



Your New Best Friends: Steven and William Ladd

By: Lily Kane
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A range of projects representing the Ladds' career, including one of their first, Shadow Tower (black), and one of their latest, Volcano (red), set the stage for the surprises within each box. William (seated) and Steven (standing) incorporate performance into all their pieces, slowly unfolding and revealing their work to the delight of their visitors.

Amid the military technology, fiber-optic lamps and futuristic airplanes at the 2006 National Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt in New York sat a mysterious Plexiglas-covered plinth displaying an elaborately beaded miniature landscape titled *Terre du Lac*. The intricacy, color and energy of the piece drew lingering viewers in droves, encouraging them to think about the process, the narrative and, most important, the makers, whom the wall text introduced simply as Ladd Brothers, Steven and William. Though at the time the show opened these two were little known outside of their Williamsburg, Brooklyn, base camp, the intimacy with which *Terre du Lac* unfolded left the distinct impression that even if you didn't know the two artists, they most certainly knew you.

Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, Steven and William Ladd have been collaborating for over five years, making hand-beaded jewelry, handbags, scarves, ties and large-scale installations inspired by their childhood memories and their day-to-day shared experiences becoming adults. Working



All the boxes of the Shadow Tower series are handmade from archival board, Ultrasuede and silk by Steven and built specifically to hold the hand-stitched and beaded carrying cases. Unzipping each case (opposite), called a Butterfly Box by the brothers, reveals a clutch and numerous accessories, in this instance, hand-beaded necklaces that can double as straps for the purse. Credit: Top: Gary Mamay; Bottom: Daniel Gonzales

primarily from their journals—candid and energetic daily records of their feelings, adventures and inspirations—the Ladds hatch ideas for their projects and then divide the work flow—William is primarily responsible for the beading, while Steven crafts the handbags and boxes.

William, 29, got his start as a beader in high school. “My friend Angela taught me to do macramé when I was 15,” he explains. “When I moved to New York to pursue my modeling career I had one huge duffel of clothes and one huge duffel of probably 5,000 beads.” The ex-showman for brands as diverse as Versace and Polo Ralph Lauren honed his craft waiting in casting lines and on photo shoots. After hours he sought out books that would teach him integral beading techniques, which he practiced until he had them down pat. His 30-year-old brother, Steven, on the other hand, has extensive experience as a clothing and handbag designer, having studied textile, fiber and costume design at Rockhurst University in Kansas City. Though distinct in the paths that brought them to the present, their familial bond and intense respect for one another has allowed them to create a cohesive body of work that is setting the tone for a new craft scene.

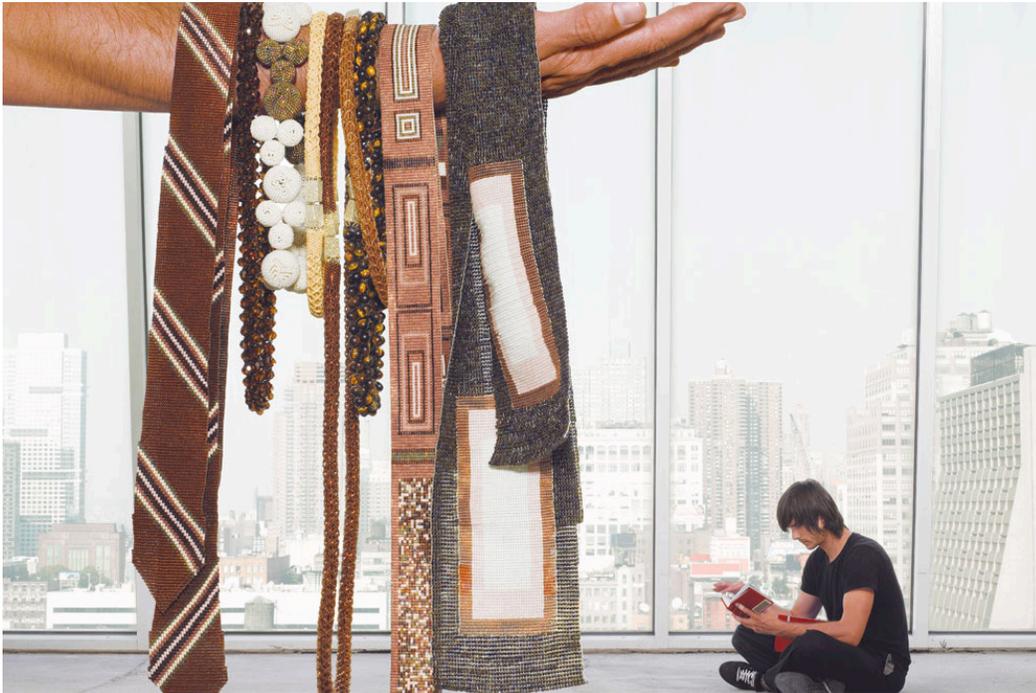
The Ladds are part of a generation of designers and craftspeople who are cross-pollinating a mélange of images, media, artistic practices and cultural references into self-starting business ventures and art careers. Weaned on fashion that borrows copiously from the past three centuries, music made from samples, homemade “zines” and art made by reworking familiar images from film, video games and television, these makers are unafraid of creating, promoting and constantly evolving their visual landscape and the objects within it. The Ladd brothers take this ethos one step further, making the bulk of their own clothing as well as recycling all unused material to create interior details at their home/studio, such as the closet and pot hooks made from empty thread spools wrapped in linen and Ultrasuede fabric scraps. The incessantly thoughtful Ladds are often home for days, obsessing over each project as if it were headed to the Louvre, which, in fact, some are.

When Matilda McQuaid, exhibitions curator and head of the textiles department at Cooper-Hewitt, spoke about their work at a recent conference, she summoned the kind of language usually reserved for fairy tales, describing “spectacular treasures” and “beaded riches.” As fanciful as this might sound, if you’ve ever been lucky enough to observe the Ladds showing their work, you know that this is spot-on. There is an intricate method for unveiling each piece, box by box, and the brothers have even created a video to present this performance when

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they cannot be there to do it in person.

As with *Terre du Lac*, their newest work, *Volcano*, 2007, is accompanied by a limited edition book produced by the brothers in conjunction with Christopher Finlay, a graphic designer, and Andrew Zuckerman, a photographer. The book stands as a sort of behind-the-scenes guide to the work, revealing the ideas, themes, sketches and journal entries that helped shape the finished product. As they explain it, each piece corresponds to “what’s going on right now” in their lives. In such close quarters, their lives, understandably, overlap and they are able to channel singular moments into a shared theme. For *Volcano*, the key inspiration was “muscle growth.” With William training for the Chicago marathon, the two were intrigued by “explosive exercise” and the buildup of lactic acid, a common side effect of vigorous training.



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To make the book, the Ladd brothers gave Finlay total access to their journals, which he scanned to create the graphic identity for the published piece. Although the imagery is abstracted in the sculpture itself, the piece is extremely self-reflexive when coupled with the book and video elements. In *Volcano*, some of the graphic images loomed into the beading by William came from the way Steven’s lists of crossed-out actions in his “*Forgiveness Journals*” traversed the edge of the page. Portraits of Steven and William also appear in the book, close-ups of muscles and skin that are, they explain, “the gestures that inspired the series.”

Like so many young makers today, the Ladds are extremely savvy about branding, image making and promotion, thanks, no doubt, to their long tenure in the world of high fashion. They make every attempt to meet with interested curators, galleries and writers, and create personalized packaging from recycled studio materials for all of the literature they send out. Many curators have visited the Ladds in their home studio and, more often than not, come away with a story of warmth and intimacy that seems almost unbelievable in the fast-paced New York art world. One curator, for example, spent several hours in a studio visit with them on Easter Sunday and was earnestly invited to share their holiday meal with the siblings and friends who were gathering in the apartment.

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Parlaying their not insignificant personal presence into their work has undoubtedly helped the brothers along the way, but in the end it's the work itself that has taken a bit of the brothers with it and found its way onto the pages of magazines and museum floors. Given the uncanny knack for integrating their work with their personality, it's not surprising that their long-term goal as artists is a greater, even more detailed exploration of their ideas about design, the performance of design and how people interact with their work. "We have gotten to the point," they explain almost in unison, "where we are learning to storyboard our projects better and are asking whether we should be buying fabric or a video camera to fulfill the performative aspects of creativity." Whatever the medium, Steven and William Ladd will undoubtedly continue creating work that, in an ideal world they would love to sit down and share with you.