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Brothers' helping hands

Rob and Christian Clayton create candy-colored dreamscapes by painting over and reworking each other's handiwork.



Brothers Rob, right, and Christian Clayton have an artistic collaboration that has produced color-infused surreal work that will be exhibited at the Pasadena Museum of California Art starting May 15. (Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times)

By Hugh Hart, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Rob and Christian Clayton enjoy a killer view of the San Gabriel Mountains from their La Crescenta studio, but the brothers rarely gaze into the distance for inspiration. The source material for their twitchy exercises in Social Surrealism lingers just outside the door of their Honolulu Avenue storefront.

Christian remembers the impetus for one recent show: "This horrible motorcycle accident happened right out front. We ran out and saw the guy who got banged up. After the ambulance came and got him we came back in here we were both 'Arrgghh, my God!' and started talking about the idea of diagnosing our paintings from this sense of urgency, as if we were both EMTs."

And by "diagnose," Christian means one brother paints over, reworks, adds to or takes away from whatever the other one comes up with. The my-turn/your-turn methodology results in jittery, candy-colored dreamscapes peopled with anxious characters that have earned the brothers a growing corps of followers. Part of a Southern California cohort of artists who erode distinctions between fine art and populist graphics, the Claytons infuse impish surface charm with currents of dread, discontent and intimations of mortality. A sampling of their work will be on display at Pasadena Museum of California Art's "Clayton Brothers: Inside Out" retrospective beginning May 15.

Dressed in near-identical newsboy caps, paint-splattered jeans and track shoes, their arms saturated with tattoos applied by musician-inker "Big Frank," the brothers radiate a go-with-the-flow alertness that makes it easy to picture them 30 years ago, when, as teenagers on spring break from hometown Denver, they'd rent a cheap motel room in Santa Monica and soak up the city's skateboard and [punk](#) rock scene. Pointing to a portrait-in-progress reminiscent of [Peter Lorre](#) if he'd sported purple striated skin and blue ears, older brother Rob, 47, muses, "I might have just painted a shape on there, put some eyes on it or something."

Then Christian, 43, went to work. "I didn't like his ears so I cut them off and put different ones on," he says. "I changed the eyes, which I don't like. I don't mind the shape, but the direction and emotion of the eyes aren't there yet. And this is the part where it gets fun, because now I can give it back to Rob: 'I'm done.' I don't know if he's [mad] or wants to bury it."

Angry or not, the siblings generally keep tweaking until the piece is deemed complete, if only because it's due to be shipped to a gallery opening.

Stephen Fleischman, curator of the original "Inside Out" exhibition that ran last year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madison, Wis., says he's fascinated by the densely tangled

tableaux produced by the brothers' tag team approach. "We tend to think of the creator of a work as monolithic entity, so you think, 'Surely they must have the same take on what they do.' But that's not the case with the Clayton Brothers." Though ample precedent for artistic duos can be found, for example, in the Starn Twins' photographic installations or Clegg & Guttman's "community portraits," Fleischman points out that the brothers demonstrate a rare degree of synchronicity. Once a piece is completed, the brothers themselves rarely remember who did what.

Free expression

The Claytons initially practiced their craft separately during a free-ranging childhood dominated creatively by a photojournalist father who urged the boys to pay close attention to their surroundings and express themselves accordingly. Rob recalls, "We drew on the walls, leather jackets, on our arms, scraps of paper. We made punk rock fliers and painted on skateboards, went to movies with our dad we probably had no business seeing and picked up on everything going on around us."

The brothers earned degrees from Pasadena's Art Center College of Design, then trekked around the country in search of roadside folk artists before setting up shop as illustrators-for-hire in L.A.'s [Fairfax](#) district. They worked in adjoining rooms until 1996, when a [Portland, Ore.](#), ad agency yoked their talents for the first time. Recalls Rob, "The creative director loved the work that both of us did and couldn't decide which one of us to hire, so he said, 'Why don't you guys do something together?' "

The Claytons — who now live in Pasadena with their families (Christian, married, has two sons; Rob and his wife have two dogs) — have been signing each piece with their pair of near-identical signatures ever since. "You never completely control the destiny of the piece, and that intrigues us." Rob explains. "Christian might come in one morning and find something that's completely different from how he left it the night before. We also play around with the idea of completely obliterating each other's marks and letting that be a mark unto itself."

It's telling that a commercial assignment for Miller Beer had a pivotal influence on the brothers' aesthetic. The Claytons belong to a generation of Los Angeles-based artists who've eroded formerly distinct realms of commercial art and fine art by deploying old-fashioned drawing skills to produce character-driven artwork. Shorn of the sentimentality that for decades made "narrative" a dirty word in kitsch-adverse fine art circles, the brothers and their so-called low brow friends share a fondness for figurative imagery and the "broken narrative," as Rob describes it. "We're captivated with the idea of a story that doesn't necessarily have all the pieces to it, as if you'd ripped a page out of a book."

Camille Rose Garcia draws on her Orange County childhood near [Disneyland](#) to render nightmarish takes on [Snow White](#) and her scarily grumpy dwarves ("Snow White and the Black Lagoon"); Gary Baseman recently expanded on his signature grinning devil-baby repertoire by reworking "Golem" legends found in Jewish folklore ("Walking Through Walls"); fabulist oil painter Mark Ryden redirects Grimm Brothers iconography in disturbingly idyllic landscapes filled with wide-eyed beasts ("The Snow Yak Show").

"We all sort of follow the same train of thought," Christian says. "In school it seemed like illustration and fine art were separate worlds. Why are they separate? Why can't a good [commercial] commission be a notable thing that you can take credit for in the same way you would for a great painting?"

Rob adds, "We've always been interested in applying our imagery to a greater audience so that it's not just something you see in a gallery or museum."

Gallery owner Patrick Painter, who represents the Clayton Brothers, says, "Rob and Christian weave together high culture and low culture, and that's a tough thing to do. They transit these deep philosophical ideas while also relating to the everyman in a way that works on both the academic level and on the popular level."

Critic Stacey Duff, reviewing the Claytons' 2008 China exhibition "Patient" for Beijing Time Out, observed a "naughty boyish curiosity" in the paintings: "Absurd narratives sprawl across the

canvas at once coherent and chaotic, precise and improvisational, disturbing and soothing, fragmentary but unified."

The Clayton Brothers' populist instincts often manifest themselves in the form of an artfully executed sucker punch. Rob says, "If you make a piece that's very vibrant and candy-coated, it lures people in, but when they get closer they start to realize it's not necessarily something that's easy to look at. And we always use the eyes to get empathy."

The brothers direct a keen collective eye toward everyday experience. The downbeat domesticity flavoring 2009's "As Is" series can be traced to Christian's house-hunting misadventures, when he'd return to the studio haunted by visits to foreclosed homes being sold "as is."

And the muse for their 2007 shed installation "Wishy Washy," which featured a peppy palette common to detergent packaging juxtaposed against wall drawings of haunted faces, can be found a half block from their studio at the neighborhood laundromat. "We'd go over there and sit around for a few minutes and see what was going on," Rob says. "We built the whole show around snippets of conversations, even if it was just one person over there talking to himself."

Transmuting raw [documentary](#) content into finished fantasia is no easy task. Having another hand on the tiller helps, Christian says. "If I were doing one of these paintings by myself, I'd get lost. I'd be going, 'I don't know what it is anymore.' That's when it's fun to turn it over to Rob and say, 'Do something to it. Do whatever you want. Just save it. Bring it back around.'"