

Art in America





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

Keegan Monaghan:
My Place, 2016,
oil on canvas with
artist's frame, 61¾
by 73¾ inches; at
On Stellar Rays.

MARIAM GHANI

Ryan Lee

When Brooklyn-based artist Mariam Ghani arrived in St. Louis in 2014 to begin a yearlong fellowship at Washington University, the city was deep in mourning over the loss of Michael Brown, the African-American man whose controversial killing by a white police officer in the northern suburb of Ferguson galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement. Attuned, as previous works attest, to the ways in which urban and architectural space both influence and index social experience, Ghani began researching the history of St. Louis and the key sites in the city's social and geographic development. The resultant project, "The City & The City" (2015), consists of works in various mediums. The centerpiece is a twenty-nine-minute video made in collaboration with St. Louis-born choreographer Erin Ellen Kelly and narrated by Missourian Derek Laney, who plays a slain man drifting about a fictional metropolis, trying to piece together the circumstances of his death. The work summons Brown, the October 2014 Ferguson protests, and a number of dark chapters from St. Louis's more distant past.

In a further act of invocation, Ghani has taken the title of her project and the conceptual framework of her video from a 2009

Mariam Ghani:
The City & The City, 2015, video,
28 minutes,
50 seconds; at
Ryan Lee.

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.



View of Leslie Hewitt's untitled installation, 2012, sheet metal with industrial paint; at SculptureCenter.

book by China Miéville, the British-American sci-fi novelist and social activist. As in Miéville's book, the story in the video is set in a city that has split into two distinct peoples and nations, segregated from each other less by physical barriers than by their conformity to laws commanding them to willfully "unsee" each other. By mapping this fictional bifurcation onto the geography of an American city whose recent racial turmoil stems from generations of inequality, Ghani opens viewers' eyes to an all-too-real contemporary dystopia.

Ghani's two city-states appear to correspond to the predominantly white, relatively affluent southern portion of St. Louis on the one hand, and the primarily black, economically distressed northern section of the city on the other. At various moments these separate worlds bleed into each other through a series of dissolves and visual effects. We are reminded in these instances that prosperity in this country is sustained by its obverse—that beautiful tree-lined streets are products of the same structures that contribute to urban blight.

Laney, as narrator, lays out a story of an aborted revolution waged by a small group of citizens capable of clandestinely slipping from one city to the other. Laney was among several artist-activists who marched a mirrored casket through the streets of Ferguson at the height of the 2014 protests. Ghani pays homage to this event by representing the dead character's body in her video as a shattered mirror lying in an abandoned construction site.

A series of photographs from Ghani's project helped connect the images in the fictional world of the video to the real-life history of the metropolis. One image shows a desolate street in Kinloch, a traditionally black suburb bordering Ferguson whose population plummeted in the 1980s after the City of St. Louis began buying out private homes there as part of a noise-abatement plan for the nearby airport. Another depicts the urban forest that has grown over the former site of Pruitt-Igoe, the notorious housing project whose demolition in the 1970s, after years of neglect, became emblematic of the supposed failures of subsidized housing programs. Like the street in Ferguson where Michael Brown's corpse was left to fester for hours in the afternoon sun, these are spaces haunted by the victims of systemic racial violence and disregard.

—David Markus

LESLIE HEWITT

SculptureCenter

On view in Leslie Hewitt's recent exhibition at SculptureCenter, an untitled 2012 installation consists of white metal sheets that have been dog-eared or otherwise folded. The sheet-metal sculptures—some standing upright, some laid on the ground with a single part bent upward—appear to alternate between three and two dimensions as viewers circumnavigate them and look from different angles.

Such ambiguity also appears in the photographic and moving-image works included in the show. The diptych *Where Paths Meet, Turn Away, Then Align Again* (Distilled moment from over 73 hours of viewing the Civil Rights era archive at The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas), 2012, consists of two lithographic



prints of similar images—showing the back of a woman's head amid a crowd, partially blocked by a man's shoulder. To make the images, Hewitt used a micro lens to zoom in to a historical photograph (or perhaps two of them; it's unclear whether the images are from the same shot) from the Menil archive cited in the title, abstracting the source material into constellations of pixels. Whether a parade or a protest, the context is illegible. If not for the title, we might never connect Hewitt's quietly banal depictions with the Civil Rights Movement. Offering a counterpoint to photojournalistic images that privilege spectacular scenes and iconic figures over the day-to-day workings of ordinary activists, Hewitt asks us to reconsider histories of 1960s black life and protest.

The Menil archive—which contains photographs by Bruce Davidson, Danny Lyon, and Charles Moore—extends the legacy of the de Menil family's support for civil rights causes, which included donations to a Black Panther chapter in Houston and sponsorship of "The De Luxe Show" (1971), the first of several racially integrated art exhibitions that appeared at the time in response to black artists' protests. Re-presenting fragments of these pictures alongside works like her stark sheet-metal sculptures, Hewitt implies that late modernism, Minimalism, and 1960s political consciousness were not just concurrent but were deeply imbricated.

Lately, Hewitt has been drawn to filmmaking, collaborating with cinematographer Bradford Young. Their three-channel video projection *Stills* (2015), on view in the exhibition, brings together various types of imagery: depictions of grids of glass windows and distant skyscrapers, shots of the infamous "Shirley" cards used to calibrate color and skin tone (favoring white skin), a sequence of introductory film leader displaying a ticking numeric countdown. Some of the material was drawn from the work of director Haile Gerima, a prominent member of the LA Rebellion, a loose movement of black filmmakers and documentarians that arose in the late 1960s. *Stills* references its own materiality as it oscillates between sharply focused and tactile, flickering footage. Hewitt and Young present perfectly composed still-like shots, only to