the Grand Tourist

Simon and Nikolai Haas. Photo: Mason Poole

THE HAAS BROTHERS: ENFANTS TERRIBLES NO MORE

BY THE GRAND TOURIST
September 20, 2023

In the world of collectible design, Nikolai and Simon Haas have forged their own path to success by creating everything from sofas with monstrous feet and alien-looking sculptures to adorable porcelain tea sets.

Nikolai Haas (NH): One thing about growing up with the type of family that we did that's so focused on artistic expression is that you completely disregard money, and there's a beauty to that and there's also some difficulty with it, but something that we'll never do is just do something for the money. If it looks like a money grab, I promise you it isn't because collaborations don't make us the majority of our money. It's about social interaction for us.

Dan Rubinstein (DR): *Hi, I'm Dan Rubinstein, and this is The Grand Tourist. I've been a design journalist for nearly 20 years, and this is my personalized guided tour through the worlds of fashion, art, architecture, food, and travel, all the elements of a well-lived life.*

Over the course of my career, the very definition of design and what makes a designer has gone through so many changes. One of which is the emergence of so-called collectible design and the rise of new American talents that infused youth culture, color, and traditional craft to create wildly imaginative works, and these new upstarts often came from outside New York, especially L.A., once considered a wasteland for good design, not to mention good taste.

One such upstart wasn't a single name, but a duo: Nikolai and Simon Haas, more affectionately known to many simply as the Haas Brothers. At first, I knew them as the younger brothers of actor Lucas Haas, whose films as a child actor in the 1980s are seared into my Gen X memory. Solar Babies, anyone?

While the duo fell into design by accident, quite literally (more on that later), they became known for their ceramics, which had a slightly organic and fantastical element to them. Imagine a sea creature yanked from an alien ocean. I think actress Laura Dern said it best in an article in Interview magazine about their, quote, unquote, "manifestly erotic work." The twins seem to be playing in a plastic world of pure imagination, unfettered by too much superego or interpretation. Unlike Magritte's pipe, say, that so studiously was not a pipe, the Haas' biomorphic chairs and couches, often upholstered in furs that give them the appearance of odd taxidermy, are indeed heavily laden with sexual potency, but they are also whimsical delights that look like they might be extras in a stage production of Where the Wild Things Are," end quote.

From there, things only got, as Alice in Wonderland might say, curiouser and curiouser. As time went on, their works got bigger and bigger and also drifted more into the sculptural realm. The boys had a major solo show at the Bass Museum in Miami in 2018, cementing their shared It Boy status in the design world.

Today, they're planning on numerous museum shows for the years ahead, represented by Marianne Boesky Gallery. I caught up with Simon and Nikolai from their studios in Los Angeles to talk about how their practice has survived, everything from fatherhood to rehab, how Toby McGuire is partially responsible for their careers in the first place, and why they've decided to stay in LA and build a brand new 16,000 square foot studio.

DR: I guess I want to start from the beginning. I have interviewed you guys before. I've met you before. I've seen your work since, I think, almost the beginning, but I've never really had the chance to talk to you about your upbringing. Your dad was a sculptor, and I believe your mom was a singer. She was an opera singer.

NH: We grew up in a really creative household. Our mom was an opera singer. She was a Texan, and she moved to Berlin for opera and she was singing in the Berlin Opera. Our dad was a painting student at the university in Berlin, and our dad's nude model for one of his classes became a friend of his and was like, "Oh, you would love this woman, Emily." The nude model also happened to be an opera singer. So, they met in Berlin through this mutual friend. So already, it was a wild story the way that they met. So, our family started in Los Angeles. Our older brother's almost nine years older than us.

Simon Haas (SH): He's an actor. Our dad's father is a sculptor, was a sculptor. So, it was very steeped in that. Our household as kids, our dad was carving stone and Lucas was acting and our mom was singing and she was a screenwriter, was her actual main career. So, it was just art only.

NH: Really, really, it really was very, very focused on being creative. There was so much room for that. I think the older we get, we realize how lucky we are that we had that upbringing because it became such a fluent language for us, I think. There's a piano in the house. We all played music. There were instruments everywhere. There was any type of art supply you could possibly want like books. Our mom was writing scripts. She was writing for Seinfeld and The Cosby Show.

DR: So, she did TV. I thought she was more film.

NH: Yeah, and did TV movies and stuff like that. Our dad had this construction business, was doing stone countertops but also carved fireplaces and sconces. We worked for him from a very young age. He actually had a furniture company, too, Out There Furniture, for a while. So, we were doing construction from the time we were…I mean legitimately doing construction like showing up for work over summers when we were 11 or 12 years old because if you're there with your dad sanding stuff, just doing simple things, but really, it's super in our blood and not just the creative aspect of it, the blue collar work aspect of it too was always joined with it. It wasn't ever really separated. It was like, "Oh, you want to make this? This is how you do it yourself. You don't ask someone else to help. You got it," basically, which was cool. It was a really fun way to grow up.

DR: I read somewhere that you guys considered your home life that your parents created this sort of idyllic, almost sheltered in a good way, environment for you guys. Do you think that that upbringing really impacted actually the work that you're making today in a sense?

NH: Well, yeah, sheltered in some ways and not in others. You know what I mean? A really nice, yeah, it was really nice. I wouldn't trade our upbringing for anything. I loved it. It was pretty awesome and it definitely shaped the way we make our work. I think that the level of fantasy that we dive into is a bit escapist in a way. I feel really safe inside of our fantasy. I think that's our main drive and motivation. I don't mean we're in any danger at any moment. That's not what I'm saying. I just mean we have the support and structure inside of our fantasies to explore and express anything that we want to explore and express.

SH: Also, growing up in Austin, I'd say if you can see any direct influence from childhood, it's more having grown up in Austin and absorbing the stoner aesthetic from there. There was a festival called Eeyore's Birthday that was the weird …I don't even know what it was. It was a deadhead convention or something on a creek. Then there's the original Whole Foods was there and it had all these big fruits, big sculpture fruits and vegetables and chickens on top, and there was a big glowing red eye. Does it have red eyes, the Manja dinosaur?

NH: Yeah, it had glowing red eyes.

SH: The Manja pizza had this big dinosaur on top of it, so it was very…There were a lot of sculptures, actually, all over the place, but just for businesses and a whole lot of head shops. It was a very loose place to live and just full of bizarre artwork. So, that definitely fully funneled into our work, and then a Daniel Johnston mural that was there that says, "Hi, how are you?"

DR: What about the home? Were your parents conservative, or what was their taste like?

NH: Oh, my God, no, not even a little bit.

SH: They were not conservative.

DR: I guess in taste. I don't mean politically.

NH: Oh, no, not in that way either. Our mom, it was like Ariel from "Under the Sea." It was like her cave, basically. It was like shells glued everywhere. Simon and I, again, we learned construction so young. It was like the whole family once a year would repaint every single room in the house. We would rearrange our mom's crazy, amazing collections. I remember she was collecting butterfly wing trays from the 1920s, and there'd be entire walls of the house that are just like butterfly wing trays, which at the time it's funny because they were pretty, nobody cared or wanted them. She would take us to antique fairs and collect all kinds of weird shit. Now, they're hard to find, but yeah, I remember being at a Damien Hirst show at White Cube and seeing these huge butterfly wing things. I was like, "This just feels like our wall as kids."

The thing is, in Austin, it's not like a city that's as known for its, I don't know, design isn't, its export and art isn't really its export, hasn't been. It was always like music or startups, Whole Foods, not Airbnb, but VRBO and tech stuff. IBM had a big center there and Dell and all that stuff. So art, I think it was innocent and beautiful because art design expression in that realm, aesthetics was always really innocent. It was a practice as a way to engage with people culturally.

The sign on the head shop to get people to come in and be a part of a community, our mom basically creating a Damien Hirst painting on the wall, but just because she wanted to have people over and be social and have dinners and keep people around. It was very like there wasn't really a need to impress or a try to flex. It was just intrinsic to the culture and the way people wanted to be, and they used art in a way that felt really innocent and beautiful and sweet. We felt really, I don't know, it was just a really nice way to grow up, and our parents fell straight into it. They were like hippies in purple Austin in a red state, and it was cool.

DR: Simon, I guess I'm wondering, I have some friends and family friends that have had twins, and they raise kids. When they raise the kids, they have to try to remember that this is the day you have to take one out to go to the movies, and then the other one does something else and play sports to separate them. Did your parents try to…Were they conscious of this or did you fully how were you guys as twins?

SH: I don't know if they were conscious of that, necessarily, but Nikki and I definitely chose our own things that we would do. I was working at a restaurant and Nikki was on a hockey team very early on. When did I start cooking? When I was 15?

NH: No, younger. You were working at that cooking school when you were 12 or 13 years old, and then later you did—

DR: What did you cook?

SH: All kinds of stuff, mostly French. I worked at this place called Jeffreys. It's one of the nicer restaurants there at the time. It was George Bush's favorite restaurant.

NH: No, it was like Simon was cooking for George Bush, and I was his busboy when he was governor. By the way—

SH: I catered for the Bush family.

NH: The nicest guy, so sweet.

DR: Really?

NH: Yeah, so funny and so fun, and made a real point of talking to the busboy. You know what I'm saying? By the way, anyone you talk to that's spent time with him will say that he was great.

SH: Let's not defend George Bush.

NH: I'm not defending, I'm just saying as a person in a dining room, he was great. He was fun to—

DR: Wait, Senior or Junior?

SH: Junior.

NH: Junior.

DR: Oh, okay, okay. Well, you can fault him for many things, but I think being a honky dory folksy is…. Everyone can say that.

SH: But Nikki and I just naturally did different things. I was in ballet, he was in hockey, he was playing the saxophone, I was learning harp. I was the gayest kid in the world and Nikki was not.

DR: From French cooking to harpist. How do you call it? Harpy? I don't know.

SH: Yeah, I don't know.

DR: I don't know, but yeah, that's pretty gay.

NH: Then, the older we get, Simon's drives a Jeep and he's all buff and lifting weights, and I've gotten gayer by the minute the older we get.

DR: At one point, Simon, you decided to go to RISD. Is that true?

SH: Yeah.

DR: So how did you decide? What about RISD appeal to you?

SH: I had an amazing art teacher. What was her name?

NH: Ms. Graham.

SH: Ms. Graham, who…I wanted to be a painter, but she really encouraged and helped me get into RISD, and then I got in. It was the only school I got into. I got rejected from everywhere else. So it was my only choice, but it was the best choice. I deferred for a year, moved to LA, and I don't know what I did in LA, but then I went to school after that.

DR: What was your major at RISD?

SH: I started in architecture and then I dropped out and then I went back for painting, and then I dropped out again.

DR: All right. Nikki, I heard you were in a band.

"Microslimers" (2023) by The Haas Brothers. Photo: Tim Hans

NH: Yeah, I went to New York. I was modeling when I was 18 for six months. I just did that to move there. Then this guy, Vincent Gallo, was friends with our older brother, and so I started playing music for him. Eventually, Simon also did. We went on tour, we moved to LA, and then Simon dropped out of RISD, and Simon was working at Elf, which is a vegetarian restaurant in Echo Park. At the time, it was a scene. It was like everyone there was doing shit. It was just cool. It was one of those moments where you look back and go, "Oh, there's 15 creatives that have all gone on and become stuff from that scene," which is cool.

Simon was working in this restaurant. I was working for Leonardo DiCaprio, who's a friend of our older brother also. Then, he and Toby McGuire, and then Lucas, our brother, and this other guy who's a good friend of theirs too, all really gave us encouragement to move off and start doing our own thing.

Toby gave us our first big job because we'd always been doing construction. I made the decision to move off on my own. I wanted to have Simon do it with me. So, I asked him to do this big job with me. Then just by some stroke of luck, it ended up getting featured in Wallpaper. I don't even really remember how or why because—

DR: Because it was a Johnston Marklee project.

NH: Duh, obviously because of them. They're phenomenally talented. So it ended up, and we got to design some furniture because it was like our friend had asked us to do it. We were broke, but we used the budget to rent a studio. Simon moved in, too, he was living in the back. It was pretty rough for a second, but when you're 23, it's fun. It was cool.

DR: I heard that you guys were transporting a Gio Ponti bed that fell off the top of your car on a highway—

NH: Yeah, that's a good story.

DR: And that Toby McGuire had something to do with it. So I was like, how did something fall off the…What happened to the Gio Ponti bed?

SH: Toby's part in that was that he was building a studio and we were advising or he, as a favor, let us advise, I guess. We developed a relationship with Johnston Marklee because—

NH: Well, we ended up building the studio. We were the builders.

SH: Right, and then we designed some furniture for the space. Since we had been working with Johnston Marklee and they saw that we were pretty handy, they had the Gio Ponti bed and they were like, "Can you repair this for us?" So it was a really simple…I don't remember what it was. It was like a slat.

NH: No, there was a threaded bolt that was custom-made, whatever, in Italy in the '60s, and so it needed to be retreaded and then reset and then put back into the frame. It was a mix of some strange half-laminate, half-solid situation. So, we needed to reset it, put it back in. So, we did all that. It took, I don't know what, a couple hours and they'd given us this huge amount of work. So, we're on the freeway and, again, I'm just reiterating, we were fucking broke. You know what I'm saying? So, it was like I had this old, shitty Forerunner that wasn't the right size to be carrying a Gio Ponti bed. We thought—

SH: We didn't have tie straps or anything.

NH: Well, no. We tried to tie it down properly, but we're on the 110 getting onto the 10 freeway, which is a crazy intersection. The headboard is going like this, wiggling in the wind, and we're like, 'Oh, shit." So, I started to slow down. It just goes like a sail and flips into the air and lands and skids, and we're like, "Okay. It landed on the back. Everything's fine," and then all of a sudden it's like…and this big 16-wheeler just drives right over. It was…into a billion pieces and we were trying to pick them all up like, "We could do something about it."

SH: We were on the side of the road like, "No, no," and getting all the pieces and reaching out.

NH: So, we call Sharon and Mark and it's like they're, first of all, amazing. They're so talented and also so cool. Sharon, we go into their office, she comes in and she rips us a new one and rightfully so, we screwed up royally. Then Mark comes in and he's all like, "Hey, guys," super-easygoing about the whole thing, and he's basically like, "I know you guys destroyed this priceless bed that can never be replaced and it's not just bad for us, it's bad for the world," but he's like, "Where I come from," because he's Chinese, he's like, "the word for disaster, depending on the inflection also means opportunity." So, he's like, "Why don't you guys build us two pieces of furniture?"

It was in a Frank Lloyd Wright pseudo designed house that they had redesigned. It was a super interesting space. So, we made two. Those were our first art furniture pieces that we made for Sharon and Mark, and it's still in that same house now. So, this huge disaster for us with really these phenomenally talented architects that had hired us with a lot of responsibility, and honestly, we didn't deserve the credit to be able to take this type of job, gave us our first big push, which is really cool. So, it ended up being fine.

DR: What were the pieces like, Simon?

SH: Oh, that we made? They were teardrop shaped. There was a desk that was a teardrop, and then there was a low coffee table that was a teardrop, but extruded and twisted a little. They're actually really pretty. They don't look like our work, but they were coated with this black resin that we then used a grinder on to create an almost a wood

texture, but not really. So, they were cool because they pointed to us using materials in a way and trying to make something where you can't quite tell what it is. Then also, there was an indoor fountain and we found a rock at the LA River and cast it over and over and over and filled the fountain with identical rocks that I think was pretty cool, but yeah, you would not necessarily know that it was ours if you saw it.

DR: When it comes time to go from Nikki and Simon to the Haas bothers and being known as such with, I believe, some of the earlier collections were ceramics. Was that the first official—

SH: It was. Yeah, that and then this hex tile process, these brass, like a brass inlay process I think were some of our first ones.

DR: What were those conversations? How did you decide upon those early anthropomorphic, slightly anthropomorphic ceramics and how did that …Because ceramics is its own, obviously, its own discipline where you need to go to a kiln and it's its own thing. How did that start?

NH: I'm going to answer for Simon because he's going to be modest about it, but the thing is Simon entered into a…Ceramics is really complicated. It's really hard to get into it. There's a huge learning curve. Simon entered into it and he created this process called accretion, which is layering with a brush liquid clay called slip over itself over and over and over again until you get this…That's what accretion is. It's just like sediment laying on top of itself till you get this texture. It's one of the few processes in ceramics that's considered new. He, just within a week of futzing with it, was like, "Oh, here's this new thing that's never been introduced to ceramics," which is pretty rad. It was, I think, just a preview of Simon's material ingenuity, which is just to think of it in a completely different way. I think the way his mind absorbs material is more like a physicist and less like a practical applicator.

So, I was a little bit more engaged in construction than Simon was. So, for me, it was all very practical and like, "This is the way it's always been made." Simon has always been like, "Well, who cares if it's always been made that way? I have an idea and I'm going to figure it out, and no one can really tell me not to do it." So, he may spend a year and a half before he ends up with a product that's even usable, but then you get something where no one has ever done it before because they're not tenacious enough or dumb enough or whatever you want to call it, to spend that much time.

Luckily, inside of our market and the type of work that we make, we're allowed that space to discover whatever we want to discover and spend the type of time we need to get there. So Simon is one of the most tenacious material development people I've ever met in my life. So that's—

SH: Oh, thanks.

NH: It's true, but that's how we got first with ceramic, really.

SH: At the time, because we had zero money and I was still working at Elf, that restaurant when we had first started and I would come home to the studio and I was sleeping in the wood shop. Since I was there late at night, I just had materials around. So, I would test stuff out because I didn't have a TV or anything. So, I would just do materials tests. So, that's where accretion came out of that. I think I was drunk at 3:00 in the morning, just brushing.

DR: As you do.

SH: That was my life.

NH: Isn't everyone up at 3:00 drunk brushing clay?

DR: Brushing clay, well, I think we found the other gayest thing.

"Breast Friend" by The Haas Brothers. Photo: Tim Hans

DR: Fast-forwarding to today, what is your studio setup like? If you just meet someone right off the street and they're like, "How do you work and what is your studio like today," how do you describe it?

NH: Well, we have the ability to work in whatever material we're excited to work in. That's really the way we like to keep it set up. Currently, we're building our dream studio. We're about six months out from moving in. So, we're in a temporary spot that's not as developed. So, we have the materials we need at this moment, but when we're set up properly, which we will be again in six months or so, we have the ability to do ceramics or wax work or welding or stone or wood or fur or whatever. The list goes on and on, mold making, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, tons of stuff, painting, sketching. So, really, our practice isn't focused on one material, it's focused on the broad idea of being able to come up with something from your mind and practically apply it in our studio with no inhibiting our expression between conceptual inception and application.

So, we outsource, of course, some things like bronze casting, for instance because you need a major facility to be able to do the type of bronze casting we need to do, but we'll build the wax entirely in studio without a mold, for instance. So, there's never a mold for a lot of our pieces, and they'll be built completely by hand and we'll get the bronze back after it's been cast. So, really, the moment that it goes out of our hands is it's just a very technical aspect of it.

So, our studio is really built so that we can express from start to finish inside of our studio. So, it's really diverse. Our new studio is 16,000 square feet. It's pretty big. There's a lot of room for exhibition because we like to have a home when we're making work. We like to show people what we're up to. We like to have space, community space. We like to bring people into our world. So the bigger—

SH: We like having our work all around us, which we haven't been able to do in our temporary space, but it's nice to see all of it and get inspired by our own sculptures from years and years ago.

DR: Where's the new space, or where will the new space be?

SH: North Hollywood.

DR: What is it like working…because I think there was a phase where so many new designers were coming from LA? It was the post-recession boom out in LA. Now, here we are the post-pandemic moment. Why stay in LA?

SH: That's a great question. Because Nikki has a family here and because we bought a studio. Otherwise, I actually want to move back to Texas, but yeah, I think it would be…We're really established here, and we do love it and we're really inspired by it. It's a fantasy place. The film industry lends itself to creating all sorts of weird materials or just there's a resin place down the street that has casts of a penguin—

NH: Arnold Schwarzenegger's face.

SH: And Arnold Schwarzenegger. There's just all sorts of weird set and prop places that are good for manufacturing what we make. It's just wide open. I think now that we're in North Hollywood, which feels more hometowny than the rest of LA, it's like a really nice feeling to be working here.

NH: We're right down the street from Circus Liquor, which I don't know if you remember from Clueless. There's a scene where Alicia Silverstone gets stranded, someone robs her, and she's got…There's this huge neon sign behind her of a clown. So, that's right down the street. That's Circus Liquor. So, that's our claim to fame. If you just take that, that it's just a liquor store, but in LA they're going to make some huge crazy sign, it's going to feel almost like a Las Vegas situation, it ends up in a movie. The value of being in a place like this is that LA, really, California is so good at inventing industry and taking imagination and making it real and making it something you can touch and feel and be a part of.

The way that we work so organically fits that belief in manifesting fantasy that I think it just fits our studio practice and it's absolutely a part of the DNA of the way that we work. I think there's some…Now, luckily, we own property and stuff now, but LA has a lot of problems. It's a bummer that…I don't know. One of the reasons we're talking about opening a sub studio in Austin is that we pay our employees really well and they can't afford to buy houses because a starter home is 1.2 million. You know what I mean? So, you go—

DR: How many people do you have working for you at the moment?

NH: There's the two of us and then four others. So it's like, "That's fucked up." You know what I mean? It's just like, "Okay. We can just sort of lean into this city life thing, but we want our employees to have…They deserve to have good lives and quality of life," and we need to…I think, practically, you need to be in LA, you need to be in the city so you can engage and be a part of what's going on and the art and everything that's happening here like Frieze gaining momentum, David Zwirner opening here, Hauser & Wirth having been here for a long time, the client base, the way people look at LA now compared to how they used to, it's a pretty big deal, but along with that comes this wave of collectors and people that can afford to do that, but they also destroy your city.

So, is it as exciting as it was 10 years ago? Absolutely not. No, it's not, but it's, whatever. We lived in Williamsburg in 2003, and it's like we all know what happened, right? It's not exciting. It is like a baby stroller, dad with tattoos. I'm one to talk, right?

SH: It's you.

NH: I'm just saying it's like I've turned into that, too, I get it, but I worked hard to make sure I have a life here, but it's weird to watch it happen, but it's also…It's good. It's a city, it's growing, it's becoming what it is, and you still can't take away the fantasy. You know what I'm saying? It's still one of those places where there's so many people with amazing creative jobs. I have this book club, it's like dad books. It's like dads that want to read books. It's one of my favorite nights of the month when I get to do it. Everybody in the room is a creative. It's like music producers, other artists, writers, people that have fashion companies, pro skaters, that type of person where I don't know where else in the world I could live and have that same mix of people where we have this baseline of understanding who we are and what it is that we do with our lives.

We all moved here for a reason, which is we believed that we could do more and we could touch the world in a bigger way than just having whatever, quote, unquote, "regular job" in our hometown where we came from. So, I think despite its progression into something that might be sad and unattractive in some ways, it still holds that original inspiration and beauty for me where you just go, "Everyone here moved here for something better." Most of us are transplants. We all believed in ourselves that we could achieve bigger, better things. That vision gets lost I

think a lot of time, and a lot of people come here and fall flat on their face and get taken advantage of and all that, but at the core of it, you can't break that beautiful, innocent belief that everybody brought with them the first time that they came here.

I think that's really what gets me about LA is that you can build anything you want. I watch my son and his interaction with the kids that he goes to school with, and he's allowed to be whoever he wants to be. I don't just mean coming from me. I mean the system around him, the school, everything. It's like, I know that Simon and I weren't. A friend of ours, it was funny, sent us a photo just yesterday of his fiancé, went to kindergarten with Simon and I, and it was just funny looking at the photo. I don't really want to…I don't know how to talk about it to not say I'm looking down at people, but there's a very specific way we were supposed to be, and it was very apparent.

SH: Well, Texas is conservative and back pre-Internet, it was a monoculture. So, that's not surprising. That was in 1988, I think, that photo, right?

NH: Yeah, right. So my son, Fox, his monoculture, that word would never enter the picture. He can be anything he wants. So there's something about that that's really, really beautiful. So, I think LA has created space for something like that. When you're like, "Why are you still in LA?" and Simon's like, "Because Nikki has a family," it's because I don't want him to not have that. You know what I'm saying? It's very important.

SH: No, it's great, and my husband to be is a TV writer, and so he has to be here also. I'm being facetious when I say there's no reason to be here. I love it, but I think the older I get, the more I want to be a little more in a quieter place. So I do have fantasies of going back to Texas.

DR: When you guys, at a certain point, some of your work started to go from abstract or anthropomorphic-ish into full-on creatures and truly more fantastical things, where, really, design was…There's no function to some of it, not all of it, some of does, but some of it is just pure art. What was that like? Was that just a natural progression or was there an aha moment where you said, "What if we just kept pushing this?" to create things that look like out of a really, a really straw, a trip, for sure?

SH: It was natural. The trip part, we were both taking a lot of drugs. So, that's not far off. When I say drugs, I mean mostly psychedelics. We started out as furniture designers because it was a good starting point for us, and it was a more practical…The reason we started our business was to work for ourselves, and designing furniture was something that just came naturally to us, but I think in the end, we're both more sculptors and painters than we are furniture designers. So it naturally…we would start using the function as a medium more than an end goal or we'll use the function as a punchline. That became, I think, was more interesting to us. As soon as we started to be able to afford to slash there was enough interest in our work for us to sell it, I think we were like, "Yeah, the function is not really what we're in this for."

NH: Well, also, when we're given boundaries, we can thrive to a certain point, but then at some point, if people are telling us what type of work we should be making, which you might be surprised happens more often than you would expect, that work fails. You know what I'm saying? When we just do whatever we feel like doing, I'm not trying to say this in a we're so rock and roll way, but if we're just fucking around and just expressing and having a really good time, our work turns out great.

SH: The two of us working together as designers, we have super, super different design aesthetics. I'm a whole lot more…I appreciate a communist office building, and Nikki wants a sunken living room '70s vibe. So, I love mass-produced furniture from way back when, and I think Nikki's more about a smoke piece of furniture. So, if we have to come up with something that's specifically just functional, it's going to waver around. What we do have in common is that our shared fantasies, our shared childhood experience and reference points, and I think we just wound up in a spot where since we're both creating together, this is something that we share.

DR: When it comes to today, you guys do commission pieces as well as your own work. Is that still true?

NH: Yeah, less commissions than we used to because, again, it's about freedom, but that being said, we've had some people commission stuff where it's pretty wild how much it can change your mind about your own practice and your just worldview in particular. So we've had some great, great commissions. Luckily for—

SH: If it sounds fun, then we'll do it. When people give too much instruction or they want a specific color or size, whatever of something, that's where it starts to get annoying or we won't be inspired while we're making it. That's not fun.

NH: I think they've also, they won't get as good of a thing from us. I don't know. When we just riff and do our thing, maybe it doesn't fit their niche exactly the way it was supposed to, but they end up with a more, I think, heartfelt artwork, which ultimately means it's more valuable and better or whatever you want to say about it, but yeah.

DR: During the pandemic, did you guys have to slow…Did you wind up slowing down? Did you speed up? I'm sure you had a lot of work.

NH: Slowed down a lot.

SH: No, we slowed down and we had a really big studio beforehand, and then when it happened, we thought it would be temporary so we kept our huge number of employees on. I won't get into the whole thing, but we tried to keep supporting people. Then at a certain point, it just kept going and going, and the whole business practically collapsed. So, it was really hard. We had a ton of momentum and then just in terms of straight business, everything was not going well, but it was nice for us to have to reset and almost go back to the time of the Gio Ponti bed, et cetera, where we are moved into just experimenting and it just being me and Nikki and refining our footing. We've had moments before, I went to rehab, for example, and there are really hard times in life that wind up being a real blessing. If you can get through it, you wind up having a new perspective on stuff and having new ideas. I think that we've come out of the pandemic business-wise in a way that I'm happier with our studio as it is right now than I was back then, actually.

NH: Yeah, me too, and creatively I would say because we had to really dig deep and understand what and why we were making work. The nice thing for us is coming out of this, we have some of the biggest things that we've ever gotten to do. Namely, we're doing a big show at the Nasher Sculpture Center in about a year, almost exactly. We're super excited about that. We're going to be presenting six massive sculptures between 12 and 22 feet, each of them, which is great. So, for us, we're doing that and then going on a museum crawl, which we can't talk about the other museums yet, but we're excited about them.

We're working on our first survey book, which is really fun for us. We've got another solo show with Marianne Boesky, which we're really excited about. So, we've been moving into, I think, just a place of understanding how lucky we are to be in a position that we're in, and to really give time and attention to our individual practice and just really honestly realize how special it is that we've ended up where we've ended up, and that we have what we have, and to really not take it for granted and know that potentially it might not always be there, which to me is a healthy thing to know. I think at one point you can get pretty or we could, one can, and we did get pretty, I think, used to our position in what it was that we were doing.

DR: In what way?

NH: Well, I don't know.

SH: We got successful really fast.

NH: We did. It happened quickly, and I always appreciated it. One thing I'll say is, we never stop working as hard as we can. Simon and I don't know how to not work super hard or to stop. We really care about the things that we make, but I think I just assumed that we wouldn't have to be dynamic necessarily in that we would always have a consistent, reliable flow coming through. For instance, if someone offered us a museum show, that it was going to happen 100% or if a client was like, "I want to buy that thing," that they would do it because at one point it was like

that. Nowadays, I would say we probably used to bat 98% we would hit for things that we would propose. Nowadays, people, it just takes a lot longer and people are a lot more nervous to pull the trigger.
I don't think that's specific to our studio practice. I think that's across the board because people are scared, more scared than they used to be, but at the same time, to me, it makes me feel like the work that we're all doing is all that more important. You know what I'm saying? We're not, I think a lot of practices got more busy than they ever have been, interior designers, construction, stuff like that because people were focusing on their homes, but we're not—

SH: Not us.

NH: We're not a service studio. You know what I mean? We're in our own reality. I'm not saying we're rock and roll or rebels. That's not …Although someone recently was like, "Oh, the bad boys of the design world," which was so funny to me, but I guess that's how some people look at us, but—
SH: We were the enfant terrible of the Design Miami or whatever.

NH: Yeah, totally.

DR: Oh, gosh.

SH: Someone said. We recalled that.

NH: Someone called us that. Yeah, we're the enfant terrible. Exactly.

SH: Well, now we're not enfant anymore.

NH: Yeah, we're the old men terrible. So I think now for us, it's just like, yeah, to understand how lucky to be in the position that we're in, but also, we need to stay true to who we are, which means we're always striving to just do what we want to do and not take direction from someone else. I don't know if that's because we're cool or if it's because we're conceited or what it is exactly, but it's just the way that we work and the way that we want to work.

DR: I've read that you guys have three museum shows or three solo shows coming up in the next two years. Are you guys seeing this as a second act or however you think about it, a new era or a new phase in your career?

SH: Yeah, in a way. We're not making a concerted effort to have a second act, but I think it's naturally just happening. We're both almost 40. I think with this set of work that we're making for the upcoming shows, it is very different. A lot of it is glass. That's not a material we ever worked in. A lot of it is larger. I think it's less…Well, I would say it's more focused the way we're presenting stuff. We used to have rooms with just everything in it, which is really fun, but I think we're being more focused. Our studio is smaller. We're making fewer things. There's a lot that changed, but to me, I think that the shows we have coming up are a little more poetic.

NH: I also think Nasher, for instance, people for a long…It feels like a long time. I know our career is short in the grand scheme of things, but people, really, I think we're one of those studios that can be a little polarizing. You either really like our work or you really don't, which is, I think, I'm proud of that. I think that's good for us, but a lot of people would say, "The Haas brothers are absolutely not artists. They design fine China," which is, I'm proud of that, too. I'm stoked that our collection, L'OBJET, I'm phenomenally proud of. You can hear chatter from the art world saying that we're too accessible or you can hear chatter from the design world saying that we left it behind, but the truth is we're doing our own thing and people are sort of reading it the way they read it.
When you're asking about the second act and what we're doing with the Nasher and all of our museum shows, it does, just to be totally honest, it feels nice to have this seal of approval where you're like, "Okay. Well, you can say we're not artists, but we have…" The Nasher is one of the great sculpture museums in America. It's a huge deal for us. I think we feel so honored. When we got offered it, we're like, "What? Are you talking to me?" a little bit, which is amazing.

SH: Plus, it's in Dallas, which is nice because we get to go back—

NH: Totally.

SH: We get to go back there all the time.

NH: So for us, there's a bit of retribution and there's a lot of people in our careers that told us we would never be able to do what we wanted to do and we've done all of it, which makes me feel really good. Both of us, I think we've worked really hard for that. So in that way, is it a second act? Yeah. We're coming from the ashes in a way, which I think a lot of people have right now. We've done our best to maintain this joy and excitement about what it is that we get to do, which is I think we have some of the most exciting, fun jobs in the world. We're so lucky to get to do it.

So, the more hurdles we can put down to allow us to just keep on trucking, it's like, "Please bring it on." I think we're really getting into that zone where the deeper and deeper we get into solidifying our path, it's just super nice for both of us and for our team too. We have this phenomenal team of people. We all really believe in what it is that we're doing. So when we win something like the Nasher, it feels like we've done something that counts, that matters.

DR: When it comes to…You mentioned leaving things behind and having something that you'll be remembered for. What do you think in the future, your son, your great-great-great grandson will open up a design encyclopedia by Rizzoli in the year 2075, and they'll look back on your work. What do you think it means? How do you think it will boil down to an entry and say the history books or do you want it to say?

NH: Yeah, that's a good question. I don't know how people are going to look at our career. I do think that we have earned a spot in that encyclopedia at this point in our career, but I don't know what that spot looks like. Also, the world can change so much, but I think Marianne said it really well. Our practice is very generous. The people that we work with, we give a lot inside of what we do. I think it's like we come from a viewpoint of humor, we come from a viewpoint of joy, and we want the things that we make to be fun and exciting because art is beautiful. It's a beautiful thing to express. I just want to have a good time when I'm making art.

So, I hope whatever it is that people know us for in the future, I hope that they at least understand the generosity of our practice and just the humor of it, and that also that we came from a place of non-sophistication, originally, and that's okay, that anybody can do it. I talk about programs. When we were kids in Texas, we visited the Menil in Houston, and they have that Cy Twombly building. It's unbelievable. I remember standing in front of this huge painting by Cy Twombly, and I don't know what I mean by I got abstract art. I felt something looking at Cy Twombly. I thought it was unbelievable, and it made me feel something, and that's the whole point of artwork.

To have a program like the Menil and to have kids in a cultural vacuum, at least in that sense, Texas didn't really have a lot to offer in terms of art viewing, that was really important. I guess our place in the encyclopedia would like people to understand that we came from a place like that and that the work that we make is, I understand the price point and all of that, but that really we're making it…We're not making it for anybody, we're making it for everyone, and we're making it for ourselves, and we're making it to be inspirational and to help people move in a positive direction. That's really the point of our work is to inspire people to do better and to give them space to make their own decision about what that means exactly, but that we're trying to make work from a very stringent moral place.

I would say most of the time we meet our own standards, and that's what I would love to come through in an encyclopedia. I don't know what that would mean. Maybe it's a building we're going to build eventually. We can make it for free and donate it, and it becomes like a community space or who knows what.

DR: Simon, we're talking about the meaning of work, which is sometimes to designers, especially if you have a design connection, is really a hard thing for people to articulate. What does your brother Nikolai mean to you?

SH: What does Nikki mean to me? Nikki is…So, I come from a background of having studied a lot and being a tight-ass and being a little bit too obsessive, I think. Nikki is the only thing that has ever gotten me to move outside of that. He really brings all of the energy into our work. When you look at our work, I think the thing that we're known for more than anything is the energetic part of it, and that's Nikki's. So that's a big deal. When you look at the stuff I make on my own, it's really boring to look at, the materials and stuff.

NH: That's not true.

SH: Well, not boring. It's just little samples of things, and then, yeah, it doesn't look like our work. So Nikki's like the freedom in the work.

DR: Nikki, what does Simon mean to you?

NH: Simon is the eloquence and the sensitivity and the heart and the brain behind what we do. You know what I'm saying? I guess if Simon's saying that I'm the energy, I guess it would be the fuel to power the thing that makes it possible, which would be Simon, I guess, in our practice for sure. We're really lucky to have each other. I think that's what it comes down to is we can't make the work we make without each other. It's impossible. I think because it's about compromise, it's about…Well, we can't even take a step or make something without understanding that you need to consider another person in the picture of it.

I think one of the biggest things that you can do as an artist, and we've had moments of this, is that you can, or a designer, is that you can lose yourself in it. You can self-focus too much. You can become too selfish in the way that you apply. I think we just will always hold each other accountable for acting morally inside of our own practice and doing better for ourselves and for the people that we make our work for.

DR: Could you guys ever split up like a band and go into your own solo careers?

SH: No. I think we both have interests and I draw on my own, but it's just…I love what I do, there, but it's not our work.

NH: Simon's drawings are amazing. They're really good. Honestly, his stuff on his own is…The stuff I do on my own is just skateboard art, basically.

SH: No, that's not true. You also—

NH: It is true. It's (crosstalk) shit.

SH: You designed your house and it's in AD—

NH: That's true.

SH: And I live in a condo that looks literally like a dorm. I don't decorate my place.

NH: I designed an awesome house. That's true.

SH: You did. The way I live is so different than how Nikki lives, but yeah, I draw. I have a show soon, actually, but I draw very dark, gay, sexual drawings.

DR: Like Tom of Finland?

SH: Yeah, but his stuff's positive. Mine is a little more depressing. It's pretty, but it's a little darker.

DR: Darker than Tom of Finland, that's some depth.

SH: Everyone is smiling in Tom of Finland's work.