

# Kiely's works offer unnerving mixtures

By Miles Unger  
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Colleen Kiely's paintings can make you feel a bit queasy. Sure, these bunnies with their chubby cheeks, the gawky giraffes with their big doe eyes, and long-necked ostriches with goofy faces are sweet. In fact, they're way too sweet. Spend time with her awkward menagerie and you might feel like you've eaten too much icing right out of the can.

Kiely's images have an uncanny ability to both attract and repel. Beautifully painted, often in cheery pastel colors, and festooned with glitter and sequins, they have an unsettling presence. (Imagine a devotional icon featuring Tinky Winky of the "Teletubbies," and you'll get some sense of the weird mixture of ingredients.) They wallow in pathos even as they expose the way certain artifacts are calculated to tug at our heartstrings.

Pathetically eager to please or slightly deranged, her creatures seem to combine a child's desperate neediness with an adult's disappointment.

Now 38, the artist honed her skills at the Rhode Island School of Design and in a graduate program at the Museum School. But "the real formative experience," she says, came from a part-time job she held while in school: stocking gift centers in Osco drug-

stores with stuffed animals and inexpensive ceramic figurines.

Handling these objects and, more important, interacting with the customers who purchased them, allowed Kiely to make an emotional connection to her childhood. "When I was working with these figurines, I was interested in the way most people collect things, and how we invest these objects with feelings, with our needs," she explains.

"My grandfather had a business selling religious articles.

Growing up there were all these figurines around the house that my grandfather had bought. This job, it forced me to reexamine my roots. They were a part of my own background and experience that I had left out of my work."

Very quickly, Kiely has become an artist on the fast track. In

1998, she made her debut as one of the Museum School's "Traveling Scholars" exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts. Since then, she's had a solo show at the Judy Ann Goldman Gallery and been included in an exhibit of Boston-area artists at the Rose Art Museum. She currently has a solo show at the Maurine and Robert Rothschild Gallery at Radcliffe College, where she is completing a yearlong stint in the Bunting Fellowship program.

Rita Brock, who directs the

Bunting fellows program, notes the "nervous laughter" provoked by Kiely's work. "What intrigued me was the way things that seem innocuous or cute are turned into something nightmarish."

At her Somerville studio, Kiely defies the expectation set up by her paintings — an artist who is all raw nerve endings. Looking younger than her 38 years, she is dressed practically in khaki slacks, jeans shirt, and running shoes. She is thoughtful and soft-spoken, almost shy.

Kiely traces the sources of her art to her middle-class Catholic childhood. Yet she describes growing up in North Providence without much of the angst with which many creative types recall a suburban childhood. Art was not an integral part of her life.

Asked what led her to become an artist, Kiely recalls: "My father was a mechanical engineer. When I was a kid he would bring work home. He would often stay up late drafting. I think that definitely had an impact on me." But it was not until high school, and a class with an inspirational art teacher, that Kiely began to contemplate building her life around art.

Kiely's paintings alternate between cruelty and pathos, or, as she puts it, "between aggression and vulnerability," revealing a profound ambivalence toward the

culture in which she was raised. There is an element of sympathy, but also a distrust for its mix of piety, sentimentality, and crass commercialism.

Kiely recalls another crucial moment in her art when, following graduate school, she had a job drawing illustrations for giftware, with scenes featuring images of Jesus. She remembers being asked by the company to make her Jesus "sexier."

"So I gave him collagen-injected lips, big doe eyes, and longer tousled hair," she recalls. "When I finished, Jesus looked like he was appearing on MTV — and the client loved it."

The artist continues to draw on this mix of repressed sexuality and emotional neediness as a potent source for her own art, embracing both "attraction" and "repulsion."

"I think, for me, Catholicism was very formative culturally. . . . the veneration of the object, that sense of the body as a sensual entity, but on the other hand as something to be dismissed," she says.

She makes the connection explicit in "The Rabbit Madonna," on view in the Bunting show, a larger-than-life bunny based on the traditional image of the Madonna of Mercy.

"It's important," she says, "to have moments of beauty side by side with moments that are more disturbing."

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Colleen Kiely has a show at Radcliffe College.