

**On Sunday, May 19th 2013, Artist, Kellie Romany and Art Historian and Curator, Romi Crawford met at the Arts Incubator Space in Washington Park to have a conversation about the artist's work in the show *Gestate*.**



Kellie Romany and Romi Crawford, 2013, image courtesy of Allison Glenn.

**Kellie Romany** is an abstract, non-representational, figurative painter interested in bodily representation, materiality, and the history of the painting process. Romany was born in Trinidad and moved to the United States in the late 90s. She received a Masters of Fine Arts in Painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2011 and a Bachelors of Fine Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2008. Romany has exhibited both nationally and internationally, including Sullivan Galleries in Chicago, Parade Ground Gallery in New York, Amel Bourouina Gallery in Berlin, Germany and Minninger Gallery in Cologne, Germany.

**Romi Crawford, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor in Visual and Critical Studies and Liberal Arts at SAIC. Her research revolves primarily around formations of racial and gendered identity and the relation of such formations to American film, visual arts, and popular culture. She was previously the Curator and Director of Education and Public Programs at the Studio Museum in Harlem and founder of the RC and Sloan Gallery (NYC, 1994-1998).

**Romi Crawford:** Hi, thank you for coming out this afternoon. I am in the position to get us started. I would like to get us started with a little bit of an introduction. I just met Kellie very recently, and I say that because I am really excited that we finally got a chance to meet and I finally had a formal opportunity to speak with her about her work and also to see the work. There is a lot of enthusiasm and good spirit here this afternoon. So that gives you an insight as to what the questions will be like. I will be asking questions that I genuinely have as somebody who has recently had an introduction to her work. I am not pretending that I have had these conversations with her in the past. With that, one of the first things I wanted to ask you has to do with frame and introduction. I am very curious to know how you describe your work and how you introduce yourself. So, how do you introduce yourself, and how do you describe and frame what you are up to?

**Kellie Romany:** I guess as a painter. I think being a painter is really important to me. At SAIC [The School of the Art Institute of Chicago] I once had a professor say that I had to choose whether I was a painter or an artist. I always thought that was a really interesting question. If I have to choose, I want to be a painter. So, I think I would introduce myself as a painter. The paintings are an extension of myself in a really big way. Most of them come from anecdotes, life experiences, my family, friends, specifically about me being a woman and living life in this body.

**RC:** So, I am glad I asked you that, because it is fascinating to me that you highlight so adequately and in such a clear way, painting. The relationship to painting and the body seems to be a core relationship in your work and in your process. Related to that, if you could speak a little bit about how you make the paintings and especially how you make these without a brush and then how the body becomes a really important way for you to access the painting and the painting practice.

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Found Image, von Luschan Scale

**KR:** I think there are several moments in the painting that my body comes into it. There are points in the beginning where I am thinking about the idea behind the painting. For instance, a lot of the paintings downstairs, some of the most recent paintings, are based on von Luschan's scale of skin tones. That process started by breaking down these thirty-six colors and only using these thirty six colors to make these egg structures. That [investigation of the von Luschan scale] started because my mother said to me a really long time ago that she was, I am not sure about the right phrase... She was talking about being black and how as a black woman she could only have a black child, and that as a white woman you can have any kind of child. I am not really even sure what she meant by that, but I always thought it was very interesting. My sister recently had a baby and the baby is a little white boy. So, my mom went to pick up her grandchild and he was in a sea of white children and she could barely pick out her grandson. Which I thought was really funny. So I became interested in this scale of skin tone and how we define ourselves as black, white, etc. The von Luschan scale has colors of one through thirty-six, so one through five means you are Caucasian, five and six means you are Asian, and so on. I started making these

paintings based around that construct. So the body is already in the structure. As I mix the paint, I have all of these bowls with paint in them and I start making these paintings. I don't use brushes. I am pouring it [the paint] and moving it around my hands. So in that way [the process relates to the body]. I am also always thinking about making something really seductive and beautiful that somebody will want to look at closely. To me that really resonates with being a woman, or how I feel about being a woman. The importance of how you portray yourself or what you are first seen as, that seduction. The paintings change over time. They wrinkle, and some of them yellow as time goes on. So I hope that somebody who lives with these paintings will start to see these changes over time and learn more about the painting over time and I feel like there is a really interesting relationship there to how somebody sees me or sees my body.

**RC:** It is a very complicated articulation of the body. So it is not a painting practice where the figure of the body shows up or it is not one where it's just about the stories or the narratives, like the one you described with your mom and your sister. It is actually in four different tiers. So it is about the embodied story that you care about or that is a concern to you, and there is some sort of bodily presence there in the idea and how you described it. Then there is this layer of using your hand to move the paint around. Of course, I am imagining there is a deep sort of physicality beyond the hand as you try to move around.

**KR:** One of the largest paintings I ever made [*Between*] was about ten feet by ten feet. I was making this painting and it was supposed to be two figures almost kissing. There was this moment of running from one side of the canvas to the other trying to control the paint with my body. I had this thought that there is only a certain limit to that with my body. There is a certain amount of square feet I can control; there is a certain amount of speed that I have and that limits what I am painting.



Kellie Romany, *Between*, 2012, oil on canvas, 120 x 96 inches, image: courtesy of the artist

**RC:** Do you want to stay within that limit?

**KR:** Yes.

**RC:** So that is an important perimeter. So that is kind of interesting in how it is work that has a clear investment – that the artist just spoke of; I am not putting that in there – she just talked about how the body is related. It is so convex and multilayered, so that is the second layer – the bodily movement. What was the third one? The von Luschan scale, that sort of thing. And the fact that many of the paintings, both those on canvas and those in the bowls, the paintings themselves start to have qualities of the body, the wrinkling, the skin. I was just thinking about the painting presence in the bowls, I have been thinking about this a lot in the past hour, how in the last week or so they have changed color. So all of this is to say that your work kind of teaches you something in many ways about how the body is actually a really much more complex, fascinating space for painters to work in than I think is given credit in 2013. About how the body is actually evolving, complex and not sort of a singular site of racial or gender identity. Your work and the way you talk about it has taught me that in ways I hadn't thought about it prior. I mean yes, I think about the body in complex ways, but it becomes a very clear thing to me in how it shows up in your work. I wanted to ask you other questions related to that, other questions about aspects of gender and sexuality. You also spoke to this and that is one of the things that shows up immediately when one sees your presence as a maker, as a woman, as a black woman artist as you identify. I want you to say something about some of the iconic, kind of graphic material. This mention of eggs, the representation of eggs that shows up and how that references gender, what you want to do with that and how you want to deploy that.



Kellie Romany, *21*, 2013, oil on board, 12 x 16 inches, image: courtesy of the artist and Joey Carr

**KR:** I guess for me the eggs are something that I can't get out of my head. Especially now, as a woman, you have so many choices. But there is this part of me that is always having this need to have a child or want a baby, or to procreate. I always found that urge to be fascinating because it doesn't seem to be something that we have a lot of control over. I think as a woman in your twenties, for a lot of us in this time, it is something you are really trying to be thoughtful about, but I think there is very little control there. My sister and I are very close and she never wanted to have a baby, and then she turned 23 and something clicked and she said that was all she wanted. I feel the same way. There was this time when something clicked, and I thought, oh crap, I have to do that? To me it is this really weird thing, because

the rational side of me, financially, my lifestyle, all of these things say no, that is a terrible idea, but there is a basic instinct there. I think who I am and having a liberal arts education and being so 'of mind' to have this instinct that I think is really controlling my life is very profound to me. I just can't really seem to get away from it.

**RC:** It is so interesting to me the way you talk about that from all of these other contexts that you speak to, like having a liberal arts education, being a woman of this era in 2013. You, of course, will have a lot of people saying, no, you don't have to have a baby. So you know that, and what you are speaking to is about something else. It is that something else that is so important for us to try to understand because it relates so much to your work. I think on a grander level it might be speaking to something that is kind of semi-unspoken as a politic. It is a weird thing to speak to in 2013 as a young woman.

**KR:** Yes. I read an article once that was talking about women's choices. So many women in their twenties don't want to have a baby, and so these women would try to go to the doctor to have a hysterectomy or get their tubes tied and they were not allowed to. The doctors would not perform this. There is something really interesting about that too. Even if you were to make the choice [to not have a baby at this age] it is almost like you are not really allowed.

**RC:** I'm struggling with the wheels of conversation here because I just wrapped up a women's literature course. Of course I struggled with all of the different quotes around women's literature and knowing better. I can justify it, as I always have over the years, that it is about the historical production of women as formal writers. But it seems like recently it has gotten clearer than ever, not just because of the constructiveness of gender, the multiple ways of interpreting what is a woman and what does that mean, but it seems to be complicated more than ever right now. So, I am actually really interested in being in conversation even more recently with makers, with thinkers, with people who are actually able to see the other side of that. Just because I am really curious about how these two tendencies are starting to evolve at the same time in a sort of parallel relationship. I don't think you are alone. There is someone I know that is working on a conceptual, theoretical project on motherhood, this idea of motherness. You are not alone. I guess another question that I could ask also relates to women. Beyond the egg, which is very present in a lot of the forms and structures in the paintings downstairs, what are some other forms, or types, or ideas that you might move into?

**KR:** So, I think I have different trajectories that I am working on at the same time. The two larger pieces downstairs are these kind of vaginal shapes. They, too, come from anecdotes, thoughts, and/or family interests. There is a painting downstairs called *Just the Tip*. I am Trinidadian, and in Trinidad the population is about 50% Indian and 50% Black [of African descent]. My grandfather is Indian and I grew up around a lot of Indian people. I recently read somewhere that women in India are bleaching their labia majora, I guess that would be the appropriate term. I just thought that was so curious, because it wasn't talking about women bleaching their entire bodies, which we know people do that. It was just this specific area. So I made that painting thinking of that idea. I sort of set parameters for myself. Most of the vaginal pieces I want the viewer to be able to walk into the piece and for their body to be directly reflected in the piece. So these pieces end up at a human scale and that is definitely a more recent parameter.



Kellie Romany, *Just the Tip*, 2012, oil on canvas, 90 x 76 inches, image: courtesy of the artist and James Powers

**RC:** What is interesting about the vaginal structures is about how this space is an opportunity space if you will. You mentioned the trend, of this thing that is happening. There is a bleaching phenomenon. Do you think that that says something about an intersection of race and sexuality, or race and gender and sexuality that is crucial to what your abstractions evoke? So it's about a coming together of conversations about race and conversations about sexuality.

**KR:** Yes, I definitely think so. I hope that a lot of it becomes really complicated. I am not trying to answer any questions. I do not want the paintings to make a specific statement or hold some kind of ground. Really, it's about presenting an experience, an experience that I have been through, or an experience I have thought of. I don't want it to seem like these are my thoughts on this, because I think everything is way more complicated than that.

**RC:** There is a point of access that I think you are thinking about and that you offer. Also, the bowls, the bowls have this shape that is universal and familiar to us. There is a point of access there of wanting to pick up and use them, which I think those gestures are really important, they speak about what other people can do or say in relationship to the work and what conversations they can have about it.

**KR:** Nicole [Seisler] was amazing to work with on that collaboration. She made all of those vessels. We were joking around about how at one point they are vessels. They can be eaten out of and they can be used, but then at another point they become paintings and they have lost that function. Then we talked about what could be next. Should we fire them again and put a clear glaze on them, making them useful again? When are they ceramics? When are they not? There is a kind of flux that we are still thinking about, and that we both find really interesting.



Kellie Romany and Nicole Seisler, *Gestate*, 2013, oil on porcelain, variable sizes, image: courtesy of the artists and Joey Carr

**RC:** Yes, and I think that is a really successful tension in that project/collaboration. I wanted the paintings to do two different types of work at once. I wanted to see them as bowl objects, and then I wanted to be able to see them as paintings only. Of course, that is an absurd, ridiculous sort of need to clarify, but the tension there is really dynamic and exciting. You look down and see or want to see a painting, but you also see paint in a bowl. That leads me to some questions I had about your painting process and maybe another aspect of materiality in the paintings that you do. This sense of, well in the bowls, the bowls are like petri dishes and there is this sense of experimentation. This happens on the canvas as well. I want you to say something about that moment of experimenting with the paint and with materials.



Kellie Romany and Nicole Seisler, *Gestate*, 2013, oil on porcelain, variable sizes, image: courtesy of the artists and Joey Carr

**KR:** In graduate school I worked with Frank Piatak and he is really interested in the chemical structure of oil paint and what happens when you mix it with different mediums. So I spent a lot of time working with those things and moving them around, seeing what happened. Once I understood them a little better, I started making paintings. I want to allow the paint to still be. I want to have a relationship with the paint where we are both giving something. We are both allowing each other to do certain things. I

don't want to have too heavy a hand. I don't want to make the paint do this. I want to coerce it, which is different. I mostly paint on the floor and I sit down and I mix color. I put different mediums in to make different things happen, thin, thick. Usually I will make multiple paintings at the same time.

**RC:** And then you see which one works for you?

**KR:** Yes, and again there is this relationship where I am trying to move the paint and I am running around the studio with different sized wedges. Doing the vessels with Nicole was actually a really interesting process. We did it downstairs in the gallery. We laid out all of the raw vessels in the gallery, took a look at all of them. It was a really awesome experience. I sat for most of the time. Nicole would stand and bring the bowl to me. I would then look at this beautiful thing which is different than a canvas because these were all different. Then I would do my thing and look at it and say to Nicole, "I am ready," and she would come and lovingly take the bowl and put it down in a different spot in the gallery. Because the gallery downstairs is half glass, we had all of these people looking in. I don't think the space has ever been used in this way, where someone is actually making in there. So there were lots of curious people. We had one guy knocking on the glass. He asked us if we were glazing. He said, "I remember when I used to do that."



Kellie Romany and Nicole Seisler, *Gestate installation process*, 2013, image: courtesy of the artists and Joey Carr

**RC:** So you sort of became a spectacle?

**KR:** Yes, it was a unique experience.

**RC:** You mentioned that the collaboration was new with Nicole and, of course, I think, really successful. I am curious. Are you interested in performance? In the way that you were performing downstairs, you were there and people could see you.

**KR:** I don't think so. I think that that was very specific to this place and I don't know that I would want to do that in any other environment. I think that was very specific to this space, here in Chicago, on the south side. That is what made it so interesting. I don't think I would be as interested to do that in my studio and have a bunch of artists come and see. I think that is different. The investigation is different. The viewer is different and I think the way I would view the experience would be different.

**RC:** Yea, I kind of assumed that answer. I ask because it solidifies or clarifies your interest in the experimentation with the paint. While you are interested in experimenting in a really intense way with paint and what paint can do, these multiple reactions and how it reacts differently, you are not necessarily saying you are somebody who is an experimentalist in every way. That is important.

**KR:** This is my first collaboration and it is not something I ever thought I would do, but it has worked out beautifully. Working with Nicole was amazing and it just came together really easily and I would definitely do that again.

**RC:** This had to do with some kind of important reaction. You are trying to get some reaction with some new material. Another question I had is going back to the palette. In your statement downstairs you describe the types of colors and lack thereof that you work in. Of course, we understand your relationship to the von Luschan scale. I was wondering if you could say a little about this, because I think it also has a little bit of this science-ish edge, kind of skin tone and pantone and the constructiveness you were getting into earlier around there being a set number of skin tones and thinking of that in terms of other scales such as those used in painting or for painting?

**KR:** The palette is definitely structured and there is definitely a perimeter there. Thinking about the body, there are certain threads in there as well. I don't know how much that palette will change in the future. I am trying to think how to articulate this. There was this lecture I went to of Albert Oehlen's. He has this drawing of a tree. He was talking about being an artist and making images and how far you can push an image until it is no longer that thing. I think I am really interested in that as far as the vaginal shapes and the egg shapes. I guess, like how far until they no longer have that effect.

**RC:** I was really curious about that in your work too. Can they get lost? Some of the works in the bowls are going about this evolution and change and progression in a way. Here you have already set up that logic and I was privy to it. I was thinking of the paintings in the first room in relationship to that. I could imagine some sort of project where those structures disappear. What might be there as the rest of the residual part of that?

**KR:** You know, I don't know yet. I think only time will tell.

**RC:** It makes me want to run between the two spaces to think about something like that. Some of the bowls do reveal these very simple shapes. The reason I bring up the word "residual" is because some of the bowls feel like there is just a little residue.

**KR:** In some of the bowls. I actually painted one and poured some of that paint into another. So it is actual residue. So the left over of one becomes the next.

**RC:** That seems like a really important aspect of your experimentation. As you say, you make a couple of paintings at once and then you see which one has the results that you want. It also seems like another aspect of that experimentation is that there is always some really important part of the experimentation process, like the residue, that is useful in some way. If not literally in the work, then in the methodology.

**KR:** Definitely.

**RC:** I think it is a really interesting work in terms of a set of methods and parameters and limits, again, all language that you have used.

**KR:** Yes, those things are all very important to me.

**RC:** So there are these structures, these parameters and limits that relate to how you want to mess with the paint on one side. Then there is this other piece of the puzzle which is this juicy, salacious narrative content, like stories, you have said, that may come from twenty years ago. They are kind of complex stories and narratives. I want you to say something about the process in terms of how those come together. I think we have some insight into it, but there is not as clear of a method there. What kind of stories do you gather? Are you actively gathering stories?



Kellie Romany, *Inked*, 2012, oil on canvas, 68 x 58 inches, image: courtesy of the artist and James Powers

**KR:** I wouldn't describe it as actively gathering. I think it's more thinking and reading and things just coming together. I am going to be a little graphic. I was in Spain last year and I got this dish, squid with squid ink. This was literally a whole squid with its ink – never again, by the way. Then I started thinking about ink and being inked and what that means. Then I started thinking about being a woman and menstruating and menstruating on a man, inking a man. And then I made the painting downstairs called *Inked*. So I don't think I am gathering that. It's that I have an experience, then I am in Spain eating squid and then painting and thinking about that. It is very serendipitous. It is more like it comes together. The thing with my sister and her baby, for example, I can't plan that she is going to have a baby that is really light skinned right? That irony just happened.

**RC:** Really interesting answer because you are the person that knows how to create these really cool structures around one thing. So there might be another person who has a really structured relationship to the stories. Some other person might have a notebook with volumes of stories, but you are not that person. Although you have the ability to do that because you have done it with paint. That is something also that appears to me as an interesting way of using different impulses and bringing some sort of tension together; one which is around the parameters of the structures and one which is very open, loose, and serendipitous.

**KR:** The painting themselves have that too.

**RC:** There is something there with how you bring some sort of process and the form together.