

Waiting Room

The Clayton brothers' modest storefront studio in La Crescenta, a hill town nestled at the feet of the San Gabriel Mountains outside of Los Angeles, feels too small for the paintings that line its walls. Not because the paintings are especially big, but because they are overflowing with their own contents, and because they are packed into the space like patients in a crowded hospital waiting room. The contents of each canvas – contorted limbs, splayed intestines, networks of nerve endings, bewildered faces with broken glass eyes and drooping eyelids, organic pools of acrylic color – writhe within its skin like those of an ill or injured body.

As children, the Claytons – Rob and Christian, who are indeed brothers – recall being drawn to people in wheelchairs, to those who were injured, ill, or unpopular. Their new paintings, each a portrayal of an ailing individual, concentrate these early sympathies in compositions ripe with scenes of pathos, need, and the hope for relief through healing or palliative means. Indigent (one senses) and forlorn, each “patient” is also caught within the collapsing matrices of a technologically sophisticated but spiritually alienating American health care system. For this body of work, the artists – who collaborate by painting on the same canvases but not at the same time – speak of themselves as emergency medical technicians who gather the injured or ill off the streets, or as doctors in triage. But they paint more like surgeons, attending to small details with a cool hand.

The Clayton brothers are known for their portrayals of people in the neighborhood, more or less - not necessarily specific individuals or their particular La Crescenta locale, but something closer to psychic composites of the local characters and stories that pass through the vicinity of their (shared) awareness as painters. The style in which they paint is a kind of hysterical realism in which vitality is vested in the details. The overall image – the portrayal of a person, or the scene surrounding that person – is a menagerie of its countless parts. Deriving its radiant visual half-life from the sprawling LA fission of American popular culture, the Claytons' pictures are painted with acrylics in a bright, relatively unmixe

palette, and have been likened, fairly or not, to Gothic cartoons, tattoos, graffiti, Latino murals, punk, outsider paintings, and visionary narratives.

The portraits and figures that compose the core of each new painting, while drawn from the everyday world, feel like personifications of the artists' shared sense of wounded humanity and its possible redemption through the intuitive activity of painting. Working on many paintings at once, the Claytons speak of "leaving messages for each other" that stir memories dormant since childhood. Often, one brother will recognize an image the other has painted. Or a written word or phrase, which the artists use like fleeting thoughts, oblique captions, or signs in the local atmosphere, will crystallize the sense of a painting's meaning. (In this sense, painting is a form of remembering-in-common.) Neither painter knows what the final story of each painting will be, but as they "riff" on each other's additions to (and subtraction from) the canvas, a kind of intuitive conversation between them pushes each painting towards the visual narrative it eventually becomes. "We have to start painting in order to stop painting," they say.

Collaboration in the process of painting is difficult to define but fun to imagine. Among other things, it means relinquishing one's romantic claims upon the medium as the embodiment of one's personal emotional content(s). It means establishing some distance between oneself and one's subject. Despite the graphic intensity of their painting style and subject matter, Rob and Christian seem as close to the collaborative space they occupy as brothers as they do to the street-wise visions their collaboration begets. Painting together substitutes for a lone psychological burden a shared psychic exploration, especially if the painters are members of the same family – neither one being entirely separate from the other to begin with. In this respect, the Clayton brothers are at once independent and mutually reliant.

We tend to think of modern painting as a liberating activity (for the artist), and liberty presumes independence. In reality, painters become deeply entangled in the painting process, and whatever independence they seek while painting is seldom from painting. What is curious about the familial form of

collaboration the Clayton brothers practice is that neither is solely responsible for bringing a painting to life or allowing it to expire in the waiting room. This must be liberating: getting lost in the details and making sense of the big picture later, when the artists step back and consult with each other. It's like writing one sentence after another without having to tell a story, until the sentences gather momentum and tell the story themselves.

The Claytons' paintings gather momentum this way, one eccentric image at a time. If the paintings are their patients, then each artist is a specialist, and the passages he paints into the picture – the inner machinery of an oversize human heart, luminous filaments of human hair, a burnt orange colon-like carrot (among a cornucopia of other oversize and over-ripe fruit, like human organs, sharing a hospital bed with an ill male patient) – allows him to pay attention to a painting's particular "symptoms" until its overall state of health, or illness, comes into focus. The result of this absorption in the body's minutiae, however, is a strange and palpable empathy for the human subject who lies behind their depiction. The artists are not offering clinical analysis, but care. They paint care-fully. Their realism is not hysterical at this point, but deferential to the exaggerated, microscopic way seriously ill people must experience their own bodies – people who can no longer see the big picture of themselves, but only sense the menacing parts within.

Sitting in their studio "waiting room," Rob and Christian Clayton observe that the human figure "is being beaten up by lots of artists today." What they mean, I think, is that in the age of disembodied media and the experiences of drift and anomie they induce, the body is represented in the arts as an increasingly anxious cipher for all that simultaneously attracts and repels us about our corporeal post-modern selves. We still have bodies and they still disintegrate with age and poverty and bad luck, a hysterical reality that does not correlate with the idealized images of youth and health that dominate our global pantheon of adolescent beauty (or beauties). These new paintings, like cut-away medical illustrations of living cadavers, are initially seductive and suddenly repulsive. Standing transfixed in the waiting room, the observer soon understands what the Clayton brothers already know, that empathy is the only course of treatment.

Jeff Kelley

Beijing, October 2007