



Thrift Store Leftovers Inspire the Clayton Brothers' Surreal Artworks

By [Hugh Hart](#)

Christian and Rob Clayton talk to Co.Create about "discarded effort" and their new thrift-shop-inspired show,

As skateboarding punk rock fans growing up in Colorado, artists Rob Clayton and his younger brother Christian spent spring breaks taking bus trips to Los Angeles so they could explore the city's less glamorous nooks and crannies. Three decades later, the brothers continue to seek out offbeat environments. Their specialty: drawing on seemingly mundane sources of inspiration to craft color-blasted paintings charged with manic energy and impish humor.

"Rob and I are drawn to things that have been broken or discarded," Christian Clayton explains. "Even when we were kids, we'd take something that didn't function well and try to re-build it or customize it or re-use it for some purpose it was never intended for."

Following earlier exhibitions *Wishy Washy*, based around the oddball characters at a local laundromat, and *Inside Out*, sparked by a traffic accident outside their Montrose, California studio, the Clayton Brothers spent three years buying bags of bric a brac at the nearby Sun Thrift Store. Fascinated with the shop's quirky habitués, they incorporated resale objects into their own art pieces to produce "Open to the Public" (through September 27 at the Mark Moore Gallery).

Christian and Rob Clayton talk to Co.Create about the hazards of hanging out at a store with no dressing rooms, the beauty of a man sleeping in a chair, and the allure of what they call "discarded effort."

ORIGINS STORY

Occasional visitors to Sun Thrift Store since the nineties, the Clayton Brothers realized the shop was ripe for re-invention when they stumbled across a four-dollar art rock during one of their visits. Rob says, "We found this rock that had a drawing of a bird on it, which was just this weird thing that caught our attention, and we also noticed all these other paintings and drawings sitting around that seemed too cool to ignore. Those things that started to speak to us. We weren't really picking for a living, but the place seemed pretty creative and in the right vein for the way we like to go about exploring places."



"DISCARDED EFFORT"

The Clayton Brothers noticed plenty of cheap reprints of Degas, Matisse and Picasso but they were more interested in anonymous amateur art pieces stashed in the back of the store. "It was obvious that somebody put time and effort into creating the piece but they didn't want it anymore," says Christian.

For First Place Winner, the brothers added a face to an amateur drawing. "That's an example of what we call 'discarded effort,' where somebody was learning how to draw the figure. It seemed odd to us that this hand-done drawing was on the floor and wasn't being honored or loved in any way. The feeling you'd get when you looked at it was, 'If this isn't sold here in the store it's going to go into the garbage.'"

Rob adds, "We'd noticed how store employees ranked art within the store, so we bought this big bag of ribbons at the store and decided to rank some of the pieces ourselves."

CHARACTER STUDIES

The brothers became familiar with regular customers, including one elderly man who routinely slept in a chair at the store and subsequently found his way into several *Open to the Public* paintings. "We weren't trying to do direct interpretations of people, where we'd photograph them and re-draw them in the studio," says Christian. "It was more about the energy we'd get from going there a few times a week and watching the people."

The unclothed woman featured in *Dressing Room* re-imagines encounters with customers Rob and Christian often came across at the store. Rob explains, "You'd see lots of signs on doors saying 'This is not a changing room. Since the thrift store has no dressing rooms, people would change in the aisle. It was always an awkward situation when you'd run into somebody's trying to pull a dress on over their clothes.'"

OBJECTS WITH A HISTORY

"History is always evident when we walk into the thrift store," Christian says. "All this stuff had to come from somewhere and a lot of it goes back to things that would have been popular in the sixties or seventies or eighties. Those objects allowed us to think about different generations and popular art forms from previous times."

To create *Grandmother, Mother, Daughter*, the brothers expanded on their portrait of a pregnant woman by adding a thrift store quilt to the work. "When we laid that hand-made quilt out on the table back at the studio, by coincidence it matched the colors in our drawing of the mother with her baby. With the quilt, we were able to reference history and home and crafting and then the painting represents creation and the cycle moving forward."



IMPULSE PURCHASES

The Clayton Brothers rarely knew in advance how their thrift store finds would figure into the work. "Rob and I made a pact with each other that if we were drawn to something in the store, we'd just put it in a cart, buy it and bring it back to the studio rather than think about it too much," says Christian.

"We'd bring big bags of stuff, and go from there. You could make this weird analogy to food," Christian continues. "Certain ingredients go really well together to make a flavor and it can be the same for art too. Shopping in the thrift store and bringing things home, we had some really random ingredient, so to speak. A lot of the process became about how you mix the elements together."

The Claytons both teach at Art Center College of Design, where they encourage students to value spontaneity. "What you should learn first is how to play with the medium, whether its painting, photography, sculpture or whatever it is," says Christian. "Grab a camera and take a photo or take a paint brush and start painting. Those are the things to kick off from, and then as you go, you can bring in tricks and techniques you can learn later."

TAG TEAM COLLABORATION

For *Open to the Public* and other joint projects, the brothers give each other free rein to erase, paint over, or otherwise alter any art piece in progress. To create *This Is Not a Man With a Pipe*, Christian drew the face and Rob later added the pipe. "I did a drawing of the man's face in the shape of the pinched pot because we'd been admiring the shapes of these clay pots at the store," Christian recalls. "After we saw some Magritte prints at the store, Rob decided to put a pipe in the man's mouth and that's when the piece came full circle."

Rob elaborates, "At the studio we don't say, 'This is mine, that's yours.' We refer to the drawings that haven't made it into the process yet as carcasses. If a painting sits around for a while, one of us will usually grab it all of a sudden and change it in some way. It's a constant give and take." Christian adds, "When do get into a heated spot with a piece, we know each other well enough to let things stew. I guess it's worked out pretty well," he laughs. "So far we haven't killed each other."