

Keegan McHargue BY YAELLE AMIR

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"The Control Group" by San Francisco-based Keegan McHargue, a series of acrylic paintings and works on paper, provides a rare glimpse into the artist's inner search for self-knowledge under test conditions. Admitting, in the press release, his intention to conduct a thought experiment using, not himself this time, but a theatrical control group or "cast of

actors" as his guineas pigs, the artist proceeds to combine figurative and abstract elements in recurring forms, patterns, and colors, thus exposing a veritable flatland of trials and tribulations.

Stage-set inside angular architectural interiors, cartoon-like human figures and truncated body parts are placed alongside ornamental or everyday objects in no particular order or context. *Mishap* (all work 2006) shows geometrical ducting, a skylight, and what looks like two hospital beds, one stained with blood. An indoor pool dominates *Runoff*, depicting people bathing in both industrial and domestic waste. *A Very Still Life* entails a Dr. Mengeles-style operation on an upright man-table, possibly involving recycled water or urine. *Pipelines II* is split into a quartet of fingernail-like open pipes, near the upper right corner of which stands a straddled couple engaged in murky acts.

On the one hand, these rooms, cells, or laboratories offer an all-over framework for their invariably free-floating forms,

despite their consistently warped perspective. Yet the presence of the cardboard-cutout figures, as well as the threatening or sexually ambiguous environments, hints at an illusionistic message encapsulating poetic ideas, which transcend purely formal concerns. For behind all the art historical associations, principally Magritte and other surrealists, American folk or outside art, and the late San Francisco painter Jess, one suspects a rather less subtle hidden agenda.

Whether these theatrical acts embody an unconscious processing of McHargue's general knowledge and certain pet peeves or perversions, or represent deliberately internalized acts of obfuscation, we may never know. The pictographic and iconic "data" are quite precisely tagged at various points (as in *A Very Still Life's* inside-out self-inversion or the figure/ground cups in *Ceramics*), rendering direct quotation an unlikely source of motivation. Even the various distortions in scale, lack of reciprocity between elements, and pared-down (over-determined?) subject matter mimic the conflicted inner screening room of instinctual primitive drives.

In the past, McHargue has confessed to a general concern with contemporary modes of recycled or transacted information. For "The Control Group," however, his focus has shifted to a less ornate and more restrained, calculated approach. Not surprisingly, and despite the multiple layers of information spread across some two-dozen items, the viewing experience remains predominantly out of the loop. The suppressive conjoining of the erotic and unexpected, mysterious and unfamiliar thwarts any final attempt to penetrate the surface of these works. Neither especially enlightening nor easily contextualized, these are the solitary and alienated standpoints of the voyeur—physically present, yet forever light years apart.