

Clayton Schiff: Close Quarters

1819 3rd Ave ▪ Feb 11 - Mar 25, 2023



Harkawik is pleased to announce *Close Quarters*, our third presentation with New York painter Clayton Schiff. In eight new canvases, Schiff probes domestic life, inward escapism, the lives of others, and the notion that the character of a city—the logic of its spaces, what it leaves revealed and hidden—might come to define a person in ways unexpected and not easily quantified. These paintings take their cues both from the figures who shaped our understanding of cinematic space, chiefly Alfred Hitchcock and Jacques Tati, as well as the artists who examined it, as in the paintings of Edward Hopper or drawings of Ken Price. Conceived during a period in which Schiff was settling into a new apartment and noting curious facts about his surroundings, they sparkle with the sort of insight into human behavior that may only be gleaned from a comfortable remove, from years spent pondering the people who came before, who linger in the window, on the other end of the subway car, or the other end of the telephone line.

Close Quarters is an exhibition that speaks to the endlessly cinematic spaces of Los Angeles. *Check-In* uses the facade of a

chalky art deco building as an occupational divide, as two workers, perhaps the same person, gaze at one another. In *Indoors II*, an elaboration on an earlier work bearing the same title, a person peers into a golden-hued room, only to discover another room with its own glowing box hovering in the distance. That the person's head is both shaped like a lightbulb and bathed in yellow light, or that this scene of trespass is utterly innocuous, suffused with wonder, is testament to the surprising sanguinity that can be found in these otherwise ham-fisted encounters. Like the weary shopper who is lingering in the hall before *Getting In*, the light that hits this figure registers not in representational space, but painterly space, "seeping out" from the confines of arm, face and hands. In *The Clipper*, a solitary figure assumes the pose of personal grooming, only to unwittingly become a diamond against the backdrop of four rectangular quadrants; in *Close Quarters*, these shapes become physical objects threatening to overtake the individual, who sinks into the wall as if terrorized by a maze of leaning Blinky Palermo canvases.

Sanctum represents the union of two of Schiff's divergent interests—the psychological space of the domicile, and the dehumanizing aspects of the cityscape. Here he uses pentimenti as a kind of "in-between" space to suggest both gestural action within the painting, as well as a path not taken by the artist (note moments of "erasure" around the body, windows, power lines). Looking closely, we see the figure is not only draped over a building, but borne of its confining bounds; its hand is defined by the shape of the window; its feet are carved out from the negative space of a power cable; it "holds" the building in a gentle embrace. Here, body and building are one. What is, truly, the fundamental difference between a mouth, a belly-button, and an air duct? Between a packed high rise and a packed dishwasher waiting inside? Between a dangling bag of groceries and the parts of the body that dangle?

At first glance, it may appear as though Schiff denies his people a certain kind of propriety. On closer inspection it becomes clear that his investment in shared experiences, in the humble encounter and the relatable moment, places him in the species of artist concerned with commonality and consensus. He reminds us that, despite the tendency of memory to structure our past around moments of triumph, trauma, profundity and consequence, our daily lives are composed primarily of rote tasks. He shows us ourselves, caught in the moments we're told not to examine, engaged in activities not worth remembering. He returns to us the experiences that accumulate casually and come to define who we are without intervention or agency. What we find is therefore thoroughly ordinary and remarkably profound.