

The Connor Brothers interview: ‘We could buy either a house or a dinosaur – needless to say, we bought the dinosaur’

The pranksters of contemporary art have gained both notoriety and celebrity fans, and are now making a radical return

By Mick Brown
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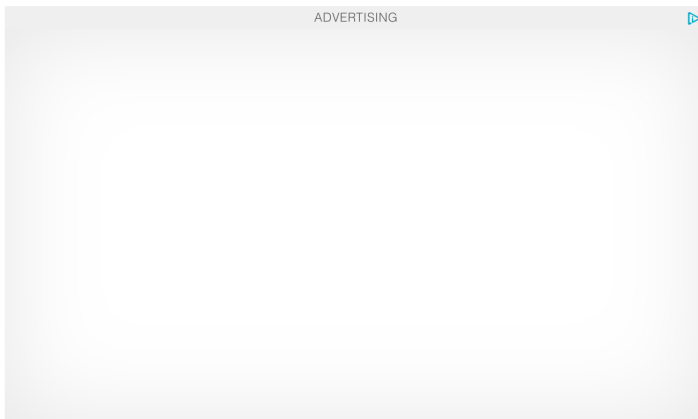


James Golding (left) and Mike Snelle, aka The Connor Brothers, with Tracey, the triceratops | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

“And this is Tracey,” says Carla Nizzola, director of Cambridge’s Extraordinary Objects (E.O) gallery, standing beside the huge skull of a 68-million-year-old triceratops. Strange and compelling as [dinosaurs](#) are, perhaps the tendency to give them names brings the creatures more within our sphere of understanding, if not exactly making them cuddly. It’s certainly a thing.

The skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus rex, which sold for \$31.8 million in 2020 at [Christie's](#) in New York, was christened Stan. While in May, the most complete skeleton ever found of a Deinonychus antirrhopus, “the Raptor” in Jurassic Park, which sold, again at Christie’s, for \$12.4 million, rejoiced in the name of Hector.

Tracey, who once bestrode the landmass in the American northwest known as the Hell Creek Formation, one of the world’s great mother lodes of dinosaur fossils, is the prize exhibit in a new exhibition, Some of My Best Friends Are Dinosaurs, at the E.O gallery, which brings together a variety of dinosaur fossils, skulls and skeletons, along with rare ammonites and ammonites, a 4.5-billion-year-old meteorite, and a piece of the moon.



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Objects of wonder and beauty, they are being exhibited with new paintings by the artist pairing known as The Connor Brothers, who have co-curated the exhibition with Nizzola.

Artists and pranksters, The Connor Brothers have made their reputation with their “pulp fiction” paintings, meticulously realised appropriations from the covers of lurid 1950s and 1960s paperbacks, showing glamorous, hour-glass-figured women with such captions as “I drink to make other people more interesting” – and which sell for up to £44,000 a piece. Collectors include Dua Lipa, [Chris Rock](#) and Jay-Z.



One of the pair's 'pulp fiction' artworks

Their new work could not be more different; vividly coloured paintings and drawings of dinosaurs in a naive style bearing stark captions such as “envy”, “addiction” and “social media” – bloody-toothed raptors as symbols of the ill devouring society.

The first thing to be said about The Connor Brothers is that they are not brothers, and neither is named Connor. They are Mike Snelle and James Golding, who first started collaborating 10 years ago when they were working as art dealers. Golding, 47, and Snelle, 44, first met in Cambridge, where Snelle was studying philosophy and Golding had retreated from a short spell as a city trader. Later, both moved separately to London, meeting again at a time when both were in a bad way. Golding had recently overcome an addiction to heroin and was working in a gallery in Soho selling street art. “It was a really bad environment for me to be in,” he remembers, “surrounded by this celebrity culture and everybody doing cocaine.” Snelle, who had run a successful gallery in Shoreditch but grown disenchanted with the art business, had been diagnosed as bipolar and was, he says, at “the lowest point in my life”.

Living out of a suitcase in a succession of hotels, Snelle had been sitting in his room

for days, not eating, avoiding telephone calls and fighting an increasingly powerful urge to take his own life. It was at that point that the phone rang. On impulse, he answered it. It was Golding, who persuaded Snelle to meet, leading to Snelle moving in with Golding and his wife, beginning a relationship that was to be as much mutual therapy as friendship.

In 2013, “for fun”, they started playing around with the ideas that would become the staple of The Connor Brothers’ work. They took an old paperback of Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing* and changed the title to *A Load of Fuss About F--- All*, then began refashioning the covers of Mills & Boon romances and pulp-fiction paperbacks with ironic and amusing captions.

Meanwhile, they invented a fictitious identity, The Connor Brothers, “twentysomething twin brothers” Franklyn and Brendan Connor, who had been brought up in California within a secretive Christian cult called “The Family”, before escaping to New York, where they lived as recluses and made art.

The story, according to Snelle, was a metaphor for what both were going through at the time. “We replaced addiction and mental illness with growing up in isolation, and recovery became escaping from a cult,” he explains. “There was no great plan. The most exciting thing is to have an idea that seems so fully formed and so perfect that it’s hard to deny going ahead with it,” he continues. “It was that simple. It doesn’t matter if you make any money out of it. So many things we’ve done, there’s no money in it.”



The pair’s new exhibition, *Some Of My Best Friends Are Dinosaurs*, combines contemporary art with natural history | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

They started selling the work through auction houses and at art fairs, maintaining the fiction that they had never met The Connor Brothers personally, but were simply acting as their agents. Nobody thought to question the story. In a sense, it was a spoof on the pretentiousness and one-upmanship of the art world.

“We had people coming up to us in a sort of gloating way at art fairs, saying, ‘Actually, I’ve met Brendan and he’s a really interesting guy,’” Golding recalls. “‘Oh, you have?’ – ‘Oh yeah, he really is hilarious.’ That happened several times. It was a wonderful moment.”

In 2014, the pair orchestrated another playful conceit, curating an exhibition, *Curiosities from The Hanbury Collection*, in central London. There was, of course, no such collection. Among the exhibits was the skeleton of a wholphin – a creature born from the mating of a bottlenose dolphin and a false killer whale (real) – and a piece of ambergris, the waxy substance from the intestine of a sperm whale, used to stabilise perfumes (also real).

Other exhibits included *The Seven Sounds of Silence*, recordings made by a man with an oversensitivity to sound, of the quietest places on Earth, which visitors could listen to on telephone handsets. (All fake – including the last recording which could be heard on a handset labelled “Out of Order” – and on which the sound, of course, was exactly the same as on the other handsets.) Then there was the gold-plated hippopotamus skull that once belonged to Pablo Escobar. Another fake.

In the same year, the *Telegraph Magazine* published a story revealing that The Connor Brothers were a hoax. Ironically perhaps, rather than damaging the reputation and the value of the work, the revelation seemed actually to enhance it. The hoax became an intrinsic part of the work itself, and the popularity, and prices,

soared.

At the time of the story's publication, the pair were working out of the basement of a disused pub in Hackney. They now have a studio employing 30 artists creating huge-scale paintings and posters, which are sold through galleries in London, New York and Los Angeles.

When Idris Elba married Sabrina Dhowre in a three-day wedding in Morocco in 2019, among the wedding gifts was one from Prince Harry and Meghan Markle: a Connor Brothers' work from the "pulp fiction" series of a pouting 1950s-style vamp with the caption: "Why fit in when you were born to stand out?"



The Connor Brothers' friendship helped them to recover from the lowest points of their lives | CREDIT: Andrew Crowley

When the story was published in the Mail on Sunday, readers were quick to respond with damning comments – some of which the pair have turned into large artworks for another new Connor Brothers' exhibition, entitled Mythomania, the damning words printed on glowing orange and red backgrounds: "They were robbed if they paid for that rubbish. It looks like it came from someone's skip", and "Tacky, tacky, tacky, ghastly picture from ghastly people with ghastly taste". "People," Golding says with a laugh, "say the meanest things."

As a child, Snelle says he had wanted to be a palaeontologist, and over the years he had built up a small collection of minerals and fossils. In 2019, Snelle and Golding were at the Tucson Gem, Mineral & Fossil Showcase, the largest fair of its kind in the world, where they came across an almost complete, 9ft-long skeleton of a thescelosaurus for sale.

"We'd saved up a bit of money," Golding remembers, "and I was going to take out some of my savings to put a deposit on a house. And Mike just leant over and whispered in my ear, 'Do you want to buy a dinosaur or a house?' So, needless to say, that we bought the dinosaur."

"It was," Snelle adds, "one of the great moments of my life."

They bought it on a layaway plan from a man "who looked just like Indiana Jones". But at the end of the payments, the seller – and the dinosaur – vanished. For reasons that aren't altogether clear, the story of how they attempted to track down both involves Mongolia, a lawyer named Lupe who represented the Mexican drug lord El Chapo, and Bernie Chase, a former high-end car dealer who now runs a prestigious art gallery in New York and once spent two years living in the Dorchester Hotel. The story culminated when Golding and Snelle returned to Tucson earlier this year to confront the dealer, who paid back the money. They have no idea what happened to the dinosaur.

So the 9ft thescelosaurus is not among the exhibits of *Some Of My Best Friends Are Dinosaurs*. But there is the triceratops skull and the various other fossils, minerals, the meteorites and, of course, the piece of the moon. And unlike the gold hippo skull and the *Seven Sounds of Silence*, all of the items are real, sourced from auctions and collectors around the world. But how does one get hold of a piece of the moon? "Well," says Golding, "we built this rocket..."

Some Of My Best Friends Are Dinosaurs runs at *Extraordinary Objects*, Cambridge, until October 2; extraordinaryobjects.co.uk. *Mythomania* is at the *Maddox Gallery*.