

## The New Painting: A Widening Discourse in the Nineties

the lovely picture with its chaotic underpinnings. This montage of conflicting images and switchbacks between painted illusion and paint itself becomes the equivalent of contemporary life's disparate realities, such as the everyday physical world combined with escapes offered by memory and dreams, or the contradiction of consumerism and pop culture with the spiritual, or even the concrete opposed by the virtual world of technology.

The realities of pop culture and consumerism also figure prominently in the work of Colleen Kiely, who explores them in slightly more subversive ways than McCarthy. Kiely's images of oversized, overwrought cuteness connect with the consumer culture that Jeff Koons sends up so succinctly with his porcelain pigs, blooming puppies, and enshrined vacuum cleaners. Beyond the mere acquisition of stuff and knick-knacks, however, Kiely probes our emotional investment in inanimate, adorable objects. Her paintings have links with real, somewhat bizarre cultural phenomena that quietly take place beneath the scope of high culture. There is in the heartland, for example, an annual Kewpie Doll convention that's thronged by fervent international collectors. Not far away, a large factory and theme park are devoted to Precious Moments, particularly cloying ceramic figurines of children. There, a Precious Moments Chapel, seasonal holiday displays, and, of course, a large gift shop draw busloads of tourists year-round.

During college, Kiely worked in drugstore gift aisles, stocking knock-offs of these items and taking note of their popular attraction. But her interest does not stem solely from critical irony regarding popular taste, as one suspects of Koons:

I was interested in the way most people collect things, and how we invest these objects with feelings, with our needs. My grandfather sold religious articles. Growing up, there were all these figurines around the house. The drugstore job forced me to examine my roots . . . my own

background and experience that I had left out of my work.<sup>14</sup>

Quality crafting—what consumers increasingly seek in pop culture tchotchkes—is also lavished on Kiely's images. Her lush, expressionistic brushwork, occasional sprinklings of glitter, and inflated scale imply "value." Adorableness, an essential part of their allure, is mixed up with adoration, both religious and secular. *Rabbit Madonna* (2000, plate 63) may be one of her more syncretistic images, combining consumer kitsch, Catholic symbolism, and sly references to two of art history's more revered Madonnas—Piero della Francesca's *Polittico della Misericordia* (1445–1462) and *Madonna del Parto* (1467). Nearly six hundred years later, Kiely's version is an apt symbol for today's crazy stew of secular, religious, and consumer culture.

Lucy White's bright little paintings, meanwhile, are equally innocent and popularly appealing, though a bit slyer in their conceptual content. While White's earlier works were constructions that evolved into abstractions or patterns and incorporated romantic additives like lace, seed pods, and leaves, *Blue Eyes* (1996, plate 67) may be a transitional piece. Its patterned abstraction of felt circles that the artist cut out freehand resembles a sea of gazing, blissful baby blues and feels more cartoony than romantic, a bit reminiscent of Ellen Gallagher's strategies of tiny object/image flat up against planar surface. White carries both application and paint over and onto the deep, built-up sides of the work, making a textural and three-dimensional object that defies pigeonholing as either painting or sculpture. Cutting her own circles, White explains, "gives them a tiny individuality and animates the overall surface—not in a chaotic way, but in a very active way because there are so many. You see some areas being squeezed and other areas with a bit more breathing space. The sides of the piece are an active part, and comment on the painting's content or process."<sup>15</sup>