



# Riffs on Metal Canvasses

Artist Klari Reis has learned to smile on misbehaving cells.

Story by Eric Wahlgren, Photos by Erik Butler and Richard Rethemeyer

Few people relish having to take prescription drugs, even when drugs may be the sole way to ease pain, lower blood pressure, or keep depression at bay. Artist Klari Reis, who must swallow 16 pills daily to treat Crohn's disease, a digestive tract disorder, is no exception. But rather than bemoan her dependence on meds, Reis has found a way to be upbeat about her Pentasa prescription and other pharmaceuticals. Drugs have become the inspiration for her abstract paintings.

She begins each work by looking through an electron microscope at the molecular activity of a particular drug in blood samples before interpreting—loosely and colorfully—the various cellular patterns that emerge. “When I was diagnosed, I was trying to think positively about all the things I was putting into my body,” says Reis, 30. “Painting for me is a very therapeutic process.”

Her process of creating works with names like “Lipitor,” “Oxycontin,” “Zocor,” and “Thiothixene” differs from many other painters’ in more ways than one. She uses epoxy polymer rather than paint or acrylic, so her finished work has three-dimensional elements and is so high gloss that it glistens, as if it were truly alive. Instead of canvas, she paints on aluminum sheets, and more recently, aluminum honeycomb panels usually seen in server farms or in laboratory “clean rooms.” “The aluminum I like because it gives it a medical feel,” she says.

Her getup is more cumbersome than that of most painters: she must wear a respirator, rubber jumpsuit, and heavy boots, which make her look like she's readying for a chemical spill. It's not clear whether the epoxy material is

really toxic, but just to be safe, she protects herself the best she can.

All the fuss appears to be paying off. The San Francisco Bay Area native has become a name to watch on the international art scene. A London exhibition in May at the Cynthia Corbett Gallery on Cork Street—home to some of the city's toniest galleries—was her biggest show yet, featuring 40 of her paintings. There, another record was set: the sale of “Rowasa,” a large diptych, fetched \$32,000, a new high for her work.

Reis has strong ties to London, having received her masters' in painting from the City and Guilds of London Art School in 2004. More shows are planned for Berlin, Paris, and Miami over the next few months. “I first saw her work the night of her degree show,” says Cynthia Corbett, director of the gallery that bears her name. “I just stood there thinking, ‘This is the most amazing work I've seen in years.’”

The growing attention seems to have caught Reis off guard. “I just hired an assistant part-time,” she says, striding across the paint-stained floor of her studio in San Francisco's SoMa district. Even so, her schedule hasn't gotten any lighter. She continues to work seven days a week, she says.

Tall and focused, Reis was once a high school tennis star in Mountain View, California, her sights set on becoming an architect. And sure enough, she enrolled at the University of California, Davis, leaving there with a degree in architecture and design in 1999. Reis eventually landed at blue-chip architecture firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

But with work pressures compounded by

Guerrilla art: Klari Reis wears a respirator as she paints with epoxy polymer instead of paint or acrylic.



ERIK BUTLER



Crohn's disease, for which her treatment started in 2003, she began to ponder other options. "I liked the immediacy of fine art," Reis says. "Unlike architecture, after a couple of weeks, you see a finished product."

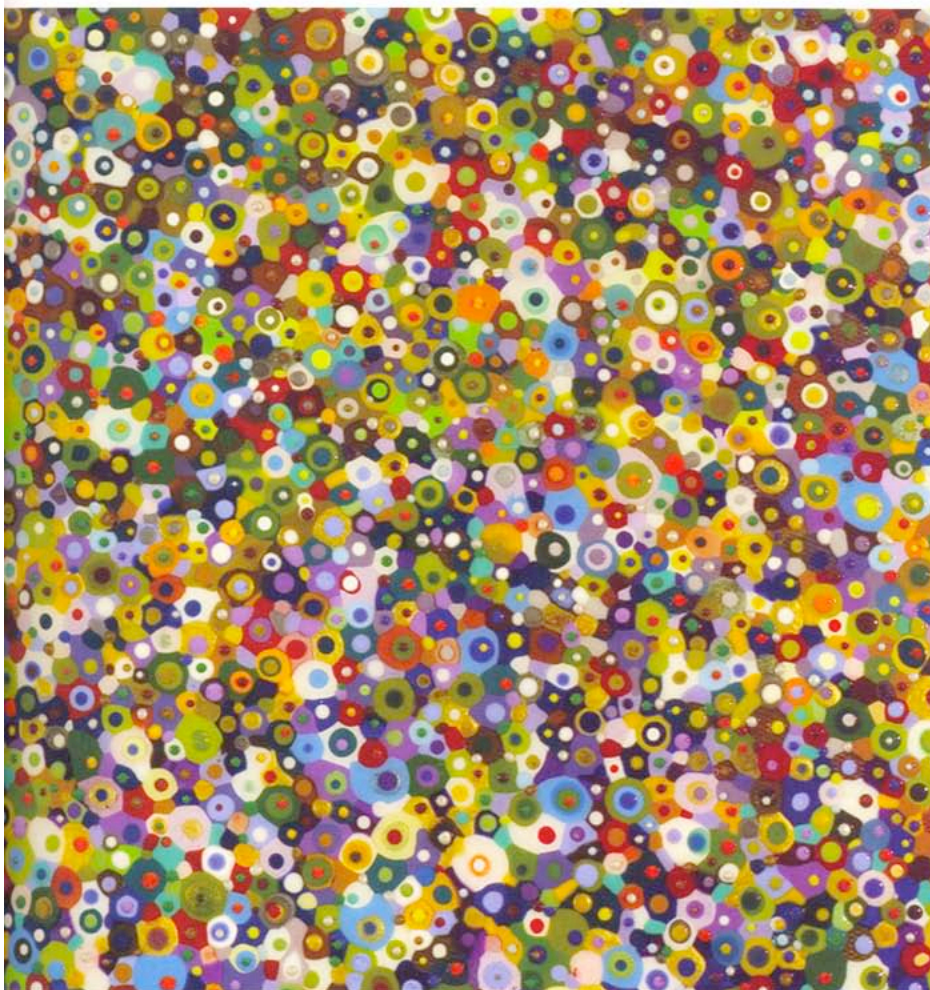
It was while studying art in London in 2004 that she stumbled on subject matter that would take her art in a new direction. Knowing she was an artist, her physician there took her into a classroom to peer into microscopes to see how various drugs, including ones for Crohn's, reacted in blood. "I had seen images before on the web, but actually being able to look under the microscope was really helpful," she says.

Back living and working in the biotech hotbed of the Bay Area, she's never in want of fresh

inspiration. A doctor at Stanford University has been supplying her with images of bone-mending drugs. She also has been getting looks at heart and cancer drugs from Cytokinetics, a South San Francisco-based biotech.

Because what's seen under an electron microscope is often a drab black and white, Reis introduces bright colors, often influenced by vibrant gels and dyes—contrast agents researchers use to highlight certain elements of a slide.

Her paintings aren't meant to be faithful snapshots of what she views through the scope, but more like fanciful riffs on molecular interactions. Reis' "Tygacil" (an antibiotic) has a sci-fi quality—a moss-colored lunar lake, with purple pods swarming above it. Her



RICHARD RETHMEYER

"Verelan" (a blood pressure medication), with its soft beiges and warm browns, resembles a dreamy aerial view of an agrarian landscape, only studded with cells, naturally. For a series on antidepressants, she steered clear of grays and blacks, selecting only colors one might see looking through a kaleidoscope.

"Her work elicits very interesting comments," says Corbett. "They can be as banal as, 'I would love to have that in my living room,' to 'This painting is going to help my family work through their problems.' It encourages them to look at what some of the positive effects the drug industry can have."

No surprise, then, that commissions from biotech and other companies have been pouring in. "My style is to try to beautify their imag-

es [of drugs], and sometimes they aren't beautiful at all," she says. "Sometimes they are just black-and-white worms."

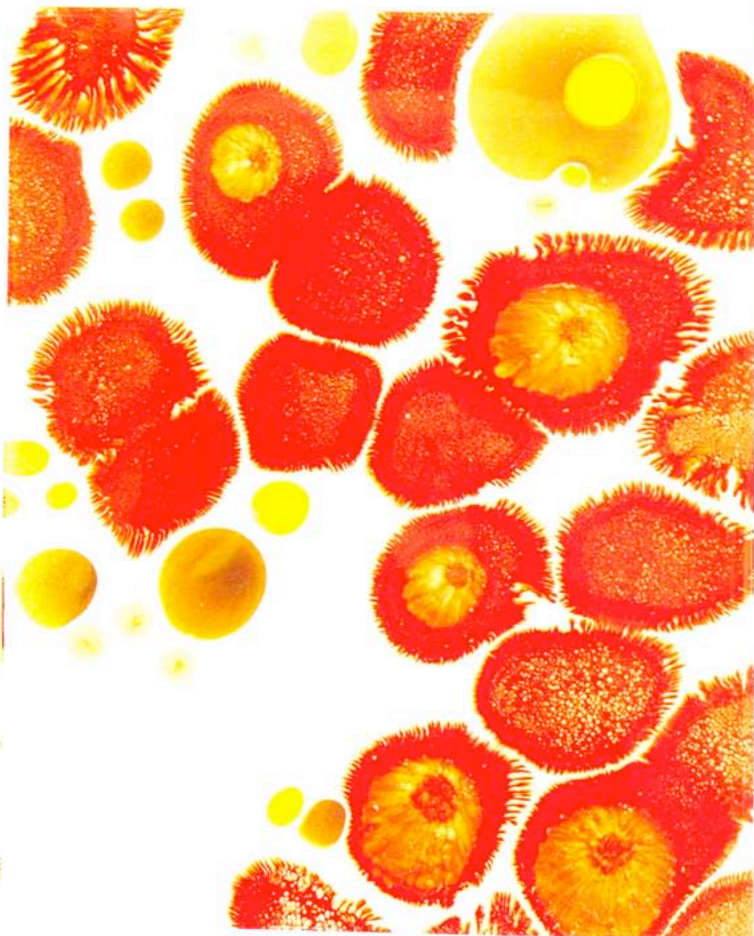
One of her recent commissions is for a piece for a German company that makes herbal drugs for herpes. "I'm looking at a lot of images of that," she says. "They want it to be aesthetic." Difficult as that assignment might seem to the layman, Reis is unlikely to let them down. [more](#)

Klari Reis' next U.S. exhibition will be at the Bridge Art Fair, December 6-9, at The Catalina Hotel and Beach Club, 1732 Collins Avenue in Miami.

"Zocor", Klari Reis, 2007. The drug treats high cholesterol.

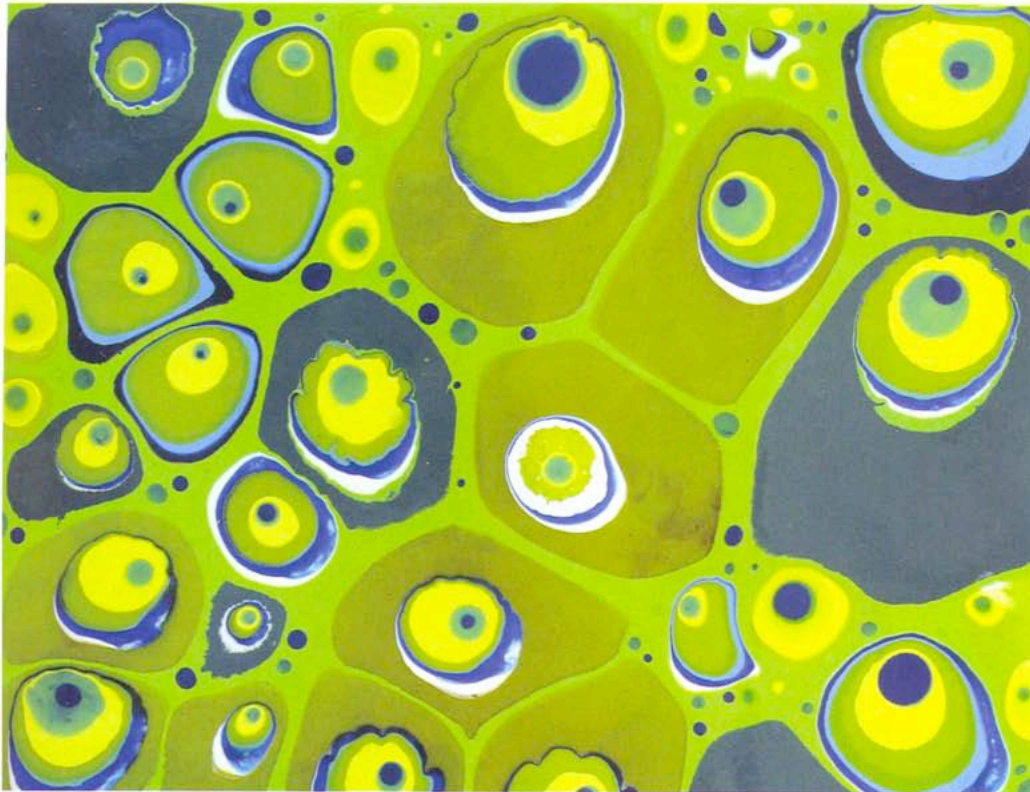


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"Verelan", Klari Reis,  
2007. The drug is  
a blood-pressure  
medication. (top)  
"Rituxan", Klari Reis,  
2007. The drug treats  
Non-Hodgkin's  
Lymphoma and  
Rheumatoid Arthritis.  
(bottom)

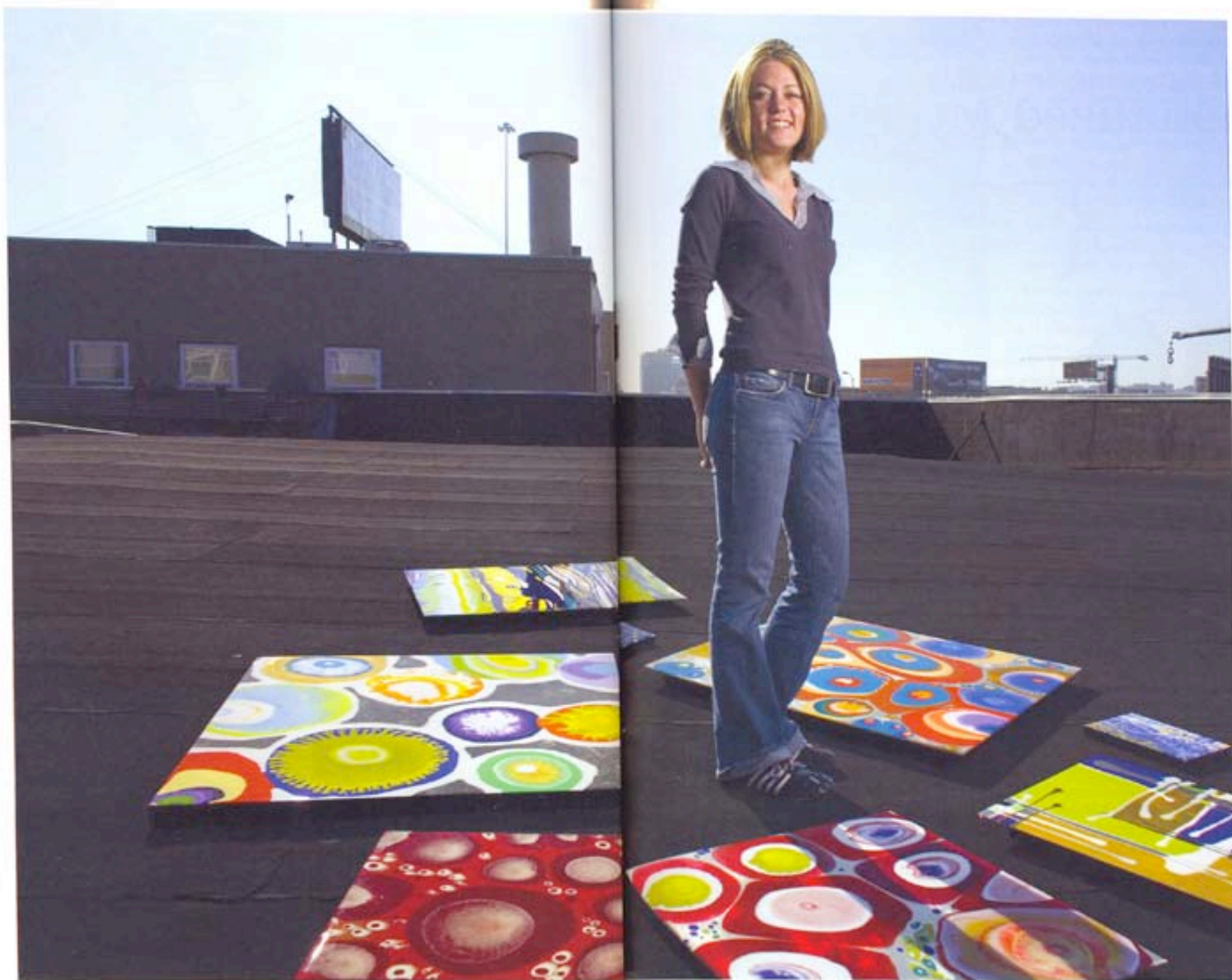


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"Thiothixene",  
Klari Reis, 2006.  
The drug is an  
antipsychotic. (top)  
"Lotesin", Klari Reis,  
2007. The drug is  
for hypertension.  
(bottom)



Getting exposure: Upcoming shows of Kari Ries' work are planned for Berlin, Paris, and Miami. Ries on the roof outside her studio in San Francisco's SoMa district.

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