

De la Torre Brothers Are Making the Most of Maximalism

Working and living on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, they shatter entrenched ideas about beauty and good taste.



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Reporting from San Antonio and Baja California, Mexico.

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The wallpapered-room is filled with antiques and a menagerie of blinged-out taxidermy. A 24-foot-long banquet table has been laid out, but the dinner guests seem to have disappeared, leaving their coats behind. On the table: nucleated eyeballs nestling in golden spoons, miniature torsos propped up on cake stands, and baby Kewpie dolls trapped in red goo, like candied desserts. A glass “Capitalist Pig,” one of several profane centerpieces, grins as it defecates gold coins.

The banquet, an installation called “Le Point de Bascule” (“The Tipping Point”) at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, is visually stunning, and also a bit repulsive — and that’s the point. “We’re repulsed by this opulence,” said one of its creators, Einar de la Torre. “But we’re also thinking: ‘God, I wish I’d been invited to this party.’”

The brothers Einar and Jamex de la Torre create mixed-media works of dazzling complexity. Using disparate materials, including blown glass, mass-produced curios, resin castings and photocollage, the siblings, who have collaborated

artistically since the 1990s, construct richly detailed, mandala-like installations; lenticular prints that shimmy and explode with movement; and color-saturated glass sculptures embedded with workaday items like dominoes, coins or doll parts.

Pre-Columbian deities, Mexican lucha libre wrestlers, Olmec heads, Slavic water spirits — the de la Torres' visual universe is vast and pantheistic. The brothers freely mix high and low, in part, they say, to challenge entrenched ideas about beauty and “good taste.”

“In college, there was a lot of minimalism,” Einar, the younger of the siblings, recalled at a recent interview at their studio in Baja California, Mexico. “We thought: how the hell are we ever going to make it in the art world, which wants to distill everything down to the bare bones? We're kind of the opposite. We wanted to add more meaning.”



The riotous dining room installation of “Le Point de Bascule,” at the McNay Art Museum, with the brothers' richly detailed banquet table and chandeliers — anthropomorphic objects with humanlike arms



“Corazon volante,” 2020, blown glass and mixed media at the McKay Museum of Art. Paul Feuerbacher/McNay Art Museum



“Snaily,” 2023, blown glass and mixed media by Einar and Jamex de la Torre. Paul Feuerbacher/McNay Art Museum

Two current exhibitions carry the brothers’ maximalist vision further afield. “Collidoscope,” their touring retrospective, featuring 40 mixed-media works, is at the Corning Museum of Glass, in upstate New York — where the brothers had a recent residency — through early 2025.

“Upward Mobility,” at the McNay Art Museum through Sept. 15, includes, in “Le Point de Bascule,” their first chandeliers — anthropomorphic objects with humanlike arms brandishing broken beer bottles, signaling that the “masses are outside with torches,” Einar said.

In another gallery, two oversize lenticular works underscore the show's weighty themes — excessive consumption and climate apocalypse — with dark humor and kaleidoscopic exuberance. They began to experiment with lenticular printing, a revolutionary 3-D printing technique, in the late aughts, drawn to the format's ability to contain many images in one frame. "Coatzilla," a lenticular print at the McNay Art Museum that the brothers liken to a monster movie poster, depicts the Aztec earth mother goddess, Coatlicue, as a two-headed, Godzilla-like creature. She stomps across Mexico City's fast-disintegrating downtown, "grumpy," Einar explained, because humanity has ravaged the world she made.

In "Miclantiputin," another lenticular, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, is melded with the lantern-jawed Aztec god of the underworld, Mictlantecuhtli. Ribbons of traffic-clogged highways gush from the hybrid monster's rib cage, and his fingers are intercontinental missiles. In the small, black-box gallery space where the posters hang, a projector shows traffic footage from Mexico City's Paseo de la Reforma on the floor, encouraging visitors to play out their own monstrous destruction on the capital by stomping on the floor, a commentary on humanity's monster-like impulse toward destruction. The de la Torre brothers unlock the lenticular's narrative possibilities — often dismissed as the stuff of playing cards and flickering prayer cards — and its mesmeric qualities.

"I've had countless people who are artists, and not only glass artists, tell me the brothers made a significant impact on their artistic practice after they saw them demonstrate or teach at various places around the world," said Tami Landis, a curator of postwar and contemporary glass at the Corning Museum of Glass.

Recently, working in collaboration with the Corning's in-house glass artists, the brothers produced dozens of new glass pieces for a mandala-like installation commissioned by the museum. The yet-untitled finished work, which will be unveiled there in November, will "have a large impact on the museum's galleries," Landis said.

“They are pushing not only the medium of glass, but the medium of sculpture itself,” Landis added. “They are pushing it by thinking in terms of a multiplicity of layers, which definitely was something you didn’t see as much in the glass field in the early ’80s and ’90s.”

Learning From Godzilla

Born to a Mexican father and a Danish-Mexican mother in the early 1960s, in Guadalajara, in western Mexico, the de la Torre brothers attended Colegio Cervantes, an all-boys Roman Catholic school, where they remember watching Godzilla. Einar, 60, is the more loquacious one; Jamex, 64, the polite, unflappable older brother. Their father was a gifted but troubled architect, “extremely charming to friends and colleagues” but “monstrous” to his family when he drank, Jamex recounted. In 1972, when he was 12, and Einar was 8, their parents separated and their mother took the boys to live with extended family in Southern California.

The culture shock was vivid, but also “wondrous,” Jamex said. Their mother was a certified translator, a wordsmith with a gift for limericks. From her, they inherited a love of wordplay (evident in the brothers’ titles, often featuring portmanteaus or Spanglish puns), and her sense of cultural fluidity, privileging them with an outsider’s insight into both Mexican and American cultures.

They both studied glassblowing at the California State University of Long Beach, falling in love with the medium’s plasticity and immediacy, and the intense spirit of collaboration that working in a “hot shop” demands from glass artists. They found a mentor in the studio glass artist Therman Statom, learning from him the business of being an artist — the minutiae of running a studio and juggling public art projects. Early on, they developed an agnostic view toward labels, neither courting nor rejecting them. “As a young artist, you’re wondering: Are you a craft person? Are you a conceptual artist? Are you Mexicano? Are you Americano? A Chicano?” Einar said. “At some point, we understood that the least we worried about it, the better.”



Einar and Jamex de la Torre during their residency working on their commission at the Corning Museum of Glass with its glass artists. The brothers' new glass pieces will be unveiled in November. via Corning Museum of Glass



At the Corning Museum of Glass, “Bolivar’s Burden” (2001) is a wall-hung relief that depicts Mayan glyphs as modern corporate logos, suggesting globalization’s degrading effect on Latin America. Auto upholstery, invoking a swath of human skin, is embedded with blown-glass sculptures that resemble hair follicles (alluding to the region’s racial hierarchy, privileging blond hair over dark). via Einar and Jamex de la Torre and Koplin Del Rio Gallery



“De Pilar of M Pyre” from 2004, a blown-glass, mixed-media sculpture, incorporates imagery of the Aztec codices, portraits of world leaders, and beer bottles, and invokes historical cycles of decadence and fallen empires. via the Daniel Saxon Collection and AltaMed Art Collection

A ‘Glittering Rubble’ of Destroyed Work

Before transitioning into full-time artmaking, the brothers operated a small glass-work business in Los Angeles for more than a decade, creating custom pieces for museums and crystal shops. They booked their first solo gallery show in 1994, 30 years ago this year, at San Francisco’s Galería de la Raza. In 1995, the unthinkable happened when their solo show at MACLA art space in San Jose, for Latino and Chicano culture, was vandalized. Two years’ worth of their work was smashed to

smithereens. Nearly three decades later, they remember that day in surreal detail, including the police sergeant who teared up when he saw the glittering rubble of their shattered work.

Since the 1990s, the brothers have lived and worked on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, traveling once or twice a week between San Diego and their “homebase,” a small ranch abutting the main highway in El Valle de Guadalupe, Baja. They remember El Valle before it became known as Mexican wine country, before the profusion of hip restaurants, wine barrel-shaped rental cottages, and glamping tents now permanently draped over its hillsides.

In the summer, the main road gets so clogged with tourist traffic, it’s hard to leave the ranch, Einar told me during a tour of the property. In late spring, at the cusp of the busy season, the highway is relatively tranquil, and the ranch’s meandering paths are dotted with wild blooming artichoke plants. The brothers are in their studio preparing for an upcoming residency. They travel throughout the year, in demand as visiting artists at top glass art programs like Pilchuck in Washington State. Their studio is cavernous and light-filled, with red brick, glass walls and cathedral ceilings designed to frame the property’s great sprawling oak tree.

Rolling cabinets are filled with spray paint and adhesives. Industrial shelves are stacked with dozens of plastic containers, a quirky ever-expanding archive of material culture: doll parts, ceramic statuettes, plastic insects. Einar frequents a flea market in south San Diego, scavenging for “carefully chosen” objects (a description he prefers to “found objects”). The baubles are as important to their work as any finely wrought sheet of glass.



The artists' studio in Baja California, Mexico, houses an eclectic archive of old and new materials, including a pair of angel wings and a glass bottle purchased for use in a mixed-media work; ceramic flowers left from a public art project; and the sketchbook and mold used to create cast plastic foam arms for the chandeliers featured in "Le Pointe du Bascule." Also pictured, propped against a wall, a 2009 mixed-media work, "Do Vegas Right." John Francis Peters for The New York Times

In conversation, they oscillate between disparate topics — the dismal state of arts funding in Mexico, the crumbling firewall between the worlds of fine art and craft, what great fun it would be to one day mount a show at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The brothers don't finish each other's sentences so much as they speak in shorthand. The easy give and take between the two is remarkable, and it becomes quickly evident why a former student once described them as "idea machines."

“They rebel very militantly against the idea of the lone artist, painting by themselves, lonely and alienated in their garret or studio,” the producer and director Isaac Artenstein told me. “They’re just the opposite.” Artenstein has been working on a documentary about the siblings, titled “De la Torre Brothers: Artists on the Line.”

He recently spent an afternoon filming them at Art-Hell, the glassblowing studio inside the Bread & Salt, an arts center in San Diego’s Barrio Logan neighborhood, where the brothers maintain a satellite studio. “I really know of no other artists like them in the U.S.,” Artenstein said. “The level of work that they do, the complexity, the sense of humor.”

“It’s overwhelming, but in a wonderful way.”

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