

Sibling Revelry

The dream of French-born sisters to work together has led to a line of nature-inspired, home decor pieces

BY CARLA AVOLIO

Saying that French sisters Ariane Bihan and Alexia Maher are up for a challenge is a bit of an understatement. Since starting their home decor business, Authenticaa, last September, the design-savvy siblings have taught themselves everything involved in hand-crafting eco-friendly furnishings out of reclaimed wood and metal. But looking at the razor-sharp detail of the steel zebras, lions and blossoming flowers that decorate their pieces, you'd be forgiven for thinking that they were born with plasma cutters in their hands. Not that they're the type to boast. "The metal was a huge learning curve," says Bihan. "It's a man's world, and people didn't take us seriously. But our mother taught us that we can do anything ourselves, so we never gave up."

And Austin is all the richer for it. Having mastered the Vulcanic arts, the pair are now full-steam ahead with producing their line of striking, nature-inspired pieces, which include mirrors, frames, memory boards and wall art featuring a range of animals. As well as having a naturally beautiful aesthetic, the products are also made with minimal environmental impact. "All our wood is salvaged from old picket fences and pallets from around Austin," says Maher. "We don't use any chemicals, and we make our own stain using vinegar and steel wool."

While Authenticaa (the last two A's represent their first names) might be new, for these sisters it's been a long time coming. "We'd dreamt of working together for 15 years," says Maher, who came to Austin 15 years ago after marrying an American. Five years ago, Bihan was finally persuaded to join her sister in Texas. The women worked in different professions (Bihan running an interior design business, Maher starting the non-profit Open Arms) but always hoped that one day the stars would align. In 2012 the sisters decided to fulfill their dream of working together, leading to what would become Authenticaa. "We really push each other when we're together," says Maher. "It's amazing to look back and see how far we've come."

And their perseverance has paid dividends. With growing online sales (available on authenticaa.com) and products about to hit retail stores, the sisters are outsourcing the cutting of their steel designs to another workshop. "We'll still do the custom pieces in house," says Bihan. "And preparing the wood is something that we need to do ourselves." And in this single task, they concede that they do receive some help. "Our 71-year-old mother helps us dismantle the pallets," says Bihan. "She might be old, but she's stronger than we are."

And with each hand-crafted design, these fearless women give new meaning to the national motto of France—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*, which means "liberty, equality, fraternity." ■



Bihan (above, left) and Maher use a plasma cutter to create their pieces, such as a steel zebra on a wood frame.



JON SHARPLEY (4)