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Artists connect creatively as only brothers can

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By Sheila Farr
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In case you've been under a rock somewhere and haven't noticed, artist brothers Oscar Tuazon and Eli Hansen are the hot new thing. Their work is suddenly showing up all over the place: Seattle Art Museum contemporary art curator Michael Darling selected them for the premier "SAM Next" exhibition, geared to spotlight new talent. Their work is featured in a solo show at Howard House and a group show at Western Bridge. And, because Tuazon won last year's Betty Bowen Award, he's also got another small show up in SAM's First Avenue lobby.

Hansen is a glass artist, and Tuazon a sort of conceptual minimalist. What they concoct together is a neo-1970s Northwest aesthetic that mixes up clean lines and basic form with a messy assortment of blown glass, smudged mirrors, raw timber, oozing caulk and lots of duct tape. The work is a brainy marriage of funk and minimalism that thrills curators and insiders with its impeccable art-historical DNA.
On the other hand, some casual viewers might get the urge to tear their hair out. If somebody found Hansen and Tuazon's taped-together dirty plastic "Tent" crammed in their garage (instead of hanging on the wall at Howard House, where it is priced at $16,000), they'd likely haul it to the Dumpster.
I talked with the brothers last week at SAM. Tuazon was just off the plane from Paris, where he lives, and Hansen was up from Tacoma. I wondered what led them to make essentially minimalist artworks with such obvious disregard for finesse.

"To me the forgotten counter-history of minimalism is the do-it-yourself architecture happening at the same time," Tuazon said. "People were inventing new vocabularies of building, like geodesic domes. ... Those histories are concurrent but are always kept pretty separate."

For him and his brother, children of the 1970s, it was natural that those two disparate movements came together as guiding principles. Tuazon was born in 1975: Hansen in '79. They grew up in Indianola, a small town on the Kitsap Peninsula, where the families all knew each other and everybody kept an eye on each other's kids: "You couldn't get in trouble across town and get home before your mom knew about it," Hansen recalled. "We went through the public school system, but art was always a big part of the

program. Our parents were book binders by trade, so they were always home and there was always kind of a shop that was functioning."

Eventually, the two rebelled against their parents' brand of craftsmanship. Tuazon (who kept his first wife's last name) said he is more excited by "a kind of amateur energy ... because you are learning and failing at the same time. I think when you get really very good at anything, aesthetically and phenomenologically it's less interesting. If you've done the same vase 100 times, you're going to get really good at it."

"Something about that repetition loses the life of the original creation," Hansen said. "It becomes more of a job; you could be in a factory." So, rather than following a set method, as a bookbinder or glassblower would, Hansen and Tuazon rely on their "intimate response" to the materials. They deliberately reject the aesthetic of, say, Donald Judd, whose minimalist forms were perfected to the point of looking machine-made.

"Minimalism in a way was a complete rebuttal to abstract expressionism," Tuazon said. "You had to be as hands-off as possible. It fulfills the modernist prophecy of removing the person from the equation entirely. For us, we're always working with our hands, trying to recuperate the importance of the physicality of the art object, beyond what it's supposed to say."
But don't people still want to see the skill of the maker?

"Especially in the Northwest," Hansen maintains, "it's a real relief for people, who obviously see things so well-built, cleaned-up and well-crafted, to see something — ahhhh! — really clunky but with the same kind of attention to detail and time put in. Not to hide the hand, but to expose the hand. It's all right there — it's not just smoke and mirrors."

Hmmm, maybe. I must say, the term "smoke and mirrors" had crossed my mind looking at Tuazon and Hansen's work. They use a lot of mirrors (sometimes multifaceted and self-reflecting, often smudged and dirty) and cite the mirror's ancient history as a tool and symbol. Mirrors can suggest depth, infinity, prophecy, a kind of metaphysical reality — but are also easy to overuse as stock tropes.

Because of their entwined personal histories, Tuazon and Hansen have an easy mutual understanding in their collaboration. "There's a kind of vocabulary from being brothers, building the forts when we were younger," Hansen said. "And there's an inherent trust that's really important in the process. We aren't looking over each other's shoulders." That makes it possible for them to work together, even when living in different countries. "With the Western Bridge piece, he was in Paris and I was in Tacoma and we built models and took pictures and sent them back and forth to each other. ... The conversations are a big part of it."

Of the current shows, the SAM Next installation "Kodiak" makes the best case for Tuazon and Hansen's collaboration. Given a second-floor gallery to work in, they created a spare, elegant composition using their distinctive vocabulary of makeshift architectural elements. A log mutates into a ceiling beam. A rough assemblage evolves into a circular stairway. One gallery entrance is veiled by a mysterious wall with high and low windows.

Inside the gallery, a small photograph shows us a makeshift shelter that the brothers built in Kodiak, Alaska. For them, the gallery installation and the shelter in Kodiak are aspects of the same creative impulse. For the rest of us, Tuazon says: "The entire experience of the piece is to stand in that room and imagine another place. It's not necessary to go to that other place except in your mind."
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