

# ART 3

## ESSAY: CARIN RILEY

Carin Riley studied with Richard Serra, Robert Ryman, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden and Richard Artschwager in the 1970s. Their influence is evident in her early works: spare, elegant abstractions on paper, her palette typically consisting of modulated grays from near white to almost black combined at times with earth tones. The emphasis was on line and shape, on space—she left lots of it in her drawings—light, lightness and limber movement. While it still is, her direction has become more figurative over the years, her shapes and lines gradually assuming representational guises, poised between the abstract and the imagistic, a tendency she resisted at first, true to her minimalist upbringing.

Never a colorist before, she started painting about a year and a half ago and color came with the shift. Her recent paintings show plenty of agile black line but variations of red, yellow, blue and some other shades have worked their way into the black, white and grays. (Her primaries, by the way, come from Mondrian via Yves Saint-Laurent's sensational appropriation of the Dutch master for his 1965 fall collection.) Whimsical, speculative—you can almost hear Riley musing, making connections, mixing and matching—the new works might be considered a collage of her imagination and her actual life, inspired by pictures extrapolated from the visual stream that daily, relentlessly inundates all of us. Riley keeps scrapbooks of images that intrigue her, reserving them for future reference and transformation.

"Kabuki Poodle" (2010), her first painting, was based on a mélange of images: Casanova's carriage, represented schematically, without a driver, a poodle and more. The title creature appears only as a head—which suggests a species-altered version of the provocative, appearing, disappearing Cheshire cat—and even more curiously, a gall bladder is present among the baggage, a nod to qigong which Riley practices.

The recent work that is the most personally significant for Riley is "Belinda" (2010), named after the larger-than-life woman who swooped in to help her and her family through some difficult times. The magnificent main figure, a surrogate for the real Belinda, is nurturing, powerful, hieratic, modeled on the artist Steve McQueen, another powerful figure and a further instance of Riley's associative, portmanteau image making. Human internal organs play a vital role in qigong and are a recurrent motif in Riley's production. In "Belinda," it is the presiding spirit since, according to the Nei Jing, the over two-millennia-old Chinese medical text that is still consulted, the liver is where the soul resides and responsible for human benevolence.

Riley's formal syntax, her line in particular, while more expansive and elaborate, more assured, retains the elegance and sensitivity of earlier years. However, it is her current investment in the autobiographical, in daily life, in pop culture and esoterica that is so exhilarating, so memorable. She has become somewhat of a magpie, she said, bringing whatever catches her eye, whatever riches she has collected to her paintings and works on paper. Her practice is no longer based on the pure, detached images that minimalism had taught her. With her repurposed form and content, her new production seem not only more definitively her own but also more contemporary.

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