for me, the meat of each work is each painting—not the exhibition. I have mostly thought of my works as discrete and individual—and even as individuals! In the future I hope to bring my work outward, to have more activation

between works. But before I expand outward, I am hoping to have the internal dynamics of each piece where I want them to be.

IG: Speaking of expanding—your paintings are literally expanding since they have been mostly very large. They seem to insist on inscribing themselves into the genealogy of great male abstract American painters. One couldn't dismiss them as "little paintings"—which is how Jackson Pollock condescendingly called Lee Krasner's works. Are you trying to impose the importance of your work via its size?

KF: Yes and no. First of all there are a lot of very practical concerns for my choice of size. I paint more comfortably on a larger canvas, I'm a very athletic person and I'm much more at ease at a larger scale with larger shapes. But also I was painting in Los Angeles from January to June this year where everything is bigger, the studio is bigger and the sky is bigger. I don't have the space in my studio here in New York to store these big giant works, so I seized the opportunity when I was in L.A. That's the logistical reason. But yes, less practically speaking, I want my paintings to invoke the grandeur of history painting, action painting and color-field painting and even a cinematic scale. I am coming out of the NY school. And yes, I want my paintings to be unapologetic for taking up space, for being loud and obnoxious and calling attention to themselves.

Conversely, however, I recently also made quite a few 30 by 30 inch paintings, some of which I will show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in September, next to the very large works. So there's a scale of expansions in both directions, from intimate to grand.



IG: There is a smaller painting in the show where black loops coexist next to what I would describe as a pixelated impressionism. Some of your bigger new paintings remind me of religious posters that were omnipresent in Germany during the 1970s in the course of the liberalization of the Catholic church. We find very bright “sacred” colors in your paintings as well—like purple, red or yellow—that are mostly slightly blurred or nebulous next to more clearly painted zones. Some of these paintings seem to evoke the sunset or a light from within.

KF: Oh, yes.

IG: I was immediately thinking of Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise on painting “Della Pittura” from the 15th century where he ascribed a “divine power” to painting. Are you trying to create such a sensation that painting has a god-like agency?

KF: Well, I don’t know these religious posters you’re describing, but I’d love to see some. You mentioned pixelated impressionism and a sort of impressionist light which I am definitely interested in as well as pointilism. Maybe what you read as the divine or heavenly or as religious propaganda comes from the fact that I was partly inspired by a Matisian idealized utopia with naked figures dancing in a landscape. That kind of heaven-like idealization of innocence and freedom, including a free sexuality, all that is in there. But I don’t know if the divine is in there, I’m not even sure what the divine is...

IG: Well, painting is this divine power according to Alberti...

KF: I’m not sure if any of this is related to the divine, but I do take the powers of the

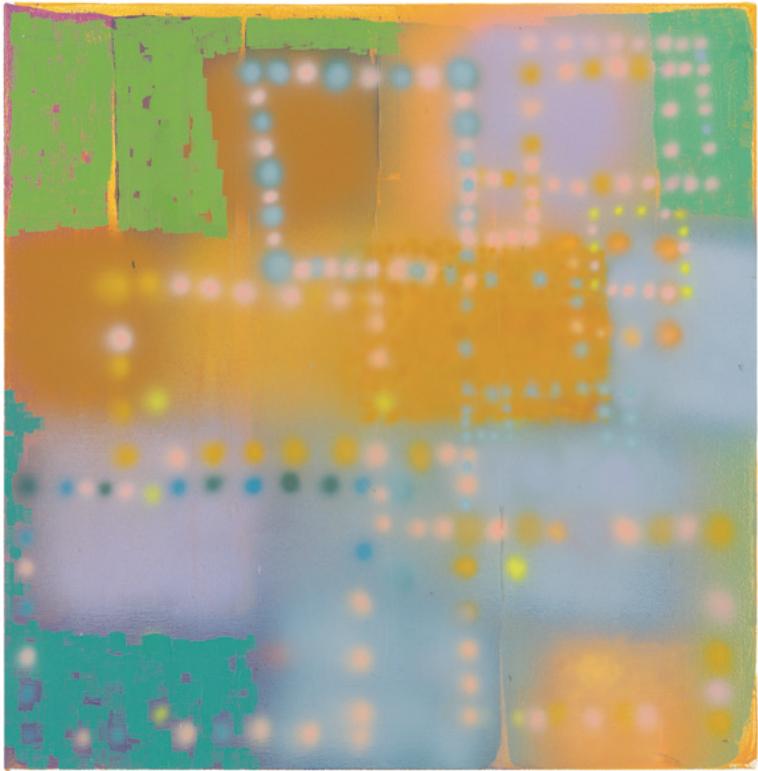
imagination very seriously. What we imagine has a way of becoming real, and being at least so in our perceptions.

IG: When you mentioned Matisse, I was thinking of the two smaller paintings that you will show. They have a kind of patterned surface and seem to embrace painting’s decorative potential—similar to how artists like Matisse or later Christopher Wool have approached painting as décor.

KF: I shy away from the word “pattern” in my work, since it has so many meanings—from mathematics to home décor. With so many associations it’s difficult to talk about it clearly. Also, pattern to me connotes flatness, and I am interested in spatiality. Instead, I think more in terms of marks, and building with repetitions of those marks to create greater forms. That said, like many artists I like to flirt with the decorative—it seems so unclassy and therefore exciting.

IG: Do your paintings allude to the digital world we live in because some zones in them look pixelated? Or do they give us a hint as to why painting is so desired in the digital age? I think that painting strongly suggests a way of life and work that has become very unlikely in our new economy: being on your own in a studio or barn as you are now and working in a comparatively self-determined fashion. Of course painters are exposed to all kinds of external pressures as well, but the way say Joan Mitchell lived her life seems very improbable today—she even retreated from her own social scene—something that seems outrageously impossible in our age of networking.

KF: Well, yes, solitude is very important to







the making of my work. You have to be at least momentarily disconnected from others to make a painting.

Before the digital read of my painting— basically before the rise of the iPhone— everyone saw cityscapes in my work, but now everyone projects the digital onto them. When I first started to paint abstractly, about 12 years ago, I was imagining an artificial man-made network, created by waves and light, that is an imaginary universe inside our collective mind and is interconnected. It's a grid; it's bedazzled and energized. It's very tangible for me this thing that I'm painting. But whatever it is, it's something of the future or the present turning into the future. This construct of interconnectiveness is what many interpret as the digital—if that's what people see then that's okay. I would never tell anyone how to interpret my work. However, I think the digital is simply a metaphor for a much larger and more abstract thing that I am painting and that I am thinking about.

IG: What is that larger and more abstract thing?

KF: I think it's the future or interconnectivity or artificiality, or construction itself, it's the things between things.

IG: And once you opt for this abstract rendering of interconnectedness, how do you deal with what Harold Bloom aptly called the "Anxiety of Influence"? I am thinking here of the body prints you were showing in 2014, which resulted from pressing your oiled body, clothed or unclothed, against paper on the studio floor and then dragging it through powder pigment. As soon as you make a body print you have this whole history of the body print in your head—from Yves Klein to

Jasper Johns to feminist artists like Janine Antoni or more recently Amelie von Wulffen.

KF: The body prints are extremely indebted to David Hammons. I made mine exactly the way he made his in the 1960s. I even began to make mine after I saw his prints. I hope that my body and I are different enough in this moment in time from David Hammons's body 50+ years ago. So our body prints will function and be interpreted differently.

The prints deal with anxiety and influence in that they are very influenced, openly so. I embrace that anxiety. The body prints are my attempt to literally bring myself into the work—to literally force myself and my own agency and identity onto my work. Because more and more my paintings have seemed to be on their own trajectory. They were becoming themselves, doing their own thing as if I were only shepherding them along. They have this bombastic emotionality that I love, but I also want to make work more from my subjectivity, by just literally bringing myself into it. The body prints were also a response to people always wondering, who I am— biographically speaking. Like right now, we're having this conversation supposedly because someone somewhere wants to know who I am, what I think and what I do. I'm just like everybody else, and I also have these peculiarities that are not like everybody else; I think the body prints bring my regularness and my difference literally to the table, to the horizontal plane.

IG: It struck me how photographic they look.

KF: Yes.

IG: But I was also wondering how they relate to the feminist history of art. Many women artists declared their body to be the







battleground in the early 1970s and used it as their material. But later on there was a discussion whether using one's female body didn't contribute once again to reducing women to their bodies which is anyhow what often happens. Doesn't the body print feed such reductionism?

KF: I would side with the earlier feminists. If your body is not the battleground or at least on the battleground, then it's probably not a real battle or you are just hiding. It definitely raises the stakes when you bring your own self into the picture. Also, I feel that my androgyny changes this conversation, since I am not normally an object of male desire or whathaveyou. Sometimes, the body prints appear male, and sometimes they appear clearly very female. So even though it's always me, it's not necessarily always a female body in the print.

IG: And apart from not always displaying a clear gender you are only seemingly present and factually absent in these works: your body is traced, but then it's not you, it's a highly mediated version of your body, right?

KF: It's mediated but maybe not so highly. I mean it's literally me touching the paper, like a potato stamp, I can't be any more direct than that.

IG: I noticed that many of them are headless...

KF: This is because my face either looks exactly like me, or it did look exactly like someone. And I want them to feel larger, more general than that. So I'm still struggling whether they are self portraits or whether they are not. They started off as self portraits, now I think they are very slowly moving

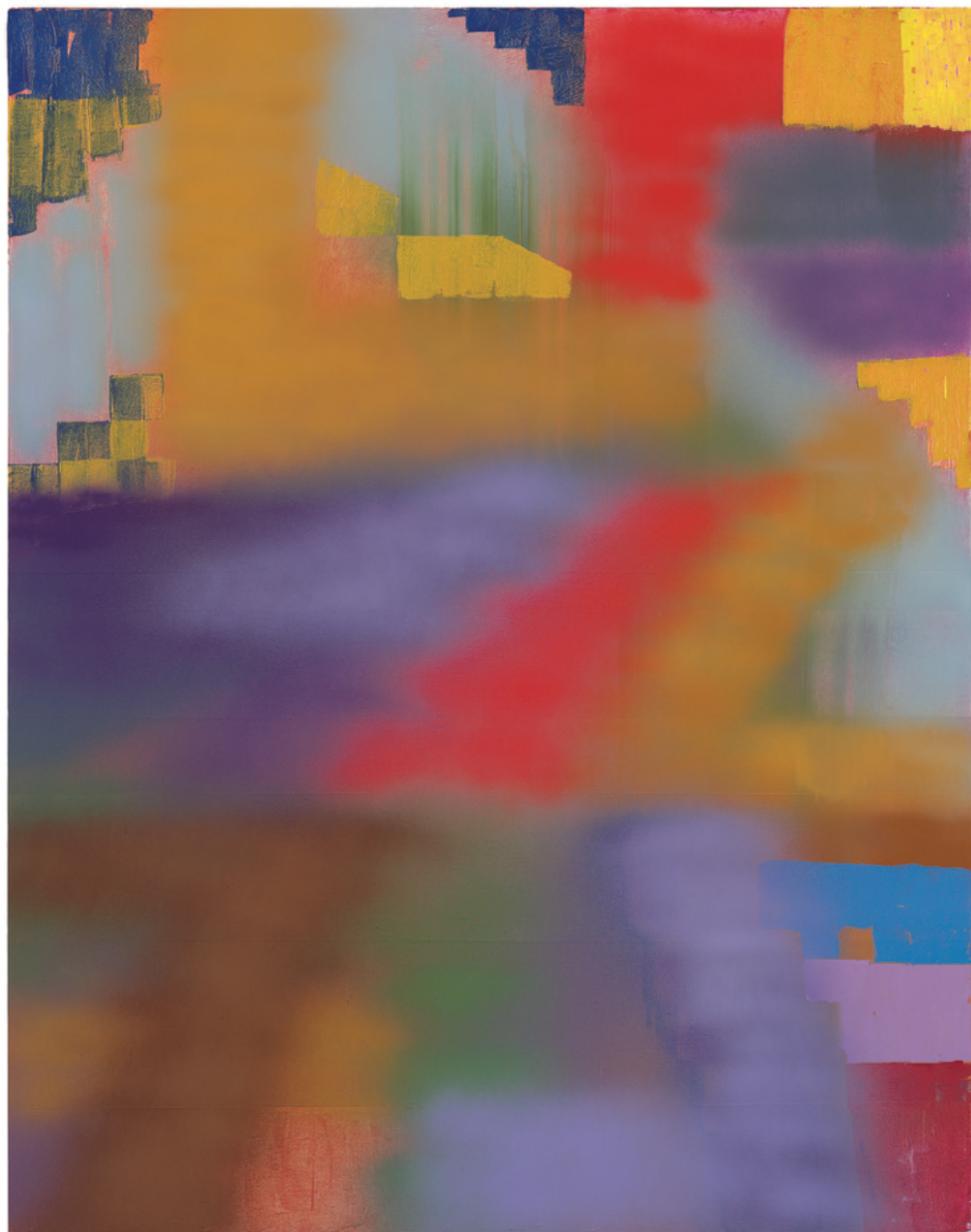
to a different, broader and more inclusive direction.

IG: There is a topos we have both been interested in: the idea that painting in particular gets perceived as a kind of quasi-person as if it had a life of its own.

For me it has been very important to underline the fact that this notion of painting being somewhat alive is what I call a vitalist projection. It is not really the case, but painting triggers this fantasy for reasons having to do with its specific semiotics. Many painters, from Bacon to Oehlen, have spoken more or less ironically about their sensation in the studio that their paintings are like persons telling them what to do. They activated a myth—the myth of painting's self-agency—and remind us that there is an experiential truth to it.

KF: Right, yes, it very much feels like that. When reading some of your essays on painting, I found this idea of yours very exciting. Painting is a very real thing and it's also full of illusions, and therefore alive in our minds. That's what is so exciting about it, that it's so there, tangible and tactile and real but full of spatial illusions, illusions of movement, and illusions of life. For instance, often people ask me that classic question: how do you know that a painting is done. While I'm working, the "conversation"—so to speak—between me and the painting feels so real, it's clear when it's done. It's not a problem for me.

IG: It is not a problem for you because you as an artist can make this arbitrary decision that doesn't have to be plausible to others. This is the last place where a sort of residual artistic freedom gets maintained. In reality the decision is arbitrary because you could have



considered the painting finished at a different moment as well, right?

KF: Of course, but I wouldn't! And I'm okay with this being called illusion or being called belief or, and this gets us back to our former point, divine. It sometimes feels like fate to me. Sometimes I ask myself: who made this and why, when I'm looking at my own work, or I feel baffled for a moment, and sometimes I feel, wow, this was just supposed to happen. I could have done so many other things with my life but I'm doing this and I guess it just had to be. And that's insanity, because of course I have agency and of course I have choice, but it really does feel that way—like a necessity or some grander momentum. These new paintings are almost a machine, making themselves now, like one pushing forward to the next one. So that's what I was talking about. It feels so real. It's funny to believe the myth when you are even making the myth. I feel like if anyone should be suspending their disbelief it should be me while I'm working—but I'm not.

IG: Many artists have made fun of this belief. I'm thinking of, say Sigmar Polke, who made this work "The Higher Powers command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!" (1969) which is basically activating this myth and making fun of it at the same time. You seem to take this myth rather seriously or am I wrong?

KF: I do take it seriously. I don't think of it as "higher powers" though, I think of it as the painting and that's why I was especially drawn to what you wrote, that the painting, is something outside of us, something intelligent and alive, but not divine, or a spirit. It's just a person. I often think of them like

children, you know you give birth to your children and then guide them as they grow and hope they turn out the way you want them to. Then you send them on their way to their own lives. It's not a higher power, it's between me and the painting, which is an alive thing. How you have written about it, it seems slightly different from the Polke joke, where there's a third entity, which I don't know whether that is creativity or the unconscious or spirituality...

IG: Polke was actually making fun of Joseph Beuys because Beuys often invoked higher powers due to his anthroposophical orientation. So the painting was mocking Beuys, but also resulted in a painting that seemingly had painted itself. I was just thinking about what you said about children—this idea of the artist's creativity being equated with biological procreancy is very old: artists in the Renaissance already thought of themselves as bearing children. But of course only men were supposed to act out their libidinal energies in this way—because women were supposed to be busy with "real" child bearing...

KF: It's funny how all the magic came under critique and doubt just when those of us who are not white men were finally allowed to participate. Until then the magic was alive— and men were allowed to make babies! I'm all for doubt and self-awareness but I'd rather not throw out the baby with the bathwater, to mix the metaphor. Besides, it's incredible that old Renaissance ideas can be taken by someone like me or anyone in 2015 and reshaped and given new forms that speak to the here and now, and hopefully the future. Somehow, painting by being a very old and very long-lasting medium seems especially well suited for that.

LIST OF WORKS

- 1 **oRiOn**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
72 by 60 in. 182.9 by 152.4 cm.
- 3 **Marksman**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
72 by 60 in. 182.9 by 152.4 cm.
- 5 **Story**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
90 by 80 in. 228.6 by 203.2 cm.
- 7 **L*y*r*a***
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
40 by 35 in. 101.6 by 88.9 cm.
- 9 **WoVeN**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
72 by 60 in. 182.9 by 152.4 cm.
- 11 **[P]y[X]i[S]**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
30 by 30 in. 76.2 by 76.2 cm.
- 12-13 **W(A(V)E)S**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
96 by 130 in. 243.8 by 330.2 cm.
- 15 **Facade**
2015, Oil and powdered pigment
on paper
40 by 26 in. 101.6 by 66 cm.
- 16 **Titan**
2015, Oil and powdered pigment
on paper
40 by 26 in. 101.6 by 66 cm.
- 17 **Jack**
2015, Oil and powdered pigment
on paper
40 1/8 by 26 in. 101.9 by 66 cm.
- 19 **Boxer**
2015, Acrylic and oil on canvas
100 by 80 in. 254 by 203.2 cm.

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