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STERLING RUBY - CATHERINE OPIE - SHULAMIT NAZARIAN - HAAS BROTHERS

THE HAAS

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This spread, all images: The Haas Brothers' "Afreaks" collection, 2015, beaded sculpture, cast bronze, photo by Joe Kramm/R & Company.



BROTHERS



Portrait by Joe Kramm.

Niki and Simon Haas, the fraternal twins known as the Haas Brothers, have had a meteoric rise in the design world. They started working in a studio together in 2010 in Los Angeles, and almost immediately experienced success (representation by R & Company), demand from clients (such as Tobey Maguire), and collaborations (with Versace, Peter Marino, etc.). Their work is surprising—hairy settees and stools with anamorphic legs; funny—ceramic vases with Dr. Seuss-like spikes and wonky necks; and often sexual—phallic floor lamps and labia-like curtains.

At Design Miami/ last December, they debuted a new series entitled “Afreaks,” a collaboration on beaded works with a group of South African women who dubbed themselves the Haas Sisters. Niki and Simon initially saw pieces by the female Xhosa bead workers at the Monkeybiz booth within the Design Indaba fair during a visit to South Africa over two years ago. After some initial conversations, they put the group of women on salary and made several subsequent visits to create together creatures in bronze and beads, some functional and some sculptural.

As the Haas brothers’ work has evolved, it has become harder and harder for some to categorize what they do, but they don’t seem to mind. This spring, their work is a part of the Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial (which opened in February). *Whitewall* spoke with the artists about their focus on social change and awareness, and why L.A. is the most dynamic city in the world.

WHITEWALL: We wanted to start by asking you about the “Afreaks” collection done with the Haas Sisters, which debuted at Design Miami/ just a few weeks ago. While you were in South Africa with your gallery R & Company for some World Design Capital events, what initially struck you about the beaded work you saw on view at the Monkeybiz booth at the Design Indaba fair?

NIKI HAAS: The beadwork by the women at Monkeybiz had this undeniable energy. Monkeybiz makes an effort to give the women that made each piece

credit. Their names are included in the information tag. There was pride in the work; the social aspect was evident. There was empowerment. The beads were more than an iconic aesthetic—they carried an energy that was undeniably irresistible and intriguing. It was the energy of massive talent that had been completely untapped on a large scale.

SIMON HAAS: I was struck by the expressiveness of the work at Monkeybiz and also excited by the fact that each piece has a tag with the name of the artist who made it. I liked the spirit of giving credit to the creator, since most of the objects of this type in Cape Town felt more anonymous and touristy.

WW: Why did you want to collaborate with these women?

NH: Because they are immensely talented. Beyond that, they are unrecognized and unrespected. We saw an opportunity to open a venue for them that they had never been offered. But make no mistake—it was our privilege to be allowed an opportunity to collaborate. These women changed the way we think about our own practice. There aren’t many instances I can cite where outside forces affected our art mind so dramatically.

SH: We wanted to collaborate with this group of women because we were so impressed by the level of craftsmanship and artistry in their work. We are always looking for opportunities to learn something about the world and about ourselves, so I think we were naturally drawn to work in Cape Town as a way to reframe our own reality.

WW: Can you tell us about what it was like to work with them for the first time?

NH: Honestly, nerve-racking. It took a second for us to get used to each other. There was a lot of excited energy on both sides, but there was a lot of learning

in the beginning. Surmounting that initial moment and getting into a groove inside the collaboration was euphoric. Once we established a visual language together, it was fun and easy to create objects we were all proud of.

SH: When we first arrived, I was nervous that the language barrier and the overall difference in our experiences could make it difficult to work smoothly together, but it hardly took any time for me to realize that those things were actually going to make the project better. We had to use hand gestures and limited vocabulary to get points across to each other, which made for a lot of laughter and joy in general.

WW: *Instead of hiring them on a commission basis, you put them on salary. How do you think that changed the way you worked together creatively?*

NH: Salary gave them room to experiment—there was no penalty for making something that was perhaps unsellable. It also meant that they were not competing with each other to make sellable work. It led to a much happier team mentality and a wealth of creativity that was based in support and collaboration. The vibe was like a functioning modern commune. It was unbelievable.

SH: The most important thing about paying them salary instead of a piece-by-piece flat rate is that it meant that time spent experimenting could generate income. Under normal circumstances, taking risks with shapes or time-consuming techniques could mean less money at the end of the month, but this system allowed for all of us brothers and sisters to freely experiment.

WW: *How did the forms of the "Afreaks" collection evolve? How did the material or process of beading affect the forms you wanted to and could create?*

NH: There are very few limits to shapes you can achieve with beading. The fact that a bead is a very literal unit got Simon's programming mind very excited. He created a very beautiful system for creating equations that can give birth to super-complicated natural forms out of beads. The fineness of this system next to the more crude language of the body form of the freaks was very exciting. Lots of the arms and surface choices were literally all of us just sitting down together and making sketches. I guess the fact that we were working with so much color affected the forms as well—inspired them to be more playful.

SH: This collection evolved organically. Before arriving in Cape Town we asked the Sisters to experiment on their own and try to create some new experimental bead processes. When we got there, all these samples were spread out and we sat with each woman to come up with something that utilized her stitches. As we worked together, they'd come up with new ideas and say, "Why don't we try this?" We would do the same to them, and the end



result is very much a physical manifestation of this back-and-forth conversation we had the entire time.

WW: *Is this collaboration ongoing, and how do you think it has affected your overall studio practice?*

NH: Absolutely—we hope to continue this project for a while. I'd have to say the largest way it has affected Simon and me personally in our own practice would be how we relate to our own privilege. It takes a community of support to make great work, whether that community is directly involved in the fabrication of the work or simply acts as the social structure that reflects your ideas back to you. The women in South Africa as well as many others there were our community, our collaborators, for this project. Our team here in L.A. and our social group help us make our work here. I think I really just try to give everyone around us that helps us in our vision credit. I also understand now that that the fleeting glory of doing something alone pales in comparison to the lifelong pleasure of engaging in and supporting a community. Also, being white males, we have the least resistance in our path socially on a global scale, understanding that a lot of what we have has been given to us by an arbitrary social structure that is thousands of years old and should be obsolete. This idea puts things in perspective. We are lucky to do what we do. Our reality as it relates to our social, historical, and technological advantages are nothing short of a miracle. We are making hyper-overpriced pieces of work. I've become seriously focused on defusing this immense privilege by pushing my advantages back toward those who aren't so lucky as we are.

SH: The biggest change in my own life as a result of this project is that I have become acutely aware of my privilege. It was difficult for me to accept that so much of my life's achievements ultimately have quite a lot to do with my own race and gender, and it made it somewhat difficult for me to enjoy my life for a period, but coming out the other side I can say that I actually enjoy life much more. I approach everything much more openly, much less cynically.

WW: *You've always described your work as socially aware and yourselves as advocates for outsiders, delivering the 1 percent things to make them think, whether it is anti-shaming sexually, socially, creatively. Is that something that came naturally through your personalities, or something you both set out to do intentionally?*

SH: Our initial moments of making socially aware work were natural and completely non-preconceived, but definitely at this moment in our practice it has become a large part of our work and a very intentional aspect of it. Once we became aware of our ability to be aware artists, it became our complete focus. I believe art is in place to ask questions, to enact social change. Truly without an intellectual or philosophical pursuit, art feels dead and useless to





me. At the market value that art is hocked, I feel it needs to offer more than an aesthetic or clever message. It needs to offer a window into possibility; it needs to affect a viewer positively. This is my goal in making work. I hope whatever we make could be considered aware, and though the 1 percent is buying our work, I hope that we are speaking to a much larger audience.

SH: I think our anti-shame focus came naturally. I grew up feeling a lot of pressure from the outside world to change things about myself—to be more masculine, to be more put together, et cetera. I always thought to myself, “If I can prevent for someone else the kind of emotional turmoil I experienced myself as a young gay man, that is all I will ever do.” I am driven to call out our culture’s toxic behaviors because I want everyone, especially people who are not part of the upper-class, white male majority, to be able to enjoy their lives.

WW: Do you see “Afreaks” and collaborating with the Haas Sisters as sort of the next level of that?

NH: It’s the perfect project for us because it embodies everything we ever wanted to achieve with our work. It definitely, at the time we embarked on it, was the next level, for sure. It was uncomfortable and it made us grow a lot. I hope that whatever work we produce from here on out carries a similar level of integrity. Our standards of the way we interact with ourselves have changed a lot for the better. I hope that from now on we always float in the next level.

SH: This collaboration was absolutely a next step from our “Advocates for the Sexual Outsider” project. “Advocates” was something I felt very secure in doing since I have spent so much of my life considering how people’s sexualities impact their day-to-day lives, but racial and feminist issues were harder to tackle. I think we both understand that sexism is one of the most enduring problems our culture faces, but neither of us really knows how to approach it. This project in Cape Town made me think, “I don’t really know how to go about addressing sexism and racism as a white male, but maybe the problem is that not knowing how keeps so many white males from trying.” I thought the best thing I could do is talk about it—try to explain my own thought process.

WW: You describe yourselves as blue-collar artists who grew up around well-connected, famous people, but say that you also grew up trying to escape the perception of nepotism. How do you maintain that perspective?

NH: [Laughs] Honestly, “Nothing matters and everything matters” is my



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