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Mistaken Identity

A chance meeting in New York, a documentary in China, a trip to Vietnam and now a photographic exhibition in Madrid. Meet **The Hilton Brothers**, two photographers on the cutting edge of America's arts scene. Words by **Nick Ross**.



PROVIDED BY THE HILTON BROTHERS

IT ALL STARTED IN NEW YORK. THE Hilton Brothers, aka Chris Makos and Paul Solberg, were about to set off for China. In the 1970s and 1980s Makos had collaborated with legendary pop artist Andy Warhol and in 1982 the two of them had embarked upon a historic trip to China. Now, more than 25 years on, a French TV channel, Canal+, wanted to make a documentary on the journey and asked Makos and Solberg to retrace Warhol's footsteps.

Just before they departed they had a chance meeting with Betsy Fox in New York. The cousin of Rick Mayo-Smith, CEO of the Vietnam-based Indochina Land which owns The Nam Hai Resort in Hoi An, Fox is responsible for much of the company's overseas PR.

"If you're going to be in China," she told them, "come to Vietnam and stay at The Nam Hai. It's so close."

"We thought that after two weeks of China we'd be sick of Asia," admits

Makos, "but we decided to try it. I had dismissed Vietnam before. It was never on the radar."

What they discovered was a country diametrically opposite to all preconceived ideas. It was a land where in every corner they found artistic stimulation, a complete contrast to the "train wreck" images Makos remembers from the media coverage of the war.

"The thing I notice is the sense of forgiveness these people have," says Makos. "If you have it, it is a wild virtue. They are fine with forgiving the Americans and French. When you read the stories and watch the movies, that is wild."

"A lot of our work has been through our travels," adds Solberg. "The culture here is elegant and full of song. The people are gentle and the women beautiful. I don't think we've had a more inspiring trip photographically. We came away with colours. It's so colourful here."

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IN VIETNAM WE TRUST

(Left) Diptychs created out of images shot by Paul Solberg and Christopher Makos on their recent trip to Vietnam. The images will be shown as part of the exhibition *Mistaken Identity*, which will open in Madrid at La Casa Ensendida in early July

The collaboration started when Makos and Solberg spent time together proofing their respective works. Solberg was producing images of flowers seen in a different light and Makos was working on a book of equine portraits called *Equipose*. Together they realised that some of the flowers and horses, with their exquisite colour and intriguing shapes, made very strong images when combined and printed as diptychs. The resulting work was turned into the series called *Hippofolium*.

"We started working together at the time when the Hilton Sisters and Britney Spears - all the shallow elements of American culture - were popular," explains Makos. "We wanted to manufacture something and we wanted a big name, something recognisable. That's how we came up with the The Hilton Brothers."

Since then they have combined a range of different photos including some seminal Warhol portraits which Makos shot in the early 1980s with some of Solberg's images of flowers. This methodology, which the two of them call "sampling," was to culminate in the 2007 series, *Andy Dandy*.

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Their present journey to Vietnam, though, has provided a different angle on their work.

"In this trip, we have taken so many pictures," says Makos, "and we have a whole new body of work which has been so inspiring."

The result is a new collection of diptychs combining a range of elements unique to Vietnam: propaganda art, flora and fauna, the beach life, food, drink, traditional art and traditional ways of life. While it builds on local themes, it avoids the postcard imagery, the prosaic conical hat or child on a buffalo photo that has become the clichéd image of this country.

The work will be shown as part of the exhibition *Mistaken Identity* which will open in Madrid at La Casa Ensendida in early July. For Solberg and Makos, though, this is only the start.

"We miss Vietnam terribly," writes Solberg in an email after returning to New York. "I have a feeling we'll be back."

For more information on *The Hilton Brothers* go to www.thehiltonbrothers.com. 

◦ From Warhol to the Hiltons

Makos's background is well-documented. Born in Massachusetts in 1948, he grew up in California before moving to Paris to study architecture and later, to work as an apprentice with the legendary photographer Man Ray. Once described as "the most modern photographer in America," his photographs have been the subject of numerous exhibitions both in galleries and museums throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, and have appeared in countless magazines and newspapers worldwide. A seminal figure in the contemporary art scene in New York, he is also known for his close friendship and extensive travels with Andy Warhol.

"Warhol was a dedicated artist," explains Makos. "He loved experiences and would always use things like holidays to make art. For Valentine's Day he went through the phonebook and took out the "Harts" page. He made a silk screen out of the page."

In contrast, Solberg is a relative newcomer to the industry. Although he took pictures as a kid, he grew up in Minnesota in a culture where "photography wasn't even a profession."

"I was working in finance," he explains, "and was in a profession where I was emotionally and creatively dying. I was two weeks from leaving when I met Chris. We started naturally, just creating together."