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'Mary Tyler Spore' (2015) © Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery

THE HAAS BROTHERS — TWINS BRING THEIR FANTASTICAL BESTIARY TO LIFE

By Ariella Budick

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If, on walking into the Haas Brothers' mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Arts and Design, you feel like you've entered the mind of a bizarrely accomplished child — or two — then you've grasped the Peter Pan-like spirit of their sculpture. The fraternal twins Simon and Nikolai Haas grew up in Austin, Texas, in a household permeated by a mixture of stone dust and pixie dust, and they have kept both the work and the whimsy going into their forties. The catalogue quotes a friend who described their studio as "a vibrant, eclectic fusion of Andy Warhol's Factory, Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, and the Laugh Factory." You have to be in the mood for that particular concoction, because otherwise, unlike the Haas brothers, it gets old fast.

Organised by the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan and curated by Laura Mott, the exhibition is crammed with googly eyes, woolly teeth, big-footed furniture and blobby beings, like a picture book struck into three dimensions by a sorcerer's wand. This fantastical bestiary flaunts a range of ancestors: surrealist creatures, rubber chickens, anime monsters, Mexican papier-mâché dragons, animatronic robots, bunraku puppets, Maurice Sendak's wild things, taxidermy gone wrong and whatever pop-culture flotsam has tumbled through the artists' consciousness.

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The result of this mash-up is a deluxe kind of silliness, heightened by punny titles. “Shelly Duvall” (2023) consists of a blown-glass snail with perky breasts and an exoskeleton sculpted from pale grey marble. A vitreous trail of slime looks as delicate as a Venetian champagne flute.



‘Bruce Willis Beyoncé’ (2016) © Joe Kramm/R & Company & ‘Shelly Duvall’ (2023) © Colin Doyle/courtesy of Lora Reynolds Gallery

All that virtuosity serves an ostensibly serious purpose: “By simplifying some forms and enhancing others, adding humour, and playing with gestures, we have found that it is possible to imbue an inanimate object with not only a feeling of sentience but with a distinct personality,” the brothers write in a joint catalogue essay that makes them sound like latter-day Dr Frankensteins

Less ambitiously, they also delight in the artist’s licence to be rude. “She’s So Ducky” (2018), a walnut bench upholstered in concert-hall red velvet, sticks out a tongue and rolls its globular eyes. “King Dong”, a humanoid yeti with tusks, lounges in beast-spreading pose, airing his brass genitals.

Much of the pleasure of the experience would be tactile, if only you could touch anything. Goofy forms come in an abundance of textures and materials, their provenance as carefully noted as ingredients on a farm-to-table menu. The coarse wool of Icelandic sheepskin, the silky curls of Gotland sheepskin, the seductive softness of Mongolian long-pile fur, Finnish reindeer hide, pele de tigre marble, black walnut, ebony, glow-in-the-dark blown glass — all of it makes the fingers tremble. Hence the profusion of “do not touch” signs; this fruit is extra-forbidden. ‘

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King Dong' (2016) © Joe Kramm/courtesy of R & Company

What heightens the frustration is that these objects are the product of so many hands. Despite their playfulness, the brothers are big believers in the kind of repetitive tasks that make eyes sting, fingers stiffen and minds go numb. The labour doesn't have to be theirs. For the big blue fungus called "Mary Tyler Spore" (2015), they collaborated with the South African bead-art collective Monkeybiz — which is another way of saying they got a bunch of women to do the fussiest work.

But the bros put in plenty of their own sweat, too. With the doggedness of feather pluckers on industrial chicken farms, they produce "Accretions", porcelain vessels with exteriors encrusted with numberless coats of slip. For non-ceramicists, slip is a dilute solution of water and clay that can be brushed or dribbled on to the surface of pottery as a raised decoration. The Haases treat the stuff like the sedimentary deposits that form stalactites in caves, building it up, drip by drop, until it coats the piece in nodules. The process yields pieces like "Bruce Willis Beyoncé" (2016), a porcupine-like sphere with a puckered mouth, or "Father Accretion — the Peacock" (2015), a tufted porcelain pom-pom with a long and shiny brass appendage.

Simon and Nikolai Haas were raised on art and craft. Their grandfather Siegfried sculpted in bronze, their father Berthold in stone. Their mother, Emily Tracy, wrote for Seinfeld and was an opera singer to boot; their older brother Lukas has been acting professionally since before he could ride a tricycle. An atmosphere of frenetic creativity wafts through the galleries; this hippie family must have had a puritanical aversion to idle hands, and the kids have spent 15 years determinedly cranking out joy.

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'She's So Ducky' (2018) © Lee Thompson/courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY, and Aspen



The Haas Brothers, fraternal twins Nikolai (left) and Simon © Ian Flanigan

Their objects subvert the purposes they suggest: chairs are precarious, vases unfillable, couches booby-trapped with horns. At the same time, they rarely stray far from the implication of usefulness — they look like you could sleep with, drink from, slump on, or light a room with them. That ambiguity is part of the trickster's toolbox. When they debuted a raunchy walk-in installation called "Sex Room" at the Miami Design Show in 2014, the

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offended organisers threatened to evict it, on the pretext that it qualified as art but not usable design. The brothers countered by relabelling paintings as frames — handiwork that happened to have pictures in them.

The Haases have an expansive view of function. In their philosophy, aestheticising a threat serves to neutralise it, or at least make it tolerable. A teddy bear is a talisman against the cruel wilderness. A painting of a night sky repackages the ghastly indifference of the universe into something that makes us smile. Beauty, Simon writes in the catalogue, “is a veil that hints at but protects us from the maddening difficulties of the origin of things; it is a bridge between comfort and horror”. Each of their objects is a machine for distraction.

Confronted with this array of wriggly shapes in shades of fuchsia, lemon and sparkly blue, the child that still crouches within me is simultaneously tickled and stymied. There’s something wonderful about seeing imaginary beings so richly realised — and something disheartening about the intellectual bubble wrap in which the artists and curators have swaddled them. “Uncanny Valley,” the show’s title and a key Haas concept, comes from Freud, and Simon keeps invoking the writings of the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter. But that’s a lot of abstract philosophical cargo for such adorable sculptures. As all those hands-off injunctions in the museum imply, the Haas twins make fragile, lightweight work; load it down with too much meaning, and it’s apt to crumble.

To August 16, madmuseum.org