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L.A. Artists Rob and Christian Clayton Use Bold Splashes of Color to Entice Viewers

By LINDSAY CHRISTIANS | The Capital Times | Posted: Sunday, September 12, 2010 5:10 pm

For Rob and Christian Clayton, painting requires partnership.

The Los Angeles artists, brothers and collaborators share memories and studio space while creating large-scale paintings and brightly colored stand-alone sculptures. The Madison Museum of Contemporary Art presents the first major museum exhibition of the brothers' combined work in "Clayton Brothers: Inside Out," running through Jan. 2, 2011. Six series of works, mainly paintings, are featured, spanning nine years (2001-09).

When the Claytons began collaborating more than 10 years ago, "We were into playing around and having fun with the art," said Rob, the older brother by four years. "You just have to check your ego at the door and understand that some thing might change." "The fun part about it is not knowing where a story can go and how an image can evolve," Christian said.

In addition to an animated style, what links all six series is the brothers' curiosity, both about their subjects and viewers of their art. Their bold, bright images use a hefty dose of humor and cartoonish characters. But their subjects — isolation, community, memory and illness — are clearly adult.

The Claytons are "keen observers of the world," said Stephen Fleischman, MMoCA's director and curator of the show. "They like these things on the out skirts of consciousness.

"The technique may be very accessible in its roots, but the topic isn't necessarily. They're complex — they're layered, there's a lot going on." The relationship between the Clayton

brothers and the museum began in 2005 when MMoCA acquired a piece called "Tim House (In Green Pastures)."

The museum showed the piece in the State Street Gallery in 2006 in an exhibition called "At Home," which ran shortly after MMoCA moved into its current space in the Overture Center. Though built in 2001, the faded wallpaper and curtains make "Tim House" feel like a playhouse from the 1970s. It looks like it was constructed by a resourceful pair of boys, with a roof of children's books, scribbled messages ('I like it when we have cupcakes') and walls covered in sketches and dripping paint.

The inspiration for "Tim House" was Tommy, a developmentally disabled boy the Claytons knew growing up in Colorado. Tim House was the halfway home where he lived. A portrait of the boy based on a photo graph he gave Rob and Christian hangs inside.

"When people come into "Tim House," we like them to bring their own connections to the work and try and resolve their own stories," Christian said. "Tim House," for me, is the hall of fame of anybody that's been an outcast, whether they're a genius or struggling, financially or mentally."

The music they chose as a soundtrack for "Tim House" was played by a family friend. Christian said the song, "Deaf Child," fit because it "had such an innocent quality about it ... a haunting quality, too."

That feeling of disquiet is echoed in a later series called "Patient" (2007). Inspired in part by viewing a motorcycle accident up close, the series examines the fragility of the human body, inside and out. The characters are exaggerated somewhat, but not grotesque.

Among the paintings in the series are "Patient-Girl," which features a jaundiced young woman holding a plate of what appear to be human bones, and "Patient-N," in which a character is holding a human heart outside of his or her body (gender is often difficult to discern in the Claytons' images).

"Pleasant Day Sit Down" (2005), part of another series called "I Come From Here," contains cartoonish characters with elongated fingers, a moping dog with floppy ears and the kind of bright collage style one might find in elementary school.

But even in this lively, 16-foot wide painting, expressions are flat. Rarely does anyone in a Clayton painting smile.

"These people are real people, they're not based on any kind of fantasy of what we expect society to be, happy all the time," Rob said.

"When you go outside, you see people walking around very serious about their lives.

"We love the characters and subjects we're creating. Even if they look scary or bad, we want them to be accepted."

Also in "I Come From Here," the 2005 work "Healing Carefully" shows a young girl and a fluffy-haired dog rendered in primary colors. But the painting is chaotic, and the small details are more sinister — her arm looks deformed, a hand is grasping at her leg and she appears to be crying.

"Everyone wants children to grow up and be healthy and happy, but there are moments in life where we don't have control over the situations," Rob said. "We use color to entice people to look at things ... those are ways of getting people to be lured into a situation where they have to decipher it.

"A lot of the underlying ideas in "As Is" and "Patients" ... we want people to think about it and have it resonate with them." The series "As Is" was born out of the housing crisis in 2008, when Christian began looking for a house and discovered homes filthy, destroyed and hastily abandoned.

"They entered a place they thought was a meth lab," Fleischman said. "They were taking their clues from other people's plights. ... They were basically telling a story about what they thought might've taken place."

Often, the brothers' work interprets the domestic and everyday. A series of paintings called "Wishy Washy" (2006-07) is set in laundromats and includes a standalone "house" in the manner of "Tim House" with a washer and dryer inside. In his notes about the exhibit, Fleischman called the laundromat "a populist gathering place — a spot where everyone can come and go as an equal."

The brothers like to stretch and distort, from tree limbs that reach inside a house to "hair" that spurts like fountains from characters' heads. The most recent series, "Jumbo Fruit" (2009-10) is exactly what it implies — enormous blueberries and bananas, absurd-looking apples that look "so good for you they might kill you," Fleischman joked.

In addition to being the Clayton brothers' first major museum exhibition, "Inside Out" will also mark the first time work from all six series will appear together.

"The exciting part for Rob and I is to have it all come under one roof," Christian said. "It's this narrative that we've been working on for the past decade and to be able to see it all in one space — it's going to be a lot of fun.

"It's the first time we'll see everything in one space, too."