

Gallery NAGA/Boston  
Louis Riso: *New Paintings*

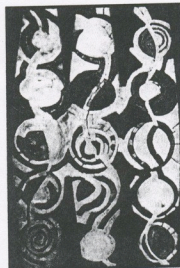
There is a kind of trash, nose-thumbing defiance to Louis Riso's paintings. Who would seriously try to make a painting with contrasts of Pepto-Bismol pink and chartreuse? Or how about wintergreen and orangy red? Riso likes a challenge, he likes to set up the most unpromising situations only to amaze us by pulling it off.

This gives these works a personality, one that is simultaneously vulgar and knowing. The vulgarity is central to our experience of the works. It reminds us of spin-art and tie-dyed jeans, the goop that children like to make plastic creatures out of and the unnatural colors of oversized bunnies worn as boardwalk trophies. These paintings have a peculiarly American postwar history to them, Day-Glo, psychedelic, and Mattel, it is a raucous history, more Las Vegas than Paris. The neon colors of Larry Poons and Ellsworth Kelly may perhaps be a source, but Riso's colors have the tackiness of something cheaply made and already falling into disrepair, a deliberate secondhand decrepitude. In *Yellow Connection* the sickly yellowish-green paint has separated like curdled milk, creating a sort of mutant Ellsworth Kelly. The jet-propelled optimism of those space-age colors, all zip and zing, now seems like a sad reminder of a future that never was.

Also, like Kelly, Frank Stella, and other artists in the mid-1960s, Riso likes to experiment with shaped canvases, playing the geometry of painted forms against the quirky contours of the frame. Brightly colored patterns wrap around H-shaped and M-shaped frames, forcing us to take into account the high relief of the support. In *River*, a pattern like a string of beads in contrasting hues of reddish orange and chilly green bends around a frame formed like a double-M. The painting becomes a tau skin, not fully three-dimensional but like a piece of cellophane stretched across the mouth of a bowl.

Riso sets up intriguing dialogues of sculptural form and flat pattern in these works, but a painting in the back room of the gallery, not

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Louis Riso—*River*, photo Don A. Soper

officially part of the exhibition, makes us reassess the wisdom of these eccentric forms. *The Home Team* is painted on a traditional rectangular support and yet the decorative patterns engage the eye more fully. The rectangle creates a unified field for the eye to scan, without the distraction of gaping holes and turns in space. Colors are also warmer and richer, and ultimately this offers a more satisfying experience. Painting on eccentric shapes can be a bit like playing three-dimensional chess, a game favored by Mr. Spock on *Star Trek*; the two-dimensional game seems complex enough without confusing the issue.

—Miles Unger