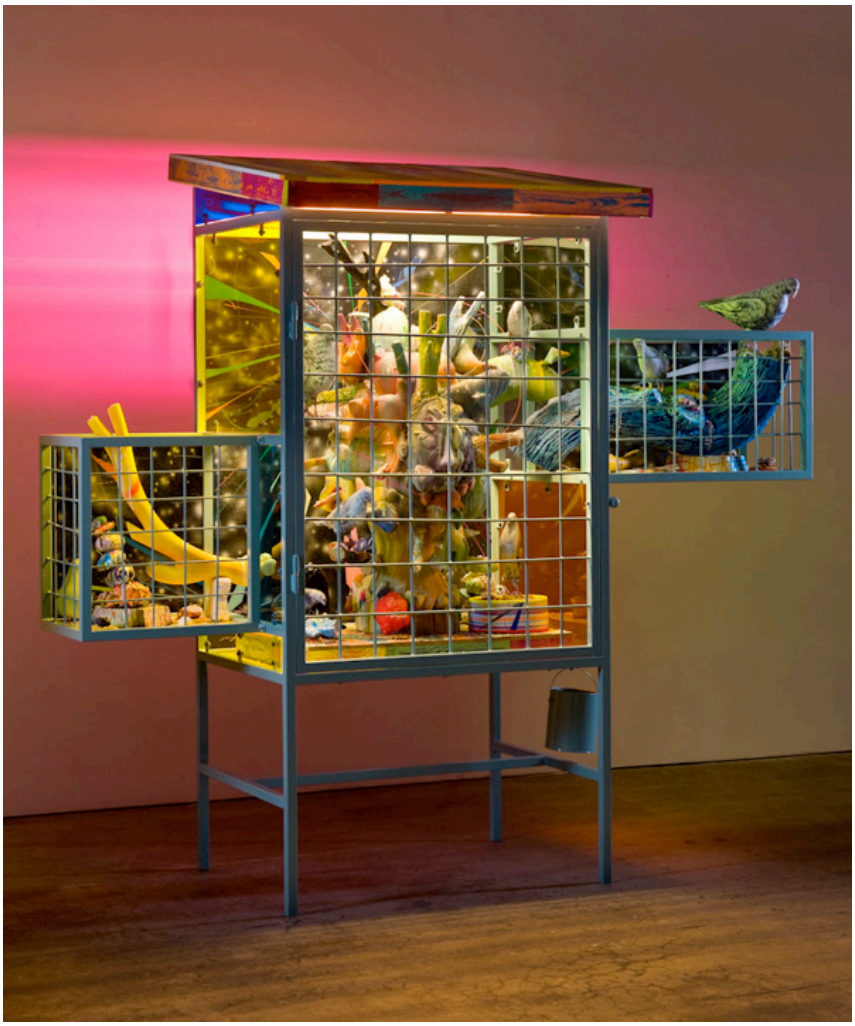
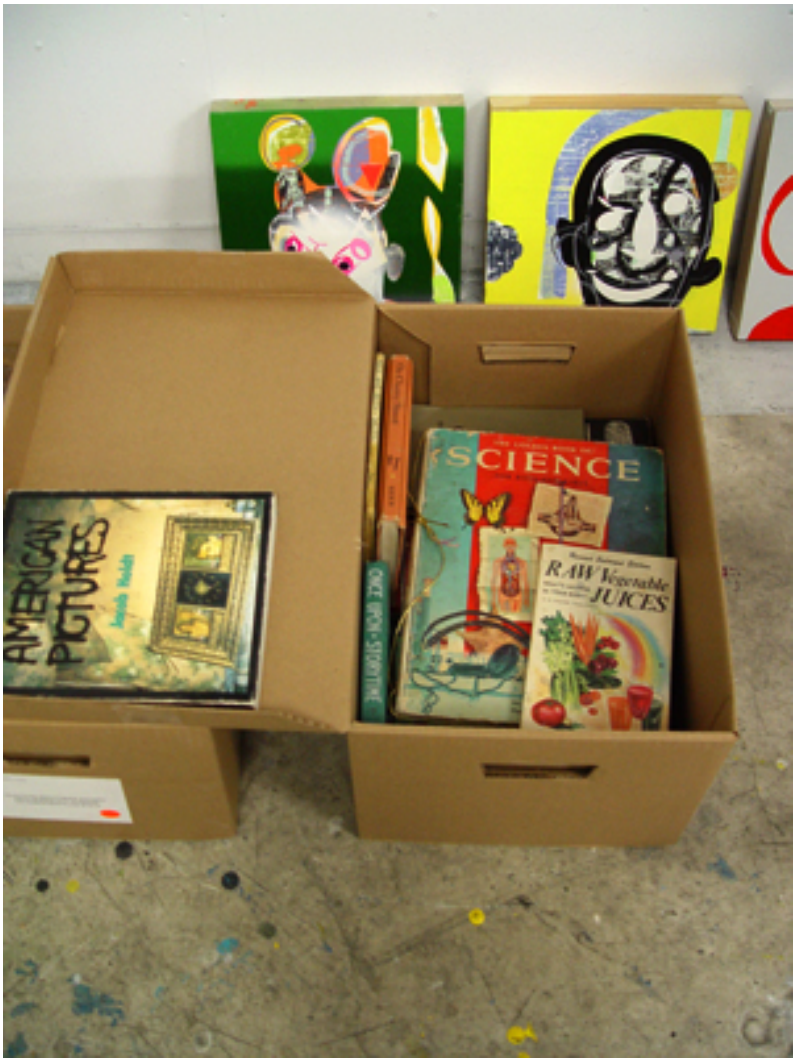
Clayton Brothers on Inspiration, Pigeonholing, and Pigeon Coop Poop



Clever to a Fault, Clayton Brothers 2010

A woodland landscape. A domestic interior. Birds. Fruits. Never have the traditional subjects of painting looked so psychedelically intense, and so horrifically tragic. It's Rob and Christian Clayton's world. We just may not know that we live in it.

Their work is currently the featured attraction at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, along with supplemental shows by graffiti artists and graphic designers.

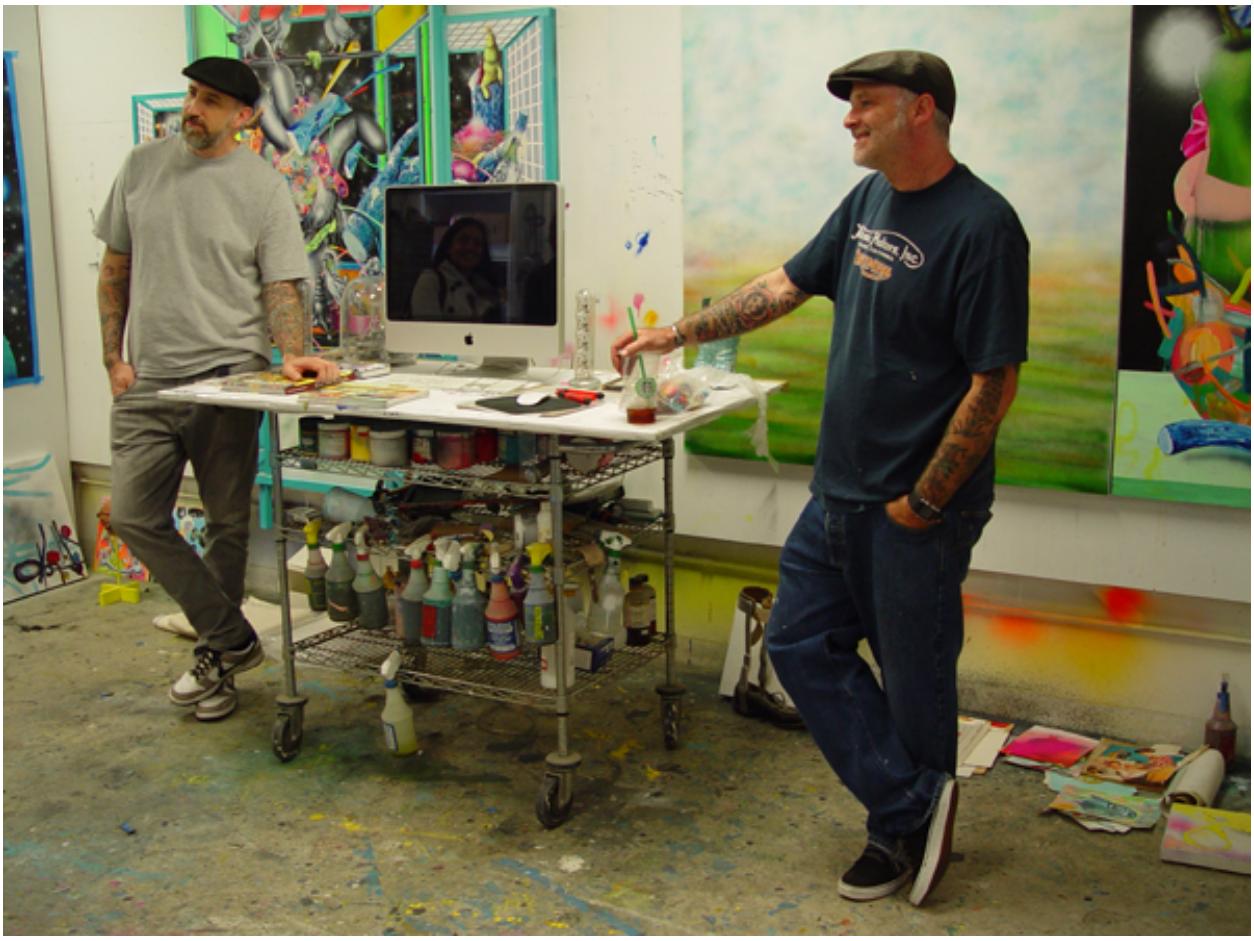


Clayton Brothers studio floor. Photo by M. Dooley.

For more than a decade, the brothers have been a regular feature in Lowbrow Art and Pop Surrealism-friendly galleries such as La Luz de Jesus and magazines like Juxtapoz *and* Blab! *(And here's my interview with Monte Beauchamp,* Blab!*'s editor.) And while their world is yet to become part of the more established fine art universe, they're perfectly content to keep in their own orbit.*

I've known Rob and Christian for a while now. As a fellow instructor at Art Center College of Design, I'll occasionally poke in on their illustration class. And a week before their PMCA opening, my UCLA Extension "Exploring L.A. Design" students and I invaded their cozy little workspace, where the brothers treated us to a tour and a talk.

I recently returned to their studio to discuss their creations and evolutions, which include both of them taking turns at interpreting, altering, and developing each one of their paintings and sculptures. We also touched upon a couple of earlier, controversial events at other L.A. museums: Ed Kienholz's scandalous assemblage of back-seat auto sex at the L.A. County Museum of Art back in 1966, and kustom kar cartoonist Robert Williams's inclusion in the Museum of Contemporary Art's 1992 "Helter Skelter," which helped open gallery space to artists such as the Claytons.



Clayton Brothers in their studio, presenting to my UCLA Extension students. Photo by M. Dooley.

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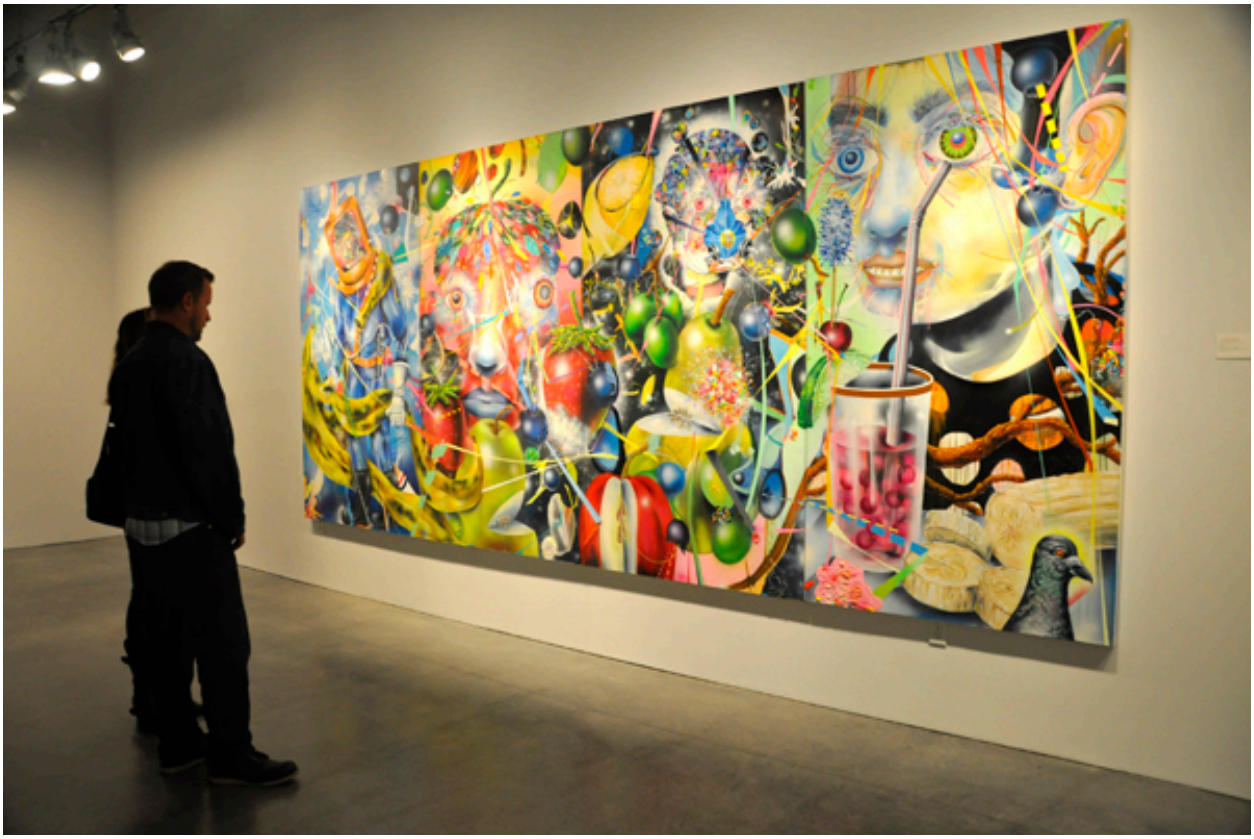
ON CATEGORIZATION AND INTERPRETATION

Rob: A lot of our work is a cross pollination of a bunch of different things. It's part graphic design, and part art history, and part contemporary culture, storytelling, narrative. We always refer to the paintings as abstract narratives.

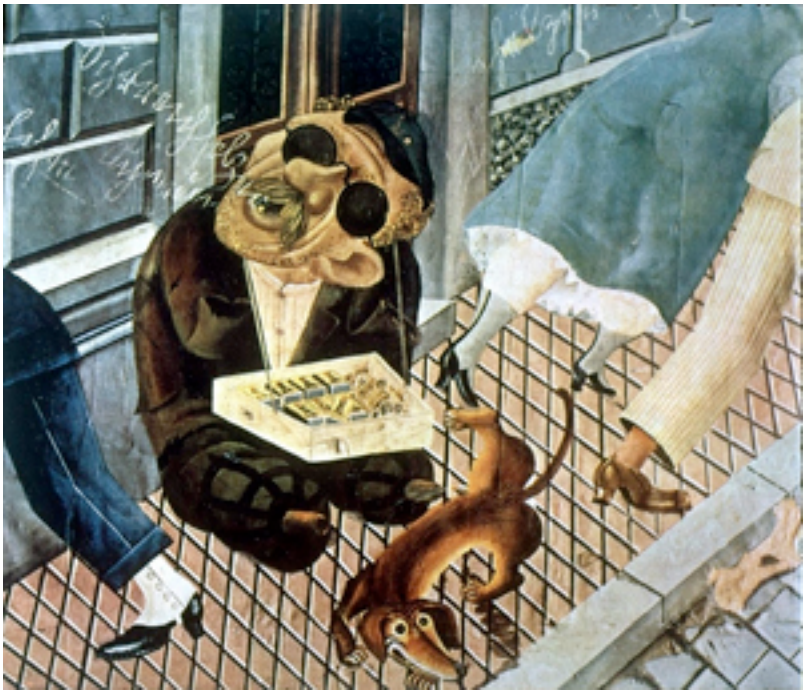
People have constantly tried to put it into some sort of historical context. "They're working off of a Post-Expressionistic kind of behavior," or "a Folk Art behavior," or... But we've always thought of what we do as very contemporary. We haven't really felt like it fit into any kind of social grouping.



Opening night. Photo by Joan Dooley.

Christian: I don't think we try to consciously place it into any kind of movement. When we come in here to paint we try to strip everything out of what we might be thinking in terms of inspiration, and just try to look at it really free form, and let it grow from that.

I actually hate trying to describe it. I don't really like being on that side of art making. I just like to paint it, to make the image, and sit back and let people experience it.



Otto Dix: "The Match Seller," 1920.

But I think it's kind of cool to see how people want to place it into some sort of of context. It helps people come to the work, and read into it. I think that's something art historians and curators and critics do well. And sometimes what they're saying even interests us. Sometimes it's there.

Rob: There are artists that we've liked over the years. Otto Dix is somebody who I think shared a similar narration, in a sense. When I look at an Otto Dix painting I don't see a direct interpretation of the individual. I see more of an emotional interpretation. The emotion that Dix was able to capture within his portraiture was very inspiring to us.

Christian: But with two people working on these figures, and the human expressions and emotions... since I'm only painting half, I'm not really that sure *where* that figure is coming from.

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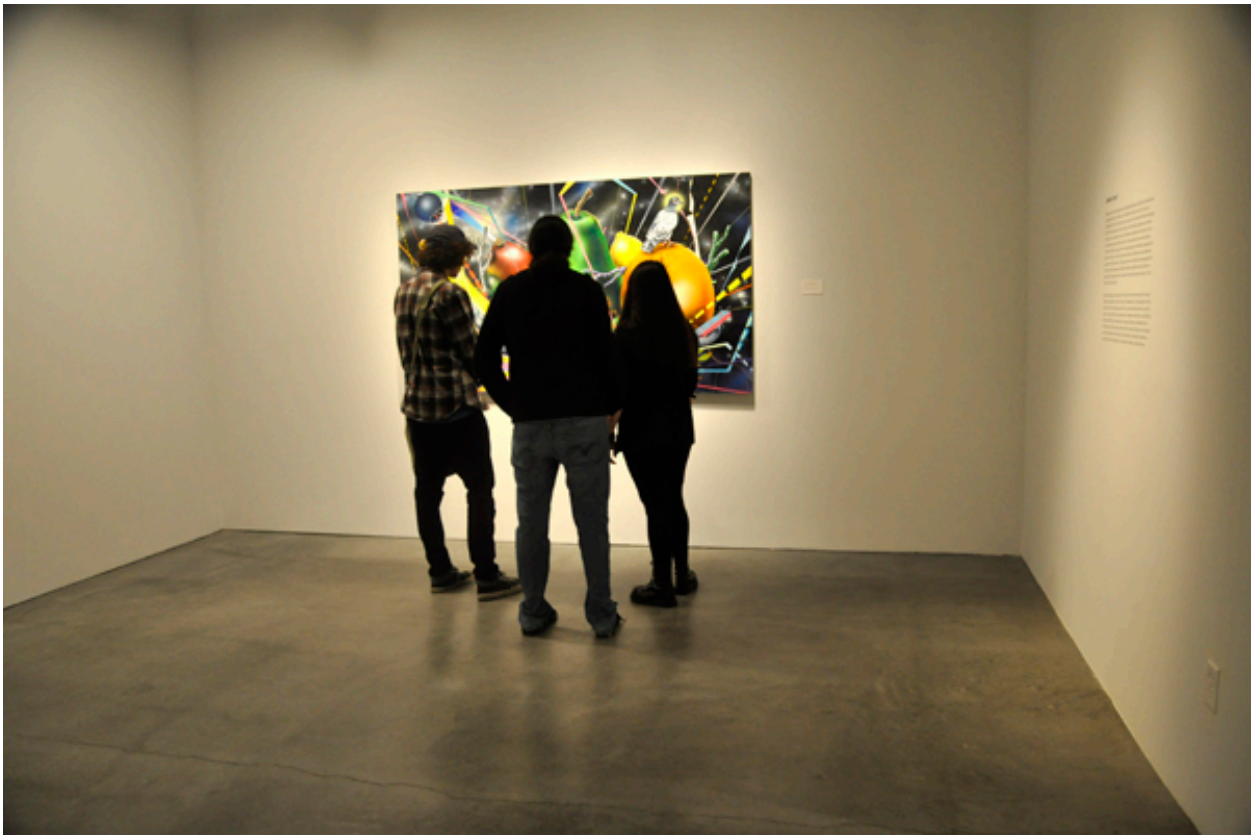
Opening night. Photo by Joan Dooley.

ON CREATION AND COLLABORATION

Rob: It's hard to pinpoint what it is that we're experiencing as painters, versus a singular painter. As a singular painter you might work from reference points, you might work from a grand idea. In our situation, that grand idea may be just a word, or a phrase, or a conversation that we've had with one another. We can't walk in here and go, "This work's about this today." It organically changes.

Christian: I might be pulling from something that happened on the airplane, and he's pulling from something that maybe happened in our neighborhood. And then as that grows – because there are two voices – it starts to evolve into something that neither one of us have complete control over.



Opening night. Photo by Joan Dooley.

Rob: It's not an "I." It's a "we." It's almost like its own third person in a way. And when the paintings leave here they become little statements on their own.

And part of what we really enjoy is the fact that we can return back to our paintings and still have a wonderment about them. I can't always identify exactly what it is that I brought to the painting. And that's one of the reasons why I keep doing this. It's a really fun thing to be so lost, and so intrigued with something, that it wants to refer back to itself and keep me interested.

We're also hoping that that's what the viewers get, that they'll go revisit this stuff and they might pick up another little snippet of something, or another junction point, or something else that spurs on a another topic of conversation.
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Opening night: Clayton Brothers inside Wishy Washy. Photo by Joan Dooley.

ON LAUNDROMATS AND REAL LIFE

Christian: It's not galleries and museums that make us make art, even though I totally respect them and love them. But that whole experience isn't what charges me and makes me run back here and make art. Life in general does. Totally.

Mostly what we get inspired by are just day-to-day experiences. Like a laundromat, where it's mundane and not very exciting. But to us that *is* exciting. People go to these places, day in and day out, and they routinely do something. And they're experiencing a part of life that's not like going to the ocean or seeing the mountains, where it's a conscious, "I'm having this great experience." There's something happening within these *little* structures that's really intriguing to us.

Rob: Wishy Washy is an actual laundromat in our neighborhood. Going in there and being inspired by the graphics and signage and those little moments of overheard conversations, the T.V. blaring in the background, the sound of washing machines going on and off and clicking, and change machines. All those clues become reference points for us in the way we interpret a structure that we would make.
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Christian in his studio. Photo by Joan Dooley.

ON EVOLUTION AND EXCREMENT

Rob: We don't necessarily stick to just what's around us. One of the more recent pieces that we did is called "Clever to a Fault," and it was based off of an old photo from photo albums that we'd pulled out of a trash can. It was a shame to see them just tossed aside.

Christian: Generations of family history that were thrown into the trash can. And they stayed in the studio for years – probably a decade – before we actually started to deal with what was in the photos. And one day we were going through these albums and Rob pulled out this black and white photo that was, maybe, shot in the 1940s. A very blurry vision of...

Rob: ... a backyard pigeon coop. You look at the picture and you see the little bird standing on the structure, as if they own it, like they own us. That became an interesting point for us, the idea of these pigeons being in a cage, starting to create a new world. What we were after was to create a sculpture that was based around pigeon excrement.

Christian: You walk up to a national monument or a sculpture and the pigeons have crapped all over it. And it's got this patina on it, but still, people are all photographing it. But we're noticing the pigeon poop is part of what makes that sculpture interesting. And that's part of their world as well, that they're crapping on it.

Rob: They're claiming it.

Christian: And we started to think about how maybe the poop's forming this sculpture, or this monument. This became our focal point, the locus of the image that was in the cage. And then the sculpture grows. You're looking at a cage that's fully glorified, and it's really colorful. And if you look at the birds closely, they're eating fruit, and the fruit is what they digest, and then, through the digestion, the poop grows into this colorful, wild sculpture of what looks like a man.

Just their poop in general is like, "Oh, that's disgusting, a pigeon crapped on me." But we're taking those little moments and exaggerating them into absurdity, but in a beautiful way. Like, really highlighting that this is part of life, and that maybe you could look at it in a different way.

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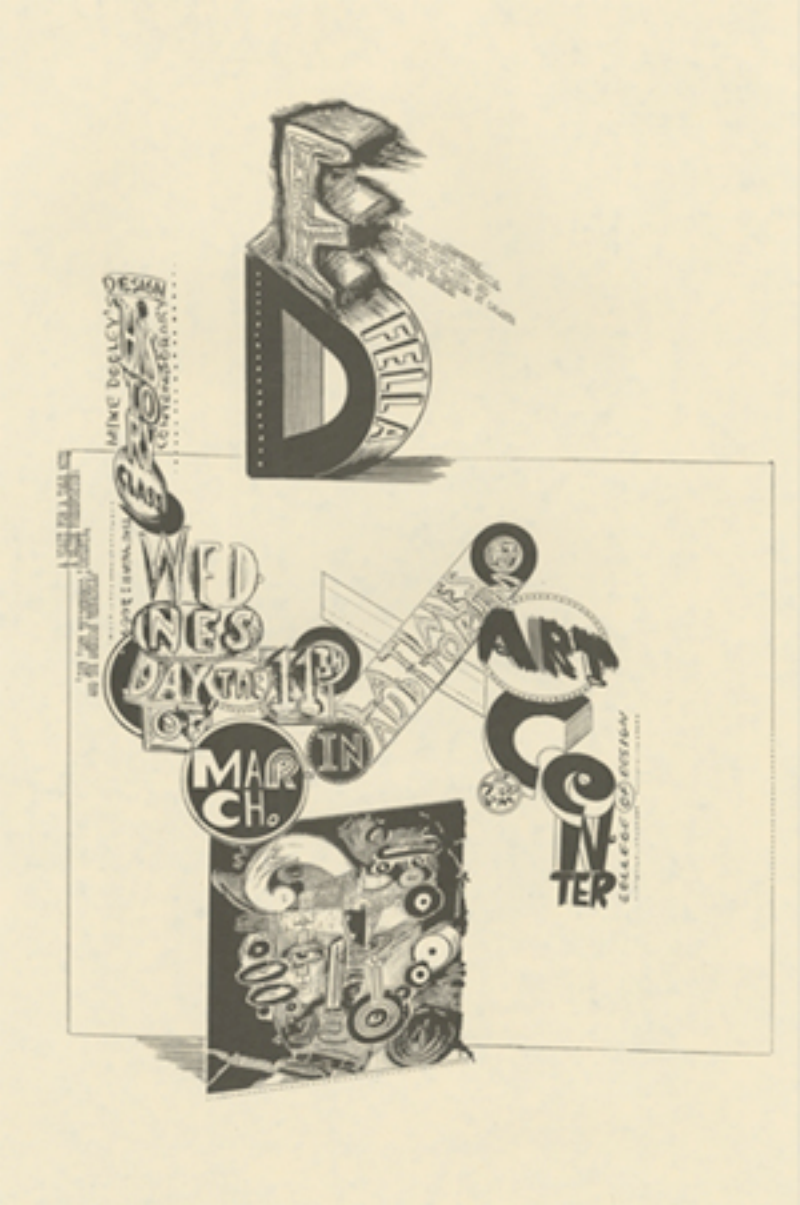

Ed Fella: flyer, 2009

ON ED FELLA AND GRAPHIC DESIGN

Rob: I admire graphic designers' ability to be able to deconstruct and reconstruct. And a lot of the graphics I refer to in my work are common, everyday graphics. Things like the signage in the laundromat. Just a few words thrown up on a board hanging in a window become an interesting source of inspiration for us.

I like Ed Fella. Ed is a graphic designer and typographer that does a really awesome job of documenting his world and seeing type that's beyond the stuff that's in the computer. It's seeing the mom writing the sign that says, "Garage Sale this Weekend," and identifying that.

Christian: A great designer has to be aware of everything in the world. You have to be very conscious of all facets in order to work with all these things. And that's incredible. I love that. Because I feel like, in one respect, we work in such a defined area within the arts. There are things that we do well and then there are things that we always have to struggle with. But putting it all together in one package is an amazing thing.
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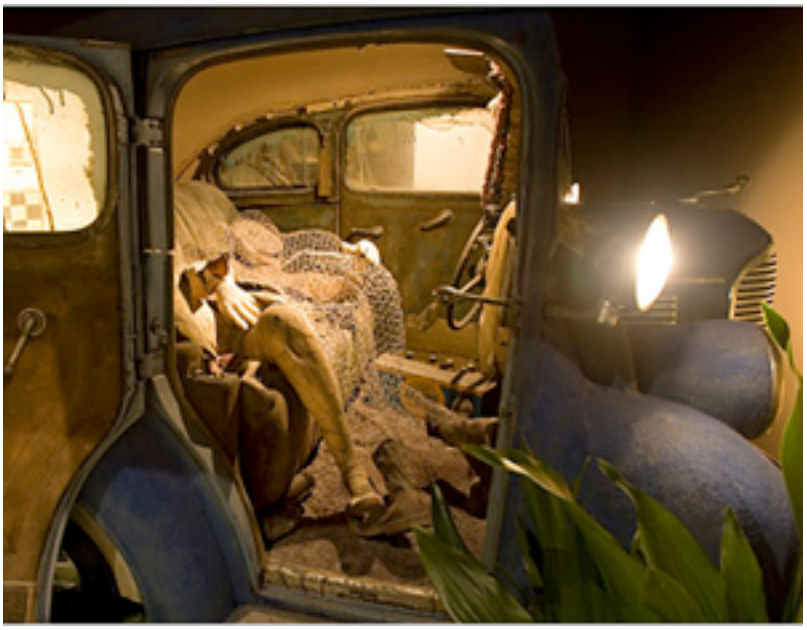

"Back Seat Dodge '38," by Edward Kienholz, 1964

ON ED KIENHOLZ AND DECONSTRUCTION

Rob: Ed Kienholz is a very interesting artist in the fact that he made things out of nothing. That "Back Seat '38 Dodge," it's an interesting piece. Very controversial at the time. I look at it now and I don't necessarily see why people were so up in arms over it.

Christian: But it's a pretty heavy piece, though.

Rob: Yeah, in terms of art history it became this deconstruction of something that we know about, this *idea* of the automobile. He foreshortened it and he chopped it apart and he brought it down to this little essence of the back seat. It wasn't necessarily the Dodge that was important, or the car...

Christian: It was the moment.

Rob: ... the moment in the back seat. And that's one of the things that we strive for in some of our structures. We're looking for the ambiance. And most of our structures also have some sort of sound installation that goes with them, to coax the viewer into being a little bit more a part of it.

ON ROBERT WILLIAMS AND PERSEVERANCE

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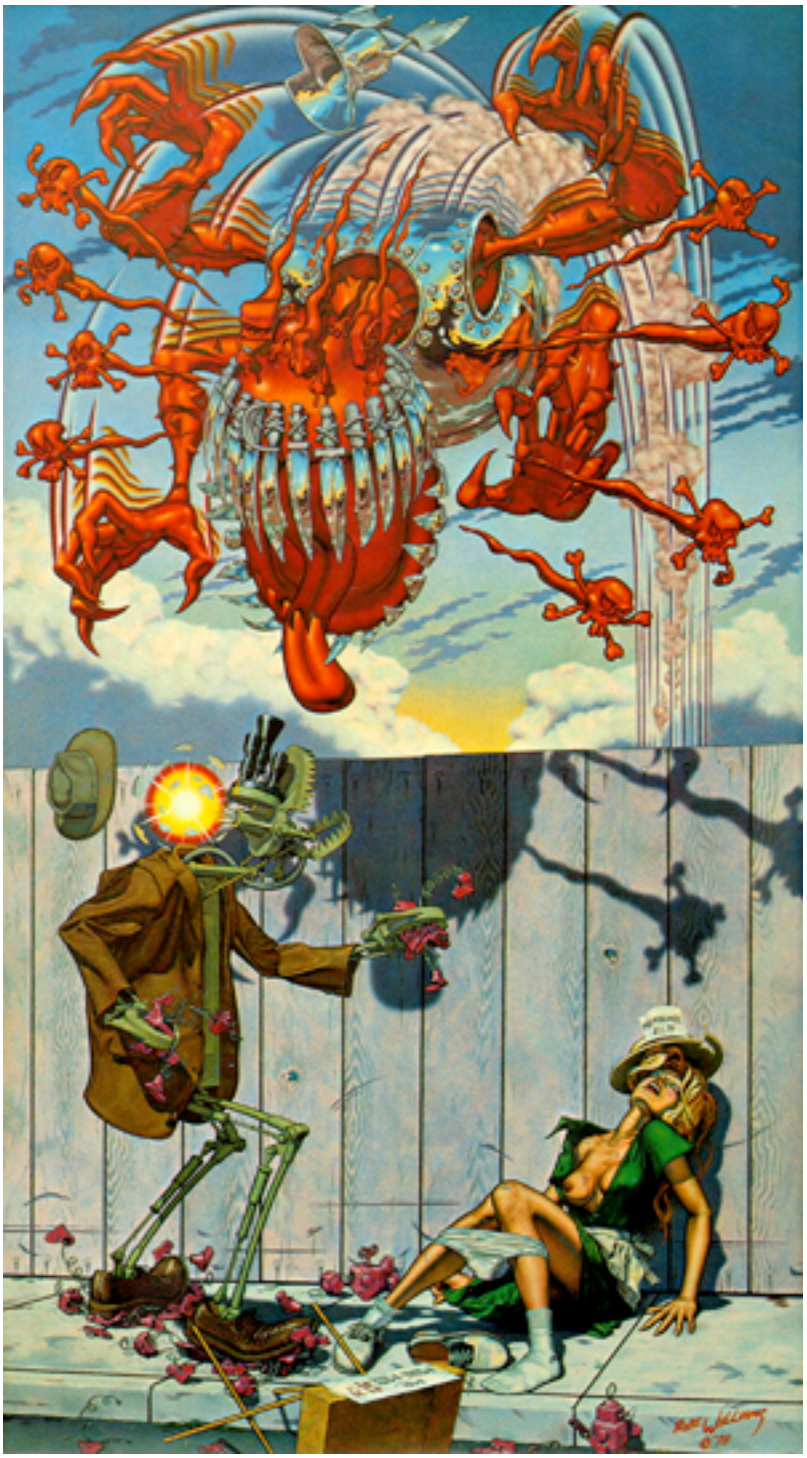


Robert Williams: "Appetite for Destruction," 1978

Christian: "Helter Skelter" was a phenomenal show.

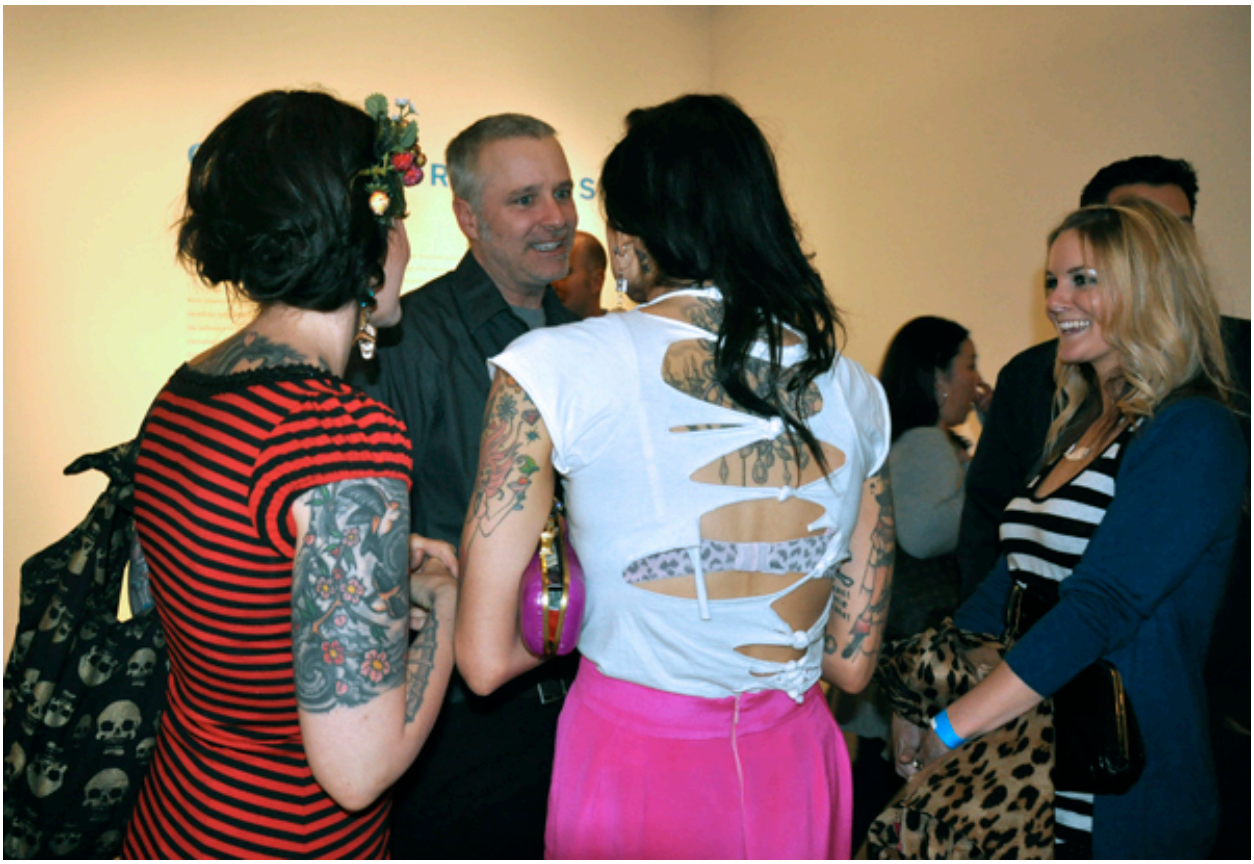
Rob: One of the most exciting shows, maybe ever in MOCA's history. That one really put a lot of stuff on the map. That group of artists were definitely doing something that people weren't even thinking at the time. And most of them are still working today.

It was a very well-curated show. And a very challenging show, too. It wasn't just a genre of work. It was a bunch of different disciplines, a bunch of different ways of looking at the world around you. And the artists who contributed to that show were just amazing. Robert Williams's work spoke to generations of people.

Christian: It still is, and will continue to.

Rob: He's amazing at bending and molding and creating a story line that has so many different reference points, and entry points and exits points. It's really fun to see his work. And the older he gets, and the more seasoned he gets, the more expressive his work is getting. The sculptural stuff that he's doing is absolutely great. It's monumental.

Christian: A huge part of this art making career, so to speak, is perseverance and being able to keep making. A lot of people get shut down because they can't afford to buy paint anymore, or can't keep a shop open. So you look at somebody like Robert who, over all these decades, is still making art. That, there, is a sign of somebody who should be credited.



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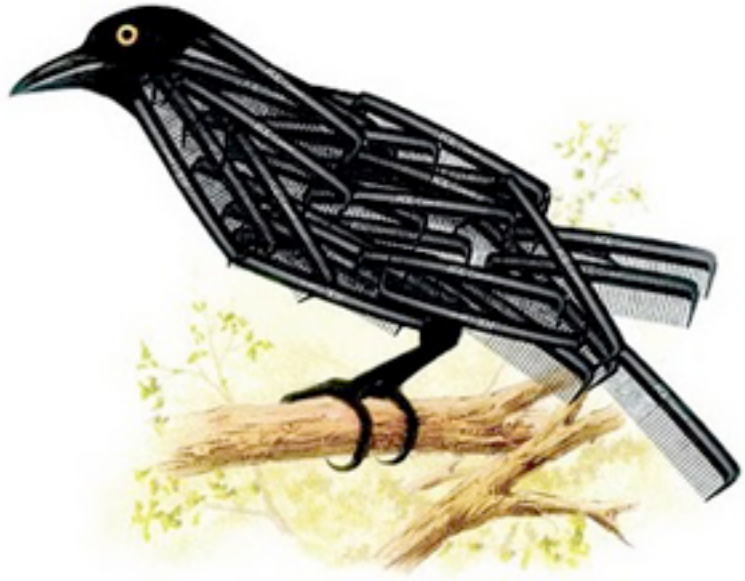
Rob and fans on opening night. Photo by Joan Dooley.

ON GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

Rob: I was introduced to Robert Williams's work through a teacher of mine at Art Center. His name is Lou Beach. He's an illustrator. I loved Lou as a teacher. He was very open to what was going on in the world around him, and didn't necessarily dictate, "This is the correct way to do something." He was getting us to make art. And I really appreciated that.



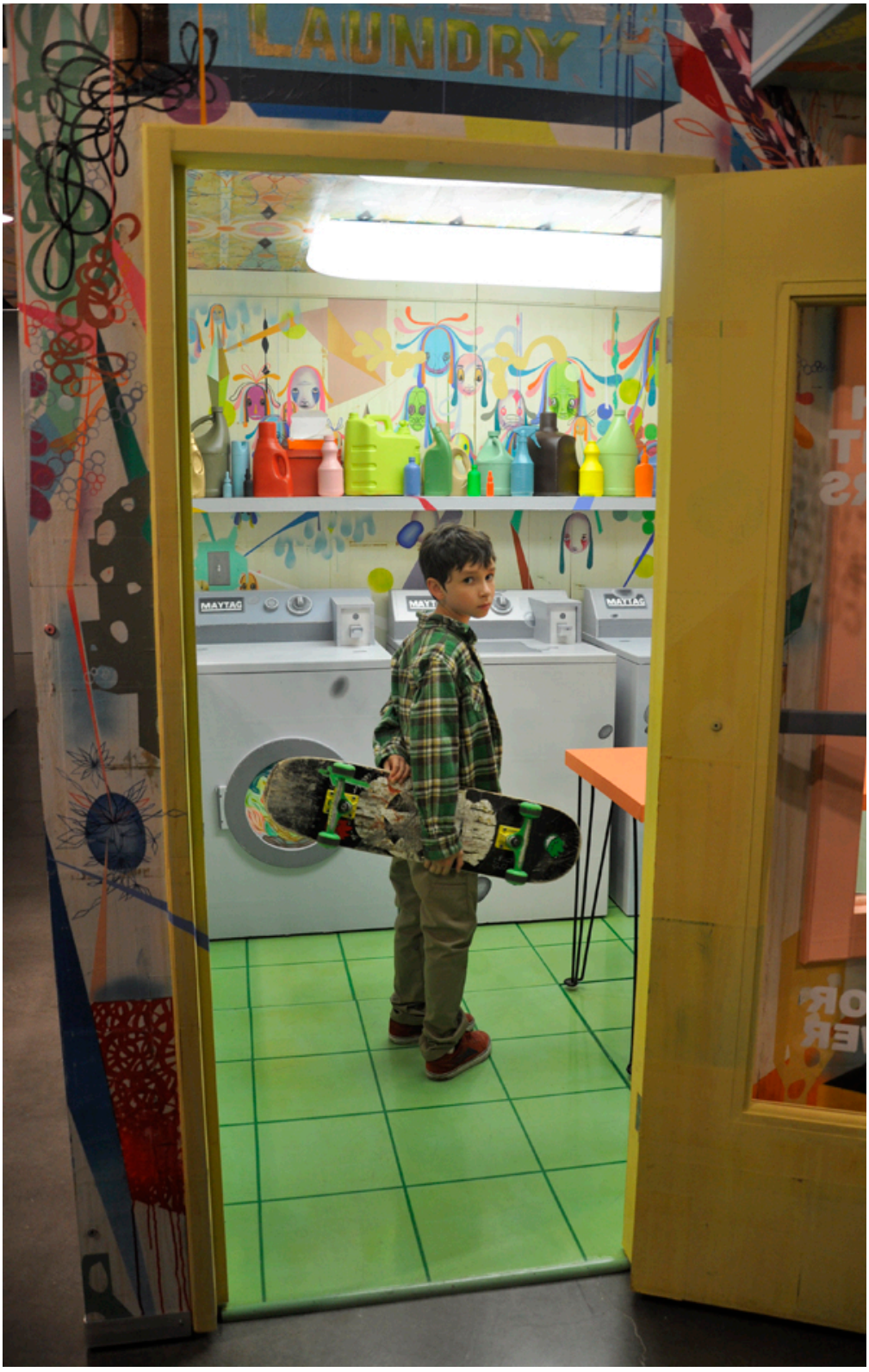
Lou Beach: "Crowm"

Christian: We never consciously embed what we do into what our students should do. I think what we're really good at is just listening to what they're motivated by, and when they're passionate. Even if they're struggling with a piece, but they're really committed to wanting to make it. I think we're good at guiding them, like giving them ideas and pushing them to try to go after the things that interest them. And sometimes it's just support, and they just grow and develop on their own.

Rob: We'll show paintings and stuff.

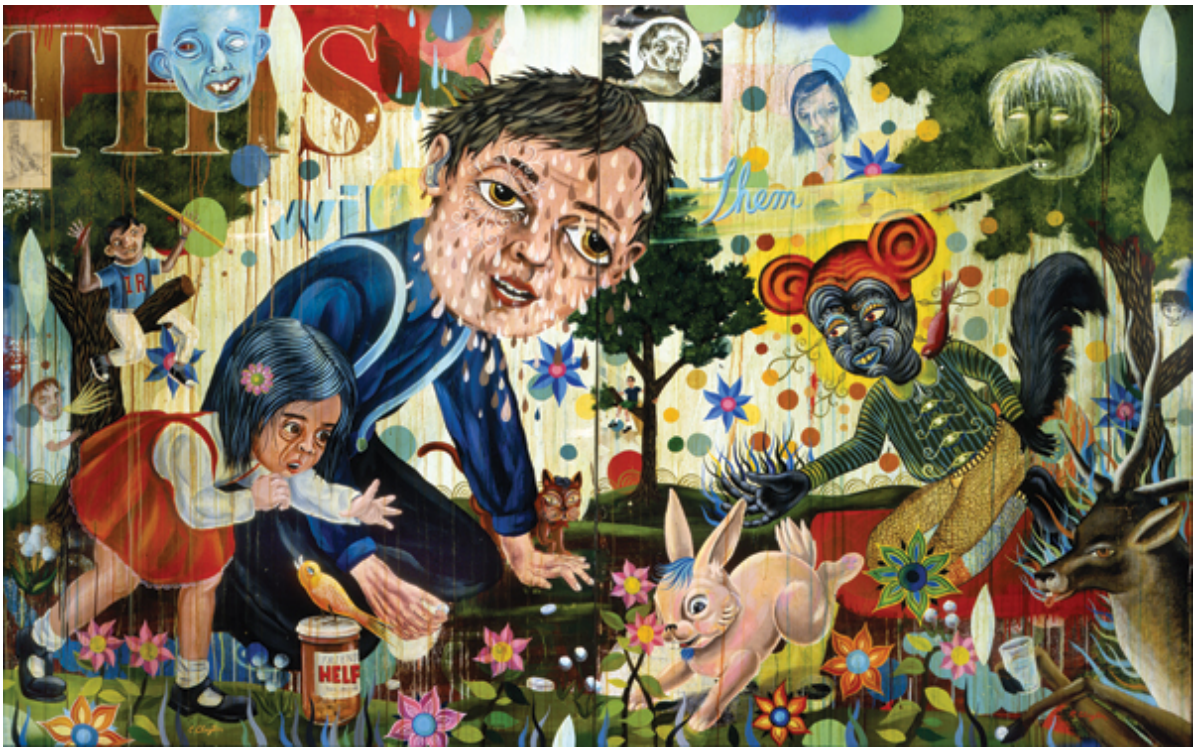
Christian: Local painters, people we might know in the neighborhood, friends. Or even people who aren't famous. They're completely unknown but have a way of working, or thinking, that's very fascinating or interesting.

Rob: We're making them aware of their surroundings in a way. I think it's important for students – and people in general – to know what's going on around them. Not to be the hermit just sitting in their room all the time, but to be aware of what's happening out there.

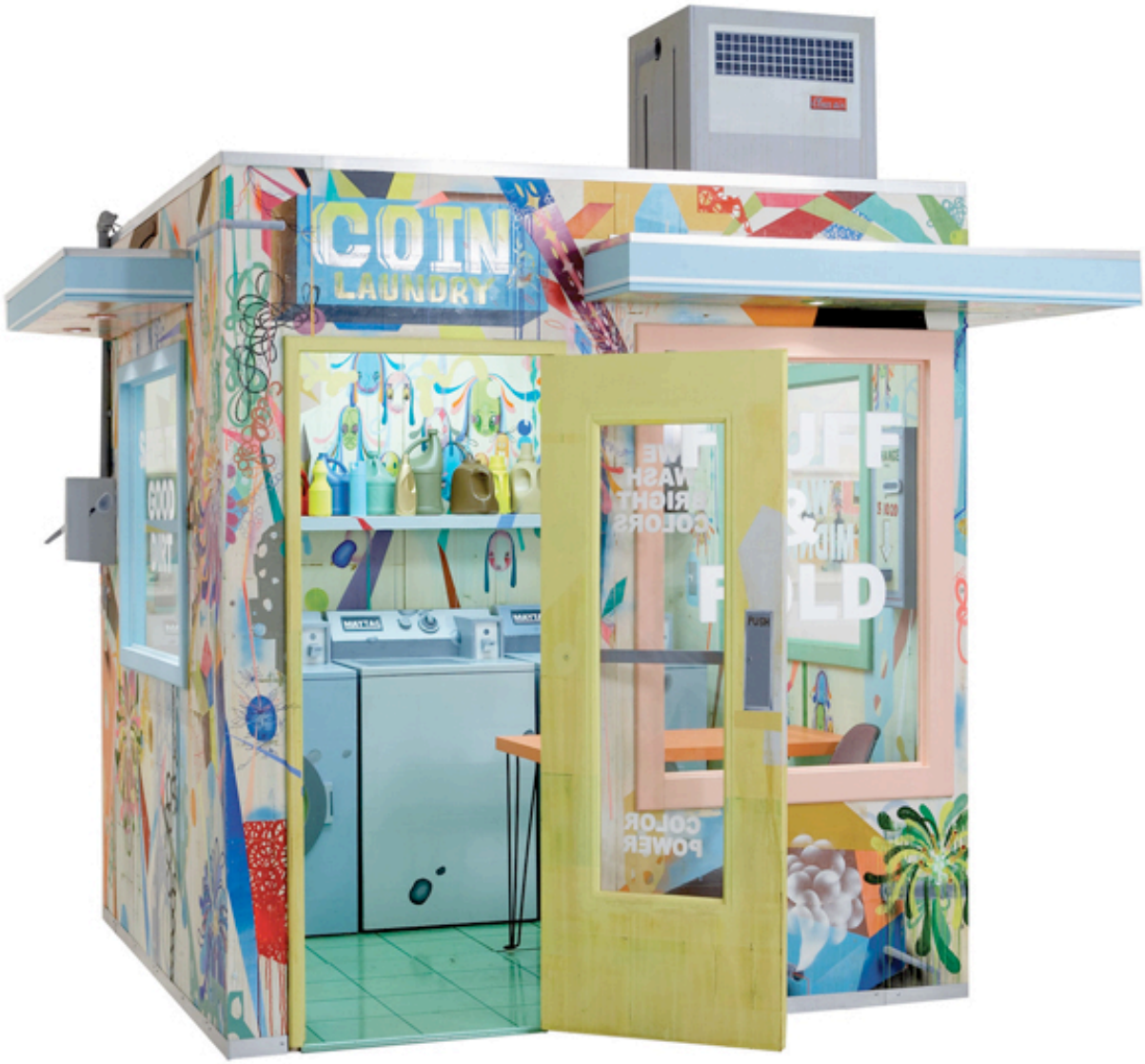


Opening night: inside Wishy Washy. Photo by Joan Dooley.

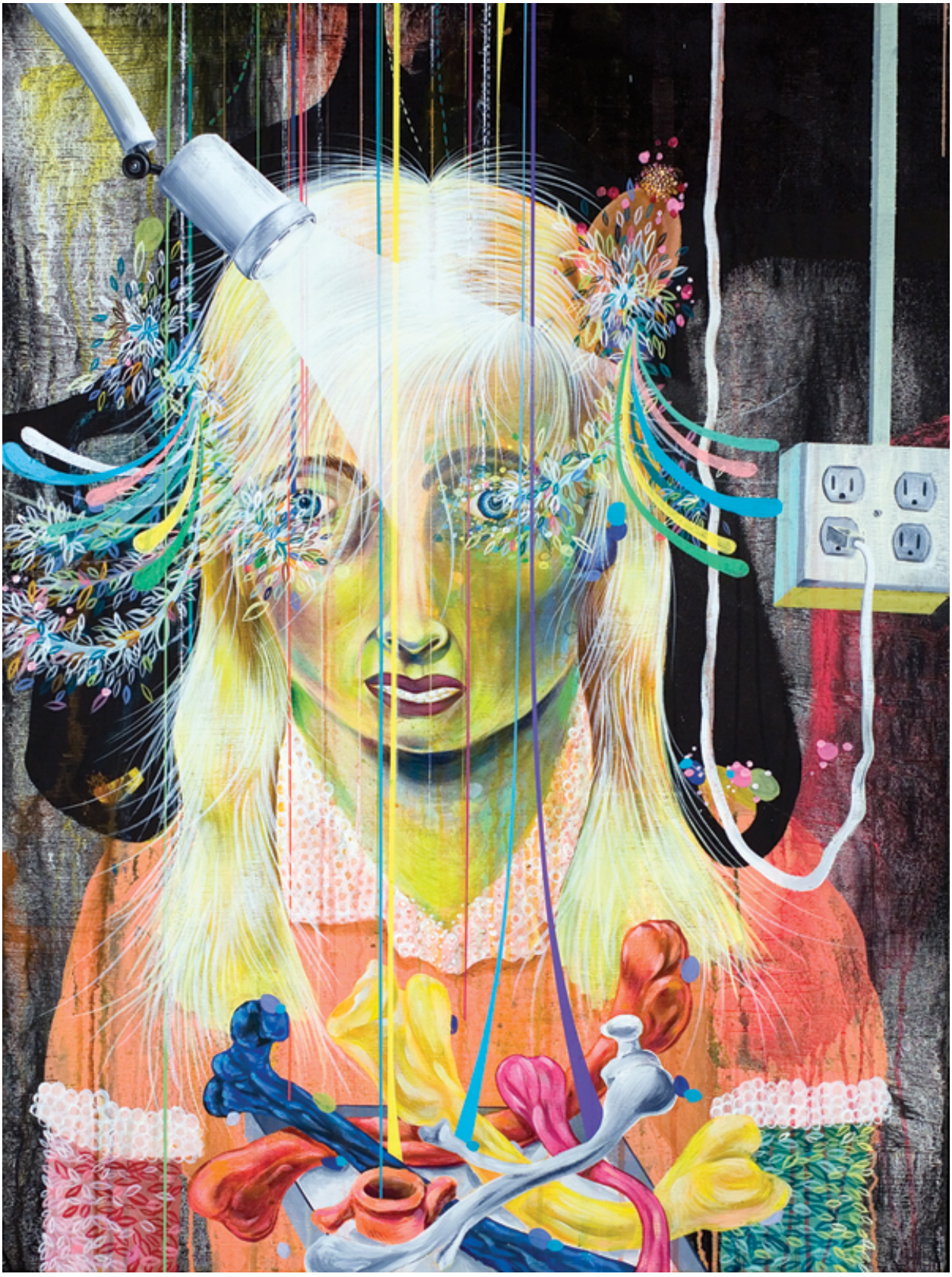
The artworks shown below are currently on display at the PMCA "Clayton Brothers: Inside Out" exhibition. It runs through September 4th.



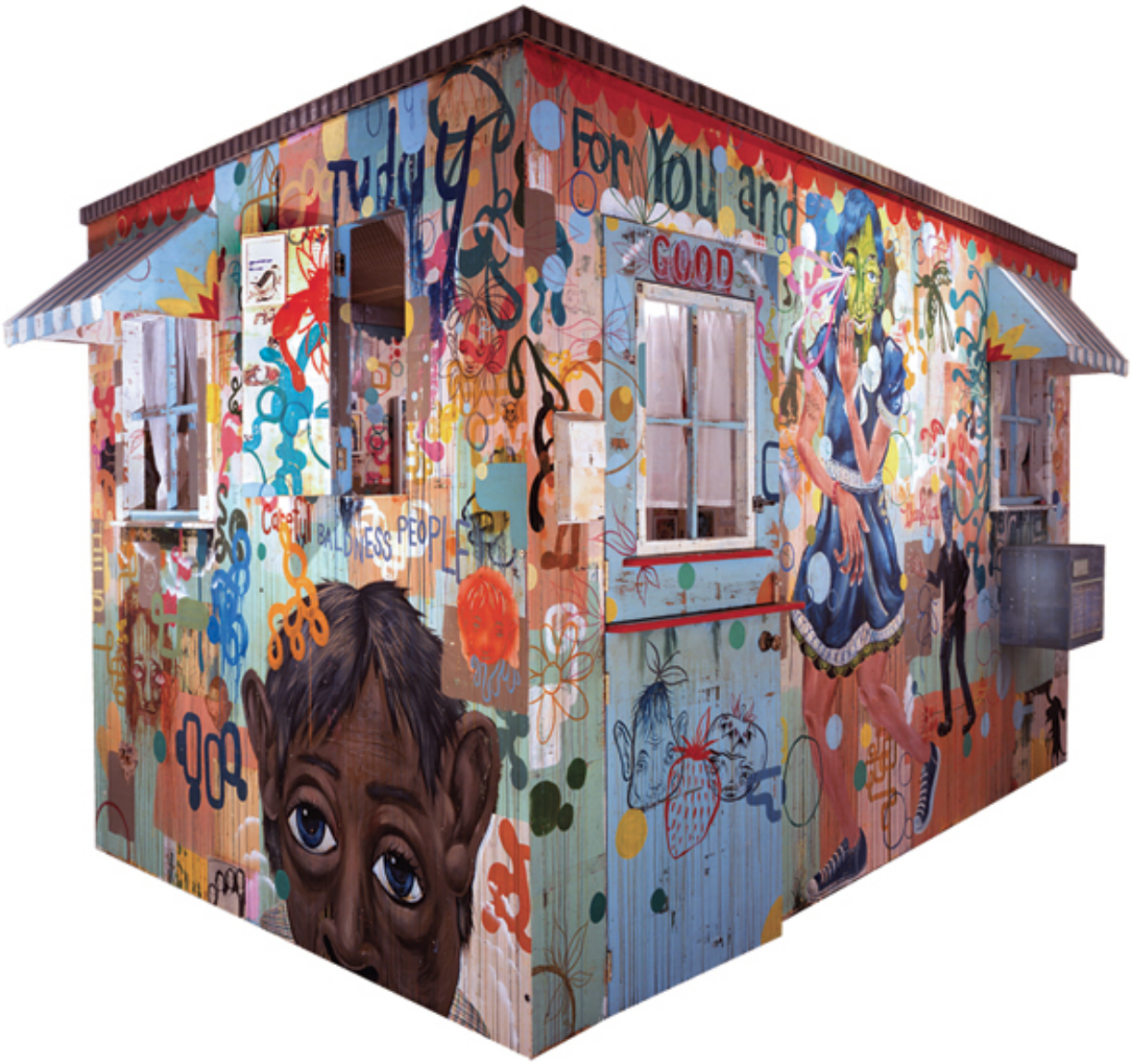
"This Will Help Them," from the series "Green Pastures," 2001. Mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.



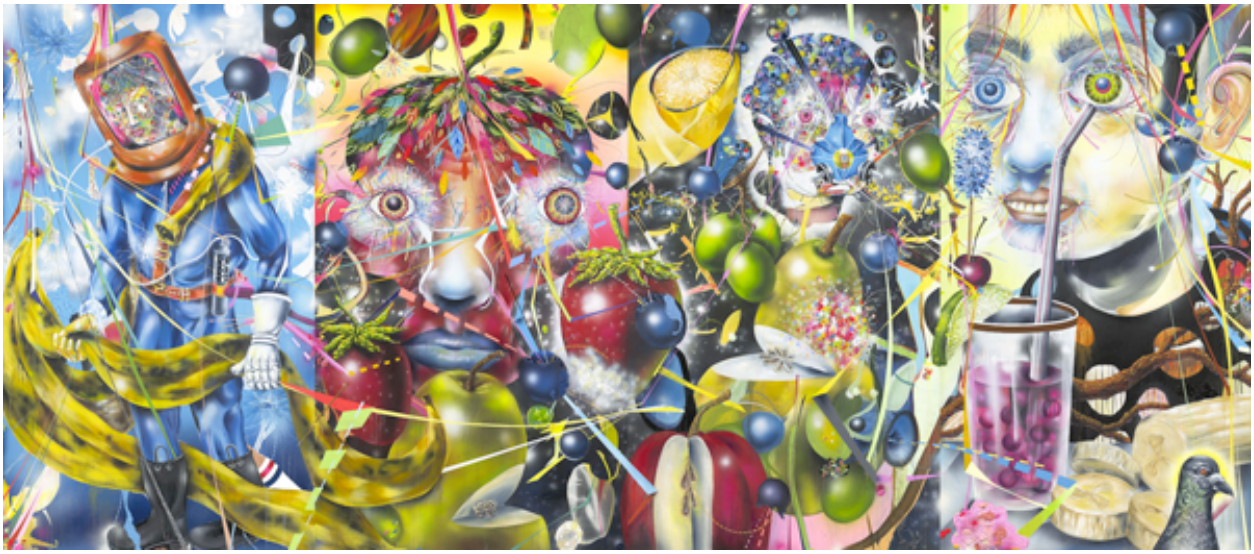
"Wishy Washy," from the series "Wishy Washy," 2006. Mixed media on wood panel with electrical and sound, 96 x 96 x96 inches.



"Patient-Girl," from the series "Patient," 2007. Mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.



"I Come From Here (House)," from the series "I Come From Here," 2004. Mixed media on wood panel with electrical and sound, 96 x 144 x 96 inches.



"Joy Jelly Jump Junk," from the series "Jumbo Fruit," 2009. Mixed media on stretched canvas, 84 x 194 inches.