



Brother Artists Exhibit Craft And Memories At Mingei

By: Angela Carone
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William and Steven Ladd admit their artwork conveys some obsessive-compulsive tendencies.

“Our parents think we’re a little crazy,” said William, 35, the younger Ladd by one year.

Walking through “Function and Fantasy,” an exhibit of their work at the Mingei International Museum, it’s hard not to be impressed by the Ladds’ ambition and attention to detail — not to mention the diversity of objects they create. There are wall pieces, lamps, sculptures, handbags, jewelry and neckties.

Many of those pieces are hand-stitched, beaded and elaborately presented. And there’s a lot of it, “the most objects we’ve had in an exhibition ever,” Steven said.

Five hundred and three pieces to be exact.



This piece is called “Dad,” and honors the relationship the brothers have with their father. (2010, Archival board, fiber, beads, metal).

CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

There are some repeated elements: beaded trees, scrolls of fabrics and pins. There are beaded handbags that look like something Marie Antoinette would carry her rouge in. And boxes, a lot of boxes. Some are designed to be opened, others hold multiples (things sharp, soft, round and pointed). In some pieces, the boxes are stacked to display a landscape where beaded pins pierce twisted fabric to create miniature coral reefs of texture.

The brothers have been official collaborators since the late '90s. Prior to that, they collaborated in the traditional ways brothers do, making up games and terrorizing their parents and neighborhood.

The productive phase of their collaboration — at least the stage that reaped financial rewards — began when William convinced Steven to move to New York after he graduated from college. Steven was making his own clothes (still does) and William was doing a lot of beadwork (still does). They began combining the two crafts.

“And we weren't really sure if it was going to be performance, video, design, art fashion, so we were working on all of these things at once,” Steven explained. “And then it all sort of merged together.”

The performance element often involves a silent presentation where the brothers unpack the handmade boxes or stack them into a tower for their final display. Six videos will be on view at the museum. They include some of those performances and show the brothers at work in the studio.



PHOTO BY ANDREW ZUCKERMAN. A handbag designed and crafted by William and Steven Ladd. It's called "Water Bag."

Despite the amount of time the Ladds spend together, working and designing in their New York studio, they don't fight. In fact, they seem to truly enjoy each other. As one talks, the other looks on with rapt attention, as if he's never heard this version of their lives.

They make each other laugh, finish each others sentences and tease each other regularly. In the hour I spent with them, William made much of Steven's penchant for organizing. Doing his best impersonation of his brother, William reenacted a moment early on in their career when Steven told him: "I created a Microsoft excel document and we're going to plan out what we're going to do for the next 10 years."

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The Ladd brothers in their New York studio.

The Ladds grew up in St. Louis, Mo., in a close family. There are four siblings, all a year apart.

“We were a force in the neighborhood,” Steven said.

Their memories of growing up together inform a lot of their artwork. Like a wall piece — perhaps the first ever artwork combined with Little Debbie product placement — titled “The Nutty Bar Brigade.”

It honors a high school tradition the brothers started during lunch period.

“We didn’t get lunch money from our mom and we both had jobs so instead of going to the lunchroom, we would go buy nutty bars. We’d pull our socks up over our pants and call it the nutty bar brigade,” William explained. “We’d go skipping through the hallways. And we’d pass by the classrooms and wave to all the teachers.”

“The Nutty Bar Brigade” is made up of multiple square boxes covered in rich tweedy fabrics in different shades of brown. It’s like a three-dimensional patchwork quilt.

The fabrics in “The Nutty Bar Brigade” were donated. A lot of the materials in the Ladds’ work are recycled.

“You know we don’t like to waste and we can make things out of anything,” Steven said. “So it’s become very important to us to use recycled materials.”

Rob Sidner is the director of the Mingei, which showcases folk art, craft and design. When he first saw the brothers’ artwork, he was impressed.

“They are self-taught, which helped me realize their work very much belonged here, as well as the fact that they are so craft and design centered,” Sidner said.

The Ladds say the darker parts of their childhood are explored in the use of sharp objects in their work, as well as in some of the childhood memories they explore.

A good example is the day they realized their house was infested with ants.

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“One day we pulled out this Lego box and all these ants poured out,” Steven said. William immediately jumps in for emphasis: “There were thousands of them. Black carpenter ants started pouring out of it.” The boys yelled for their mother, who soon realized this was just the tip of the ant iceberg.

“We started pulling the beds away from the wall and there were these trails of ants throughout the entire house,” William said.

That inspired “Ant Infestation,” a piece that includes William’s beaded trees, Steven’s textile scrolls and 700 bronze-cast ants. Infestations are anxiety-producing, but the Ladds have softened the idea with the miniature jeweled trees and the swirls of fabric. In fact, Steven says the ants didn’t really bother them as kids. I’m surprised the imaginative duo didn’t try to enlist the ant trails in their games.



PHOTO BY ANDREW ZUCKERMAN. William and Steven Ladd also design and create jewelry. This is Cloud I: Beaded Ball Necklace

Steven explains that their work tends to be “light, fun and full of love.” When they do explore darkness, it’s often in conjunction with what they see as beautiful.

“It’s sort of this contrast between the darkness and the light. So you can have this darkness and this oppressive mood but then,” Steven added with a smile and shrug, “we love our lives.”

The Ladd brothers have a mantra they often share: “Spend your life doing what you love. Be focused and disciplined. Collaborate.”

As you’ll see at the Mingei exhibit on view until June, that mantra has served the brothers well.