



Simon and Nikolai Haas

Photo by Joe Kramm

Artists the Haas Brothers Want to Turn Aventura Mall Into an Art Space

JONATHAN KENDALL | JANUARY 2, 2018 | 8:30AM

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Amid Aventura Mall's selection of stores that make your eyes sparkle (and wallet cry) is a whimsical collection of art carefully curated by businesswoman Jackie Soffer. Under her gaze, the largest mall in Florida has become not only a shopping mecca but also a bona-fide cultural destination.

Consider, for example, the mall's set of macabre, smiling sculptures by Ugo Rondinone. They look like characters from Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The disembodied eyeball benches by Louise Bourgeois just outside the entrances of Louis Vuitton and Nordstrom compose an alluring piece that captures the scene-to-be-seen quality of all shopping places.

The works, many of which were created by the art world's biggest names, imbue the mall's gleaming promenades with a zany, soulful quality that sets Aventura apart from other Florida malls – and from those across the nation. Aventura's artful approach to mall-managing has, evidently, been working. Whereas other malls have collapsed into shadows of their former selves while online shopping become increasingly popular, Aventura is wrapping up a 315,000-square-foot expansion – a state-of-the-art wing designed by Venezuelan architect Carlos Zapata that houses Zara, Topshop, and a Tesla showroom. Because of the new addition, the mall is already being dubbed the "most extra" place to shop in the Sunshine State.

As more stores in the new wing are being unveiled, **enter the L.A.-based artists Simon and Nikolai Haas**. About three years ago, Soffer, the CEO of Turnberry Associates (the company that owns Aventura Mall), commissioned the duo to create "something beautiful," bordering on a playground, for the shopping center's youngest guests. In December, just in time for the new wing's opening, the brothers formally unveiled their work, a Seussian water feature called *Gorillas in the Mist* (yes, after the movie).

The flippant, H2O-spouting primates, which repose at the heart of the new wing's piazza, **weren't just fun for Simon and Nikolai to create in their studio on the West Coast**. The teal sculptures' new home has the brothers reflecting on the role "private enterprise" can play in the arts and culture scene, which for years has been spearheaded almost exclusively by galleries and museums.



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Aventura Mall

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"Though working with museums is superamazing, there's also this ethos in terms of the greater good for the community," Nikolai says. "Rather than having art solely in museums and galleries, which attracts a specific audience, millions and millions of people will see *Gorillas in the Mist* at the mall each year."

Compared to Miami's art flagship, Pérez Art Museum Miami, which receives about 300,000 visitors each year, Aventura Mall – even before the recent expansion – **reportedly receives about 30 million visitors annually**, offering artists incredible exposure. Few other spaces are more visited in all of South Florida.

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Many of the mall's visitors might not be indoctrinated members of the cultural world, but the Haas brothers believe that's actually another strength of having work showcased at the shopping center – it enlarges their audience. "To go to a museum, on some level, you have to be an art fan, and you have to take the time of day, and you have to know about the museum's existence," Nikolai says. "But maybe it's more important for people be hit in the face by art in the mall because it's more unexpected that way. You're in awe of it."

It's an interesting prospect, and one that might spur the cultural cognoscenti to rethink what can formally be considered an art space. Now, as artists are vying for the attention of smartphone-distracted mobs of people, eyeballs are eyeballs – and engagement with a work of art at a mall (even if just for selfies) is still engagement. "People don't really like going to a gallery and feeling like the art is over their head," Simon says. "If you can be engaged with the work of art because it's fun and really beautiful, then that's a really good thing."

With her role in creating an immersive experience of art in the everyday lives of locals, and for creating a space filled with works that free visitors from the mundane, Soffer is arguably the most underappreciated cultural patron in South Florida.

"I think Aventura is leading the way there in bringing art into more accessible spaces," says Nikolai, mentioning its impact on the shopping center's overall ambiance. "Instead of being some cookie-cutter mall, Aventura is a real experience."