Artspace

Q&A: The Haas Brothers on Saying 'Goodbye' to Toxic Masculinity in their Show at Marianne Boesky Gallery

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Over the last decade, Los Angeles-based twin powerhouses, The Haas Brothers, have upended the worlds of art and design with their biomorphic, hand-crafted objects. Striking, adorable, and luxuriant in equal measure, their horned, furry footstools and erotically alien lamps became go-to decor picks for the rich and tasteful, earning their studio near-instantaneous success after its founding in 2010. With a high-profile clientele ranging from from Lady Gaga to Donatella Versace, these twins became globally renowned for their off-kilter breed of bestial whimsy, and by their Art Basel debut in winter of 2018, they were beginning to take the world of fine art by storm.

On September 12th, the dynamic duo made their New York City debut at Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea with a new body of beaded sculptural objects, ranging from intimate to utterly towering in scale. The exhibition, entitled *Madonna*, draws its conceptual inspiration in equal parts from the twins' interest in nature and their commitment to collaborative material exploration. They were first introduced to beading back in 2015 by a group of women artisans in Cape Town, South Africa, a meeting that fostered the development of their overseas collective, the Haas Sisters, and birthed the Afreaks series, a suite of beaded creatures that were shown at Cooper Hewitt's Design Triennial in 2016. This focus on community is essential to the twins' artistic ethos, and the results, lush, complex, and imbued with the tenets of fair pay and labor practices, speak for themselves. They've extended their family of fabricators to the town of Lost Hills in California, where they employ dozens of migrant women in need of work, all of whom have had their hand in producing the joyously colorful works on view at Boesky. On the eve of *Madonna*'s opening, Artspace editor-in-chief, Loney Abrams, had the opportunity to sit down with the twins, Nikolai and Simon, to discuss their approach to their multi-layered practice.

In the show opening tonight at Marianne Boesky, there's a large figure that's made of both marble and beadwork. We haven't seen this combination of materials from you yet.

Nikolai: Right. When we make an art piece it doesn't usually start with an aesthetic, it usually starts with an idea or philosophy. How do you execute something emotional rather than physical? For us, the whole idea behind the show is that the work is fabricated by women that we've engaged to hopefully better their community by the work that we're doing together, while also bettering ourselves and our practice. That piece in particular is called *The Madonna*. It involves two different types of beadwork that happens in two completely different places, in South Africa, and the Lost Hills in California. And the stone is done in Portugal. We wanted to use all three communities to make one piece as a symbol of…

Simon: …Collaboration. The overarching theme of the show is our appreciation of working with women, because we do it a whole lot. This show had 50 women globally working on it full time. Financially, it's a really good job for them. And in terms of how much it effects our work, it's a really reflexive relationship. Working with them has taught us a lot and the entire direction of our studio has changed as a result of it. This show is very much about the positive change that we've made as a studio since starting to work with all of them. *The Madonna* is an emblem of that.

The Haas Brothers: Madonna, at Marianne Boesky. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © The Haas Brothers. Photo: Object Studies.

N: We wanted everyone to come together to make one thing. That just hadn't happened before.

S: We're collaborating already, so it's natural for us to collaborate. But there was a point three years ago where we started getting a little too into ourselves, and we got knocked on our asses a little bit. Then we started

working in Capetown and then the Lost Hills, and it has really shifted our perspective. We noticed our own egos and toxic masculinity, basically, and this show is about us trying to get away from that.

This show has a noticeable lack of male genitalia. Is that a reflection of this shift?

N: It's funny you bring that up because it wasn't intentional. But yeah, I think the only piece in the show that we thought of as masculine is the huge sculpture in front: the big five-ton hand. It's like a hand that's sinking into the ground. It's oversized, it's very heavy, literally and figuratively, and its all the things you'd think of as masculine, whatever that means. I think that's the point—the idea of masculinity is changing. It's sinking into the ground because it's sort of the end of toxic masculinity.

S: I was looking at Olmec ruins—those heads that are half in the ground. I think that's just beautiful, the way the jungle is taking over. That's kind of the general aesthetic idea there.

N: Or like in *The Planet of the Apes* when the Statue of Liberty is already sunken. I guess part of what we're saying is that age that toxic masculinity has run its course; its already in the past.

S: Well, it's still there.

N: But it's been stupid for a long time. Let's get rid of it.

The Haas Brothers: Madonna, at Marianne Boesky. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © The Haas Brothers. Photo: Object Studies.

If it was made from a different material it'd almost seem like the hand is reaching out, grabbing. But because it's made of stone, such a heavy material, it has a sense of sinking.

N: It feels like a tombstone. It feels destructive in a way, but it's also a cartoon hand.
S: We placed it in the front so it's the first thing you see. And then as soon as you round the corner it's this lush, very, very happy room. The walls are a nice yellow color, and all of the creatures are really cute and everything is prettier than usual. I'm thrilled that our work is in such a positive space. If I look at the shows we did three or four years ago, I see such a stark difference between very dark and very light.

Can you talk more about his shift? Because your earlier work definitely had a more perverse, sinister aspect that doesn't show up in this show. Is this shift from dark to light happening internally, emotionally? Or is it a response to what's going on around you in the world?

S: Both. We had a big fight several years ago. I've since gotten sober and Niki had a baby.

Congrats to you both!

S: Both good things. We're moving into wanting peace and happiness for ourselves, so when we make our work, we're able to lose ourselves in how happy it is. I hope whoever visits the show feels some reprieve for a second. Or if they have it in their house, they feel reprieve. That's what beauty does for me in my own home.

N: I think if you have any big fight with someone you're in a relationship with that's really important to you, you either separate or you get closer. In that moment you can understand each other better. I think that happened with us, and with our relationship to our work, and our relationship to the world. The truth is, it could have gone a very different way. I think Simon could have died. I think I could have just spun out in one direction and become a total asshole, absorbed in the work in a way that wouldn't be healthy for anybody. A lot of people who helped us find the path are women.

S: Marianne has been a really amazing relief. She's *so* cool. The women that we work with between Lost Hills and South Africa, too. And then Lynda Resnick, who brought us into Lost Hills, is the most inspiring person in the world.

N: Also Kelly Woods, Lora Reynolds… The list just goes on. Donatella Versace was the first person to start working with us. We work with powerful fucking bad-ass women. The opportunities that were given to us as white men from America have served us really well, at least in terms of things like money and the ability to progress professionally. We're at a moment now where we're just overwhelmed by the women's movement. We're not saying anything in particular about it, or that its for us to say what the next steps are. We're just here to say, fucking right on, we're so on board, and we're just here to help support. And we're also being so supported by so many women who we respect on such a high level. That's sort of what the show is really about. It's not specific, but a general vision of progress inside a space. That's what we're trying to do: create a feeling of what the future hopefully feels like. Just the feeling of it—not what it is or what it should be.

S: Lost Hills is in the middle of nowhere in California. It's a farming community of mostly seasonal workers and immigrants and it's kind of a forgotten place. There's really only farm work employment, which is generally only for men. Linda invited us there because there's a vacuum of work for women, and if they're able to work, they're going to make the community better. So she brought us there, and a couple years later now, we've made all this stuff with them. Half the show as made there, which is amazing.

Is Lost Hills the actual name of the town?

S: Yeah.

N: 'Lost' in that nobody knows where it is, or what it is, or why it's there. It's not even incorporated.

S: Linda brought a voting booth there, she repaved all the streets, and put in street lamps. There were crazy drug problems... she's completely changed the infrastructure.

N: She did all this stuff to draw awareness to the fact that there's a community of people here and no one is taking care of them, largely because it's difficult to take a proper census.
S: She was serving everyone, but the one thing that everyone needed was work, especially work from home. Because they have families, they would have to leave their kids in order to go work on the farm. So for this show we made a lot of plants that could be made from smaller parts—little tiny flowers and little strings of beads and leaves—so that they can make them at home, and then we can reassemble them in our shop. They're really designed for that. That's where I'm talking about it being a reflexive thing. We don't just have a vision for what we want it to look like, we're also thinking about how it can be made in 25 different homes. So when I see one of those plants, which take hundreds of hours of beading, I think of each of the women who made each part, because they're like our family now. There's something poetic about that to me. It makes me really happy.

You mentioned a fight you had a few years ago. I'm assuming that would be right around the time you were blowing up professionally. You guys are young, and you haven't been working together for that long, and yet your studio is booming and your work is in high demand. What has that ride been like? How has your sudden success affected your work and your relationship?

N: I've seen people get successful and some turn into assholes, and some escape it. We were turning into assholes. It was overwhelming, we were all of sudden flying around the world, always traveling and getting press. I think both of our egos went out of control. Meanwhile, I was on a very bad drug spiral, so that was not helping anything. And we both started clashing. I think it was because neither of us could really handle it, or we both just thought we were so great. If you look at our work from a few years ago, you'll see that it really reflected our emotional space, even if we weren't aware of it at the time. When I look at that I'm like, fuck, we were so dark! It's crazy. I remember in interviews we'd talk about how everyone should be on mushrooms, which was such a myopic viewpoint... it really was not healthy.

And then it all exploded. I had a really humbling experience of going to rehab. I was on crutches, mopping floors and stuff. When I got out I was like, wow, now I get that I'm not that special. We both had to do that together. Now we're on the other side, and we're working from a place of gratitude. Like, wow, I can't believe that we get to do this. It's not like we deserve it. We got really lucky. A lot of people helped us and gave us opportunities, and that's part of why we're so invested in trying to give other people opportunities, like with the Lost Hills project.

Installation view, 2017. Photo: Jeff McLane / Courtesy of UTA Artist Space via Architectural Digest.

How far back does your creative collaboration go? When you were kids would you make stuff together?

N: A lot

S: We made toys. Niki made a tree house, I helped a little bit—but not really [laughs].

N: We made stop-motion animation together. We're twins and our mom was an opera singer and a writer and our dad was a painter and a stone mason, so we were taught to do carpentry and welding from a young age, but we also played music and sang. It's hard to grow up in a household where you have all of those things available to you, and the emotional support to be creative all the time, and not wind up doing this. Honestly, this is funny, but I think I gave it my best effort to not end up in this field. And then I ended up here anyways. Now I'm very happy. But I think I wanted to struggle to go against my natural inclination.

S: Doing art in our family is like becoming a banker or doctor in most families. If I had become a real estate my parents would have been like, no [laughs].

When you work together, I know that you, Simon, play a larger role in the material application and research, and you, Niki, are more involved in the form and gesture. Can you talk more about that?

N: Simon works with the material super obsessively and he has a lot of patience to do that. One of the hallmarks of our studio is that we use a lot of materials that no one else has before. Specifically, there's this brass mosaic process that Simon created at the beginning of our practice that no one has done before in the way that these hexagonal tiles fit together. And he also created a ceramic process called ‘accretion.’ If you talk to ceramists who are very, very good at their craft and teaching at schools and stuff, they're like, holy shit, I don't know how the fuck he figured this out. And he did it within two weeks of learning ceramics. He created this system that we use in Lost Hills to allow people to work from home and make small objects that fit into large sculptures. So to say it's just material research, which is how it's been framed, isn't giving it full credit, because it's also a philosophical journey. You have to take the first step on a journey and now Simon's walked a thousand miles on that journey. It started with a hexagon and now it’s about creating processes that can follow somebody home so that they can work and make money and feed their kids.

Accretions, 2019, installation view. Image via Marianne Boesky Gallery.

S: I like giving myself constraints that are ridiculously hard, and then I will spend years and years working on figuring it out. I've spent the last five years beading all the time, and writing out an operating system for it. The beads make emergent shapes, and all the plants are made using this system. We work a lot in places where Spanish or Xhosa are the languages. I've had to write it in a way that is very easy to communicate. So I really get off on those kinds of constraints.

N: So he's the material guy, but on a deeper sense, he's also the philosophy guy. Me, I'm just obsessed with people, I'm obsessed with cracking jokes. I'm definitely the less mature brother in that way. I'm the one that puts dicks on stuff.

S: I cringe when I see those... [Laughs.]

N: I never wanted to be an artist. I never thought it was going to happen. Even now the term makes me a little uncomfortable because it seems like there so much built up around it. I do also understand the importance and responsibility of haven been given this tremendous platform to try to make some social change. If we take it seriously enough and work hard enough we can do things that matter. But I guess the dicks on things or the stupid jokes are my way of breaking down the barriers to make the work feel a little bit more available to everybody. I want a kid that's three years old to like our work, and I want an adult whose 98 who's looked at art their entire life to be able o understand the conceptual value of it at the same time. I want it to be democratic. I'm a sculptural humorist. I've been sculpting since I was eight years old, so it's very natural for me.

S: He's really good at character and gesture. When he's sculpting stuff he's emoting into it a lot. That emotion comes through. That's where the funnyness and joy comes from. My stuff on its own would look like a materials sample, which isn't that interesting.

N: Which is why we need the collaboration. If it's just Simon, it's just a material sample. If it's just me, it's just a fart joke. Somewhere in between you can create relatability and philosophy. I understand my function. I'm not going to have an art conversation, I'm just going to be like, that sculpture is my friend, it's funny. I'm not thinking about how the director of Pace gallery is going to react to the sculpture on a heady level.

S: I think about that [laughts.] We shift each other's points of view.

Something that comes up a lot in conversations around your work is the art-versus-design question. Personally, I feel like it's a moot point in terms of what the work itself is. It just is what it is. But in terms of the industry and the business-side of the conversation, there are key differences between the industry of design and industry of art. Can you talk about that? What are the considerations you make when exhibiting in an art gallery like Marianne Boesky versus a design gallery like R & Company? Or what are the financial considerations surrounding editions versus one-of-a-kind unique works?

S: We've been granted freedom by being with Boesky, because there's more freedom in the art world. There was a point when we were showing things at Design Miami and were almost kicked out of the fair. We had to name them toys in order for them to stay in the fair. It's kind of interesting that all it took was changing the description. Not having to do that anymore is really nice. But we like both art and design, and they're kind of the same thing. I like to talk about how baskets and pottery were essential to our evolution and they've been expressive from the very start. Design is essentially more important to our survival. But beauty itself is functional because it prevents us from... If I have something pretty in my house it keeps me from spinning out. I can look at it and feel happy. That's a function to me, a life function. I don't think it's just about function, and I don't think it's just about beauty.

N: Jerry Saltz had a good quote at the Met Gala last year: "All art is design but not all design is art." Rather than argue over whether something is art or design, the more important question is, why are people so invested in what art means and what design means? It's all subjective. It's not a tired conversation for us, and we've been getting that question so much because we're so squarely in the middle of it. We use it to our advantage, actually. We pushed it as hard as we could so we could get attention for our studio and get it going. At some point you realize the art world has a lot more privilege in terms of how much money is being pumped into it and how big the market it, and you have a much easier time finding someone to support what you're working. But design is fucking unbelievable too.

S: People operate using categories; it's human instinct. I don't fault anybody for wanting to put things into a bucket. But if you think in such a polar way, you ignore so much stuff. If you think Earth is the North Pole or the South Pole, you're missing everyone else.

N: Because it's flat! Just kidding.

S: [Laughs]. The gray zone is richer and more exciting than anything else. Binaries are stupid. [Laughs]. Also for anything to be an opposite, they actually have to have something in common. A computer and a horse aren't opposites because they don't have anything in common.

All of the work in this show is unique. Are you going to continue to make editions?

N: Usually when we do an edition it's a collaborative effort or we use the edition to support something that feels more important to us than the value of our art market. In this case, it's because we want to keep Lost Hills working. We don't want to make so much artwork that it collapses because that doesn't serve a function either. So we figured we'd create an edition to keep that rolling.

S: It's hard to keep 25 people employed full time.

Are you guys nervous about the preview tonight? How do you usually feel before an opening?

S: We get depressed when we finish a show.

N: And I still don't know why.

S: Well, because we like actively working on it.

N: Yeah. Also I feel like we don't deserve it or something or... I don't know, I'm still figuring it out emotionally. Now it's a bit different because I have a kid and my wife so I'm really motivated to be a really good businessperson. I know the show will go well so it makes me happy that my family and the studio will be taken care of. But... it's still depressing some how.
S: But I don't think we get so nervous as much anymore. I do get nervous about talking to as many people as we're going to be talking to because that makes me really tired. I like it, but it's hard.

N: We're nervous that our mom is going to sing opera at the opening.

S: We heard her in the hotel last night.

That's adorable. I hope that happens.

N: Yeah, I'm not actually nervous about that. It's really cute, and it will probably happen. She raised performers for sure. It's sort of perfect. You see our lineage pretty clearly. Like, oh, that's why they need to be the center of attention, they're mom taught them how to do that.

S: I'm excited about this show. It's my favorite show yet.

N: And I feel like we said what we wanted to say. I've walked into a space we've created before and thought, wow, that was a really complicated subject to tackle and we were too ambitious with the specificity of the message. It was too hard to absorb. With this show, you walk in, and the message isn't specific, but the general message is really clear: We're big fans of women, we're really excited about the way the world is moving in certain ways, and that's evident inside of the work. We're there for the communities that we want to be there for. That's it. That's all we focused on doing. And I think we nailed it.