



Colleen Kiely—**Tangerine Twist**, 1998, courtesy of Judy Ann Goldman Fine Art.

Judy Ann Goldman Fine Art/Boston Colleen Kiely

Colleen Kiely does more than flirt with bad taste; she climbs into bed with it, and the fact that she emerges from this liaison with our profound respect is a tribute to her remarkable abilities as a painter. Kiely's illicit passion is for the maudlin world of the sad clown, of the pony in the pink tutu, a world marked by desperate bathos. In *Buttercup Kiss* a smiling pink giraffe with glitter-encrusted hooves emerges from a tapioca field of pale yellow. Standing precariously on a chartreuse ledge, legs bowed like a newborn colt, she smiles her goofy smile; she is completely trusting and completely vulnerable. There is something perverse about the image, a disjunction between saccharine naiveté and the knowingness of the artist who offers up this victim for our delectation. She handles the paint beautifully, like a baker slathering icing, but the transformation of these kitsch objects into powerful works of art feels like a kind of violation. I was reminded of Jon-Benet Ramsey, the murdered child beauty pageant queen whose tragic story offers the same mix of violated innocence, prurience, and sentimentality. This disquieting mix is more explicit in *Ruby*, where a cute, smiling bunny offers up a bloody heart on a platter like an Aztec priest at a ritual sacrifice. (In a strange way this image is less disturbing; the cuddly creature is now the perpetrator of horror rather than its helpless victim.) And anyway, we don't really need these clues. Even the seemingly innocuous *Tangerine Twist* is filled with cruelty. The grinning horse who cranes his garlanded neck toward us is almost certainly about to feel the cut of the butcher's ax. Too fragile and awkward to support his own weight, he is unfit for this world, but, against all odds, pathetically proud and eternally hopeful.

In these paintings Kiely has discovered a powerful undercurrent of the grotesque in modern American childhood. This is Disney as seen through the eyes of Francis Bacon, a vision all the more nightmarish for its lack of overt horror.

—Miles Unger