

# KEEGAN MONAGHAN

**Selected Press**

# DOCUMENT

Above The Fold

## For artist Keegan Monaghan, empathy needs no context



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The painter's latest exhibition, 'Indicator,' utilizes the close-up as a gateway to emotion and uncanny points of view

“Sidewalk, grate, outlet, floor,” begins a statement from James Fuentes Gallery, home to artist Keegan Monaghan’s latest exhibition, *Indicator*. “A subject so tightly cropped it becomes a quiet enigma as seen from outside, a world built upon the foundations of either what we can’t see, or of only what we can.”

Simply put, the perspectives that Monaghan chooses to employ are typically close-up, mundane, and free from context. His subject material becomes a world in itself, or else implies action just beyond a painting’s bounds. He gravitates towards barred windows, lampposts, sun-dappled walls and streets. “I’d like the paintings to position the viewer in an emotional vantage point,” Monaghan reveals to Document. “I’m trying to create an empathic view that implicates the audience.”

It’s the Evanston-born, Brooklyn-based artist’s third show with James Fuentes, having previously exhibited at Parker Gallery, the Whitney Biennial, and Simone Subal. “I’m still utilizing the close-up as a compositional and psychological device,” he says of his newest work, “but there is a greater emphasis on atmosphere, light, and pathos.” Ahead of the show’s much-anticipated opening this Wednesday, Monaghan met with Document to discuss quotidian imagery, Elizabeth Murray, and his uncanny point of view.



**Morgan Becker:** This is your third exhibition at James Fuentes. How does this show depart conceptually from the other two? Have you found that showing in the same gallery space reveals connections between your bodies of work that might not have otherwise been apparent?

**Keegan Monaghan:** I've been thinking of this new work as a continuation of the last show I had at the gallery. It was the height of the pandemic—everything felt charged and unknowable, and I wanted the paintings to embody that feeling. While my first show with the gallery featured narrative-based scenes involving figures, the work in the second show was composed almost entirely of closely-cropped imagery that was framed to exclude context, so that the action of the scene was happening beyond the edge of the picture. The close-up also became a way to avoid overt figuration while simultaneously depicting the body. Instead of painting a person, I painted the button on their shirt. This also became the functioning metaphor of the work: the idea of focusing on details, looking at something closely until it gives way to abstraction.

These new paintings are preoccupied with similar concepts. I'm still utilizing the close-up as a compositional and psychological device. Figuratively speaking, the imagery still depicts the human body, but there is a greater emphasis on atmosphere, light, and pathos. Looking back at the other two shows, I see an attempt to generate a slower-forming picture—something with a softer resolution that takes longer to see and requires space and distance to become fully legible. Ultimately, it's still headed towards abstraction, though I'm not yet sure what eventual form that may take.



**Morgan:** You tend toward rich color and dense, detailed texture. What role does that sort of vividness play in your work?

**Keegan:** The picture in my head has a specific emotionality or feel, but the actual image is still fuzzy and obscure. I'm trying to get it right and find the image, and the painting process becomes a series of corrections and edits. The painting grows out of this process, like sedimentation. Sometimes it takes up to a year of working on something, moving pieces of the composition around over and over until the surface eventually resembles something like a shag carpet. I want all those decisions and mistakes to be embedded in the psychology of the painting. The color works similarly—it's not one color, but many colors stacked up on top of one another, mixing optically. This has to do with my desire to make a slow image that reveals itself in different stages, something that registers immediately from afar but dissolves as you walk closer. Again, I see this as a kind of metaphor for the act of looking.

**Morgan:** Uncanny points of view are a repeated feature in your work. Do you mean that to be destabilizing? What kind of mood do you hope it invokes in the viewer?

**Keegan:** I'm not sure I would use the word destabilizing. It's more about creating a psychological perspective. I'd like the paintings to position the viewer in an emotional vantage point. I see the painting as a window, and I'm trying to create an empathic view that implicates the audience. Certain imagery has a strong level of anxiety associated with it, like a bright red indicator light or an overstuffed outlet. It can work as overt metaphor. But it's also mundane. To me, that is an interesting intersection.

**Morgan:** What types of scenes and objects do you gravitate towards in deciding what to paint? Are any of them purely imagined?



*Vent*, 2022 (detail). Oil on canvas. 49 3/4 x 56 3/4 inches (framed).

“Instead of painting a person, I painted the button on their shirt. This also became the functioning metaphor of the work: the idea of focusing on details, looking at something closely until it gives way to abstraction.”

**Keegan:** I tend to gravitate towards quotidian imagery—the seemingly unremarkable things that surround us. Most of my ideas come from walking around and looking at things in the world. Because I live in New York, the imagery often evolves around details of the city: a brick wall, markings on a sidewalk, shadows on the floor of my apartment. I make drawings of these scenes from memory, and sometimes the imagery is entirely imaginary. I don’t work from photographs because I’m interested in the mediation of memory, and I like the way I may have gotten it wrong. These idiosyncrasies are revealing and can provide unexpected revelations. Lately, I have been thinking about making paintings in which it’s not entirely clear what is being depicted. For example, a painting of an imagined piece of machinery with an unknown function. I also paint plein air and have an ongoing project of making fast, one-sitting observational paintings of newspapers. I have been thinking of these as existing between still life and abstraction.

**Morgan:** Your main medium seems to be painting, but I also really admire your ceramic work. Do those mediums feel like separate entities for you, or does one practice translate to the other?

**Keegan:** They are definitely related. For me, painting is very slow and elusive. I often feel on the verge of failure, and it's an arduous process of trying to dig myself out of the hole I've created. I once heard Elizabeth Murray say something to this effect in an interview, and I've always deeply related to it. Solving one issue in the painting opens up a series of other problems. But at its core, it's always about working and reworking until it feels right. Ceramics, on the other hand, feel much more immediate. The process of glazing can sometimes feel similar to painting, but the outcome is very different, and becomes entirely inert upon firing. What I like about the glazing process is the level of mystery involved. It may be due to a lack of experience, but I'm always surprised with the result after taking it out of the kiln. There's a transformation that happens overnight and it's seldom what was expected.



**Morgan:** Who are some of your artistic influences?

**Keegan:** Elizabeth Murray, Pierre Bonnard, Jack Whitten, Robert Gober, Van Gogh, Monet, Susan Rothenberg, Thelonious Monk, Philip K. Dick. Too many to mention, really, but these are some of the artists I often think about while in the studio.

**Morgan:** How do you find inspiration outside of the studio?

**Keegan:** I like to make music with people. Lately, I have been doing lots of free improvisational playing with friends. My studio practice is very solitary, and music is a very satisfying way to collaboratively work with other people. For me, free improvisation can feel casual and almost automatic. The intention isn't necessarily to make a finished piece, but just to experience the social dynamics of making and reacting to sounds with other people.

*Keegan Monaghan's Indicator will be on view between September 21 and October 22 at James Fuentes Gallery.*

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## Art in Review

### Keegan Monaghan

'You Decide to Take a Walk'

*On Stellar Rays*  
1 Rivington Street,  
Lower East Side  
Through Aug. 12

With their thick crusts of oil paint, suspenseful noirish settings and liberal borrowings from his hometown heroes the Chicago Imagists, Keegan Monaghan's paintings initially appear freighted in so many ways. Give them time, though, and they lighten up, revealing nuanced colors and whimsical musings on perception.

The best paintings bring Mr. Monaghan's own generational perspective (he was born in 1986) to bear on the Imagists' legacy, dropping their rubbery and pugnacious figures into narratives of contemporary surveillance and voyeurism. In "My Place," he takes us inside a plush orange living room with two stereoscopic portholes; it might be a brain or the interior of a virtual reality headset, or a purposeful confusion of those subjects.

And in "Introspection," he conjures an unexpectedly beautiful moment of transparency; painted from the perspective of



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ON STELLAR RAYS

Keegan Monaghan's painting "Introspection" (2016).

a seated figure who is looking down at his denim-clad thighs through a sheer green plate on a glass table. The painting's gristly surface somehow enhances the crystalline effect. Elsewhere (in the nocturnal scene "The Sign Post"), the same rough texture diffuses the red lights of

a speeding police car, which cast a faint glow on the shoe of a fleeing person in the lower right corner. Here Mr. Monaghan's fully loaded brush approaches, but ultimately shies away from, some equally heavy subject matter.

KAREN ROSENBERG

# 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

# artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

Friday, September 2nd, 2016

## The Fuzzy Space of Lived Experience: Keegan Monaghan at On Stellar Rays

by [Nora Griffin](#)

*Keegan Monaghan: You decide to take a walk* at On Stellar Rays

July 7 to August 12, 2016

1 Rivington Street at Bowery

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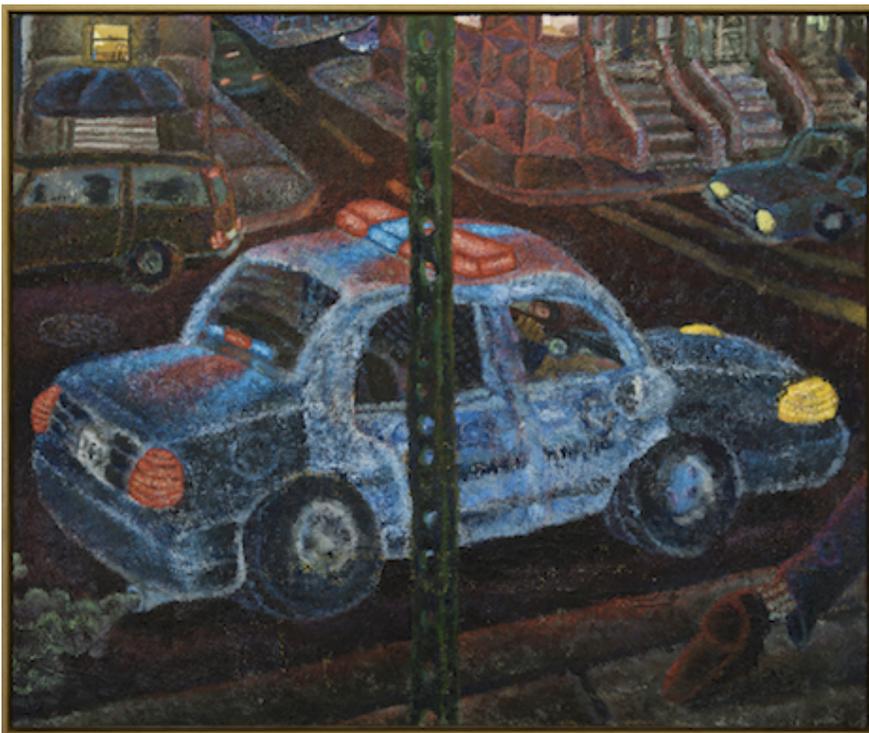


Installation shot of the exhibition under review

In Keegan Monaghan's paintings city life is solid and luminous, forms are dreamy and rounded, and subjectivity is submerged into surfaces that sparkle with thick oil. On view during the heat wave of July and August, the artist's debut commercial solo show at On Stellar Rays consisted of five canvases (all 2016) and one free-standing sculpture of painted wood, foam, and resin. Each work depicts a specific point-of-view: a movie theatre crowd; a police car at night; a stone façade framing a view into a domestic interior; a plate resting on a lap. A pleasurable structural integrity unites

the series—all of the surfaces have a stuccolike quality and a dark violet atmosphere pops against touches of bright green, orangey pink, and rich indigo. The rectangle shape and scale of the work, roughly the dimensions of a subway station billboard, engage the viewer on a bodily level.

The paintings flash a vibrant density across a room, but as figurative scenes they are surprisingly complex. In *Security* grey monolithic stones frame a rusty-orange window that bears a resemblance to a picture frame. A metal grating over the window offers a bisected view into a pink living room. Monaghan might be suggesting a personal incarceration, but it is an appealingly goofy one—as if Peter Halley’s “cell paintings” of fluorescent grounds and hard-edged squares had been re-imagined with freshly optimistic eyes. The ubiquitous materials of the city, concrete and metal, are lovingly realized with bits of color built piecemeal like a 21<sup>st</sup> pointillism. The smallest detail of *Security* is a painting on the wall of the room, rendered in a few daubs and strokes. Perhaps this painting-in-a-painting is the real “security” here, and art can exist as a protective center within these industrial blocks we inhabit.



Keegan Monaghan, *The Sign Post*, 2016. Courtesy of On Stellar Rays

Another ambiguous urban message is conveyed in *The Sign Post*, a portrait of a police car that has the presence of a mascot in this series. The chunky cruiser is all round edges, caught in the warped space of an intersection that makes it the center of the universe. The street is empty of people with the exception of a pant leg walking out of the frame. It’s a Sesame Street moment that comes up against the loaded symbolism of the car. The vehicle’s red and blue glowing lights are reminiscent of Jane Dickson’s *Night Driving* series of cars on the road. Painted with oil on Astroturf, Dickson’s cars convey an elegant pathos connected to an expansive narrative about loneliness and American highway culture. In Monaghan’s world the car is a more benevolent form, a factual character like the other paintings’ plush furniture and houseplants.

Art is on view as the feature presentation in *Thriller*, a work that depicts a movie theatre audience raptly watching a rectangle screen of a painting Philip Guston paw-hand. A slight nostalgia comes through in the rendering of the red, velvet-curtained space. The crowd might be packed into an Art Deco cinema palace, a nod to a time when the collective experience of looking at moving images was a dramatic event in itself. The exhibit has its own burst of drama when the fourth wall is broken by a life size sculpture of a purple desk holding a fabricated green lamp, newspaper, coffee mug, and donut. The piece looks beamed-in from the film noir cartoon *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and stands as a touching intermediary between our world and the space of the paintings.

This vision of urban life moves into the fuzzy space of lived experience with the most visually nuanced work on view, *My Place*. The painting seems borne directly from the artist’s head with two round holes cut out of puffy orange brain matter that look outward onto a well-appointed living room. But the “brain” has its own living room too, replete with furniture, rug, and art. Is there no escape from the rooms of the self, and would we want to escape them even if we could? This puzzling Russian doll syndrome is the human condition, and it’s thrilling to see a young painter address it with formal mastery and playfully knotted humor.



Keegan Monaghan, Thriller, 2016. Courtesy of On Stellar Rays