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JORGE PEREZ

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Ideas in Design



STUDIO VISIT The Haas Brothers

Nikolai and Simon Haas discuss art world shenanigans and their new "Afreaks" project from their sprawling Los Angeles studio.

INTERVIEW BY SHEILA MARIKAR

PHOTOS BY PETER BOHLER

This place is massive. You couldn't get this sort of space in New York.

Nikolai: New York is an awesome place, but after a year here, you start to go, "Fuck, I would never leave."

You have some construction you're finishing up over there. What's it for?

Nikolai: A music studio, a bathroom, and a place where we can sleep if we're working late.

So who's going to play in here?

Nikolai: Pop stars. They'll come in and do some rad shit.

Will they be able to record here?

Nikolai: Oh yeah. A lot of the bands will be established, and other ones will be up and coming. The point of the music studio—and the reason that we talked to our other brother about doing it—is that we all play music. We just want to integrate pop culture more into the art world. This entire place is meant to be an all-inclusive playground for all types of expression.

When are you hoping to have this fully running?

Nikolai: In a month. But it'll probably be six months to a year before we start doing projects with other people.

How long have you been in this space?

Simon: About a year.

Where were you before that?

Nikolai: Downtown L.A.

Why the move? >

Simon: We needed more space, and we also just love this neighborhood. Downtown was getting congested—it's had an explosion. This neighborhood is really chilled out.

How did you both get started in design?

Simon: It was Nikki's idea.

Nikolai: When we were 11 or 12 years old, our mom asked us to build her an office in the backyard. Literally. Foundation, electrical, plumbing, everything.

So the plan was in place as early as that?

Nikolai: There was no preconceived plan. I don't think either of us saw ourselves as designers before we started doing the work. Eventually, our designs ended up becoming very high-end and entering this market where you get lots of money sort of thrown at it.

What was the very first thing you two collaborated on?

Simon: We made these slippers called "pussyfoots" when we were 14. They were just a play on the word pussyfoot—like, "pussyfooting around." We thought it would be funny to make a vagina slipper that was a play on words.

How do you feel about your work being described as erotic and overtly sexual? Do you feel like that pigeonholes you at all?

Simon: That's part of what we're trying to agitate: that people will like something because it has a sex organ on it. That's all anyone will talk about, and it's kind of funny to us that that's the case. These things have been present in artwork since the beginning of time.

You made a chair with testicles. Do you think people were prepared for that?

Nikolai: We're toeing that line where all of a sudden someone's like, "Whoa, you can't do that!" Honestly, in the beginning, none of that agitation was intentional, but as soon as it happens and somebody resists you, you're sort of like, "Why the fuck am I getting resisted? I'm not doing this to make somebody feel badly about themselves." In fact, it's the opposite—we're trying to do something that makes people feel like, "Oh, well, I'm free to do whatever I feel." As soon as we hit that agitation, we hit it harder and harder and harder until it breaks.

You debuted the chair with balls at the FOG Art+Design fair in San Francisco in 2014.

Nikolai: We had a sex-themed piece at Design Miami before that—it was our second year at Basel. We made an anti-shame piece called "Advocates for the Sexual Outsider." What we fought against is being shamed for anything. The balls on the chair was a single piece that came out of the success of that. Our point was that everybody is a sexual outsider. Shame was the central point. We wanted to inspire feelings in people that maybe they don't feel in their own reality all the time.

It's almost like you're having an ongoing public service announcement.

Simon: My only purpose is hopefully to reduce the amount of shame that someone is going to experience when they grow up. Which is already happening. That's just the way that our culture is moving. We really want to be on that train.

Nikolai: We think of our work as a catalyst to speeding this up. That's the point of being an artist: to create social change in ways that you see fit for the world.

Simon: We grew up with the Internet. The only people who really care about boundaries are the people who stand to profit off of them, or who grew up thinking that they are so rigid they can't be changed. I find this age so exciting because there are so many opportunities.

Have you ever been approached by a big brand to do a design collection?

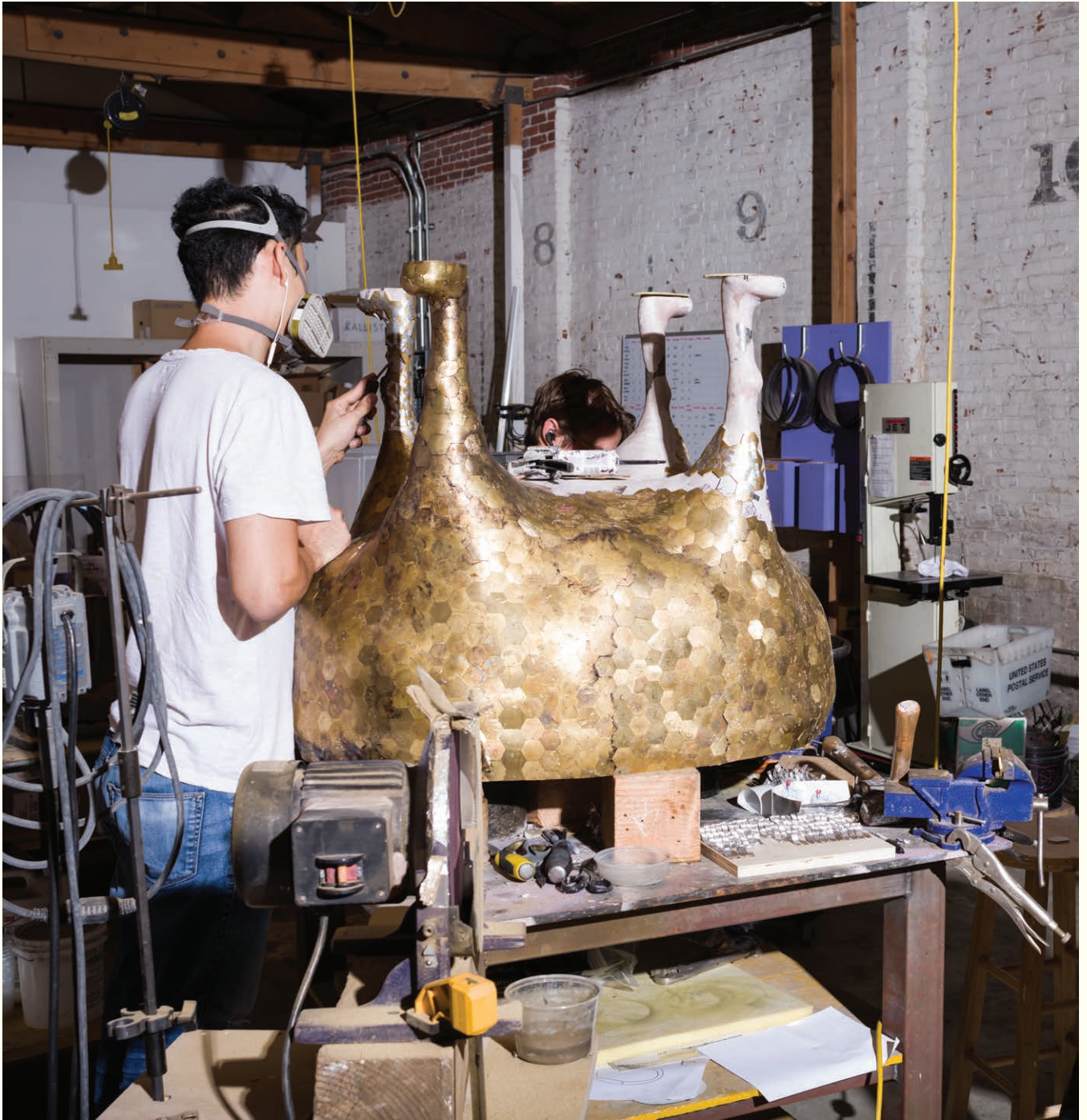
Nikolai: Yeah, we did a furniture line for Versace, one of our first projects.

Was there a set of rules?

Simon: There were very few constraints. They gave us the inspiration of Neoclassicism. I already find that funny because Neoclassicism is a rehash of classical. So what we did was a rehash of a rehash. We took Donatella as our inspiration because she's one of the coolest people we've ever met—very youthful. Her stuff is also all about sexuality, freedom, and self-expression.

Nikolai: Versace is a large corporation that has existed for a long time, and they have a lot of responsibilities to investors because of the money involved. Yet they gave us way less censorship than Art Basel and Design Miami, which are supposed to be the purveyors of the next cutting-edge thing. As soon as you cut too hard, or you get too close to the cutting edge, they start to lie down. If their minds get bent too hard, they start to worry about how much money they're going to make. >





Assistants working on a commissioned Hex Tile project. (PREVIOUS SPREAD)
The twins in their studio. (OPPOSITE)
Ceramic accretion layering in the studio.

Are you going to be showing work at Design Miami this December?

Simon: Yes, we had to fight our way in, but we're in!

How do you feel about that? Is there any trepidation?

Simon: No, we were upset. We spent the last two years working on this one project and are so excited to show it. We never expected that this — out of any of our pieces — would be censored out.

Tell me about the project.

Simon: It's called "Afreaks." It's beaded work by women from the Khayelitsha township outside of Cape Town.

Nikolai: It started when we were on a trip to Cape Town. We went to show some of our pieces there, and we came across a booth called Monkeybiz at a craft fair. They give beads to women who have very little employment opportunities and live in townships that are remnants of the apartheid era. They're forced settlements, basically. We recognized the incredible expression, beautiful use of color, real talent. If you compare what they do to that table down there, it's a similar thing in terms of how long it takes. We also noticed these beads are being sold in a tourist shop. They're taken as a cheap thing and really shouldn't be. The women making them are artists, and they're spending an incredible amount of time on them. We felt like this craft — and the women themselves — were being overlooked. We wanted to get involved and collaborate with them.

As soon as we met the community, we saw this real wealth of expression, and a major level of underpayment to these women doing incredible work. Also, it's no secret that South Africa is extremely racist. We saw an opportunity to bring in our privilege and give a piece of it to those who deserve it as much, if not more, than we do.

Simon: I think we're talented and work very hard, but there are a thousand women in those townships who are equally hardworking, equally talented, and will forever be ignored. Just the way we were born — as white males — gives us a huge advantage. I feel like it's rare for anybody who attains any level of success to point that out.

Nikolai: It's a literal collaboration — they didn't just fabricate it; they designed some of it, we designed some. No one will ever know what we designed or what they designed.

Simon: They are the artists as much as we are. We're not going to just take all the money.

So what was the fair's issue with it?

Simon: They called it "sensationalist." We will probably never know what the motivations were behind it, but you can see that these are pieces of furniture. I don't see how it couldn't be admitted into a design fair. We presented a room full of sex toys before. I would understand if they wanted to call that sensational. This is about women, racial equality, and craft.

Nikolai: The objection is ridiculous because [the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum] has already accepted it [for a show to open in February]. It has nothing to do with the work; it has to do with the social work we did, I think. It has to do with the idea that we're known for coming into situations and asking questions that make people uncomfortable.

Simon: No one really objects except for anyone who has a commercial interest.

Do you have any dream clients?

Simon: David Hockney. I would love to make anything for him.

Nikolai: I honestly wouldn't want to have the type of relationship where I felt like I needed to please them. As cheesy as it sounds, we already have our dream clients. I'm a huge Mick Jagger fan — I would be stoked to know if he owned a piece. Or Beyoncé or Jay-Z.

Simon: I would love for Apple to be a client. I think Apple has changed the world. I'm wearing the Apple Watch right now, and it's changing my life. The iPhone makes Steve Jobs almost godly and a total artist.

Because you're twins, is there a type of language—not just verbal but physical—you share when it comes to work?

Nikolai: Even when talking to you, you can tell we're finishing each other's sentences. We're a single voice. We try to achieve the same goal together, and we know each other well enough that we almost never misstep in that.

Simon: There's a division between form and surface. I'm kind of the surface guy, and he's the form guy. But really that's as much as you could separate us.





(THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Nikolai Haas sculpting a form for the Hex Tile project. Another shot of the brothers in their space. A Beyonce Accretion vase in the studio. (OPPOSITE) Studio artists and assistants doing group stretches in the morning. Tiling detail.

