

Art in America

KEEGAN MONAGHAN On Stellar Rays

The interminably nosy among us felt right at home in “You decide to take a walk,” Keegan Monaghan’s solo debut at On Stellar Rays. The show’s title work, the lone sculpture, stood in the center of the gallery surrounded by five paintings (all works 2016). The full-size purple desk and accompanying office chair in the sculpture appear weighty but are actually made of foam. An array of similarly fabricated objects rests on the desk’s surface: a green-hooded lamp seems to shine on the text of a splayed newspaper, but the ray of light is painted on. A half-eaten bagel and a cup of coffee cool under a trompe l’oeil shadow. Though situated in a brightly lit, white-walled gallery, the desk managed to cast a neo-noir pall over the entire show. The scene gave the impression that a private eye may have had to leave in a hurry, perhaps to solve a murder, or to peep in on the two-timing spouse of a client. In his absence, the viewer played detective, peering into Monaghan’s surreal, densely layered paintings, searching for answers.

At approximately five by six feet, *My Place* was the largest painting in the show, and, like the others on view, it is thickly encrusted with oil paint. A cartoonish musing on cognition and perspective, the work situates onlookers inside the cortex of a peachy brain, comfortably appointed with a black couch, wooden table, rug, leafy houseplant, and a painting on the wall. Two round eye sockets, like porthole windows, overlook the “outside” world: another domestic interior replete with a sofa and television set, presumably for the enjoyment of the physical body housing the cerebral living room.

The comparatively tiny *Security* constitutes a meditation on transparency and obfuscation, offering, like *My Place*, a frame within a frame that mediates viewing. Dirty bricks surround a jail cell window that bars a Pompadour pink living room. The familiar and domestic appear strange in this context, and the viewer’s relationship to the scene feels compromised and a bit seedy. Am I peeping in on someone else’s home? Am I, as in *My Place*, the one looking out from a prison? Like other works in the show, *Security* suggests a voyeuristic encounter and riffs on traditional perspectival techniques, but Monaghan seems to reject the old notion of painting as a window. He heavily scumbles the surfaces of his canvases, emphasizing the material qualities of the medium and pulling the viewer back into the gallery.

Thriller toys with this notion, offering a view from the back row of an old-fashioned cinema with a purple-washed audience spread out in the dark space. On the screen a hand gestures outside a window, pointing to some unseen drama down on the street. Shown here is one of the most universal, and socially acceptable, forms of voyeurism. The world offered by the movie, and the darkened theater, encourages scrutiny and contemplation, but always at a safe remove.



Keegan Monaghan:
My Place, 2016,
oil on canvas with
artist’s frame, 61¼
by 73¾ inches; at
On Stellar Rays.

The works share formal and thematic affinities with Chicago-born Monaghan’s predecessors, the Chicago Imagists. Monaghan’s bright paintings recall cartoonlike works by Ray Yoshida, the gristly surfaces and pulpy atmosphere of paintings by Richard Shaver, and the kinky flare of drawings by Christina Ramberg. But while the Imagists’ work often includes figures, Monaghan rarely depicts the inhabitants of his domestic settings, denying us viewer-voyeurs anyone to watch. Still, the paintings offer some of the pleasures of a windowpane, as the metaphor would have it, but without the threat of judgment or legal repercussion. Monaghan reminds us of the specialness of this experience, and grants permission to play Peeping Tom or private eye. —Julia Wolkoff