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Pouncing on art with childlike glee Clayton Brothers make their Zoetrope debut

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The three tallest men at Varnish Gallery were all Claytons. So was the shortest.

Coleman Clayton, the 5 1/2-year-old son of Christian and nephew of Rob -- the in-demand Los Angeles artist tag team known as the Clayton Brothers -- was hunkered down in the corner of the crowded South of Market gallery with his marking pens, lost in the excitement of scribbling on the white paper hanging there, artistic impulse coursing through his young veins like electrified tree sap.

"It's a space alien," Coleman breathlessly explained of a multilegged creature with a round face and bug eyes. And of the long line of letters above it, which came close to spelling "MIAMI"? Coleman shrugged. "I don't know how to spell, but I like letters."

Watching over Coleman so his father could greet well-wishers was his grandfather, the photographer Robert Clayton, who at 6-foot-5 or so towered over Coleman like Gandalf minus the beard.

"When Christian and Rob were little like this, they were always doing something with their hands -- something creative," said Robert with a whiff of pride. "I never tried to tell them to go to medical school. I let them figure it out."

Asked if he would also be an artist someday, Coleman rolled his eyes, partly obscured by dark ringlets. "I already am an artist," he said impatiently, and refocused on his creation, oblivious to the hubbub of the party honoring his kin.

It was thrown by Francis Ford Coppola's literary magazine, Zoetrope: All-Story, which hired the Clayton Brothers to illustrate Zoetrope's fall issue, "The Mates Issue." Throughout its virtually ad-free 120 pages -- which feature short stories by John Boorman, Mary Gaitskill and Edgardo Vega Yunque, among others -- are the Claytons' opulent renderings. Saturated with color and infused with mythology, their illustrations seem a perfect match for the magazine, which has also featured the work of Jeff Koons, Mary Ellen Mark, Ed Ruscha and Julian Schnabel.

"The Claytons' creative process is really fascinating," said Tamara Straus, Zoetrope's editor in chief. "One paints and then the other; they groove off each other's ideas and respond to the friction."

The newly engaged Straus, descendant of one-third of the Farrar, Straus & Giroux publishing troika, smiled as she watched the gallery fill up to its metal beams with noisy guests. The chief draw might have been the Claytons' giant, compelling paintings, or the magazine, or even the Claytons' new book, "The Most Special Day of My Life," which is soon to be released through San Francisco's Last Gasp publishing house.

"Free events," she mused as the throng grew larger. "You can't go wrong."

The ebullient Ron Turner, Last Gasp's publisher since the early days of R. Crumb and Bill Griffith comics, pondered the power of the Claytons' art, stroking his tummy-length gray beard.

"They take a pair of chopsticks to your medulla oblongata, and pull out your childhood memories," he said. "They twist them around until they achieve mythical status."

He paused, while his Last Gasp colleagues chortled at his hyperbole. "Excuse me," he said. "I have to go get a tissue."

Last Gasp author and editor Bucky Sinister, cotton-candy pink hair ablaze, passed out postcards for his stage adaptation of "Night of the Living Dead," which will run during Halloween week at Spanganga.

"Free zombie makeup for all attendees who want it!" he told them cheerfully.

"Oh, and this is not a show for vegetarians."

Then he disappeared into the throng. Eerie.

Although Varnish has been open only five months, the gallery/wine-and-beer bar at 77 Natoma has already developed a regular clientele of those who worked in the area -- between Mission and Howard, Second and First streets.

Bartender Adam Bergeron chatted with Naked Barbies singer Patty Spiglanin, who works at a law firm nearby, about having bought the vacant Club Galia on Mission and 22nd.

"It's going to be a rock 'n' roll club with live music seven nights a week, " he told her. "We're calling it 12 Galaxies. I'm hoping it's open the first week of December."

"That's amazing," Spiglanin responded. "In this economy? Wow."

Crowded by well-wishers, the well-over-6-foot Christian, 36, and Rob, 40, gamely fielded questions about their work, which is collected by the likes of Nicolas Cage and Courteney Cox and commands between \$500 for drawings and \$15, 000 for mural-sized paintings. Their work will be on display at Varnish until Oct. 18. ("They are a hot property," said gallery owner Jennifer Rogers. "We've sold seven works tonight already.")

The brothers look like low-riders -- with short-sleeved, collared shirts buttoned tightly at the neck and slicked-back hair -- and talk like surfers. "Stoked" is a word routinely used.

Christian tells how he was approached by Straus to illustrate the magazine after Zoetrope managing editor Krista Halverson had seen their work and recommended them. "When I heard about the other artists who had illustrated issues, we just couldn't pass it up," he said.

Christian kept one eye on Coleman, who was still at it in the corner, using magic markers to create kid-sized murals of his own. "He's been cranking it out lately," said Christian, marveling. "I look at him, and the joy he has, and I think, that's how it used to be and ought to be."

The brothers designated this entire corner to be where visitors could come, pick up pens and pastels, and get the feeling of creating their own collaborative art. There are faceless men with doors for genitals, bars of music and fantastical creatures.

And Coleman's creations, which have now expanded to include boats and suns and rocks. Asked if he plans to sell his art when he gets older, the boy looks to his father for encouragement. Christian smiles, and Coleman gives a confident, "Yes!"

For how much? he is asked. He is stumped, and there is a long pause.

"Sixty dollars?" he smiles. "Yes, I'll sell them for 60 dollars."