

# GARAGE



The Haas Brothers. Photo by Joe Kramm

## The Haas Brothers: A Design for Life

By: Michael Slenske  
October 13, 2017

Most artist-designers would be hard-pressed to justify a retrospective at the age of 32, but few in the younger-than-Jesus demographic have produced a multimedia oeuvre as wide-ranging, singular, and straight-out fun as have the Haas Brothers'.

Texas-born, Los Angeles-based twins Nikolai and Simon scored early success with a clutch of high-concept design objects that nabbed them (on the very same day in 2012) a collaboration with Versace and a spot on the roster of New York's R & Company Gallery. But the ride has sometimes been rough: "Because our career took off so quickly," says Simon, "we experienced a fast, massive change in lifestyle. It was actually a pretty difficult transition, and it was catastrophic for how Nikki and I were used to working with each other."

In the five years since their breakthrough, the Haas Brothers' projects—including their Fibonacci-sequenced glass vessels, phallic bronze lamps, slip-cast accretion vessels, and exotic fur-and-bronze seating elements—have cropped up in the Cooper-Hewitt Design Triennial and at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, as well as at countless art fairs. They've collaborated with bead-working artisans at South Africa's Monkeybiz, with Brooklyn's Flavorpaper, and with The Elder Statesman, the luxe LA cashmere outfit run by buddy Greg Chait. They've even survived a trip to rehab and a near-breakup of their partnership. This is to say nothing of their jam-packed summer schedule, which is capped by the aforementioned retrospective, *Haas Angeles*, open through October 14 at the UTA Artist Space.

"It's not stopping either, it's fucking crazy!" says Nikki. "But the show is great. We're really proud of it. It's the first we've had something we'd call a retrospective. There's work that was from four years ago and there's stuff that's brand new. The opening was packed."

Now the brothers are in preparations for an upcoming show at the Bass Museum in Miami this December. "Our work has taken a shift towards the psychological," says Simon about the show which will directly reference his battles with addiction and the work he made in recovery. "All the things Simon and I did in the past—all the drugs, the sex, and all that stuff—there's no shame in any of those things," says Nikki. "But now we're older, we have more responsibilities." Simon adds: "Whereas Nikki was focusing on the emotion of it all, I was grappling with . . . what is reality? I was nearly schizophrenic for a moment, and this period is about having gone through that, having come out of it, and having a more objective view. It's almost like a study in mental health."



View of *The Haas Brothers: Haas Angeles*, UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, 2017. Photo courtesy of UTA Artist Space

**GARAGE: This show must have felt like a homecoming.**

**Simon Haas:** We've never had a show here. It's crazy. The balance between people making stuff and people buying stuff has always felt out of whack here, but that's shifting now. It was really cool but I was more nervous than usual.

**Where did the retrospective idea come from?**

SH: We'd been talking to [UTA Fine Arts head] Josh Roth, having done a couple of smaller projects with him. Then I went this summer to one of his shows and we reconnected. Because they have such a big space and it's our first time showing here, we wanted to show everything we could. Over the past six months we've been spitballing, and then it went into high gear. A lot of our friends have only ever seen our work in photos and we wanted the whole community here to get the scope of everything.

**How many people are working in the studio now?**

**Nikki Haas:** There are ten of us, and everyone is absolutely expressing themselves, too.

**It seems like you guys have everything in this show. Are the bronze Hex Tile stools the earliest works?**

SH: They were remade recently, but that is our first object. The oldest piece in the show is *Sex Room*, which was made 2013–14.

NH: It started with *Sex Room* because my wife hadn't even seen it until this show, even though she'd been



hearing about it forever.

SH: It was also for all the people working in the studio so they could see everything in the same place. It was directed at the people who are close to us.



View of The Haas Brothers: Haas Angeles, UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, 2017. Photo courtesy of UTA Artist Space

**When did those sparkle paintings come into the practice?**

SH: We've been doing those for about a year. It starts with an aircraft aluminum panel that's really flat, which gets painted with car paint, then with outdoor signage enamel.

**Are those the most recent works up at UTA?**

NH: I'd say Simon's video [*Meditation not Medication*, 2017] and the murals. Those were created for the show. The video work is up for sale on ArtPlay, and the proceeds will go to Promesa, an awesome charity in Boyle Heights that gives money to the neediest local organizations.

**What's up with the title of the video?**

SH: I went to rehab this year and now I'm clean and sober. Some of the visuals in the video were conceived when I was very much on drugs, then finished when I was sober. So the idea of the title is that it's possible to experience blissful, meditative states without drugs. I like the idea of referencing psychedelia from a sober perspective.

**Are you looking to make live-action films as well as animations?**

SH: Yeah, I love film.

NH: Also, its more art for more people. And cheaper; hopefully we'll make cartoons that people won't have to pay to access, and they'll be connected to the visuals I've been creating for a beading program. I'm planning to release a free manual on the process. It's based on natural, logical patterns. Whenever someone is using it, I describe it as the person becoming the piece of hardware and the beads becoming a program they're running. It's taken me four years to finish it—the longest time I've spent on any one piece—and I'm excited to share it.

I think our direction is to keep doing what we've been doing because we're having a lot of fun, but also to open as many new doors as possible. We could do anything that grabs our attention, and so many of our projects have come from that, from spending time somewhere and meeting someone who does something we haven't seen before. Like the stone stuff we do with Jeff Jonas, who's become a good friend. He owns a quarry in Portugal, and when we understood what he was capable of and what a great guy he was . . . I know this sounds kind of weird, but everyone we work with has a really strong moral code and really cares about the work that we're doing. Josh Roth, for example, is passionate about doing a good show and about the LA community. Art is sacred; it's not important in the way of a heart surgeon saving lives, but it's important in that you can create opportunities for people to think differently about the world and its future. I know our shit is really expensive and people must think we're millionaires, but I promise you that's not the case. I want to avoid being like a televangelist who makes millions of dollars but doesn't do anything helpful.

**MS: As we just saw with Joel Osteen.**

NH: Yeah, exactly. I don't want to be the Joel Osteen of the art world!



View of *The Haas Brothers: Haas Angeles*, UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, 2017. Photo courtesy of UTA Artist Space

**When we met five years ago, you were planning an architectural venture, a crazy drug-and-sex hotel. Is that still on the table?**

SH: We still want to make "experience rooms," but not for drugs or sex. I think if I'm able to pluck an experience out of a psychedelic trip and then make it accessible and tangible without drugs and without sex, then I think that's kind of beautiful. I feel a bit of remorse for the amount of proselytizing I did for drugs. People take them and that's fine, but I don't want to be encouraging them as a part of a healthy artistic process.

NH: On that note, I also want to say that the experiences we've gone through have been hyper-valuable in one way or another. Simon's rehab experience made him into the person he is. He needed to go through those lows to get to where he is now. Sometimes you have a really bad fight with your partner and you're like, "Fuck I shouldn't have said that." But that's what you really felt in your heart. That's what art is for, for me, ultimately.

**Is having a kid and getting married influencing your work in new ways?**

NH: Yeah, right now, ramping up to have a kid, I already know it's going to be the single most important thing



that happens in my life. So yeah, for sure it's gonna change the way I make work. Wouldn't you say, Simon? I think it's going to change it for you, too.

SH: It will. I was planning on being a corruptor; now I'm going to be a good uncle.

NH: Simon and I have gotten through some terrible fights where we were not speaking to each other for weeks, some of the most painful shit we've ever gone through in our lives, and then realizing we're strong enough to get beyond it.

**Was there ever a time where you thought this might be the end of the Haas Brothers as a partnership?**

SH: Last year at this time. Exactly a year ago I had spent all of my money on drugs, I was basically alone because I'd had a fight with everyone who cared about me and pushed them away and I had no drive to do anything except get high. I remember waking up on my birthday and feeling suicidal. The difference between then and now is insane. We kept plugging away at it and even when Nikki and I weren't speaking for a few months we were still working in isolation. All our current work is what we were both doing, recombined.

**What were you both doing?**

SH: I was doing animation. And I never stopped beading. Even when I was at my lowest point, beads were my savior, and by the time I got out of rehab I had this system fully written down.

**What were you doing, Nikki?**

NH: I was working on the aesthetic of the murals, and the megabeast [*King Dong*, 2016] is a good example of what the studio was making happen during all of that. If I think about the period in which we created *King Dong* in my head I was thinking "How do I push through this if Simon dips out?" I had to convince myself I was big enough and bad enough to do whatever the fuck I wanted to do and I didn't need anybody to do it, I was going to build a big ass huge furry thing with a huge dick on it and it's so obvious the insecurity in the piece, but it also captured the fragility of the relationship. What's great about the UTA show is that it actually recontextualizes *King Dong*. He's actually in a much happier place with the mural around him and this brain cleanse of the video.



View of The Haas Brothers: Haas Angeles, UTA Artist Space, Los Angeles, 2017. Photo courtesy of UTA Artist Space

**So what's happening at the Bass Museum?**

SH: It's going to be the light at the end of the tunnel. It's going to be a beautiful forest scene using all the stuff we've figured out in the last four years. It's a little more meditative, more peaceful, and also bright and beautiful.

NH: If we can use our weaknesses and our strengths to work toward some kind of antidote to what America is going through at the moment—that pain and strife and self-centeredness—then I'll be more than happy! The project for the Bass is about positivity in general. Simon and I saw the darkest darks of our lives, but I would venture to say that I'm now the happiest I've ever been.

SH: Same. I went to hell and back so I'm just grateful to just walk around freely and not be interned somewhere.



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