

Jack Clifton (American, 1912-1990)

Apartment 'C', 1960s

Oil

Gift of Miller and Rhodes, 1963.003

Clifton was born in Norfolk, Virginia and was raised in Newport News. He studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Known for his enigmatic portraits and landscapes, Clifton exhibited throughout Virginia and had a career retrospective at the Charles H. Taylor Arts Center in Hampton, Virginia that featured more than 50 drawings and paintings from his 60-year career.

"A mind prone to fretting about the state of the world and the darkness that lives in the human heart cannot help but worry for the boy whose frightened stare grasps at the viewer through the gap in the doorway. From our perspective, the chain that prevents the apartment door from swinging all the way open looms above him, a concrete barrier to access and understanding.

We wonder at the motives of the unseen participant whose shoes we stand in. Have they attempted to open the door because of an alarming noise heard behind it? Or are they preparing to force their way in? Is the boy in distress, in need of help? Is he rising to come forward and undo the chain, or is he shrinking back in reaction to the person he sees in the hall, hoping the chain keeps them out? Could a second unseen presence be pulling the door open from inside, perhaps in response to a knock or shout? Or is the entire scene merely an innocent but mysterious glimpse gleaned while passing by?

Clifton's painting raises many more questions than it answers, while its narrow wooden frame makes it seem like a segment of space and time extracted physically from that decades-old interior. It's fascinating to think of this piece in its earlier life, part of a department store's collection, mystifying customers who cared to take a closer look."

—Mike Allen

Arts & Extras columnist, The Roanoke Times