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Art Now LA

Clayton Schiff: 'Close Quarters'

*Cinematic and Dreamlike Fragmentations Suggest an Unknown Journey Into the Unconscious*  
Harkawik

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Clayton Schiff's paintings metaphorically depict psychological states and emotions that everyone can relate to. While his characters have some realistic qualities, they are for the most part cartoony exaggerations featuring male figures situated in interior and exterior spaces. In *Subject* (2022) the large, bald head with huge ears and bulging eyes of a body-less figure lifts himself up by his hands to peer across an expanse where a much smaller version of a man (perhaps the figure's older self) walks away toward the lower edge of the gray-brown canvas. The intense stare and confused expression reflects the subject's surprise. *Council* (2022) features four iterations of a similar figure. Here, an older man without clothes is stretched out across the diagonal of the painting, head toward the bottom left and feet toward the upper right. He is lying on a beige colored carpet, or perhaps the ground, which could also be sand. From a large hole in his midsection emerges the head and shoulders of a younger version of this figure who stares directly at the older man. Two other figures pop up from holes in the ground and gaze upon the head of the outstretched figure.

While the spaces in *Subject* and *Council* are undefined, the settings of *Sanctum* and *Check-In* (2023) are urban exterior scenes. In *Sanctum*, a gigantic green figure slouches against a building as if leaning on and merging with the facade simultaneously. His head rests on the flat roof as his feet extend out along the ground completing the curve made by his slack legs. One of the figure's elongated arms stretches across the top of the building, its hand droops over the edge and grabs the upper portion of an open window for support. The other arm and hand fuse with the green foliage that grows from the buildings corner. The painting radiates a moment of obscure tranquility as well as sci-fi absurdity. The facade of an Art-Deco building is pictured in *Check-in*, where a Gumby-like figure climbs up a ladder and looks at a window only to see his reflection looking back. The two figures hold each other's gaze and do not appear to think this is out of the ordinary.

A naked old man with a wrinkled forehead is wedged between large light-colored rectangles that resemble three-dimensional paintings or Minimalist sculptures in *Close Quarters* (2023), while in *The Clipper* (2022), another elderly figure with extremely long legs and arms, wearing only socks (with holes in the toes), sits on a wooden school chair clipping his fingernails. An eerie light filters in from the windows behind him casting a green-toned aura around his head. At the end of the long hallway illustrated in *Getting In* (2022), a man who has the body of a bear puts a key in the lock of the door to his apartment. He appears to be returning from shopping as he is

carrying bags, two of which are draped over his wrists, the third rests on the floor against the wall. As in Schiff's other paintings, this solitary figure is depicted in a space that is recognizable and realistically rendered. At the same time, he appears to be an apparition— both human and not human simultaneously.

Schiff's humble figures go about their business, be it the intimate tasks of personal grooming or the everyday activity of shopping. His characters appear to be at peace with their abnormalities. While recognizable places are depicted, Schiff's closely cropped views are surreal. They have a cinematic and dream-like fragmentation and suggest an unknown journey into the character's and perhaps the artist's unconscious.

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