As twins and business partners, Byron and Dexter Peart know what it means to be in a symbiotic relationship. For more than 20 years, the brothers found acclaim in the fashion world, first as impresarios of Scandinavian design and then for their own luxury leather bags. But in the last few years, they pivoted to create a curated online platform for responsibly produced handmade goods. Now they’re helping artisans and makers from all over the world connect with consumers who support slow production and the preservation of craft.

At Goodee World, the brothers are fostering a slower, more intentional approach to making home. After growing up in suburban Ottawa, they now live a hundred metres apart from each other in Habitat 67, Montréal’s famous modular housing complex designed by architect Moshe Safdie. Byron and Dexter see the home as a living organism. The children of Jamaican immigrants, they feel blessed to have been able to form a deep sense of belonging at home their entire lives; now they want to help others form that same sense of rootedness and connection in the places we spend most of our days.

The brothers are strict about what makes it onto the site: not just that the products are beautiful or that they are ethically created, but also that they will endure a long time, to avoid creating more waste and overconsumption: “We asked ourselves what truly needed to exist.”

In this interview, Byron and Dexter spoke to us about the influence of their parents, buying less but better, and their twinship as a superpower.
YOU GUYS HAVE WRITTEN ABOUT GROWING UP IN SUBURBAN OTTAWA. TELL ME ABOUT THE ASPECTS OF YOUR CHILDHOOD HOME THAT HAVE INFLUENCED YOUR WORK.

DEXTER We grew up an immigrant family from Jamaica. My mom was a microbiologist and my dad was an economist. We learned at a really young age the power of work, but also an understanding of the value of things. The things that surrounded us in our homes were very much investment pieces that our parents would buy. But at the same time, we were the first people to have a Sony Betamax [an early video cassette player] out of all our friends. I think it cemented for Byron and me this idea that if something’s high quality or really innovative, then those are the things our parents believed in. But if it wasn’t, our parents just did not buy us junk.

BYRON It was very important for them that we had a relatability and a connection to our roots and our background. Jamaica is a country that does a lot of woodcarving, wood-working, and furniture production. We have vivid memories of the scent of mahogany growing up. These are the types of things that are in our own homes now: a balance of new technology and treasured items from the homeland. Not antiquities, but storied items that have the history and the narrative of the craft and the artisans. I think it’s a common story for immigrants, to find that connection between your current home and your spiritual past home.

ONE OF THE CONCEPTS YOU PRIORITIZE IS “LESS BUT BETTER.” HOW DO YOU PROMOTE THAT SHIFT TOWARD SPENDING MORE MONEY ON FEWER THINGS THAT ARE MORE CONSCIENTIOUSLY CREATED?

DEXTER There’s a firehose of information and marketing out there, and it’s really hard to distill how you would even make a good choice. And at the same time, we’re asking people to be more conscious and smarter about the choices they’re making. So we try to do a lot of that work for them. We try to be very, very disciplined in only putting forward stories and products that meet a certain threshold. We’re also saying that if you already have that thing that’s better in your life, you don’t need to buy more.

I THINK THE WORD TO BRING IN IS VALUE, AS OPPOSED TO PRICE. HOW DO YOU SHOW THE VALUE OF THE THINGS THAT YOU’RE CURATING AND PROMOTING?

DEXTER The play on that is “value” and “values,” right? When we think about the value that we’re creating as a company, it comes from the values of the people and the products. I think consumers—or communities or constituents—are now saying that they either want to learn something, to have something that’s going to last for a long time, or to invest in a company or a brand that shares their values.

We’re never on sale because we’ve done an inordinate amount of work to make sure that we can prove out the value of these companies and these makers.
The way you guys communicate with your community, you put a lot of emphasis on telling stories. What's your philosophy of storytelling?

It comes from our background working in the fashion business for 20 years. We were very uncomfortable with the speed and the transient nature of products that were coming in seasons: telling a quick story and getting out of that story and moving on to the next one. That's how the system's built. You just want to put the picture up on the site, put a quick caption, and move on. We've always been like, “Okay, we could follow that system, or we could create a slower environment.” We wanted to tell the stories of the makers and their communities.
DO THINGS THAT COME FROM GOOD STORIES ALSO GENERATE GOOD STORIES?

BYRON When products are made with that good vibe, I think it sort of emanates to the next person who has it. And then from a craftsmanship perspective, a lot of the things that we’re thinking about are made with natural materials, and those natural materials, obviously, over time age, whether it’s with their patina or whether it’s a scratch or a dent. I think everything on the site that we have right now is really beautiful, but I would say a lot of it is going to be way more beautiful in 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, or 20.

DEXTER The generation before us bought things that they knew they would grow into. So they were buying with a longer lens and a longer view on time. That’s some of what we are trying to bring back.

HOW DO YOU DO THAT?

BYRON We see time as a metric or an arbiter in the making process. Not just slow living but actually slow production. So we’re not going to put pressure on our suppliers to produce things in mass quantities when we know that it takes time to make something well and in time-honoured traditions. When the product starts to move, we don’t rush things overnight, like you might do on Amazon and have next-day delivery. There’s a sustainability impact just from how long it will take.

DEXTER Another aspect is time as a function of anticipation. You buy something or you’re getting something, and then there’s this waiting time that used to be part of the luxury of the experience.

BYRON And then following that, I think that the biggest thing that we think about is how a product lives over time and its afterlife over generations. It’s a totally different train of thought. I mean, we were in the fashion business. Most people would keep a pair of jeans for six to nine months. Our responsibility is to ensure that when someone brings an item into their life or gives it as a gift, it has durability and longevity baked into it. That it’s not going to be trendy, and that it’ll functionally last. Then you can carry this when you’re living in that apartment or moving to another part of the world, and it’s still relevant there as well, too.

WHAT ARE SOME FORMS OF PRODUCTION THAT YOU REALLY ADMIRE?

DEXTER There are so many. One that comes to mind is when Byron and I were in Burkina Faso, we went to a weaving centre where the women would come in—this idea of “made by hand” often means “made by women”—and they’d bring their kids. There were spools of yarn in random colours all around, and they would just start making fabric. We sat there for hours, and these women were working and sometimes dancing. They were creating these visual tableaux that were as beautiful as anything I’ve seen in design schools around the world. That human element that you can never reproduce is so powerful. You see these items and sometimes you think, “It’s someone’s art,” or “It’s handmade.” But it’s really someone’s life. It’s someone’s story.

BYRON The preservation of the craft is equally important. It can’t be overstated that because of the way of the world and globalization, some of these traditions and techniques and skills are threatened. So how do we preserve those? It’s an important part of the handwork economy to ensure that it passes along through generations and that we continue to see the value in these designs.
Are you guys makers in a tangible sense? Do you do stuff with your hands?

Dexter We’re a bit like the person who loves the art of making food but doesn’t know how to cook. We are in our happiest place if you find us in a factory, a workshop, a farm, a maker environment. I find it so cool and fascinating, and with Goodee, we are always trying to show the maker process behind the scenes. Yes, we do draw, we do design, we do all of that. But our excellence comes from working alongside the best in the business. It’s the craftspeople that are the real experts. It’s never us.

Byron Because we’re twins, we understand the symbiotic relationship extremely well. That’s just the natural way that we see collaborations. Often what happens is people are good with their hands but don’t possess the commercialization end of it. When we end up in these ateliers or factories, they’re equally excited to meet the people who can help tell their story and bring a new level of creativity to the work, so it resonates in a global market. It’s a beautiful dance.

So you’re saying that your twinship empowers you guys to better collaborate with others, too?

Byron A hundred per cent. We recognize that day in and day out. It’s a competitive advantage. I do believe that we have a secret weapon, in terms of how we see the world. A lot of people feel that they have to lift everything on their own, and that becomes very challenging. The way that we’ve been raised is that we recognize the power of our twinship and that we can do more together. Collaboration and co-operation have been foundational to us from a biological standpoint, but it’s also how we run our business.

Dexter We are living in a complex world. People are different all around the world, but the one thing that really stuck out to us is that design is a universal idea, even though it might not be seen the same way universally. I’d like to think it’s where the future is going, where you’re going to have these various points of view. Some of them are going to be easier to get to, and some of them are going to be harder, and you need both to get something that feels more diverse.

You’re engaging with artisans from around the world; people who are in completely different milieux and contexts. How do you navigate those differences?

Dexter We’re a bit like the person who loves the art of making food but doesn’t know how to cook. We are in our happiest place if you find us in a factory, a workshop, a farm, a maker environment. I find it so cool and fascinating, and with Goodee, we are always trying to show the maker process behind the scenes. Yes, we do draw, we do design, we do all of that. But our excellence comes from working alongside the best in the business. It’s the craftspeople that are the real experts. It’s never us.