

Clayton Schiff: Nervous System



A few choice adjectives come to mind when contemplating the disposition of Clayton Schiff's moderately human creatures: harried, hapless, hangdog, ho-hum. Frequently doomed to perambulate the urban grid in a chalky malaise, in "Nervous System," a selection of recent canvases, they are mercifully left to their own devices, or confront an "other" born of their own psyche. These erstwhile foils provide uneasy comfort, ensnare or thwart the subject, or else carry on in ignorance, unaware that they're being led down the path to calamity. Their bodies are often edged in a curious halo, suggesting prior action (as in, the place where one's limb used to be), pentimenti, or the oily stain left by a sandwich that lingered too long on a piece of office stationary. Schiff's muted palate and sparse horizons support the dramatic irony of his visual punning, and his wooly brushwork confounds an impulse to inspect at close range. His canvases remain bare at the edges, harkening to a panel illustration. Like a Rothko with interlopers, these vignettes, even when dense, are unfailingly straightforward, direct, and concise. They seem to exist in a place unencumbered by the trappings

of a particular time or region, as if culled from the deep recesses of memory but pointedly lacking in situational texture.

In “There There,” two identical figures embrace, their tails jutting out in opposite directions, “filling in” the head, chest and genitalia of each other’s back. They stare forward, limbs intertwined, lost in mindless supplication. In “Drift,” a limpid figure embraces a hovering medicine ball, stand-in for a barren Earth, his body curiously burgundy from the neck down, except where his right arm is concerned. Is he clad in 1920s sleepwear, or bathed in a demonic glow? In “Device,” an unlucky creature encounters a rake; stylistic mothballs encircle his head, arranged like the numbers on a clock. Like the flies perennially buzzing around Richard Williams’ infamous “thief,” or the scratchy facial abstractions in Priit Parn’s “Hotell E,” these serve ends that are not distinctly representational, compositional, topical, formal, or procedural. Seen again hovering over a patch of trees in “Meeting at the Park,” these are the painter’s painterly technologies: a window into a path left unexplored, available as enigmatic form. “Pain,” 2021, is an outlier, and its hairless figure, bent in demonstrative agony, recalls not a quotidian encounter, but a WPA-era billboard, an Advil commercial, or a placard for free wi-fi.

It is tempting to read these pictures alongside the works of great illustrators like George Herriman, Suzan Pitt, Guy Billout, etc, yet Schiff’s strategies, chief among them the erotic intertwining of human and beast, provoke an entirely different range of associations: Bonnard, Meret Oppenheim, Dorothea Tanning. Away from their cityscapes, his humanoid creatures “hang out” in their frames, crushed by the weight of their rote activities. We approach them as we would a zoo cage window; sympathetic, sure, but ultimately free of the painter’s most pernicious fixations.

Clayton Schiff (b. 1987) lives and works in New York. He received his BFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 2009. His work has been presented widely, including in exhibitions at 56 Henry, New York, LOYAL, Stockholm, Sweden; Fisher Parrish, Brooklyn, Safe Gallery, Brooklyn; Nevven Gallery, Gothenburg, Sweden; and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.