

HYPERALLERGIC

Karl, Brian, "Troy Lamarr Chew II Depicts Social Invisibility," *Hyperallergic*
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Troy Lamarr Chew II Depicts Social Invisibility

The artist's transparent portraits reveal the larger forces of culture and society that define and marginalize his Brown and Black subjects.



Brian Karl December 9, 2024



Troy Lamarr Chew II, "The T-shirt Pusher" (2024), oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches (121.9 x 121.9 cm) (all images courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco)

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SAN FRANCISCO — In his new exhibition at Altman Siegel, Troy Lamarr Chew II muses on the social invisibility of his subjects through the simple device of depicting aspects of their bodies as if transparent. Figures and their surroundings are rendered in detail save for faces and limbs, through which background objects can be seen, as if they were made of plastic or glass. With this technique, Chew reveals hints of the larger forces of culture and society that define and marginalize subjects like his, most of whom, despite their transparent masks, seem to be Black or Brown. Can we really see each other, Chew asks, or are we looking right through?

Seen through the faces and limbs of human figures, workplaces and living quarters — including the streets — and their associated ephemera emerge as the structural presences that supersede most other elements of individual personality. In “The T-shirt Pusher” (all works 2024), for instance, the details and surfaces of machinery in a small vintage factory are rendered clearly and precisely in the near background, except in one location: The translucent head of a lone figure, seated in the foreground on a stack of shipping boxes, muddles and distorts both machinery and human visage.

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Troy Lamarr Chew II, "Hold the blocc down" (2024), oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches (121.9 x 91.4 cm)

Murky areas amidst careful detailing can be found in many of the works. "Hold the blocc down," for instance, features an unclear object at the lower left — perhaps the edge of a tent — hinting, along with a small array of surrounding possessions such as a bike and shopping cart, at life lived on the street. The car behind the painting's subject, partially seen through his translucent head, seems as much shelter as vehicle, with a tarp covering much of its roof.

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While Chew places most of his subjects in urban or built environments, there is some variety in setting. In the bucolic “Office Break,” tall grasses glow through the face of a smiling, seated figure, perhaps suggesting more peace of mind outdoors. And “Boutta work on this painting” might be a slightly meta self-portrait of the artist in his home studio. The warped corner of an empty picture frame emerges through a bare leg, literally binding the artist to his work.

In “Sweet Lullabies,” the saturated almost-rainbow palette of a computer monitor’s read-out bleeds through and highlights details of a singer’s face in a recording studio. His arm extends ever-so-slightly toward the foreground of the painting, his fingers tensed with a kinetic engagement that contrasts with the languidness of the figures in most of the other paintings. While the stillness of those people suggests not simply waiting but the fundamental suppression of vitality by their circumstances, the singer comes alive with the signs of his musical performance — one instance where cultural forces allow personal expression to shine through.



Troy Lamarr Chew II, “Sweet Lullabies” (2024), oil on canvas, 36 x 67 5/8 inches (91.4 x 171.8 cm)

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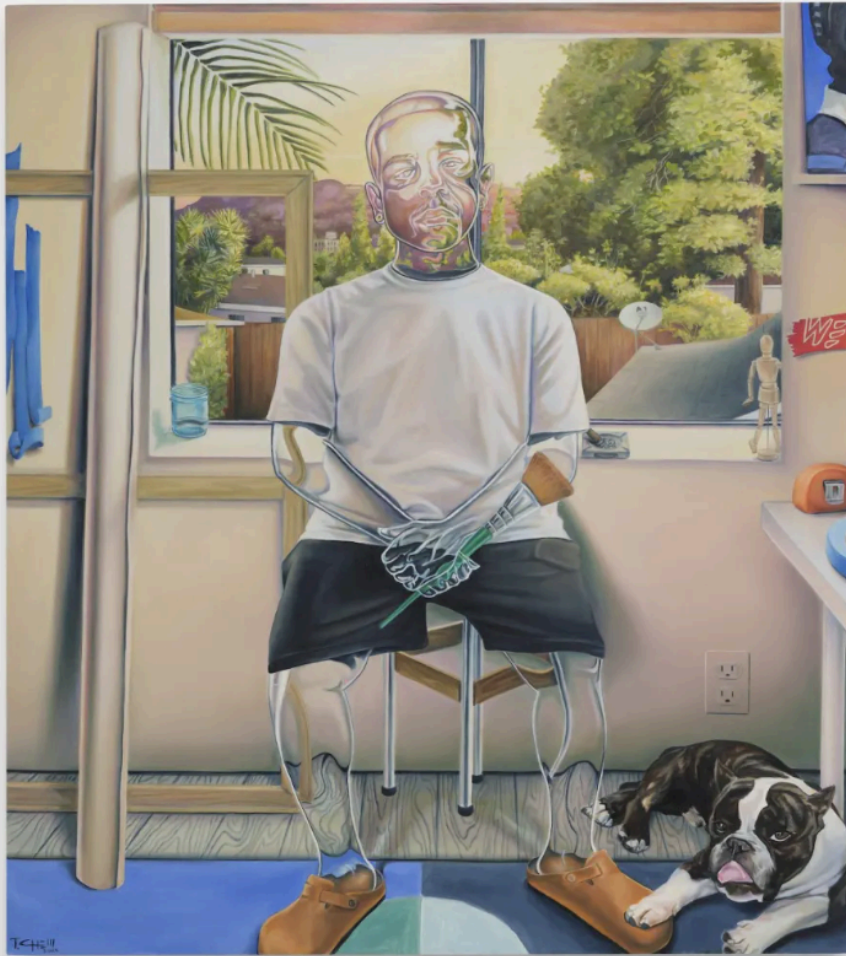
Troy Lamarr Chew II, "Office Break" (2024), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

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Troy Lamarr Chew II, "Boutta work on this painting" (2024), oil on canvas, 54 x 48 inches (137.2 x 121.9 cm)

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Troy Lamarr Chew II, "All Smiles" (2024), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

Troy Lamarr Chew II continues at Altman Siegel (1150 25th Street, San Francisco, California), through December 21. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.