



Blitzin' Out

A mad trip through the Haas Brothers' world of design

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

"THIS SMELLS VERY INTENSELY OF WEED—OUR NEIGHBOR GROWS IT," SAYS SIMON HAAS, POINTING to a space separating two decently sized, if somewhat ramshackle, studios in the downtown Los Angeles warehouse district that he used to share with his brother, Nikolai (a.k.a. Niki). Before moving to an 8,700-square-foot space in the historic West Adams district this past August, the Haas Brothers, as they are known professionally, had spent five years navigating this funky layout with a growing team of assistants to create a totally unique visual language via some of the most technically innovative, painstakingly crafted, and artistically challenging pieces of furniture in recent memory. The studios thrum with a steady beat of hammer-pounding, blowtorching, and machine-sewing as the team makes everything from the brothers' wildly popular accretion vases (crafted from brushing layer upon layer of slip over a vessel until it appears to grow clay tentacles) and organically shaped, hand-cut, hammered-and-polished brass "Hex Tile" tables to logic-based, hand-tooled glass-flower lighting fixtures. This afternoon a sculpting assistant even puts the finishing touches on a test version for a vermiculated-leather sofa (dubbed the "California Raisin") that takes 4,000 man-hours of sewing to replicate the texture of a scrotum. "There's never really a quiet spot," Simon says. "That's a big part of why we're moving."

Moving—perpetually as it were—seems to be all these indefatigable fraternal twins are capable of doing, disrupting the classically stodgy design world at every turn.

"Design can get so stuffy and take itself so seriously, and that's not at all interesting to us," says Simon.

"We're not part of any design community," adds Niki, reflexively finishing his brother's sentence, as he would do in numerous conversations over the course of the summer. "We don't want to be decorative artists and we don't want to only be designers. We consider ourselves conceptual artists."

Like it or not, this rebel yell is the secret to their rocket-fueled success. In the past two years, the Austin-born, Los Angeles-based twins have been commissioned to design the angel wings that Lady Gaga wore in a performance and a collection of one-of-a-kind furniture and limited-edition clothing and accessories for Donatella Versace; they also signed to the white-hot design-focused New York gallery R & Company—the latter happening just hours after the Versace deal. They've also presented twice at Art Basel in Switzerland (rating a *Page Six* blurb after their installation "Advocates for the Sexual Outsider" stole the fair with 5,000 voyeuristic visitors) and will debut a massive solo show at R & Company November 4 (on view through January 10), which may well redefine how furniture is shown and perhaps made. They've managed all this while pioneering avant-garde science- and nature-based techniques in leather, ceramics, glass,



OPPOSITE:
Niki (left) and Simon
Haas in Joshua Tree,
California, 2014.

and various other media; releasing their first book (*The Haas Brothers: Volume One* because, well, they're just getting started); filming a documentary about their process with Beyoncé and Jay-Z's go-to photographer, Mason Poole; converting the former auto garage in West Adams into a state-of-the-art multidiscipline studio; and managing numerous high-profile collaborations with the likes of couture wallpaper company Flavor Paper, haute rug manufacturer ABC Italia, cult-followed fashion brand The Elder Statesman, and the South African, AIDS-benefiting bead-art nonprofit Monkeybiz. And the twins just turned 30 in September.

"This is the polar opposite of how we see people grow. It's off the hook," says R & Company cofounder Zesty Meyers, who met the twins with his partner, Evan Snyderman, at their gallery immediately after the brothers presented Versace with a few four-inch samples of processes—one being their now iconic brass hex tile—which they hadn't yet mastered at the time. "We looked at each other, looked at them, and said, 'Go make some stuff.' We've never done that. And they're not technicians. They didn't even know how to make ceramics. They didn't know how to make furniture. They didn't know how to bend hex or make marble. But the most amazing thing about these guys is that they tell you about something and then they actually make it. It's unbelievable. Every time they talk, I just listen. I sometimes try to get them to stop talking because they don't run out of ideas. I can only absorb so much in so many hours."

Or as their older brother, actor Lukas Haas puts it, "They move so fast and they have so many ideas that they start to get lost in my head. What they told me a year ago is now a collection. They rented the studio a month ago, and within one week the whole thing was up and running. It's amazing; their work ethic is unreal."

IMPLAUSIBLE AS THEIR ASCENT MIGHT seem, the brothers themselves may actually be the people most astonished by their rapid rise to stardom. "They always had this immense talent and ability to make and do anything, but they didn't have an outlet for it. They had no plans for this being their path," says Lukas on a call from a set in Malibu. "Before this, Simon was a painter and Niki was more of a musician than anything else."

While Lukas, who was discovered at age five, went off to New York and Los Angeles to work in films with the likes of Gus Van Sant and Nick Cassavetes—and party with pals Leonardo DiCaprio and Tobey Maguire—Niki and Simon toiled in the stoneworking studio of their father, Berthold, making wooden CD and cassette-tape boxes as their dad built "insane karst-rock pleasure-palace grottoes" and "Tuscan fireplaces" for Austin's elite. "They basically became master stonemasons by the age of 14," says Lukas.

"Our father fulfilled the egos and the aesthetics of clients and interior decorators, and as talented as decorators can be, they are not artists," Niki says. "For us, it's about staying true to a voice that's more concerned with conceptual and philosophical interests than fulfilling an aesthetic."

This conviction recently prompted Niki to take their 67-year-old father for a mushroom trip—with a carefully timed chocolate protein shake to metabolize the psilocybin—in a forest. "He was working for us and having these ego issues and saying 'I should have done this with my life,'" says Niki. "It was a super bonding experience." Simon plans to go on another psychedelic excursion with their mother later this year.

"Our parents are really special," says Lukas. "Our grandfather was a painter, our father was a painter, now Simon is a painter."

In fact, one of Lukas's favorite memories with the boys was doodling around the kitchen table on visits to the family home when he was in his early 20s.

"We would do all these sexual Post-it Note doodles during breakfast: like a big duck with a pussy and a whale bursting out of the ocean with a big dick," says Lukas of the libidinous characters that now inhabit everything from tongue-in-cheek oil paintings in recent shows to the lobby walls of L.A.'s Ace Hotel, which the brothers filled with a strange mix of Niki's characters and Simon's realistic portraits of Angeleno icons (from a bald Britney Spears to Showtime-era Magic Johnson). Lukas also recalls that another early indicator of future endeavors—in the mold of the "Raisin" and the vermiculated-leather vagina entryway to their "Sex Room"—was the "Pussyfoot" slipper the brothers made for his 21st birthday. "It was awesome, really intricate, all velvet and beautiful in pink with a darker pink opening. I thought it was genius. I was just talking to them about how we should make and sell them." That may, in fact, become a possibility when Lukas moves into the front of the West Adams space to build his own music studio with his collection of the same rare hi-fi recording gear utilized by the likes of Led Zeppelin.

"Half the reason I'm doing it is because they suggested it to me," says Lukas. "I definitely look forward to relying on them to help me in what I'm doing with their outside-the-box thinking. They're also brilliant musicians, both of them, so it's just great to be around them and get inspired by what they're doing. Hopefully, they'll find some inspiration in what I'm doing."

That seems like a reasonable proposition. After high school, Niki pursued interests in hockey and music, working for and eventually playing with Lukas's longtime friend and former musical collaborator, Vincent Gallo. The actors met through their passion for collecting, and Niki (and later Simon) would go on to tour with Gallo's band RRIICCEE.

"Gallo has a very conceptual idea of the world. Everything is concepts and execution, and he's a very interesting guy to spend time with. Niki spent every day with him for at least a couple of years doing deals for him and working very closely with him. It made him ready for business," says Lukas. "I think that was definitely a big stage for his development, not as an artist but for someone who has

drive. He's always been more driven. Simon and I have always had a very good work ethic when there's a structure around it and it has momentum already, but Niki creates the momentum."

While Niki developed as a rocker and a jock, Simon pursued his painting, briefly studying it (and architecture) at the Rhode Island School of Design, alongside Ryan Trecartin and Jemima Kirke, before dropping out—twice. "I was dating this guy and broke up with him and went into this serious depression," says Simon, admitting, "I was the guy who wouldn't take drugs with anybody, so I was the no-fun guy."

Post-dropout, he worked as a cook at a vegan restaurant in Echo Park, but it was Niki's job as a property manager for one of Lukas's actor buddies that laid the groundwork for their first design gig. Though the brothers won't disclose the identity of the friend, it could very well have been DiCaprio, who may have employed the brothers to make pedestals for his art collection. "Niki made these aluminum block things," says Lukas. "They were cooler than the sculptures on top of them, and Tobey [Maguire] saw them and he was like, 'Oh, they can make stuff?'"

It was the summer of 2010, and Maguire was building a house and asked the twins which architect he should hire. They



RIGHT: Medium hematite vase in bronze, 2012–14, 12 x 5 in.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Unique Debbie Hairy Dromedary double-hump bench from the Beast series, 2013. Wyoming Buffalo fur, posable tail, and Chester Cheetah feet, 57 x 24 x 28½ in.

Objects in the home of Niki Haas and Djuna Bel, Los Angeles, 2014.

Working model of a hextile candelabra, 2014.





FROM TOP: JOE KRAMM AND R & COMPANY, TWO IMAGES, MASON POOLE



suggested the Pacific Palisades firm of Johnston Marklee, which is designing the Drawing Institute at Houston's Menil Collection. "Tobey said, 'Why don't you sit in on the meeting and we'll see what happens,'" recalls Simon. Maguire also needed furniture for his office at Sony, but when he asked if they could handle the job, they admitted they didn't know how to make furniture.

"We're blue-collar artists," says Niki. "We just grew up knowing all these amazingly connected, rich, famous people."

"Growing up, we were trying so hard to escape the perception of nepotism," adds Simon.

Perhaps that explains why they went to such lengths to prove themselves to Maguire. With money from Niki's property-manager gigs, they rented the first of their Warehouse District studios, which initially did double duty as an apartment for Simon, who was broke at the time.

They spent two years on the project, which ultimately cost them more money to produce than they earned from it. "Everything was weirdly too small, nothing new or exciting," says Simon of the cushy wood-based couches. "They were just weird and not great." Maguire, who still has some of the works, disagrees.

"Once they were given the freedom to explore and experiment creatively, they have been like a rushing river of ideas materializing into objects in one form or another," Maguire says. "They seem to work without any fear. Witnessing their process is inspiring and energizing, and I collect whatever I can get from them."

AFTER THE MAGUIRE COMMISSION, THE twins continued to lose money on projects, but the works evolved until they arrived at their first conceptual piece: a raw brass fingerprint table they'd left with the plating chemicals still on, so that the dirt from fingers, hands, and pieces of food would leave a residue impression.

"It was about the material having some sort of importance," says Simon. "And about the human interaction," adds Niki.

Back in those early days, which were only a couple of years ago, the brothers were selling "Hex Tile" tables for \$3,500—they now command \$25,000 each—and had no problem making works at cost for their A-list pals. Today, those sorts of favors aren't possible: The Haas Brothers have yearlong waiting lists for their works, and demand is only increasing.

The art world's insatiable appetite for everything Haas started with Versace, for whom the brothers crafted decadent black leather, gold nailhead, and "Hex Tile" chairs; a sofa; and two benches (one illuminated with colored stones; one wrapped in bondage straps), which debuted at the 2012 Salone del Mobile to enormous fanfare. Having previously completed commissions for Lady Gaga and leather-loving starchitect Peter Marino, they were well versed in the power of fetish, but the Versace commission wasn't an obvious choice for them at first.

"I think the Versace thing is interesting because people were warning us against doing it, and I understand why, because if it had failed, we would forever be known as the bad Versace line," says Simon. "But Donatella is a very cool, surprisingly energetic, and youthful person, and we knew we would just like to work with her."

After inviting them to make a chair for her apartment, she asked the brothers to send some drawings; instead of flinching at a stack of 150 of their crude characters, she asked if they could design more seating options. (The couch, originally priced just below \$150,000, is now listed at more than \$450,000.)

The success of that collaboration instilled in the duo the confidence that their voice—however undefined—had an audience.

That winter at Design Miami, when they debuted their collection of "Beasts"—sofas and chaises covered in Icelandic sheepskin, Finnish reindeer, or buffalo hides and adorned with carved wooden horns and cast-bronze hooves, cheetah feet, camel toes, and testicles—they had society women "parting the fur" to fondle the brass balls.

"People were laughing and it ended up being funny, so that is a win, because we intended to have humor in the piece," says Simon. Niki asks, "To make a joke with a piece of furniture, how many people can do that?"

It is, in fact, no laughing matter. While Marc Newson and Ron Arad may make impossibly slick statement pieces and an artist like Sebastian Errazuriz can seamlessly inject political statements into T-shirts and foldable chairs, the Haas Brothers have set themselves apart with the humor (and thus the humanity) of their work.

Sometimes, it's all they've had to rely on. With little time and a small budget to produce an installation for the fall 2014 runway collection of Greg Chait, the designer behind The Elder Statesman, they produced figures out of condom latex. "Many seasoned fashion folks were perplexed," says Chait. "They couldn't think of anyone that has presented a collection in such a manner."

For the brothers, the presentation was really their only hope of doing justice to Chait's luxe cashmere sweaters, which may be emblazoned with words like *Beer* but can run more than \$2,000 each. "A joke costs nothing," says Niki. "We could match his laid-back attitude and the fact that he's joking with the thing he cares about most."

"We care for just what we want to do. Greg is similar because he doesn't give a shit," adds Simon. "We don't need the furniture market's approval to do what we're doing, and he doesn't need the fashion world's approval to do what he's doing."

IT'S A BALMY DAY IN MID AUGUST AND THE BROTHERS ARE discussing the post-Basel buzz over coffee and green juice in their windowed second-floor office overlooking the vast new studio space. The walls are lined with books, their own ceramics, and those of gallery mate Jeff Zimmerman. The pounding and torching is barely audible behind the glass in this lofty perch. Simon is wrestling with their right-hand man, Johnny Smith, while Niki floats between a sculpting station on the main floor and his laptop upstairs, opposite Simon. As they scroll through e-mails, the brothers mention the vacant lot across the street where they're planning to install a mobile coffee truck and a permanent succulent garden with concrete sculptures that will serve as an "idea laboratory" and, hopefully, a legacy for the neighborhood. "I'd much rather my kids remember me for that garden than for making tons of money," says Niki. Their glass flowers will serve as lights in the R & Company show "Cool World."

Though we'd previously discussed their desire to curtail third-party collaborations in the future, an e-mail arrives in Simon's in-box confirming yet another project with Chait during Design Miami. For it, they intend to craft an installation of cashmere balls that they think could one day serve as a model for growable buildings. The concept, as the science-oriented Simon explains, is based on the growth programs found in shells and plants. He and Niki are currently developing a beading project to mimic the forms of mushrooms and elephant ears with the help of Monkeybiz, whom they first met at last year's Guild Design Fair in Cape Town.



LEFT:
Design models in the desert night, 2014.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
"Werewolves and Villagers," drawings by Niki Haas, 2014.

Extra large Elephant Skin candelabra in cast bronze with blue patina, 2014. 37 x 36 in.

Installation view of *Advocates for the Sexual Outsider* at Art Basel, 2014.

“With glass, it’s possible to get cheesy really fast, so we’re trying to make a way to draw mathematical functions in 3-D,” says Simon. One rule, based on the Fibonacci sequence, states that for every five layers, the glassmaker adds one bump for an entire layer in the sequence; then on the sixth layer he adds another bump, gradually increasing the bumps per layer as per the rule to “grow” the piece organically. “We’re running a logic program through our hands, basically,” he explains. “It means that you wind up with a totally imperfect idea of what the formula was, but that is the idea.”

These flowers are intended to shed light on “Hex Tile” snakes and new accretion vases with a proprietary Changeum glaze made from a rare earth material with very sharp absorption peaks. “When light passes through it, or gets reflected off it, it comes back to you with a lot of missing information,” Simon says of the vases, which debuted this spring at the Collective Design Fair. “It’s really just pointing out, ‘Hey, this isn’t what you thought it was.’” There will also be a six-color version of one of their Flavor Paper designs printed on copper depicting an enchanted forest inhabited by drunk versions of their idiosyncratic animals, which also make an appearance in various oil paintings and marker drawings on cuts of leather for their “American Freedom” series. In one, you’ll find a Haasian animal aping Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider* and in another, they’ll be goofing around in Joshua Tree, as the brothers did—on a three-day psilocybin excursion—for the images accompanying this story.

“It’s going to feel like you’re walking into a weird forest,” says Simon. The pièce de résistance, however, will be the U.S. debut of *Advocates for the Sexual Outsider* at the back of the gallery. With a vermiculated-leather vagina entrance, flanked by two cast-bronze penis torch lamps, the installation is like haute couture meets *Caligula*, with futuristic botanicals flourishing all around it. Once you breach the lips, as it were, things get even more interesting (and intimate).

In Basel, an onslaught of visitors requesting entry with their spouses or partners put a quick end to the single-occupancy design the brothers had envisioned. But at the gallery, they hope to reinstate that protocol so that each visitor gets five minutes alone in the room, removing the social context from sex inside a space where nobody is monitoring them. “You can do whatever you want with the pieces in there,” says Simon. “If somebody jacks off onto one of the pieces, we just have to go clean it off.”

While Niki thinks such an act would be disrespectful, the inspiration for the room was actually to create an environment that removed shame from sex—be it slut-shaming, gay-shaming, or simply the shame associated with certain sexual acts (which, presumably, extends to masturbating onto fine art objects)—because the brothers “think of sex as an extension of innocence rather than something that hinders it,” says Niki. “If you’re doing it properly, it’s fantastic.” In other words, anilingus (one of Simon’s first sexual shames) or visiting a prostitute (one of Niki’s) should be viewed as nothing more than a physical person-to-person interaction no different from, say, ice hockey.

“There’s a guy who is naked in a video you can watch inside a sculpture, but he’s not doing something that could be thought of as gay or straight—he’s just being male,” says Niki of his club hockey teammate who posed for the video, which plays inside their “Hex Tile Peeper” while a “Stimulator” engages your sense of touch via hand-sewn genitalia that illuminate when touched.

“You decide what it is you’re aroused by or not. You can grab onto some balls or put your finger into a vagina that’s made of leather and fur, but the idea is that you’re watching yourself do it.”

“I THINK THIS IS A BIG MOMENT FOR US,” SAYS NIKI BACK AT the new studio, further contemplating the momentum from Basel, even though they didn’t sell the installation. “There’s so much growth at this point—it’s just that all the money is being reinvested. We’re just throwing all our chips in, and the hope is that it pans out.”

Being out more than half a million dollars for the production of the *Advocates for the Sexual Outsider* is only one of their gambles. The market for six-figure contemporary sofas is limited, yet their prices will have to come up if they hope to continue their world domination. To wit: Dealer Joseph Nahmad bought the “California Raisin” for “a steal,” but right now they can’t afford to make other items with vermiculated leather—like a “Nutsack Rucksack”—until they start selling future Raisins for upwards of \$250,000. That might seem like a lot of money for a couch, until you consider all the hammering, casting, sewing, and carving that went into making it. Still, rather than worry about earning less as rising art stars than they would managing property, the brothers choose instead to focus on the silver lining of being able to show the piece in New York.

Their gallerists aren’t worried. “Most artists are like musicians, one-hit wonders, and that may last up to 10 years,” says Meyers. “But the Haas Brothers are everything. We push them to go as far as they can with these ideas. I just want them to get better. Our world is young. There’s no limit to how far we can go.”

If they can perhaps attract a buyer for this room-size installation, then maybe they can find a collector with enough financial wherewithal, sexual liberty, and artistic vision to invest in their wildest dream of all: “Non-Functional Property.” “It’s the Sex Room [from *Advocates*], but blown up into a house,” says Niki. “I’ve pitched this idea to a few friends. It’s going to happen at some point. If someone gave us \$4 million, and we could choose the property, we would do it right now.”

“Imagine some rich friend of yours picks you up from the airport and says,

‘Before we go to my house, you want to go smoke a joint or ‘shroom in my useless property?’ You go, ‘What are you talking about?’ He says, ‘Don’t worry, you just got to see it.’ Then you get there, drop your clothes, get in the pool, and just blitz out in this insane space,” says Niki. “You go in and one room is all red, and another is all gold, and maybe another is a sex-oriented room, and one is gender-bending, and another is video-oriented and you feel like you’re underwater. Sometimes you are underwater. You’re not going to have a soap dish, you’re going to have a gurgling stone piece that’s bubbling out foam. It’s going to be something where you need a staff and you tell them a day ahead of time, and there will be the right soaps and the right foods, and maybe there are flowers you can eat out of. You’re talking about an experience where you’d literally shit your pants. But then you can wash off, so it doesn’t matter. I want to go there so bad.”

“If we have one agenda we’re pushing, it is humanism,” Simon adds. “It’s about the human experience and humans having fun. I don’t like anybody telling me how to think, which is why I don’t like religion. I’m more into experience. We’re not trying to tell you anything is right or wrong. We’re trying to show people you can feel different.” MP



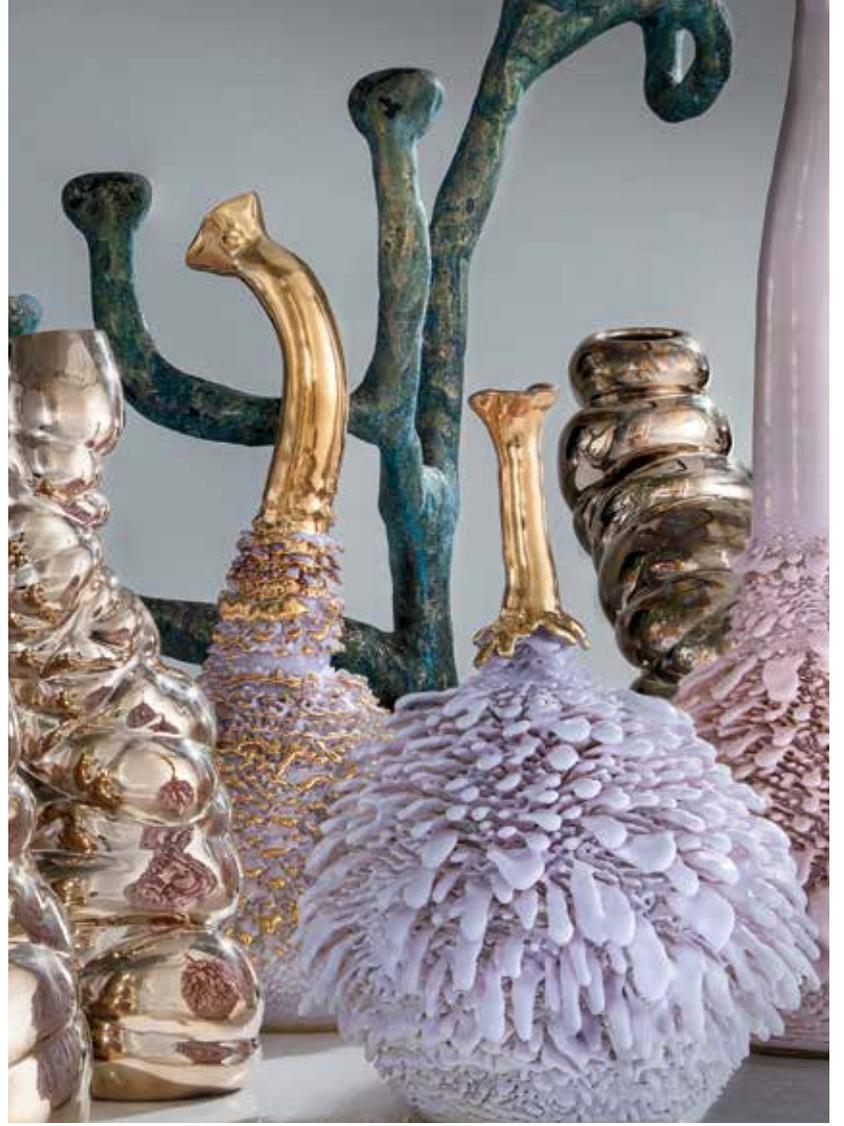
RIGHT: Installation view at Art Basel of *Advocates for the Sexual Outsider*, 2014.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The brothers in Joshua Tree, 2014.

Works by the Haas Brothers for their exhibition “Cool World” at R & Company, 2014.

Unique Beast settee with Finnish reindeer fur, carved wooden horns, and cast bronze camel toe feet, 2013. 68 x 38 x 37 in.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MASON POOLE; JOE KRAMM AND R & COMPANY; BEN COPE