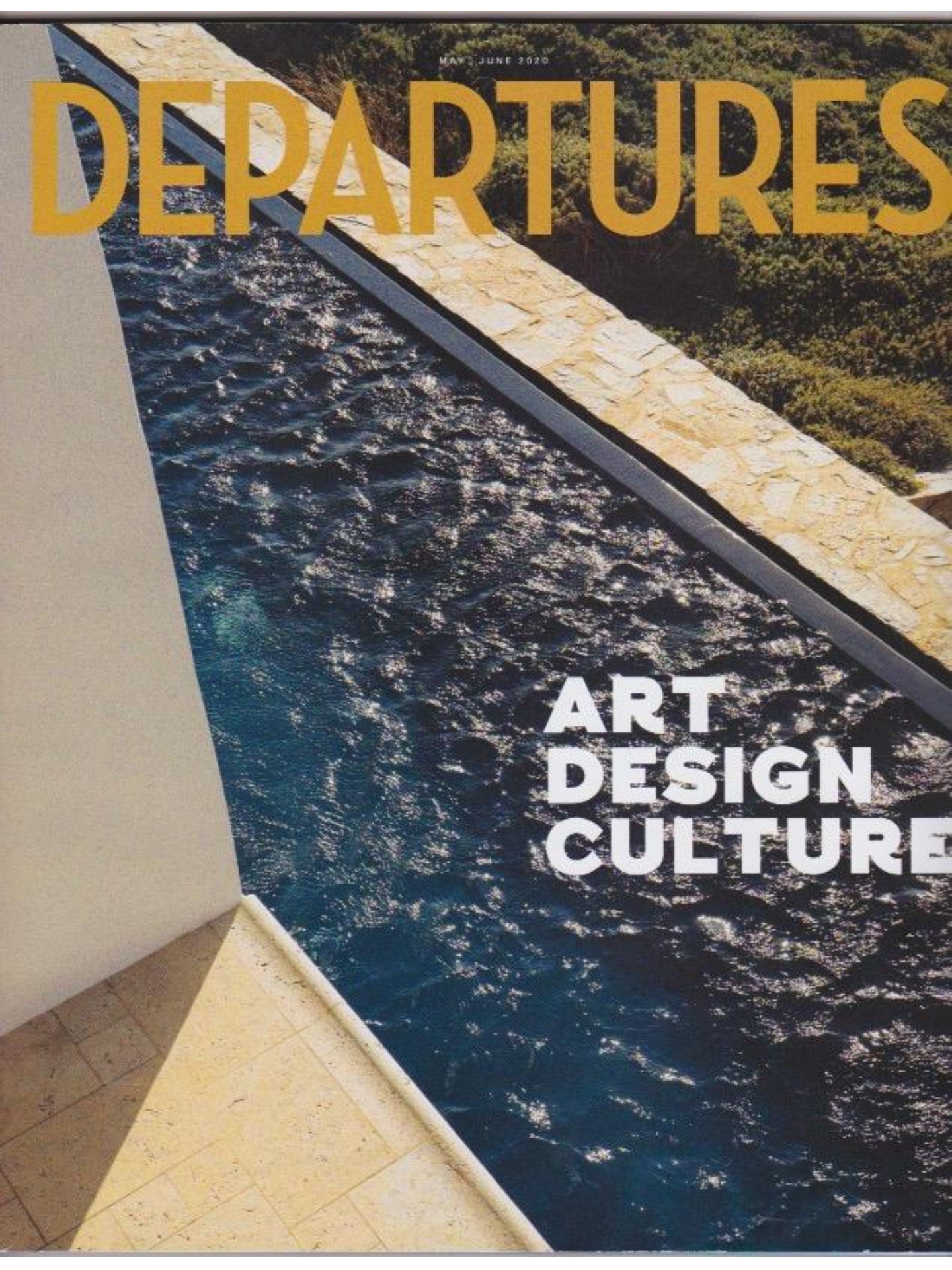



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DEPARTURES

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A detail of one of the beaded flower sculptures created by The Haas Brothers and the women of Lost Hills, California

A Tree Grows in California

After a successful partnership with artisans in South Africa, the design duo Simon and Nikolai Haas have brought their community-empowering projects closer to home. *by Gisela Williams*

ON A LATE WINTER EVENING in L.A. almost three years ago, Simon and Nikolai Haas, fraternal twin designers who are known for their whimsical furniture and sculptural objects, went to a dinner party at the home of collectors Lynda and Stewart Resnick. The Resnicks own the Wonderful Company, a corporation that produces Fiji Water, POM Wonderful pomegranate juice, wine, and other goods. Its agricultural ventures are spread over 200 square miles

of farmland in California's Central Valley.

Simon, who was seated next to Lynda, was telling her about the work they'd been making with a group of female Xhosa bead artists in South Africa. The brothers met the group, employed by a non-profit called Monkeybiz, at a design fair in Cape Town in 2015 and were captivated by the whimsical beaded animal forms the women were making. The brothers, who have become famous for



Left: Simon (center) and Niki Haas with some of their co-workers in Lost Hills, California. Below, from left: Simon's coding for the beadwork; ceramic pieces by the brothers.

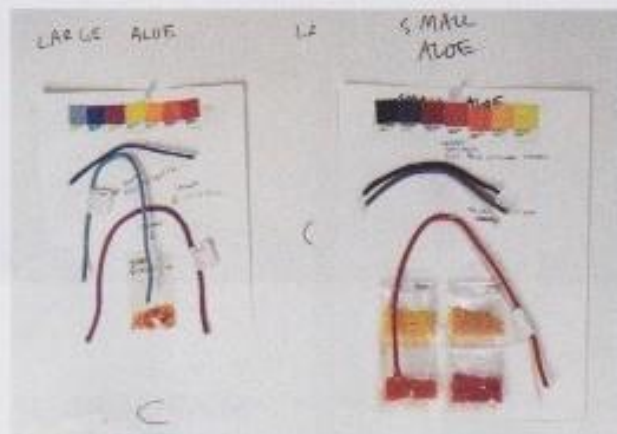
their anthropomorphic furniture—a bronze coffee table with lizard-like legs, an armchair covered in buffalo fur and sprouting horns—were inspired by the Xhosa artisans to start making pure sculpture. “It made us realize that we could make complete creatures rather than furniture that looked like creatures,” said Niki. The brothers ended up commissioning large-scale works from the women, based on drawings they sent. They paid the women a fair wage and agreed to give them 20 percent of the final price of each object made.

After listening to Simon recall the experience and how it made the brothers think about how their work could have positive social impact, Lynda piped up: “That project in South Africa really sounds fantastic, but why aren’t you doing something like this in your own backyard?” Lynda had been looking for flexible employment for some of the women in Lost Hills, the community where their company’s headquarters is located, and this sounded promising.

The idea of setting up shop in Lost Hills was intriguing to Simon but also challenging because, unlike the Xhosa artists, the women there didn’t have experience with beadwork. By chance, however, Simon had been working on creating a com-

puter-like code for their beading. He had been reading a lot of articles by Douglas Hofstadter, a scientist who studies the computer modeling of mental processes, and had figured out how to write down a string of formulas that, when followed, could generate a perfect leaf or shell shape. Simon was sure his formulas would work but didn’t know how to apply them—until now. If he could show the women in Lost Hills how to read his code, he could teach them to bead.

For many, California’s Central Valley is unfamiliar territory, but for Lynda it’s close to the heart. She has witnessed the devastating impact of poverty—40 percent of the Valley’s residents are from Latin America—and malnutrition. “Seven million people live in the Central Valley,” she explains. “Two-thirds of the fruits and 90 percent of the nuts produced in this country come from there, as well as dairy and beef. Yet people struggle with food insecurity.” In 2010 the Resnicks decided to focus their entrepreneurial skills on philanthropy, and instead of working in the developing world, they looked to their own backyard. Lynda recalled, “One day one of my employees





Left: Works from the Haas Brothers show last fall at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. Below: The brothers with some of their larger pieces in their Los Angeles studio.

pointed out to me, "You have 4,000 employees in the Central Valley, which is populated with thousands of the working poor. Why don't you start there?"

The couple built a community center, complete with a soccer field and a basketball court, as well as spaces for dance classes, a summer camp, and free tutoring for local children. This is where the brothers met about two dozen women who were interested in the beadwork jobs. "At first I thought it was too good to be true," recalled Dulce Sanchez, who on a late February morning was sitting at a table with a few finished beaded monster figures. "To get paid that well and to have flexible hours—it meant I could continue to go to school," she said. The women earn \$15–\$20 per hour, which has made them feel more independent.

Though the women work on bigger Dr. Seuss-like sculptures of the sort the designers showed at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York City last fall (they sell between \$65,000 and \$225,000), they also make smaller pieces. The goal was for the women to have steady work, so the brothers came up with Microfreaks, a limited-edition collection of three different beaded figures; each costs \$1,500. They launched the collection on Sotheby's Home last year, and it is now sold on several online shops; 30 percent of the profit goes back to the Lost Hills

community. While the women are grateful for the jobs, they've also come to appreciate the camaraderie the project has fostered. "When I first moved here, I didn't know anyone," said Carmen Aranda, originally from the region of Michoacán, in Mexico. "This project has brought people together."

After discussing some of the works for a show next fall at the Katonah Museum of Art in New York, Niki and Simon and the women went for lunch at Gabby's, a Mexican restaurant nearby.

"Collaboration comes naturally to us," said Niki over his burrito. "I work with my sibling, and our studio employees are like family. Work relationships tend to grow into something more than just business." He added, "In a way we've become just as excited about developing languages with different communities to make work together as we are about creating the work itself."

