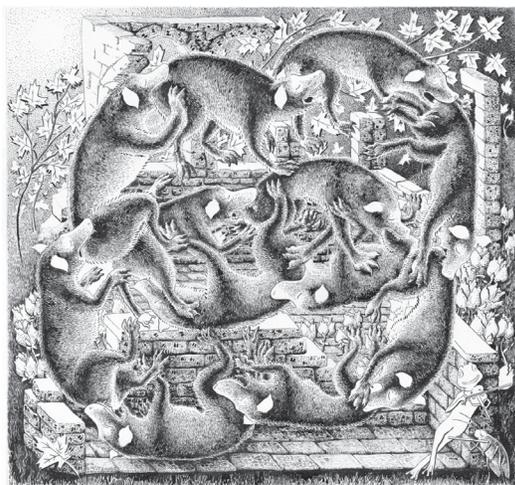


## Josh Mannis in Conversation with Clayton Schiff

JM: I'm noticing a certain efficiency in the way you pack your compositions. Like a Benedetto Antelami relief, the figure shows us the original block it came out of. It's like a perfectly packed suitcase. Do you think about this relationship in painting?

CS: Showing the block, surrounding the figure, and in this case the canvas. I've thought about this in relation to reliefs, not explicitly in relief sculptures but in images that depict relief-like space, where the figure is emerging from the ground, but partly reclaimed by it as well. Giorgio Morandi comes to mind. Spaces that feel stage-like and shallow in spite of horizon lines and presumed vast expanses, like in the Krazy Kat comics or in dioramas.



Josh Mannis, *Final Phenomenon*, 2019, Ink on paper, 19"H x 18"

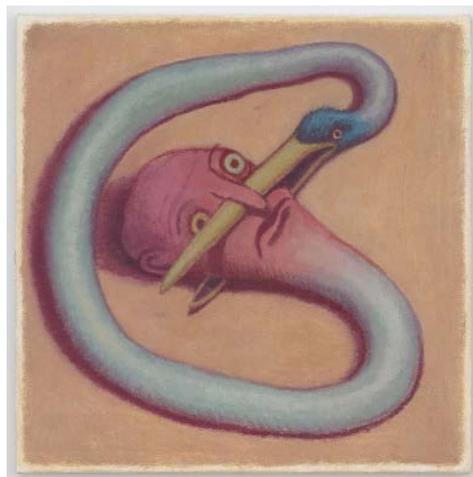
JM: This seems to be the way we both occupy the frame, a mashing of bodies, architectural or built forms, into something that indicates a larger figure. The figures as a pictogram, a glyph, a motif: symbols that straddle the figural and diagrammatic. Playing games and short circuiting interpretation is part of what I'm trying to do— how does that factor for you?

CS: I usually don't want things to touch and collapse into each other, because it seems to fix their relationships. I prefer when there's some distance between things, where they're

slightly pulled and shuffled out of order, like they're being inventoried. That kind of space is more diagrammatic, and seems to have more levity, like its contents and arrangements are fungible and beholden to the eye rather than the world they comprise. Whereas something more properly figural, has more weight and gravity, more of the responsibilities of depiction.

JM: I agree that representation is where the responsibility is. I see some of these noodly limbs and bits in your work as "spilling out into" those available spaces you're talking about, the distance between things. They spill out or crawl, like edge seeking fingers. Where are they going? In your work, all this seems to bear directly on the city as a site of isolated experience. What's the setting of the city negotiating?

CS: Yes, two subjects I'm generally dealing with are the body and the city. In the case of the body the limits seem to come from within. They're tightly packed into the frame of the canvas, an external constraint meant to link up with or highlight those limits. In the case of the city it usually diminishes their figures and presents them as a thing-among-things. The difference in either case might just be degrees of zoom—they both seem to be landscapes with a bigger structure containing smaller constituent parts that are straining to fill it.



Clayton Schiff, *Mix-up*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 22" H x 22" W

JM: The backdrop of the city also creates a dynamic of movement or lack of movement. The time of a painting is an ongoing type of time - I think this is just part of the basic mechanism of painting.

CS: Time, I think is another component of that inventory space too. When the things are spaced apart and isolated from each other, they get to contain their own sense of time, and it's a longer time. It keeps them from seeming to be shown in the midst of a terminal action that's sure to end.



Josh Mannis, *To Praise*, 2019, Ink on paper, 19" H x 18"

JM: I also like to employ that expression of timelessness with figures who are spacing out, gazing to the future, in visionary states, deep concentration, and so on. Michael Fried's book *Absorption and Theatricality* has some great sections on that use of time in painting.

CS: Yeah, in most cases for me too, the figures could be engaged in something perpetually ongoing. There's some kind of isolation inherent in that, because it implies that if things were more connected, they'd be interacting and conscripted into a narrative, and all narratives have an end. And the paintings want to cast their imagery in a way that accommodates their own sort of a dramatic eternal state, which seems to keep its parts apart.

JM: Right. It makes the figures feel that more much melodramatic. There's a really great

interview with Kathryn Bigelow that's a bonus feature on the DVD of Douglas Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* where she goes into why she loves Sirk's movies and his use of melodrama. Her serkian take on melodrama is that your audience has to be more clued in than your characters. That there's something important about the characters being sort of oblivious, by never having the full meaningfulness of things register in the actual people in the movie.

CS: That makes me think of Coen brothers movies, where the characters seem oblivious, fundamentally dimmer, than the plots they're driven by. The *Far Side* cartoons too—though those aren't plots as much as scenarios. There's something to be said for slow characters in busy worlds. They can be rendered mere patsies, but there's likely some kind of wisdom in that way of being.

JM: The concept that the far-away facial expression is a kind of wisdom is amazing, and it does seem that a lot of our characters have smirky smiles.

CS: Yes, like the green devilish figure, sporting a red tracksuit in the painting, *Onward*. He's shown strutting confidently through a void, probably gifted with the grace of someone who's happy or oblivious enough not to consider death or danger. It's that similar kind of incongruity between circumstance and state of mind that seems to give the characters a kind of power.



Clayton Schiff, *Onward*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 40" H x 40" W

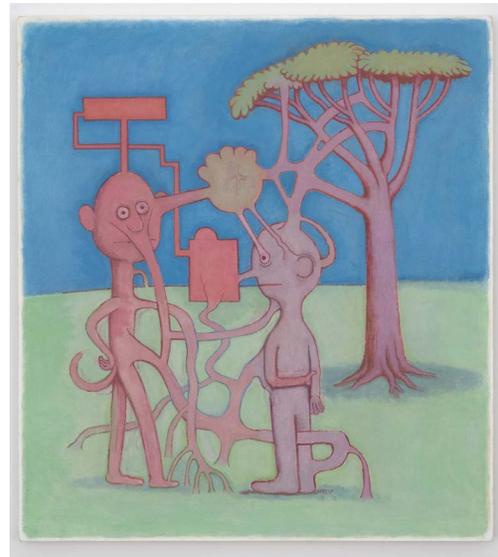
JM: Not being bothered by danger or death - it's something more than naivety and beyond ignorance. It's funny. There's a physical comedy effect here. Figures bumping into stuff. I love that tradition of comedy where the body and face are treated like rubber-- Red Skelton, Amy Sedaris. It seems like all those people are doing a kind of "enlightened idiot" bit. And obviously comics and cartoons are places of great rubberiness.

CS: Right- the rubberiness seems to lower the stakes, like how Wile E Coyote can survive his many falls. It seems to be a helpful and probably necessary property for these "enlightened idiot" characters who are constantly out of step with their surroundings, and bumping up against stuff, trying to navigate these crammed arenas while lost in their own world.

JM: The danger for us is potentially ending up with a painting full of idiots - but I refuse to let go of this rubbery psyche!

CS: There's probably something to be said about a deer in the headlights- a character being interrupted from their reality and not only are they conscious that they're being observed or approached, but they're essentially, haplessly, posing for it.

JM: I love how you ride the line of optimism and pessimism. Some of your figures are just so plainly optimistic to me, but also some figures look like they're really, just going through it, you know? Even that seems sort of optimistic to me though. The two guys who are forming an intersubjective tube system with the tree- these seem like gestures towards "wellness".



Clayton Schiff, *Connectivity*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 40" H x 36" W

CS: If there's optimism in the paintings, I imagine it's about converting harsh states of mind like anxiety and depression into a kind of absurdist melodrama, to give them some humor and sense of levity. Trying to regard the "everything is connected" mentality that can comprise a lot of paranoia as just one side of a more wondrous or psychedelic version of the same thing. I think these are mere coping mechanisms and not real fixes, but it's a means of making at least some inner turmoil feel relative and negotiable.