

## Blood Machines

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The Clayton Brothers latest series, entitled *Patient*, is a natural outgrowth of their previous artistic projects. One of the continuing themes in their work is a focus on spaces and individuals who appear under the social radar. In their installation '**Tim House**'(2001), the CB's constructed a shack-cum-playhouse based on a childhood neighbor's assisted living facility. The house featured a pitched roof crowned with a crucifix-like 't' – for Tim – so that it bore some resemblance to a church. The interior of the house included a sofa inviting the visitor to sit. The walls and ceiling were decorated with portraits of people the brothers knew personally. In effect, the house served as a living space devoted to friends in a neighborhood most of us will never visit.

Held in Los Angeles, where the Claytons live and work, *Tim House* was part of the Brothers first solo exhibition. Entitled *Green Pastures*, the show also included several paintings and presented a disjointed, kaleidoscopic vision of a deeply personal universe. In title at least, *Green Pastures* suggested a rural idyll, not unlike *Green Acres*, the late 1960s American TV serial. But in *Green Pastures*, the Brothers undercut this idyll with a profusion of characters, some inspired by real-life acquaintances, others entirely imaginary, who seemed either disoriented or wounded. Some of the characters were human; many were children. Animals – many of them menacing – suggested a grotesque, fairytale ambience: 'Ding Dong' cats with a fleshy tongue and a sinister eye. In one painting, a barefoot girl in a thigh-high dress held a gigantic pill. Even in 2001 there are traceable elements that foreshadow the Brothers' current focus on patients.

The visual language of the Claytons as a duo is firmly established with *Green Pastures*. But the visual language of each brother was already simpatico in the years leading up to the show. Both brothers were drawing heavily on images of children and animals, as with Christian Clayton's "**Dogs Dancing**" (1997) and Rob Clayton's '**Sticks for Hands**' (1999). By the late 1990s, even in individual works, viewers find the same skewed, but consoling, visions. It's almost as if the soul of the American backwoods has been poured through a filter of fairytales, punk rock, folklore and myth, suburban malaise and urban anxiety. In "**What the Billy Goat Saw**" (*Green Pastures*, 2001) – one of their most striking early works – what appears to be a cleric holds his half-clenched fists to the night sky as his carriage is pulled by a billy-goat across the landscape. Flames leap up from the bottom of the canvass where a demon waves his hands. A monkey with a Buddha-like aura hangs in a tree. Numerous birds twitter and flutter around the branches while milk-white clouds provide a canopy for this twisted, yet serene, midnight journey.

By the late 1990s and definitely from *Green Pastures*, the Clayton Brothers have already come into their own. That is, the imagination that drives their work has already achieved confidence and maturity. Absurd narratives sprawl on the canvass: at once coherent and chaotic, precise and improvisational, disturbing and soothing, fragmentary but unified.

Works that contain so many opposites lend themselves to multiple readings. *Green Pastures* seems like an ironic attack on a utopian American vision. The pastures aren't green, but dark and bloodstained, populated by vipers and flames, amputees and arthritics. They are filled with wild animals and sad characters as if a black magic is fuelling the universe. But if one viewer takes the landscape as a nightmare, another viewer is sure to find the same landscape as a skewed, endlessly evolving and eerily compassionate fantasy. "Green Pastures for us," the Brothers seem to suggest, "must be infinitely full of sharp lights and soggy shadows, so strange beasts can ricochet between shades of day and night."

The wide range of how we can respond is a direct result of the way the Claytons have worked for the last decade. They take turns at the canvass. One paints for a while and then passes it to the other. This process goes on until the painting is completed – and there is very little verbal exchange during the process. The Brothers start a painting without preconceived notions of how it must end, what theme is being developed, what moral is to be drawn. "The paintings," write the

Claytons, “seem to finish themselves during the course of our nonverbal dialogues.”<sup>1</sup> With the Claytons, ambiguity seems to be the result of the process. No two minds, and no two painters, even if they are brothers, think alike. An additional cause for this ambiguity in the work of the Clayton Brothers seems to stem from a natural inclination: to be both cautiously critical and childishly fascinated at the same time. There is kind of a naughty boyish curiosity prevalent throughout the work – up until the present – where barbed commentary gets caught up in a whirlwind of play.

This mixture of caution and fascination is evident in a later installation from 2006. For ***Wishy Washy***, the Brothers constructed a Laundromat, complete with an audio channel playing the sounds of washing machines and dryers. As early as 2005, the CB's had already started experimenting with images of individuals in a Laundromat, but the exhibition brought that experimentation into full focus. The local coin laundry is not a phenomenon that Chinese viewers share with their American counterparts. They are still rare in China, where most people do their washing at home or take it to the cleaners. In the United States, coin laundries can still be found in most cities and towns. Patrons at the Laundromat range from people who don't personally own a washing machine and dryer to more affluent people who have to resort to the Laundromat because their appliances at home are broken down.

*Wishy Washy* served as an exercise in fascination with this much-neglected social space even as it critically examined notions of cleanliness, purity and brightness in a consumer-driven system. Upward mobility is not as easy in American society as it once was – it still matters what side of the tracks you were born on. But at the American Laundromat social stratifications are temporarily blurred. Here, people are forced out of their own personal living space to a communal space where – unlike a church or club – they share little in common with the people around them. What they do share is a common task: wash away the dirt and muck. Get squeaky clean. So despite the strange faces, the Laundromat is also consoling. It provides the promise – however brief – of a material cleansing and we are, to some extent, what we wear. On a fundamental level, we are comforted by the notion – even if it is “wishy washy” – that we are not only cleansing fabrics and threads but also purifying ourselves. The Laundromat serves as a type of urban baptism, only instead of submerging in water, we bask in fluorescent lights to the hum and drone of the machines.

One constant runs through the Clayton Brothers' work, and that is worth mentioning here: a quirky fascination with common experiences, a heightened concern with events, places and people that most observers tend to overlook. *Wishy Washy*, drawn from visits the Brothers made to local Laundromats, may serve as a metaphor attacking our hypersensitivity to filth and our obsession with finding the ultimate clean. But the work also highlights the simple, stimulating reality of an overlooked space: the noise of the machines, the faces and stories of the consumers. The Claytons transmit to the viewer that same fascination – particularly with the space itself and its paraphernalia – how perfectly designed it all is for the contemporary nighthawks of clean.

In *Patient*, fascination as the main ingredient in making a work of art still takes priority. But there are a few differences. The most obvious one is that the focus of fascination has largely shifted from a space – for example, a Laundromat, a home or an imaginary landscape – to the human body itself. While some of the works in the present show feature an operation or triage room, space has become secondary to body. A second difference relates to process. Unlike previous works, the Claytons have communicated with each other during the making of the work, rather than simply taking turns at the canvass. A third difference is that *Patient* treats topics that are at the very heart of the current political and social debate in the United States: illness and the impact of a sprawling medical industry that is at once insufferably expensive and hugely profitable.

The underlying current here is a fascination with the human body and a conviction that it is delicate but remarkably self-contained, in spite of the popular perception propagated in the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Most Special Day of My Life: Works by Rob Clayton and Christian Clayton, 2003 (La Luz de Jesus Press, Los Angeles).*

mainstream media – including the Internet – that the body works best when it depends on medicine, treatment, constant vigilance, surgery and insurance.

In the drawing, entitled “**Patient T (M) #2**”, we have the portrait of a woman whose weary and sagging eyes indicate she is less than healthy. She even looks ghoulish – a transient queen of pain. Her tongue is extended out of her mouth, ready to take her medication. The canvass is cluttered with small colorful droplets that alternately suggest internal organs, pills, corpuscles or bacteria. She doesn’t even have a proper body but her head floats above a large, leaky stomach as well as a “7-day” pill administrator, each box labeled according to the day of the week. The box is marked “Wednesday” so that we can peep in on the seven colorful pills that she has to take that day. The pills are visually appealing, and the colorful array of these pills is paralleled by the trapezoidal rays that filter down, like rays of light, from an aura above her hair. A large spoon full of a medicinal pink liquid is held out just below her stomach. Her existence has become a medicated existence.

To what extent, is this type of existence worth it? How does a medicated existence translate in terms of human freedom? Are we free if we are so heavily medicated, or does life turn into a type of spiritual disembowelment? In “**Patient A (M) #2**”, a subject stands in a ring, looking down at the floor where he stands in a cluster of over-sized, over-inflated body organs. His face is also skewed, resembling a surreal mask at a carnival. He is half-naked, dressed in plaid boxer shorts that are held up over his raw, blistered body by black suspenders. Standing in the ring, he is literally roped in, suggesting his own limitations and that the human body is a sort of trap. The white background is cluttered like many of these works with small colorful droplets that at once recall illness and disease. An explosion of organs and droplets in the background also suggest disease. A small pear among the rubble of organs evoke the fragility his own flesh.

The presence of fruit in many of the drawings and the paintings serves as metaphor for the innate fragility of the human body. Comparing fruit to the human body is by no means novel. One only needs to think of the Italian Mannerist painter, Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s fantastical portraits, like “Summer” (1563). The work depicts the portrait of a man whose face is composed entirely of fruit. Viewers who follow Chinese contemporary art should also find this fascination with fruit – and its decay – familiar. Gu Dexin springs to mind with his installation last year in Beijing where he dumped tons of apples into a local gallery, offering an object lesson in decay. As part of their own preparation for the current project, the Clayton Brothers also observed a variety of fruit in a state of decay: apples, bananas, pears and blood oranges. Representations of these fruits turn up in several of the works, as in their drawing, “**Patient T (M) #2**”. The work comprises of a smattering of body organs mixed with fruits, inviting comparisons between the two. The banana is overlaid with the word “Breathing”, and it is also bruised, evocative of disease and decay.

Like the drawings, several of the paintings are also scattered with representations of fruit, as well as pills, eviscerated organs, hospital beds, syringes and machines. Two aspects of the paintings stand out. One occurs where the patient is in a state of total trauma, as if we are witness to a triage center or emergency room. That is especially apparent in one of the show’s most commanding works, “**The Human Body**”.

The painting features an aggressive nurse – or invasive at least since she’s the one holding a gigantic syringe – as she stands over a patient. Of all the patients in the series, this one is the most mutilated. The patient’s skin has completely vanished, so all we get is his large bundle of entangled organs. There’s the shocked expression in his one remaining eye that you might expect of a monster at the point of death. The only recognizable external characteristic that recalls his former intact self is a single leg, hairy and charred, but miraculously still wearing a clean sock and a laced shoe. Along with the powerful, buxom nurse and her titanic needle, it is the non-human elements in the work that make this creature seem helplessly human: an IV bag, a stainless steel gurney, and a little machine – placed on a bedside stand beside a pear and an unrecognizable organ. The machine itself is drastically dated. It looks like something used in a high school science project from the 1960s. The machine looks so ancient and simple compared to the infinite complexity of the mangled organic machine it monitors: the human body.

'The Human Body' depicts a patient at his most dramatic and urgent moment: when he is fighting to stay alive. The internal war of surviving is externalized here. It's as if we are viewing the fight on the inside, with ringside seats. Or rather, the internal struggle has been externalized and blown-up for open viewing in an operation theater.

All of the paintings tend toward the grotesque, but none of them are quite as explosive as "The Human Body". In fact, many of the paintings here, like "**Patient Girl**" and "**Patient Boy**" focus less on emergency and triage and more on a "medicated survival." Here the patients continue to be surrounded by pills and liquid medications, as well as fruit, beds, oxygen tanks and defibrillators. The show turns here and becomes less about violence and dying and more about one of the phases that living machines, "blood machines", are bound to endure. An imaginative fascination with this relevant, ever-present possibility – getting sick and being treated – is what drives the work as a whole. When that possibility turns into a fact, and it will for everyone who sees the work – as well as for those who don't – we can either resist it or find some measure of acceptance and consolation. We can even hope to get better, where recovery is still an option.

What the Clayton Brothers have managed to execute in this series, entitled *Patient*, is a fantasy grounded in alert compassion about a real but unwanted moment. The work is technically accomplished, visually striking and densely imaginative. But beyond these aesthetic criteria, what I take away most from the images is a new fascination with blood machines, the ways they have of breaking down, breaking up, and staying alive.

Beijing  
October 31, 2007