

Agathe Snow

My Encounter with a Legend

When Clayton described his sculptures to me over the phone, all he said was they are made from Bowery garbage and the like—that they were in the same mind as his photographs and his writing, part social statement or sometimes just imagination. And with that I drifted: it got me thinking about Bowery garbage, and how there is no garbage like Bowery garbage. I've seen guys in suits and women in high heels and designer outfits tug at some find on the sidewalk, a spoof, a laugh, a prop, something not even realized, unconscious, an improvised weapon, even. It calls to you, and you—whoever you are—pick it up, drag it for a few steps, a couple of blocks, to the place where you find a cab and run back to safety.

That garbage walks and talks, and it has many lives. When it is dumped on the Bowery, you can be sure it has done what it was supposed to do for as long as it could and then it failed at that.

But it is never over quite yet. It can still be this and another that, and if all else fails it can be made into art.

How many generations of artists have coveted those very treasures?

And I found it funny that even Clayton did not escape that fate. The Clayton I know I had seen for years before ever saying a word to him. The Clayton I know, I know from the hats, the photographs, the books, the activism, the LES. Always around. For decades, he and Elsa, his partner, have been combing the streets below 14th Street—that might even be too far north—let's say 10th Street, between the Bowery west and the river east and as far south as Canal.

When I went to meet him at his home/studio/gallery, I saw the sculptures for the first time as sculptures and not just as the piles of colors stuffed all over the space that I'd seen through the window on Essex. I found out that they had been kept in that state since 1981, when the last one was made and the space could not accommodate one more. And just as your grandmother might pull a real treasure from an old sock stuffed in a box somewhere, brushing away the dust and there goes a real jewel and a story so hidden in the past,

so before-your-time that it might have belonged to a whole other person than dear old Grandma—well, the same thing happened for me that day with Clayton and his sculptures.

The colors, like candy, draw you in and beauty draws you in and then you think maybe there is a way to work that thing: could it be an old pinball machine? Then you are faced with the reality that no, this is not a game to be played, that there is no working mechanism—no, this is art, and it is monstrous, and by then you are trapped, you have been bitten, and all the lights switch on and there you see a landscape of toys and broken objects and teeth and dentures and bullets and religious trinkets. And they tell a story or could it be they create a map of a place or of Clayton's soul? One thing is for sure: there is something in there for you, something you need to register and remember for another time, and you will know exactly what that thing is when that time comes.

Step right up! SEE where this leads, SEE the path to hell, the gates of hell! SEE the war—it is fought tooth and nail! SEE an all-out war between cowboys and Indians! Scars! Bites! SEE that accumulation and riches are a first-class ticket straight to hell, no coming back! SEE religion and the men of religion—the ones who put a name and a face to hell, who of course are to blame! SEE it is not man but the system that is rigged and filthy and only an all-out war will make things right! SEE disillusion at times, because the forces that be are mighty! SEE that hope and community are the only redemption, that each life matters and that together we move mountains!

After I left, what kept coming back to me was Clayton's insistence on calling the sculptures dirty. Whether he meant that they looked dirty or that what they were made of was dirty, there was no doubt in my mind that he thought the subject matter, the inspiration behind the sculptures, was that of a dirty, filthy place.

Another thing he said was that they are like the photographs. I kept saying no, they are beautiful and no, the photographs pick up what is there—there is no setup, no artifice.

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The sculptures were made to say something. They were set up so they had very little to do with chance. Even as Clayton said of them that the sculptures were made of Bowery garbage, many of the sculptural components, such as the dentures or plaster teeth, had been produced by Clayton way back when. All the elements were changed, in a way: new finish, new colors. So, from a structural point of view, I did not see how his photos and his sculptures were the same.

Then I asked myself "Who does Clayton speak to? Who are these sculptures and photographs meant to speak to? Who are they aimed at?" He doesn't speak to the Wall Street types, uptown types or the fine-art world. He speaks to the people of downtown, the people he photographs.

So what is he really saying? What is the dirt, to him? It sure isn't the people he photographs or the way they live/survive on the LES. Even though there are plenty of characters living lost on the streets, plenty who might seem to have wasted their lives, and plenty who've gone through bad times, none of them appear in the photos. On the contrary, no one is made to stare his life in the face with all its bad choices.

Many artists have chosen to depict such moments, but not Clayton. Nor does he romanticize people. There is nothing of the voyeur, the documentarian, the investigative reporter or the passerby photographer in him. No, Clayton shares the stage with all his subjects. And while he may see them when they are not at their best or intoxicated or whatever condition one could get into, he is there and he only shows his people when they are most at ease, at home on the streets, at home with what's happening on the streets, at home in their actions. It is a community he photographs. It is people who, although unknown to one another, have very few degrees of separation between them. And while there are thousands of stories among them, Clayton sees and tells one story, the one that is common to all, the one that binds them.

Which got me thinking that his audience is that ever-changing group that he sees as a community and, in dire times, as an army, always at the ready. So now,

after many days and nights, I can't argue with Clayton and tell him that the photos and the sculptures are different or that the sculptures, and by extension the photographs, are not dirty. Now I think I see his point. What I thought of as the layers of human emotional sediment, as the generations piling up, he thinks of as dirt and dust. And as garbage, but that is only camouflage: our uniforms, our war paint. And that's a good thing.

SEE dirt as camouflage! SEE guerrilla warfare revisited! SEE a place where each has a role to play! SEE those dirty landscapes? They are not a cry, a lament or a cautionary tale against the pitfalls of a life of bad choices. SEE a gate to hell? SEE that road? It is not one of desperate, rampant mental-health issues and addiction. It is a road for solitary travelers that is paved with ego, gold and greed. It is not our road. SEE this? It is a battleground, a plan for attack, like one a general would present to his troops, in 3D, showing different battalions and their positions.

SEE Clayton's world? In Clayton's world, that war is ongoing and his dream army is made of those he photographs, generation after generation, the Jews, the tattoos, the drag queens, the parties, the scenes, the riots, the neighborhood kids, the openings, the funerals, the installations, the paintings, the graffiti. SEE all this? It is what makes the LES one story in Clayton's eyes. Now can you SEE a man covered with dust, finally ready to shake it off and shine?