

# ARTSY

An Artist's Cryptic Vitrines Explore Our Physical and Digital Worlds, 2014

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In his work, recently exhibited at Emerson Dorsch in Miami, the Micronesia-born American artist Michael Jones McKean explores the intersection of our physical existence and digitized worlds. McKean uses mixed media, transitioning freely between two- and three-dimensional artworks. As he explained in a recent interview, "Traveling through all my work, there's a fundamental consideration for objects, materiality, and histories with sensitivity to how things build and shed meanings over time. Also, there's an ongoing involvement with different modes of processing and representing a form." He takes an interest not only in how we perceive information, but also how it is produced—and why.

McKean often juxtaposes flat imagery with three-dimensional forms, calling attention to their formal similarities and conceptual incongruities. In *The Garden* (2014), the artist has composed a polyptych in three horizontal vitrines, with another set of three vertical vitrines at the left side. In the vertical registers are drawings, floating in a shadowbox with colored lights and presented as something like monochromatic paintings or LCD screens. To the right, in the next vitrine, is a mixed-media assemblage of sculptural objects that are nearly flat, all in a tarry gray. The vessels and boxes appear like an overcrowded scene from a Morandi painting, and although they seem nominally three-dimensional, they are flattened and foreshortened, becoming nearly a uniform picture plane. In the middle vitrine is a diorama-like display of rubber heads wearing wigs and face paint; and in the third horizontal register are several artificial plants, all painted white and lined up on the vitrine's shelf. The various uses of space and depth complicate any easy reading of the work, but also mimic the confrontation and interleaving of digital and material imagery on screens and in life in the developed world.

McKean's *colors passing through us* (2014), a diptych with a thick black frame around two vitrines, operates in a similar way. The left half displays a screen of warm pinks, yellows, and oranges; the right half is a deep display case, lit from its roof, holding an assortment of archaic-looking objects in charcoal-gray mixed media. This juxtaposition of the ancient and the contemporary is a curious way of attesting not just to the passage of time, but also to our closeness to earlier eras and certain human universalities throughout centuries and cultures. Surrealists such as Giorgio di Chirico and Salvador Dalí employed this method to great effect in the early 20th century—and as new digital technologies appear to be shrinking the world and increasing the velocity of daily life, McKean reinvigorates this strategy and others to open questions of how, and why, we live today.