

THURSDAY, APRIL 12, 2001

Kiely's 'Glimmer'

Painter Colleen Kiely brings her awkward, endearing menagerie to the Bunting Fellowship Program at Radcliffe. Kiely calls her show "Glimmer" because she focuses on the edge of perception, the place where meaning slips into place and then vanishes. The animals she paints — mostly ostriches and giraffes she studied at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology — might be animals, toys, or people.

They cross species; they cross genders. They cross definitions of art, mixing paint with lowbrow craft media like glitter. They are real enough, with long necks or beaks or downy hair, but they take on heightened meaning with their giant, Hello-Kitty eyes and make-up. "Ostrich with Stretched Neck" confronts with its awkwardness: a long, flushed neck rising to a flat, downturned beak and severe eyebrows with sparkling eye shadow. It's the ugly duckling, dressed up but still ugly as sin, poor thing.

"Giraffe with Nimbus (No. 1)" also has a graceful long neck, not to mention green skin, seductively hooded eyes and impossibly long eyelashes. It is a parody of seduction. Yet the extreme effort is what makes these animals charming. Kiely cites "Wild Geese," a poem by Mary Oliver as "the heart" of her work:

"You do not have to be good.

*You do not have to walk on
your knees*

*for a hundred miles through
the desert, repenting.*

*You only have to let the soft animal
of your body love what it
loves."*

Perhaps these giraffes and ostriches, for all their gawky flirtatiousness, are in some sense the soft animals of our bodies, daring to dress up, to have fun, to love what they love. If so, more power to them.

By Cate McQuaid