

Artspace



THE HAAS BROTHERS – Biggy Stardust (2020)

The Haas Brothers on Unquestioning Love

By: Artspace Editors
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The Haas Brothers create the kind of otherworldly, anthropomorphic sculptures which, despite being fiendishly freaky, seem blissfully unconnected to the harder, earthier problems we mortals all experience. Fashioned from bronze, faux fur, porcelain, as well as highly technical resins and polyurethane, these beasts bring to mind early Jim Henson works, late psychedelia, as well as perhaps just a frisson of mid-century, pre-HIV free love.

The brothers didn't live through these periods themselves. Twins Nikolai and Simon Haas were born in 1984, and so came of age at a time when the AIDS crisis was passing in the West; yet they still well understand the long-term threats of the HIV virus and its attendant stigma.

As they explain in this interview, even as boys, they understood the specter the disease cast a shadow over their lives. Now, as hugely successful adults, with works in the permanent collections of the RISD Museum in Providence, RI, the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, NY, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, NY, the brothers have also come to understand that, with such good fortune, comes the obligation to share a little artistic benison with very worthy causes.

The Haas Brothers are among the artists contributing to Unquestioning Love, a high-profile sale featuring a truly incredible selection of contemporary art, at Christie's next week to benefit the New York City AIDS Memorial.

Ahead of the sale, which takes place on 9 and 12 November, at Christie's in New York, Nikolai Haas shares his thoughts on the cause, and the work they are offering for auction.

Tell us about the artwork you donated? The Beasts series is a set of work that represents freedom, self-expression, individuality and identity. Each beast is a portrait of the personality (rather than the appearance) of someone we love... sometimes it's many people mixed together in one work. It's the last of the series... we won't make beasts any longer, so there's a melancholic release in this work. A moving on and nostalgia tied to it, even though we completed it eight months ago; we started it pre-Covid. This period that we built this sculpture straddles a time before and a time after. I guess it's this combination of the admiration of loved ones and the sense of moving on from something you love that felt appropriate for this auction, coupled with the fact that it was built in its own period of pandemic.

Do you have a personal experience or memory associated with the AIDS epidemic? Luckily no one I know personally has died from AIDS. I have friends that live with it today. I guess my greatest connection to it is through my twin brother Simon. Simon and I grew up in Texas and the social stigma attached to him being gay and its association with AIDS was real and palpable. There are so many reasons being gay in Texas in the 80s and 90s must have been so difficult for Simon, and I watched him go through it. AIDS gave some sort of strange justification in bigotry towards gay people in Texas during our childhood. The year after I left home a good high-school friend's mother started a rumor that I was gay and that I had AIDS. It was strange and the negative power was real - and gay in the minds of a stubborn old Texan meant dirty and sick. We were born in 1984 so our experience is really through echoes. Death is awful, and it's sad to see people witness death and respond with such lack of compassion. I guess my biggest memory is the strange and awful negative effect AIDS had socially, and it's something we're all still wrangling with today.

What motivates you to donate your art to a charitable endeavor such as this? Artists that sell in our realm are unbelievably privileged and lucky. Without frequent interaction with this type of endeavor we'd be fakes. It's an artist's job to contribute positively to the world, and this gives us the opportunity to prove it.

Have you visited the AIDS memorial? If so, what effect did it have on you? I haven't but I plan on it. It represents something I really care about.

The memorial features a plaza engraved with sections from Walt Whitman's Song of Myself. Is there a poem, song or work of art that brings to mind the crisis for you? This performance by Klaus Nomi, dying of AIDS, singing about death.

Many artists died from AIDS. Is there one in particular whose passing you regret from an artistic standpoint - do you ever wonder how their work might have developed? Freddy Mercury and Keith Haring. Two major heroes of mine and absolutely I'm curious what they would have done. Their effect was positive. More time for them would have meant more movement towards good for all of us.