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Nikolai and Simon Haas, collectively known as the Haas Brothers. Photo by Joe Kramm, courtesy of R & Company.

The Haas Brothers on Their Breakthrough Miami Moment and Tips for Rising Above the Art and Design Divide

By: Sarah Cascone
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The Haas Brothers have been to Art Basel Miami Beach before, but not like this. For the first time, their work is being shown as art, not as functional design, at Miami Art Week's main fair. The response, bolstered by the enthusiasm for their show at the Bass Museum in Miami Beach, has been overwhelmingly positive.

During Wednesday's VIP preview, artnet News walked through the fair with the 34-year-old twins, Simon and Nikolai. They are regular fixtures across the street at Design Miami, where they have been showing their playful, often anthropomorphic and fantastical pieces since 2013, with plenty of commercial success, but Basel was in some ways uncharted territory.

"We've been in here *kind of* a couple of times, but not officially," said Simon. "I went to art school, so this is my dream."

"When we had other pieces here, Basel was like 'that's not art,'" recalled Nikolai. To show, say, a Haas Brothers table, a gallery had to be using it as a table, to sit at or to display catalogues. "Now we've been allowed in, and we're fucking stoked about it!"

Though they will continue to show functional design objects with New York's R & Company, the brothers have recently signed with New York art dealer Marianne Boesky, who is presenting four of their ceramic "Accretion" pieces at the fair.

The mainstream art world's growing acceptance of their work is due, in part, to the way in which the Haas Brothers have evolved in recent years. Where they once might have set out to make a table that was quirky or sculptural, "now we start with emotional content," said Simon.

“How do we make something that makes a micro-economy, or has social commentary, or makes us feel something?” Nikolai elaborated.



Installation view of “The Haas Brothers: Ferngully” at the Bass in Miami Beach. Photo by Zachary Balber courtesy the Bass, Miami Beach.

Design Stars Turned Art World Celebrities

Roughly two minutes after we entered the fair, the brothers were approached for the first of what felt like countless times during our 50-minute walkabout. There were collectors, not all of whom they knew by name—“there’s a lot of ‘nice to see you’ here,” admitted Simon—architects, art journalists, various assorted collaborators, and even artist LeeLee Kimmel (maiden name Sobieski), who hadn’t met the twins before, but had known their older brother Lucas Haas back when they were child actors together.

And this was all at the relatively unfamiliar territory of Art Basel. Over at their Design Miami stomping grounds, the brothers are even more likely to draw a crowd while strolling the aisles. “People don’t know us as much on the art side yet,” said Simon, “but when we’re over there it doesn’t stop.”

But the “art side” is starting to take notice, too. Next month, the Haas Brothers will receive the Arison Award from the National YoungArts Foundation. And of course, there is “The Haas Brothers: Ferngully,” which opened earlier this week at the Bass, with a Basel-style after party at the EDITION hotel.

It’s the siblings’ first major show at an art museum, featuring lifelike sculptures in various shapes and colors—furry creatures of Icelandic sheepskin with oversize heads and spindly bronze legs, or giant bronze toadstools embellished with colorful glass beads.

To fully appreciate the brothers’ humor, one must look no further than their artworks’ titles, which make the exhibition wall text a must-read. A trio of fiber optics illuminated beaded palm trees have been christened *John Palm Goutier*, *Pope John Palm*, and *Palm Grier*, for instance. Other pop references include Britney Spears, both in the anthropomorphized bench *She’s So Ducky* and a pimply little monster named *Zitney Spears*; the six-inch tall fur ball *Micro J. Fox*; and a mushroom sculpture dubbed *Mary Tyler Spore*.

Looking ahead, the brothers will have a gallery show with Boesky next September. After talking on and off for three years, the dealer and the designers formalized working together about a year ago.

“We feel like we’ve had a relationship [with Boesky] for a long time,” said Nikolai, who expressed reservations about jumping into a gallery relationship, with all its financial entanglements, without really getting to know the dealer first. “Would you marry someone after six months of dating? That’s kind of what it feels like!”



Collector Maria Brito stops to say hello to the Haas Brothers at Art Basel in Miami Beach. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

Don't Touch the Art—Or Maybe Do?

Rule number one at art fairs and museums? Don't touch the art. Painting and sculpture are treated with the utmost reverence, literally placed on a pedestal. It's a different game at Design Miami, where visitors are free to pick up or sit down on many of the design objects for sale.

But as the Haas Brothers continue to blur the line between art and design, the way in which viewers can engage with their work is changing.

"We always used to encourage people to touch our work, because we think that's an essential part of it. But the truth is, our work is getting so meticulous and fragile that it's not really possible anymore," said Simon. "There's a trade-off there—but we try to still make them sensuous. You *can't* touch them, but you *want* to, for sure."



Simon Haas and Nikolai Hass, known collectively as the Haas Brothers, with their ceramic accretions works at Marianne Boesky's booth at Art Basel in Miami Beach. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

At the Bass, there's a strict no-touching policy. But when Nikolai's one-year-old son visited, the brothers were delighted to see how he was drawn to the furry creatures and bulbous mushrooms, instinctively reaching out toward the work.

"That was one of the best moments of my life, actually," said Nikolai. "He was just trying to grab everything!"

"He's so cute," Simon agreed.

They were hoping to capture a sense of childlike wonder with the Seussian display, which takes its name from the 1992 animated children's film, *FernGully: The Last Rainforest*. Older Millennials likely remember it as a thrilling tale about combating the evils of pollution and logging, but it might not live up to your childhood memories.

"Don't watch it again," warned Simon. "It is not as good as you remember."

"It's made for kids," Nikolai confirmed.



A ceramic accretions work by the Haas Brothers at Marianne Boesky's booth at Art Basel in Miami Beach. Photo by Sarah Cascone.

A Lack of Labels

Today, the brothers straddle two worlds, keeping one foot planted firmly in design as the other extends further and further into the domain of contemporary art. Quite frankly, neither realm was big enough for what they do.

"We wanted more freedom," said Simon. Basel might not have wanted their tables, but they also couldn't show their paintings at Design Miami—and if you didn't know they painted, there's a reason for that.

"You never see them because we can't show them," Simon explained. "There is pushback if our pieces aren't functional enough." With Boesky, that restraint is out the window.

“We want to be able to make whatever we want—which is kind of what being an artist is about,” said Nikolai.

As a consequence, the Bass doesn't just have the exhibition proper, but also a pop-up shop, featuring a line of tableware and home decor produced in collaboration with L'OBJET, open through December 9.



The Haas Brothers, *Bathy Bates*, for sale by R & Company at Design Miami. Photo courtesy of R & Company.

And at Design Miami, R & Company is showing *Bathy Bates*, a massive hand-carved Pele de Tigre marble tub, for \$350,000. Back at the convention center, Boesky has the ceramic “Accretions,” created by lightly brushing the surface of each piece with slip paint thousands of times. As each added layer of slip dries, the bumps in the sculptures’ surface become more pronounced, becoming more and more like leaves or tentacles, as if they were alive.

Or, as Simon described it, “kind of like a cave, but made by hand.” He considers it almost a spiritual pursuit to create work in a way that mimics natural growth.

All four works on offer had already been sold during the fair’s VIP preview, for \$18,000 to \$60,000 each.

“It feels so right to see their work in this context,” Boesky told artnet News. “Living in such a gray zone is so interesting. You can’t categorize it, you can’t label it, and that’s what makes great art—something that is very easy to label is already done.”