

WHO ARE THE HAAS BROTHERS?

Just ask Donatella Versace, Peter Marino or Lady Gaga, and they'll tell you.

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN

"Simon, can you turn down the music for a second?" asks Nikolai, as he trots up the stairs of the Haas Brothers' downtown Los Angeles studio. Prim, they are not, and the proper is quickly overshadowed by rapid-fire giggles, interjections of "dude" and other high-octane chants about "everything that comes straight outta our heads is purely just for fun." They are twins and best friends: Simon and Nikolai Haas design for the mischievous and high-minded, capturing the attention of anyone in their range. "We function so much better as a team," says Simon, of their burgeoning business, and Nikolai shouts over: "We're just expressing ourselves and whatever venue is fine."

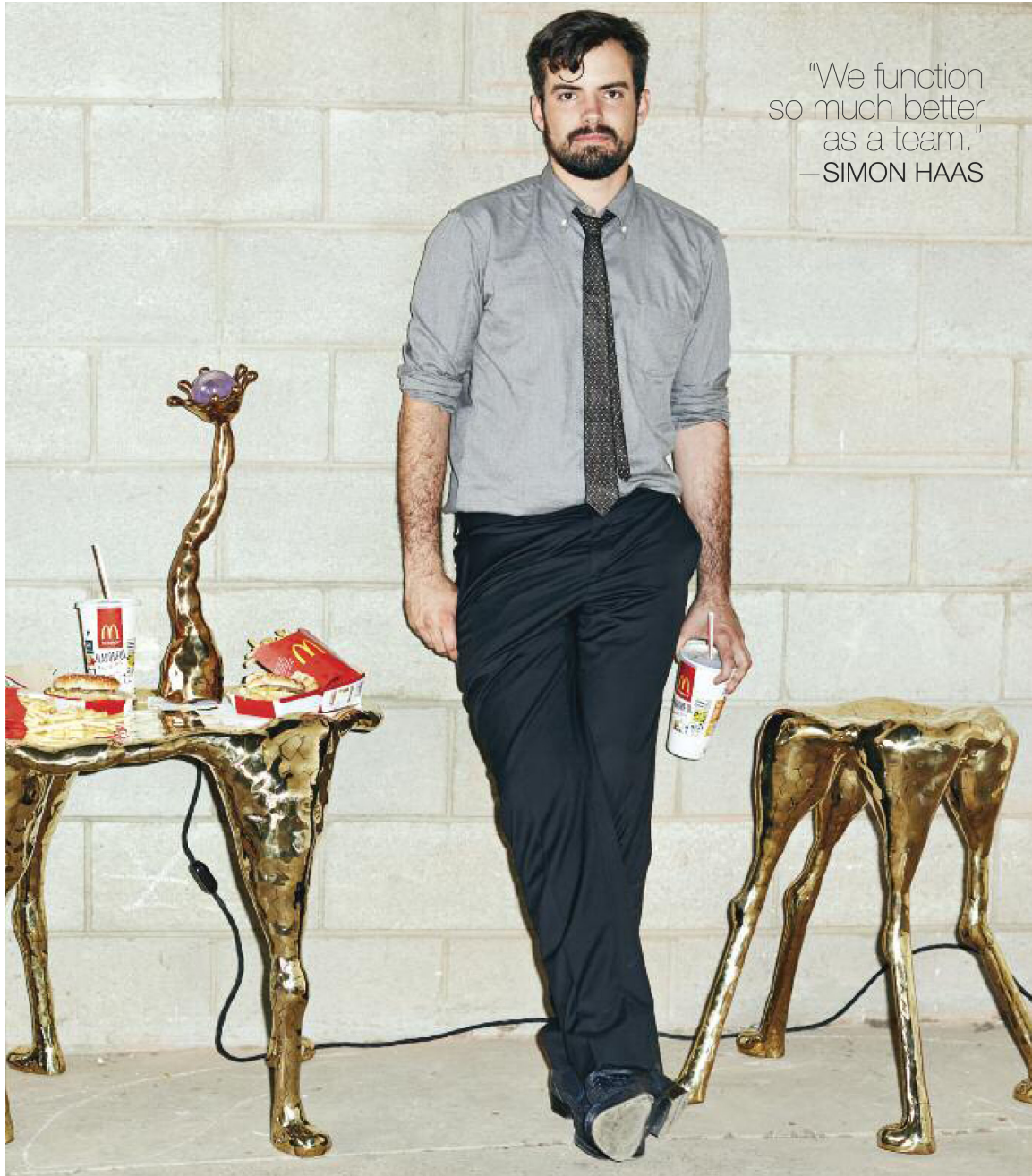
The list of projects isn't yet extensive but elite: those sopping up the duo's "obsessive and odd and singular sculptural pieces" include Lady Gaga, Peter Marino and Donatella Versace, who commissioned the brothers to create a capsule collection of T-shirts and accessories this fall. Back in April, for the Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan, the brothers designed a 12-piece capsule collection for Versace Home, the flamboyant Italian house favored by Kanye West. "She is so enthusiastic," says Simon, "and lets you do your own thing." Although Versace may seem like the antithesis of the laid-back West Coast Haas vibe, "we both love gold, that's for sure, shiny gold everywhere," Nikolai is quick to explain. "It's a good thing that our aesthetic isn't totally lined up. That's what makes this collection unique."

Focused and coltish, Simon and Nikolai, both 29, cultivated their pursuits in their childhood backyard. "Niki and I have been building stuff literally as we were growing up," says Simon. Berthold, their father, instilled into his children not only a Teutonic work ethic but one of the more challenging trades: stone carving. "Construction for us is very second nature, and it's a language that we learned early on," says Nikolai. "Stone carving is what we got the best at, and it's very easy to take that knowledge and translate it to almost any other material."

Berthold, a furniture maker from Germany, and Emily, a writer and opera



Nikolai (seated on a *Jose Hex* side table) and Simon Haas flanked by a *Wide Side Hex* table and a *Poor Unfortunate Soul* table lamp and a *Hose B Hex* side table



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singer from Texas, raised their three boys in Austin (the older brother being Lukas) to follow their passions. "It came from our parents, actually—they're both crazy collectors. Our dad even made a grotto in the backyard," recalls Simon. Lukas, a well-known actor and best friend of Leonardo DiCaprio, leads his own side project in music, too—Nikolai played bass in Lukas' band (as well as in Sean Lennon's and Vincent Gallo's) until he and Simon, who is also an oil painter by RISD training, joined forces to launch their design venture. The Haas Brothers, both as a duo and studio moniker, formally began in fall 2010 and within the last year have gone from "just doing fabrication and having a million clients that wanted reclaimed wood," to "doing whatever we want. We get to say no now!"

That may sound like the mythic holy grail of creative freedom, but: "We make tables that have super-wobbly surfaces and you could never set a glass down on them—it would just fall over, but they're really beautiful," says Nikolai. "We have a market where we can charge \$75,000 for a coffee table and sell it." Their work debuted at Design Miami/Basel, with R Gallery, their primary dealer, and it sold out nearly instantly. "Those guys have been letting us go wild," says Simon. "Now we're having the show with them at Design Miami/," adds Nikolai. "We just follow our nose to whatever feels good—it's meant a lot for the growth of the way we design because we don't have any limits."

To that point, Zesty Meyers of R Gallery extols the stakes the brothers have in American design. "I don't think they have any idea of how big their capabilities are," says Meyers. "People like this don't have a choice in life. Their innocence is amazingly great for them—a pureness that puts them ahead of the curve." What debuts at Design Miami/, hints Meyers, is based on a Roberto Burle Marx garden—and the brothers have been working on it for months. In general, however, "Everything is completely handmade, one-of-a-kind and takes forever to make," says Nikolai, as Simon chimes in: "A lot of our pieces are really time-consuming."

Typical of the brothers: chairs that look like the Minotaur of Crete (but made from Icelandic sheep's wool with wood horns and bronze hoofs), stools of brass hexagons mimicking a perch fit for a queen bee and even hematite vases resembling a Jeff Koons. They will soon launch wallpaper for the Ace Hotel in downtown Los Angeles based on "a stream-of-thought picture of L.A. with no regard for accurate perspective or time," says Simon. "We will scatter little cartoon drawings—California bears who are meant to be prodding L.A.'s history along; they'll be there when Britney is shaving her head, when Mulholland opens the waterway and at the 1984 Olympics."

"We joke around and have a good time," says Nikolai, "but we're also really obsessive—because we want to be, not because anyone is forcing us."

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