

## Lay of the Land

In his new show at Sebastian Gladstone Gallery in Los Angeles, Clayton Schiff has made the most arresting paintings of his career, images of the daily panorama that make it clear what we see is surreal, terrifying, mystifying. The canvases are exploding renderings of the uncanny, pushing Schiff to lean more into the ochres and violets of fresh earth. They feature his iconic dream-skewed people, wide-eyed in wonder, each let loose into Schiff's distinct world.

The paintings come from walks. On a stroll recently in Forest Hills, Queens, Schiff stopped to cross the road, looking at a street sign. A mini-flock of birds were fighting, engaged in an ancient beak-stab dance to get a berry for their kids. Feathers went everywhere. Later Schiff was on a walk through Yonkers, a speck of green that's been scalpel-driven into the city on the banks of the Hudson. Looking down, the tendrils of a tree were gnarling up the sidewalk and enveloping a man asleep using its trunk for a pillow. The roots are taking over.

*Good Spot* is a portrait of a solitary man responding to the call of nature, and it's one of the great works in the long historical canon of men standing taking a piss. This is a vigorous crew: Kippenberger, Breugel, Steven Shearer come to mind. *Good Spot* so nails the illicit thrill of pissing in public, the utter banality of achieving relief, assaulted by the incursion of the city stopping the stream. Schiff says his depiction is aspirational, in the existential sense—it's a slice of Eden, a place where man can stop and look without thoughts of what's been built, and what will be built. Finally, a fantasy that's just as good as life.

Schiff embraces this strangeness of going outside, filtered through his own transparent eyeball. This, too, is your view when you step out the door. Cartooning the hands and faces of his figures is the final push, Disney-fying abject terror until it's so benign it sneaks into the bloodstream.

Take *Location*, a work that scrambles the worldview for its down-dogged naked protagonist. The poor guy is left stranded on a map that somewhat resembles the whorls of our abstract ur-painters. *Free-For-All* takes the birds from the sidewalk in Queens and places them in the limelight, centerstage, to depict a battleground scene that's gory with splattered berry juice, all against a backdrop of weeds fighting to burst through omnipresent pavement.

And then there's *Lot*, of an abandoned bit of urban territory forgotten amid the race to the sky, the un-trimmed vegetation abundant. The lush flora is overtaking the old city dirt, overtaking the canvas. And nearly hidden in the back is a man peeking in through a barricade, looking deeply, yearning for any kind of wildness he can taste.

—Nate Freeman