

ART IN AMERICA

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PETER HALLEY

by Stephen Maine

Pictorially airless and conceptually uptight, Peter Halley's dismal cell-and-conduit "socio-grams" of the 1980s doused that era's Neo-Expressionism like a cold shower. Critiquing modernism's utopian underpinnings, Halley just said no to liberal humanism, and dutifully staked out the concomitant theoretical territory. Twenty-five years later, his dystopian hybrid of Minimalist landscape and Pop-culture color again commands attention, having outlasted its historical moment. Just what is it that makes today's Halleys so different, so appealing?

The artist has pulled back from the excesses of a decade ago, when his paintings, having turned from "cells" to "prisons," sported jazzy, pinwheeling conduits that made them little more than auction-friendly eye candy. Those works send mixed signals: life is a grind . . . or maybe a cabaret? Halley's new work retrenches, framing that contradiction more concisely as a paradox. Chromatic variations on the same essential design, each of the eight paintings (2009-10) in this show, 80 inches high and between 78 and 90 inches wide, features two prisons, one over the other, worked up in Halley's customary acrylic and Roll-A-Tex, and made to double as air-handling units. (Or "coolers?" Each title uses the initials "a/c.") Positioned so as to confuse figure and ground, two or three right-angled conduits connect the coolers to each other and/or terra firma, the painting's lower region. There ("underground"), a zippy conduit races through from left to right.

As ever, Halley's color is nuts. A hot pink gets into trouble everywhere, notably in Assurgent Capacity, where it assumes multiple personalities relative to pumpkin orange, apple green and sky blue. Analogous Coherence is limned in two sets of analogous hues, one a range of red-orange and the other blues, with a subterranean magenta conduit. Achromatic Concretion involves a similar palette, but the black background that lies between the coolers and conduits curiously shuts down any retinal buzz.

The paint is applied in three layers. The upper backgrounds as well as the coolers' interiors and the underground conduit are painted just enough to obscure the weave of the canvas; the "above-ground" conduits, cooler grate and underground come next; and, finally, the top-most layer is Roll-A-Tex. Odd to think of Halley's work in terms of process, but what seemed manually remote back in the day now seems assiduously hands-on, even though Halley's studio technique has not advanced much beyond computer sketches, masking tape and paint rollers wielded by assistants. To an overheated era, Halley's anal-retentive precision was an affront; in our time of snot-rag unmonumentality, his procedural rigor is bracing. Halley's commanding new work exudes humor, grace and a funny kind of humility.