

Painter Colleen Kiely brings the face beyond portraiture

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated March 18, 2021



Colleen Kiely's paintings at Steven Zevitas Gallery may look like portraits.

They depict imaginary people, conglomerations of women from art historical paintings and elsewhere. Don't go looking for the sources. Kiely, a Boston painter, isn't making references. She aims to divert us from our reflex to identify a person in a portrait.

The show's title, "This Ain't No Party, This Ain't No Disco," is a lyric from the Talking Heads' dystopian song "Life During Wartime," in which the protagonist's identity and appearance shift. So it is here.

Each woman wears a boldly patterned top that jumps declaratively off the canvas. But the women themselves often look whispery. In "Eva," neon pink breathes beneath a topcoat of palest gray. She's like a chameleon, as the two colors mingle quietly in the background and in her skin. Then the pink rises and streaks over the surface of her hair. Her face seems to shudder and glow. Eva wears an eye-catching floral print; its flagrant pattern contrasts with her coalescing face.

Colleen Kiely's "Eva." COLLEEN KIELY AND STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY



Colleen Kiely's "Sam." COLLEEN KIELY AND STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY

“Paula” is less ghostly. Her face, while more contoured than Eva’s, still quivers with facture, the tenderness of coming-to-be embodied in Kiely’s additions, erasures, and smudges. One square on a blouse with a loose grid pattern is as flat as the picture plane itself — code for the entire rubric of painting.

All the patterned clothing reads like a label, swiftly communicating something about the wearer. But skin, hair, and facial features are mutable. You may look into the large eyes of Paula, Eva, or Sam, who has whiskey-brown eyes and hair with the iridescence of an oyster shell — and think you know who you are dealing with. But something shifts, a color winks, a brushstroke seems to vibrate, and you realize you don’t have a clue.



These are not portraits. They are about paint's great ability, and perhaps ultimate failure, to capture a likeness. We are all Eva, nearly vanishing into the background, or Paula or Sam, with penetrating gazes and fugitive expressions. We are all impossible, truly, to portray. Kiely doesn't try. Instead, she paints the very evanescence of identity.

COLLEEN KIELY: THIS AIN'T NO PARTY, THIS AIN'T NO DISCO

At Steven Zevitas Gallery, 450 Harrison Ave., through March 25. 617-778-5265, www.stevenzevitasgallery.com

Colleen Kiely's "Paula." COLLEEN KIELY AND STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY