

Colette: New Paintings & Work

Although Colette's new paintings are not out of place in the current panorama of neo-expressionist work, it is more important to consider them in the context of the wide range of her other activities. Like paintings by Jonathan Borofsky or Robert Longo, Colette's images relate to a variety of work in other media and to ideas extrinsic to painting itself. One feature of Colette's extensive performance activity has been that each event or series of events has generated the production of objects or artifacts directly associated with the specific content of a performance. This was in part a reaction against the late-'60s practice of having documentation be the only residue of a performance. Her new paintings, in this connection, are the culmination or end product of a continuous series of performances and street works that occurred over the past several years.

At the core of Colette's work is a nomadic principle, an openness to any media, materials, or cultural network as a means of circulating images or ideas; neither performance nor painting is valued above the other. Her new works relate in important ways to paintings she did in the early 1970s but they also grow out of a decade of activities in other media. Specifically, the new images emerge from a long-range work conducted by Colette from May 1980 to May 1982 involving her Beautiful Dreamer Uniforms. During this period Colette consistently appeared in public wearing her "uniforms", a reductive costume derived from the fabric-covered interiors of her living environments; it was an experiment with the idea of "walking architecture". Most of the new paintings incorporate images of herself in these costumes, drawn from a variety of public performances and street works.

The most compelling of Colette's new pieces are large triptychs, dominated by the formalized poses from her uniform series. What immediately distinguishes her paintings from much current work is her remoteness from the aggressiveness and weightiness seen in recent German and Italian art. The delicacy of her color and finely wrought surfaces bespeak a very different kind of expressionism. The figures in Colette's paintings coalesce out of a broken, shifting web of calligraphic touches that define multiple trajectories and overlapping planes. Her distinctive drawn line descends from street works she did in the early 1970s, a decade before the ongoing wave of graffiti-inspired artists. Colette did numerous, large-scale street drawings, using a highly personal system of inscription, a ritual code that she employed both as an enigmatic language and as the graphic basis for large images occupying the width of a city street.

Unlike the conventional mural products of some graffiti-type artists, Colette worked with more expansive and elliptical kinds of markings that are experienced as cryptic traces to be deciphered, like many of the areas in her new paintings. As in most of her work, Colette's paintings use several modes of address, reflecting her enduring concern to speak to multiple audiences, large and small, elite culture and mass culture. As self-portraits they effect the insertion of the self into a mythological order, invoking the forms of sacred and ritual art, suggesting the hieratic figures of Ma an and Buddhist art, and elevating her image from the doll-like status it had in the uniform pieces.

In those free-flowing performances, Colette sought to define herself as an immediately recognizable sign, with the instant readability of a cartoon character. In the paintings, though, the body is transfigured into a pure iconic emblem, set in kaleidoscopic fields of flickering color tinged with gold. The metamorphic impulse in Colette's work operates on both a psychological and environmental level. The self and its material surroundings are each objects of transformation as part of a visionary attempt to diminish estrangement of the individual from its immediate milieu. In a sense she is extending the utopian ideals of modernist design, of de Stijl and the Bauhaus, in terms of aspiring to total control in shaping not only one's physical environment but also in the aesthetic forging of individual identity. Architecture and the self become interconnected territories for formal modification. Colette's art, like Warhol's, is bound up with the idea of uninterrupted performance, so that her physical presence itself becomes a kind of signature, a trademark. Both of them have experimented with various ways of integrating art making and commercial production, playing with the ironies of that intersection and with the reduction of the artist to commodity status. Colette undertook the step of establishing a business corporation for the distribution of her Beautiful Dreamer Products.

Projects carried out around 1978 included the marketing of clothes, a perfume, furniture, candy, a pinball machine, dolls, and record albums as part of her Reverse Pop series. Often her presentation of these items involved the framing device of a store window. While Colette may share with Warhol a cynicism about the marketplace realities of contemporary culture, she shares none of his cynicism about making art. Regardless of what kind of product she creates or what economic circuit she places it into, she always endows her work with layers of sensuous and evocative content. The hard edge of Colette's work as a whole has been how her frankly utopian ambitions have effectively coexisted with a blunt de-mystification of art as a commodity form. On one hand Colette is a key part of what Robert Morris recently defined as the Joseph Cornell tradition in contemporary American art: an art of reverie, of innocence, which she has expanded to an environmental and urban scale. But at the same time the ethereal luxuriance of her work is linked to a tough critique of cultural consumption and the absurd logic of fashion. These new images continue this dialogue. Colette's work in fabric and other materials has affected her treatment of the canvas surface and handling of paint. In each painting she builds a discontinuous field, a vibrating indeterminate space, as if generated by the very presence of her figures. The structural and symbolic center of the painting is the figures eyes, emphatically delineated; all other bodily features are depicted provisionally. The eyes, like those in Egyptian or primitive art, become correlatives of the paintings' visionary aspirations: an attempt to forge an adequate image of human potential for transformation.

- Jonathan Crary, Introduction from "Colette: New Paintings & Work", Verlag Kammerer & Unverzagt, 1985