

The HAAS Brothers

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THE DESIGN DARLINGS OF HOLLYWOOD HAVE ARRIVED, AND THEY WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOU THEIR . . . SKILLS

What's that old line, that writing about music is like dancing about architecture? For L.A.-based design duo and fraternal twins Nikolai and Simon Haas, it might be said that they are building about sex. The brothers' work—their furniture, *objets*, and interiors, whether as one-offs or commissioned by clients like Tobey Maguire, Peter Marino, and Donatella Versace—is manifestly erotic, even provocatively so, in their description, so as to draw the people interacting with it into deep dialogue about sex and the human condition. But it isn't just sex. The twins seem to be playing in a plastic world of pure imagination, unfettered by too much superego or interpretation. Unlike Magritte's pipe, say, that so studiously was not a pipe, the Haas's biomorphic chairs and couches, often upholstered in furs that give them the appearance of odd taxidermy, are indeed heavily laden with sexual potency, but they are also whimsical delights that look like they might be extras in a stage production of *Where the Wild Things Are*. The bronze legs of their footstools and chairs have some woody, satyr-like lecherousness to them, but they also look as if Bambi's mother had her wee baby fawn's hooves bronzed for posterity. There is a lot going on here.

And just as their work finds a dreamlike harmony in asymmetry, the twins' working partnership also seems to be a symbiotic union of mutually beneficial and supplementary talents: Niki is the left brain and Simon the right, except when it's the other way around. And either way, the 30-year-old former musician (Niki) and the former painter (Simon), brothers of actor Lukas Haas, are really jamming now. As they prepared to release their first monograph, *The Haas Brothers*, out now from Damiani, and ready for their first American solo show, "Cool World," opening this month at R & Company in New York, they got to talking about their work and the thinking behind it with an old family friend—someone who is not a stranger to deeply imaginative and surreal art herself—Laura Dern. As the actress reminds the brothers, on the phone from her home in Los Angeles, when she met them on the set of the film *Rambling Rose* (1991), almost 25 years ago, she knew that there was something special to come.

LAURA DERN: As someone who has been asked to ask David Lynch what his movies mean for 25 years, I'm very careful about asking artists what their art means. [Nikolai and Simon laugh] So forgive me in advance. And I have to call you Simon and Niki.

NIKOLAI HAAS: [laughs] Everyone thinks of me as Niki anyway. Initially our gallery was like, "You have to go by Nikolai." And I was like, "No fucking way. Everyone calls me Niki, so . . ."

DERN: People have forever been interested in twins, and it's fascinating how you're so uniquely different and

yet partners in this way. I'll never forget, when I entered your bedroom for the first time—you guys were maybe 4 and a half or 5—the genius art projects that your parents built into the fireplace in your bedroom.

NIKOLAI: Yeah, that was cool.

DERN: Those marbles inset in the fireplace would light up in magical colors when the fire was lit. I thought, "What will these boys do? How will they see the world, and how will they redefine the world?"

SIMON HAAS: Our reality as children was kind of a fantasy, and it stayed a fantasy until we left the house, really. I notice, even now, when I go to my parents' house, the fantasy is still there. Coming out of that, we really couldn't help but wind up doing what we're doing. Our beds were foot to foot and we had those arched ceilings with gold-leaf stars all over the ceiling.

NIKOLAI: We had tunnels underneath.

SIMON: I think our mom and dad both had really difficult childhoods and they wanted to allow us as much emotional and psychological freedom as possible.

NIKOLAI: And it's transferred into the way we interact with society or work. They let us think in any way we wanted. And as adults, the idea of limiting ourselves

feels totally absurd because we grew up with the idea that we can do anything. So if there's a social standard that's put on you, or someone says, "You can't make a chair that has balls on the back of it . . ."

SIMON: [laughs] It's like, "Why not?"

NIKOLAI: I don't even think of it as a chair from the start, and that totally came from our parents. My way of rebelling against my parents was playing ice hockey. They wanted us to be creative and all of us ended up in creative professions, but it was like, "Well, I'm going to be a jock." But no matter how hard I tried, I got pulled back to the art side.

SIMON: It was a really big thing that there was someone like you in our house when we were 5 years old. We were surrounded by people like you and Terry Malick and our parents' friends who are really interesting, cool people. Our exposure to culture was already at a really high level early on.



NIKOLAI AND SIMON HAAS IN LOS ANGELES, JULY 2014. FROM LEFT: ON NIKOLAI: TANK; TOP: THE KOOPLES. PANTS: SANDRO; ON SIMON: SHIRT: KENNETH COLE. PANTS: PORSCHE DESIGN. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: THE HAAS BROTHERS'S LONG HANGING DONG ACCRETION VASE, 2014. FURRY VAGINA ACCRETION VASE, 2014.



“LET’S BE REAL, IF I GO TO A PARTY, I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT A PERFECT LINE OR CURVE ON SOMETHING. I WANT TO TALK ABOUT SEX.”

NIKOLAI: There was this moment when I was 17 and had just started getting into film, and I watched *Blue Velvet* [1986] and was like, “Holy shit, that’s Laura.”

DERN: [laughs] We spent quite a bit of time together when Lukas and I made *Rambling Rose*. He was turning 14. You guys asked him, “What are you to Laura in the movie?” And he said, “Well, she’s my family’s housemaid but we have a love scene.” You went, “What?” [Nikolai and Simon laugh] Let’s be clear, that’s a movie that would not be made now.

NIKOLAI: That’s true.

DERN: When we talk about your work and freedom—your work engages questions of sexuality—and there was certainly a boundarylessness that your parents allowed their 13-year-old son to do a scene in a bed with a 23-year-old actress.

SIMON: It’s pretty crazy. I think our world was so insular, and we just try to keep that rolling. I mean, we realized that it’s possible to have that much magic and create it in that way.

DERN: I’ve never seen more fiercely protective parents. And as parents know, you usually get one thing or the other: terribly rigid and protected but void of creative freedom, or this creative expansive world where there are no boundaries. So the fact that they gave you a sense of family and wild creative thinking was incredible.

NIKOLAI: It was a perfect balance.

DERN: The connection of your father’s work to your collaboration is obvious [Berthold Haas is a designer and stonemason], but knowing your mom as well as I do—Emily [an artist and former screenwriter] is a brilliant writer and thinker—the creative, sculptural world they created made your yard look like Gaudi’s Park Güell.

NIKOLAI: I have never underestimated the amount that our mother influenced us and Lukas. We had so many mentors and so many beautiful people—like you—teaching us, and always saying, “There’s no limit.”

SIMON: Everywhere you look in the house there is something else to discover. Our mom has so many different kinds of beautiful things and she arranges them so beautifully. Instead of, for example, thinking about money, we were taught that beauty was important—which is an issue as an adult, slightly. [Nikolai laughs] But I’m glad I hung on to that because it’s harder to learn later in life. Our mom would also include us in dinner parties and things, really encouraging us to be social, which I think was really essential for us because we heard viewpoints of some very free peo-

ple. We were allowed to be adults if we wanted to be.

DERN: That’s gorgeous.

NIKOLAI: When I was 15 and had started writing music, she had a dinner party and was like, “Niki, play your song for everybody.” And when Simon was doing ballet, she was like, “Simon, show everybody your work.”

SIMON: She made me play piano in front of [accompanist and ensemble pianist] Phillip Moll, which was terrifying. [Dern laughs] That doesn’t happen to very many 8 year olds.

NIKOLAI: Our parents are super compassionate, and we try to have compassion in our work. It’s easy for us to go there because that’s all we ever knew as kids. We didn’t really experience hate or disdain or jealousy.

DERN: Remember your mom would get those old photographs of, like, group portraits from the ‘20s from thrift shops and then paint just one person in them? I asked her once why she painted just the one person, and she said she thought that one looked left out.

SIMON: I had totally forgotten about that. Those were incredible. I think my mom felt like the forgotten person when she was a kid. She knew how much she had to offer but she felt ignored. And now that we’re adults, we can look back at it and see that everything that hurt our parents anchored their artistic process. What they really wanted to do came from being made to feel like they weren’t allowed to do it.

NIKOLAI: And I think we just want everyone to know that most depression, ill thought, and sad things come from one human wanting to suppress another for their own benefit.

SIMON: Their reaction [to their childhood] was their art. I’ve been thinking about this, about how responsible they are for where we would wind up—but they don’t have the luxury of being recognized for it in the way that we are.

DERN: Simon, I remember visiting your mom and Lukas when you were off at college, and she’d say, “Simon has gone to study and he’s going to be an amazing chef.” And I was like, “Awesome! I thought Simon was going to be a dancer?” “No, he’s a chef,” she said. And later, “Actually, he’s going to RISD; he’s going to be a painter.” [Nikolai and Simon laugh] I was like, “What?” Niki was coming to L.A. and he was going to be a musician. So I thought, “There they go. They’ve found their ways to make art.” So how did you guys find your way back to each other through and to this collaborative partnership?

NIKOLAI: In a weird way, that was a hurdle for us, to have so much in front of you and to have to decide, “Okay, what am I going to do now?” There’s an idea you romanticize—for me, it was music. It was going pretty well. I was playing for some cool people. But there was this moment where I was like, “You know, I’m pretty good at music, but I’m better at building things.” I was resisting what I was naturally better at and what I more naturally enjoy because I was into the fantasy of being a musician. And when I let go and accepted that, I felt like this is what I was bred to do in a way—from our parents building things all the time and helping our dad out when we were younger. I came to Simon and asked him to join me in working on a project that I’d landed—I said, “This is the direction I want to go in; I want to make sculpture and art and furniture.” And, of course, working with Simon is almost too easy. It made perfect sense.

SIMON: Working together as we are now was 100 percent Niki’s idea, and I almost fought it because Niki always had some curiosity you couldn’t quell, and I was the analytical one. As kids we developed all these opposite talents, so that the two of us functioned as a unit. When I went off to school, it hit me really hard how inept I was at a lot of real-world things because I’d had him helping me with them.

NIKOLAI: Simon was good at language and art. I was horrible at language but great at math and science. I was great at anything technical and boring.

SIMON: I resisted it a lot. Actually, I came out at about the same time I left home and went away to school, which was a big deal, and my whole life kind of went down a more *Pink Flamingos* direction. [laughs] I started really getting into camp and the darkest parts of gay culture, which were really exciting to me. I started to devolve, so when Niki came to me with this idea, it was almost like he pulled me out of a—I don’t know what that was—something very bad. [laughs]

NIKOLAI: An experiment.

SIMON: It was an experiment. I throw myself into different mindsets and worlds sometimes, and Niki has to pull me out of them so that I don’t get mired in it.

DERN: Was Tobey [Maguire] a part of you guys starting your company?

NIKOLAI: Oh, yeah. Tobey came to me and said, “You and Simon are hip. You know about design. Who are your favorite architects in the world right now?” And we gave him a pretty short list: Peter Zumthor and Johnston Marklee, Herzog & de Mueron, and some others. And a year later, Tobey was like, “I’m hiring Johnston Marklee. I know what big fans you guys are.”

SIMON: He let us watch the meeting.

NIKOLAI: He was like, “I know you guys know about construction, so come to just listen and weigh in. That way, you can help me if I don’t know what they’re talking about.” We brought photos of things we like: construction things, architectural things, design things. And we all just vibed so well that, by the end of the meeting, [the architects] were like, “We should all do this together.” And we were like, “Uh, fuck yeah.”

NIKOLAI: We ended up getting to fabricate it and design a lot of the furniture.

SIMON: Tobey just laid it on us. And in order to complete the job, we had to rent a studio. So we rented a studio in downtown (CONTINUED ON PAGE 147)

ACTRESS LAURA DERN APPEARED IN THE SUMMER BLOCKBUSTER *THE FAULT IN OUR STARS*, UPCOMING. SHE WILL APPEAR IN *WILD AND 99 HOMES*. THIS PAGE: RETIRED SETTEE, 2014. OPPOSITE, ON BOTH TANK TOPS: THE KOOPLES. ARTWORK: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ED BEL FUR, 2014. HOSE B, 2013. EXTRA LARGE ELEPHANT SKIN CADELABRA, 2014. FATHER ACCRETION VASE, 2014. ALL DESIGN PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE KRAMER & COMPANY. GROOMING PRODUCTS: MAC, INCLUDING STUDIO MOISTURE CREAM AND STUDIO FINISH SKIN CORRECTOR IN LIGHT PEACH; L’ORÉAL PROFESSIONNEL, INCLUDING HOMME STYLING BRILLANTINE POLISHING CREAM. GROOMING: MIRA CHAI HYDE/WALTER SCHUPFER MANAGEMENT FASHION DETAILS PAGE 151.



“EVERY SINGLE PIECE WE MAKE HAS POTENTIAL TO CHANGE PEOPLE’S MINDS ABOUT WHAT’S ACCEPTABLE.”



L.A., where I was also living, got all these tools, and it's never stopped.

NIKOLAI: If you build it, they will come.

SIMON: I started dating this guy Chris back then, and I was bringing him back to my bed, which was in the woodshop, full of sawdust. The place seemed wrecked and cool.

DERN: [*laughs*] Note to self: cover my bedroom in screws and sawdust and just say it's a workspace. So if you guys had to point out the artistic strengths in the other, what would you say?

SIMON: It took me a while to figure this out, but Niki has an artistic freedom that is impossible to learn. If I were to design a chair, for example, it would look like a chair, it wouldn't look like what we make, which is a really good example where you can see Niki's influence.

NIKOLAI: Simon's technical capability, his ability to invent these insanely complicated technical material applications, is so impressive—and not what I would have expected. Because I was the one more versed in construction. I was the one that was better at math. But now Simon has become this hyper-analytical and technical person. But, beyond that—and more important—Simon has gone off on this insane philosophical, social analysis that is bringing us as a studio toward a creative ethos and an odd set of morals—like a cult. [*Simon laughs*] But it all comes from Simon's idea that we're very anti-change, and that so much of what's wrong in the world is one person telling another what to do. Simon has given us this groundwork to take our work to a place where it really matters. I know it sounds full of ourselves to say it, but I really believe that every single piece we make has potential to change people's minds about what's acceptable. The sex room we did was all about sexual liberation and that comes from the groundwork that Simon laid. A friend of ours recently came out to us, and he said it was because of an interview that we'd done in which we'd said, "Don't listen to anybody. Just be yourself." And I was like, "Oh my God. That is such success, I could stop being an artist right now and we'd completely have achieved what we were after." That changed his life forever.

SIMON: Seriously.

DERN: That's incredible. I was so amused by you guys saying in an interview that your humorous designs are full of sexual innuendo, which, in fact, you're hoping to push even further. And you aren't expressing this only in museum pieces; you're making something that we live with. But I thought it was hilarious because there is no innuendo. Your work is, like, fuck it all. It's right there. Putting balls on a fucking chair—that's not innuendo. [*all laugh*] Your work is all sex.

NIKOLAI: We put balls on that piece; we took it to San Francisco to Fog Design and Art fair, with the very old money, hoity-toity crowd, which was very cool—the crowd was awesome.

SIMON: Design-wise, it's one of the more conservative environments.

NIKOLAI: And a woman comes up—she's, like, 65 years old, with, like, a \$300,000 diamond necklace on and a glass of champagne. And Simon dares me to go up to her. "Go tell her to touch the balls." I was like, "Okay, cool." [*Simon laughs*] I went over to her and she's looking at the piece and liking it, but she didn't notice that it had a ball sack on it. So I was like, "If you get on your knees and spread the fur, you'll find something underneath there." I was kind of nervous. But she did it and she lit up, laughing. I was like, "Fuck, man, this is awesome!" Because now I'm talking to this woman that I assumed I had nothing in common with. We're having a kind of conversation about sex and what it is to be human. Let's be real, if I go to a party, I don't want to talk about a perfect line

or a curve on something; I want to talk about sex. I want to talk about partying and having fun and making jokes. And if you open that door to a human conversation, then it's easier to introduce somebody to an even more important idea. Because, sex—everybody loves sex—but the idea that larger-scale change in yourself is okay is such a profound idea. You can't get to that place by talking about a perfect line on a table.