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Clayton Schiff: 'Lay of the Land'
A Journey Merging Aspects of Fantasy and Reality
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by Jody Zellen



There is something eerie and unsettling in Clayton Schiff's depictions. His large-scale oil paintings are soft-toned and subdued urban scenes often featuring a distorted figure — part human, part animal, or alien. At first glance, normal settings or interactions become surreal and mystifying scenarios. The works appear to come from observations and encounters during walks around the city that resonated, and it is these real (or imagined) scenes that are transformed into paintings. For example, images of a man urinating, or someone walking alone along a moonlit path — what could be construed as banal moments, easily forgotten — are significant for Schiff. As the title suggests, they become the *Lay of the Land*.

The Lot (2025) is a claustrophobic composition of a small urban lot filled with robust patches of grass and flowers. It's bordered by two tall concrete walls and a yellow-gold barrier with diamond-shaped peep holes. Behind it, as if located across the street, Schiff paints the facade of an apartment building that presumably continues beyond the top of the painting. Through one of the peepholes, Schiff depicts the face of a man who gazes intently at the confined scene.

In *The Presence* (2026), a man strides down a biking or walking path alongside a body of water. In the distance are a few buildings lit from the interior, as well as ample foliage. It appears to be dusk as the distant sky glows subtly at the horizon. Oddly shaped clouds encircle a yellow moon that illuminates the contour of the man's head, as well as one of his eyes. Does '*the presence*' of the title refer to the presence of man in nature, or the strange configuration in the sky?

Schiff's images are filled with ambiguities. At first, they appear as straightforward depictions, but upon closer examination strange things are going on. In *Ground Floor* (2026), a large bird sits on a post while a cat with a human-ish face strolls across a street in front of an open manhole whose cover is pushed to the side. In the foreground there is a spilled coffee cup next to a green-skinned man in a brown jumpsuit who smokes a cigarette while leaning against a column. Across the street, two

alien figures with long legs cross paths headed in opposite directions, their bodies fusing into a single shape. Nearby, another man in a striped hoodie relaxes in a doorway, partially hidden from view. In some ways, this painting captures a typical urban street scene, yet it is the insertion of numerous oddities that makes Schiff's image resonate.

In *Good Spot* (2025) a man wearing sandals, a white tank-top and red shorts relieves himself against a wall. He is alone and apparently nonplussed about performing this activity in public. As in many of his other images, the "man" is awkward and not fully human. Other "non" humans populate *Location* (2025), *Remains* (2025) and *Exquisite Taste* (2026). *Exquisite Taste* depicts a creature sipping from a patch of water that crosses an otherwise arid desert landscape. For *Location*, a "figure" or "animal" on all fours gazes into the center of a map. Lines branch out from a central dot becoming a geometric abstraction. *Remains* shows a figure stretched out across an island about the length of its entire body, appearing just barely alive in a murky, yellow-green sea.

Schiff's vulnerable characters are cartoon-like distortions, yet it is easy to empathize with their plights. His low contrast, dark hued palette imbues the paintings with an apocalyptic aura as elements within them allude to drought, poverty and homelessness, as well as climate change. It is hard not to sympathize with the wrinkled, emaciated old man in *Dead of Night* (2026) who wraps himself against a city tree — a vertical support for what might be a long night. His exposed ribs and long fingers parallel the shape and feel of the trees dangling branches. Schiff's paintings are seductive and emotionally charged, taking viewers on a journey that merges aspects of fantasy and reality.

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