

AMY FINE COLLINS
ANISH KAPOOR
CHARLOTTE MCKINNEY
EVA DOLL
JENA MALONE
MARIN HOPPER
MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV
SANDRA CHOI
THE STARN TWINS
AND MORE

asij

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THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

ARTWORK BY

Mike & Doug Starn

PORTRAIT AND INTERVIEW BY

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INTRODUCTION BY

David A. Ross



MIKE & DOUG STARN have evolved an art practice from a path that seems so circuitous and unlikely it seems it could only have been the product of a particularly convoluted post-modern novelist — you know, the kind of widely adored writer whose books just could not be translated into movies. Identical twin brothers growing up in suburban New Jersey, they (like many twins) have always lived in two worlds: one quite quotidian, and the other an invention of their own completely private world.

Graduating from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1985—a particularly pregnant moment in the evolution of the art world’s relationship to photography—the Starns were more interested in how a photograph could lead to a more complex experience of time than they were to any of the medium’s formal capacities. Uninterested in notions of “decisive moments,” or the poetry of persona or place, they saw photography as a crude tool that could be used to explore and visualize notions of consciousness itself. They made photographic works with tools invented to capture and document the visible universe to explore the hard-to-see —the ineffable. They treated the photographic print as a quasi-sculptural element; tearing, taping fractured images into complex montage structures. Pursuing new ways to construct complex images, they moved beyond simply taping or otherwise mounting paper prints to working with images developed directly onto transparent film, held together with pipes and clamps. And yet, in a fashion that might seem contradictory, their photographic work is linked to the medium’s underlying technology, enabling light to often be both the subject and object of their work.

The Starns quickly found themselves in the thick of the New York art world. Barely five years out of school, they were one of the great Leo Castelli’s last new enthusiasms, as he happily championed their work in the last decade of his famed gallery. But success did not immediately follow—even with support from arguably the greatest American art dealer of the post-war generation. The Starns didn’t seem to fit neatly into any of the existing art world categories, and sadly enough, the art market is still in many ways hobbled by this need to put artists into neat little boxes. But Mike and Doug found enough support from collectors who sensed that there was something brewing in this somewhat contradictory two-man practice, and the brothers themselves realized that they would need (and hopefully flourish in) a situation where they could freely invent a practice that remained on the edge of what a more traditional art-collecting public could easily grasp and buy into.

Yet contradiction is central to understanding how their work could range from images of horses, leaves, moths, Jesus Christ, and the Buddha to the work that has brought them to broad international acclaim: *Big Bambú*. The brothers are interested in the ways in which things are connected, the ways in which things grow, the ways in which we are all part of a singular living system on this planet earth. This is not some religious exercise; in fact, neither of the brothers are particularly religious. Nor is it an action tied to a dramatic demonstration of environmental activism. For in thinking about the ways in which things connect and grow, how the rhizomatic nature of thought (as per the French philosophers

Deleuze and Guattari) can be expressed by the actual rhizomatic growth of bamboo, the Starns found their unique way to create a living sculptural equivalent of an universal invisible force.

I recall quite vividly my first visit to their Beacon studio (the enormous former Tallix Foundry). I had known Mike and Doug since 1984 when, as Director of Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art, I included them in a memorable survey exhibition of Boston’s rich photography community—a community that included Nan Goldin, Mark Morrisroe, Nick Nixon, and many other great artists. I had always loved the Starns’ complex photographic constructions, and had visited them at their former studio in Brooklyn to see the large-scale pipe and clamp photo-spheres, and even then marveled at the level of their ambition and courage.

But nothing could have prepared me for my first view of *Big Bambú*, as the very idea of a work of art that involved the ongoing collaboration of a team of rock climbers, thousands of bamboo poles, and literally miles of that colorful rock climbing cordage. And as I watched Doug, Mike, and their crew scramble through the huge maze of tied together bamboo poles, I saw, for the first time in my career as a curator, a work of art that truly defied all previous categories. For this was a work that was literally and figuratively alive, a work that was in the process of actually growing and moving from one end of the cavernous industrial space to the other, as if guided by its own imbedded intelligence, but in fact the product of a set of natural processes and intuitive decisions made by the Starns and their team. In a sense, it was a work that, once started, and assuming continual nourishment, could continue to move through that space like some restless prowling animal.

The subsequent successes of *Big Bambú* projects—in New York on the roof of the Met, in Venice on the Grand Canal, at the Macro in Rome, or at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem—come as no surprise. The experience of these works developed in relationship to a specific site or situation has astounded and delighted even the most skeptical within and outside of the art world. But for me, besides the original studio-bound work in Beacon, the bamboo work that had captured my imagination is the work I’ve yet to see—the work known as *Big Bambú #8*. It is a bamboo ship resting atop an actual Japanese bamboo forest on the island of Teshima. Unlike most previous works, this is a work for the permanent collection of the Naoshima Art Complex. Like its predecessors, it is made from bamboo poles lashed together with climbing cord, but this work is tied to the still-growing bamboo of the forest itself. The concept of a growing work of art which remains alive and changing as part of its nature, makes it all the more remarkable.

With all this activity, I was quite impressed on my most recent visit to see that as the bamboo work has intensified, so has the Starns’ ongoing photographic work. In process was a remarkable photo-based stained-glass construction that will soon be installed on the lawn in front of the Princeton University Art Museum. But perhaps the oddest project (also in process) is a major work exploring our very small place in a vast solar system. This work will adorn the outer wall of the entrance to the new American Embassy in Moscow. Seems to me remarkably appropriate.

DAVID A. ROSS

AS IF: *Five Thousand Arms To Hold You* is your latest piece from your series *Big Bambú*, which opened last year and transformed the Israel Museum's Billy Rose Art Garden with a monumental installation of bamboo and rope. Can you tell me about the inspiration behind that particular series?

Doug Starn: The concept of *Big Bambú* has nothing to do with bamboo; it represents the invisible architecture of life and living things.

Mike Starn: Every person, every culture has been built with this architecture, and that architecture is chaos, the random interdependence of moments, creating growth or change. *Big Bambú* is the medium of life.

DS: What we are speaking about is this: the bamboo poles and ropes holding them together in random structure are in reference to the invisible interconnected factors that make us who we are, and culture what it is.

MS: Our philosophy of life is that life is created through interconnected random moments. We gain footholds on circumstances and use them to move through life—swimming on the chaos medium of life; chaos is a law of the universe,

thought that was a good thing for Israel, it's something of a palate cleansing.

DS: To go back to Mike's comment about chaos, most people's connotation of chaos is negative and denotes violence; but we see chaos as pattern, as interaction, and as beautiful, powerful, unstructured structure—

MS: —a dynamism that finds its way, like water rushing down a river, it's chaotic, but it is a beautiful, wonderful force. And that's what life is. So, when we built *5,000 Arms to Hold You*, which is in reference to the Bodhisattva with 5,000 arms— those arms will hold you and nurture you but will also sometimes strike you down. The piece is meant to be seen from inside looking out, just like we are inside our bodies and minds looking out. When you can recognize that you are connected with the world, fighting loses its importance. Fighting is about control, and control normally comes from fear.

AS IF: This series, *Big Bambú*, has been exhibited around the world starting in your studio in Beacon, New York, followed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the 54th Venice Biennale, Rome, Japan, and Israel.



**THE NO MIND NOT THINKS
NO THINGS BELKLIP, 2015**

25.5 x 88.5 in / European private collection

and we recognize it as part of life that we all flow through every day, but more than flow through, we all use chaos *all* the time—

DS: —and this invisible structure is demonstrable physically. We realized that we could make an artwork that was created through random vectors coming together that would be big enough that you could enter into, ascend, and descend...

MS: *Five Thousand Arms To Hold You* was up during the war in the summer of '14. The museum told us that 120,000 people went through it and that it was a real oasis, a place people could go and momentarily forget about that terrible conflict. In Jerusalem's Old City, Christians, Jews, and Muslims for the most part exist together very well; there are different quarters but there's a lot of perforation. It's the rest of the city and country that's so polarized. There is a chaos in the old city, which is fantastic; inside those walls is a beautiful chaos. Our work has a lot of tendency towards Buddhism, and we

When you created your first installation in Beacon, did you know it would become this expansive project?

MS: Well, we intended it to be a very long term project, a living organism with an indefinite lifespan.

DS: It was a very important idea for us, and we moved our studio from Red Hook, Brooklyn, to Beacon, New York, where we could get the high ceilings and the square footage we needed.

MS: It started out as a pure concept that we were demonstrating but using bamboo as the medium to express the random vectors of the philosophy, the work came to life in an unexpected way. To actually create and build your own wilderness with your friends is an incredibly liberating and joyful activity—

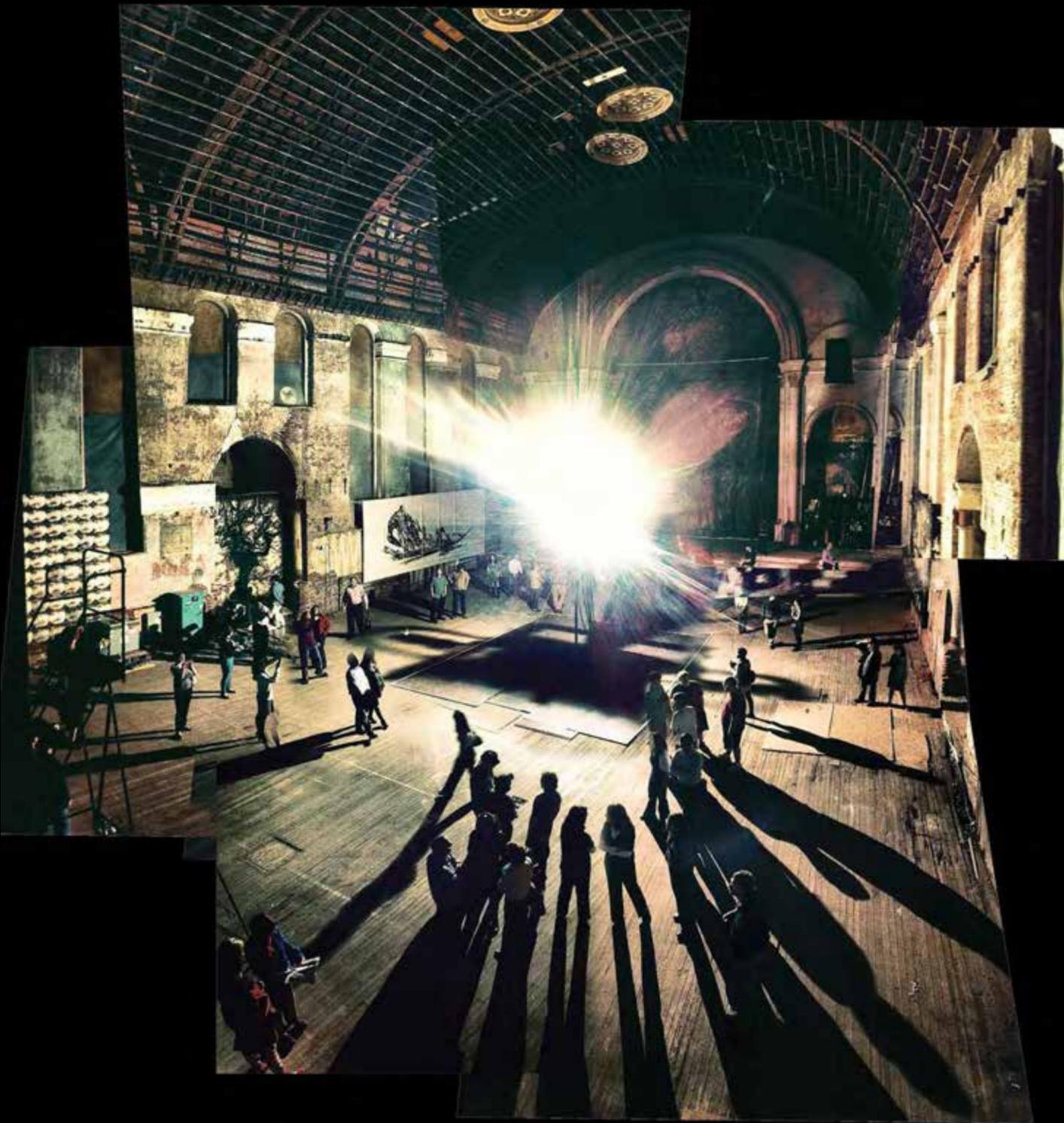
DS: This wilderness, this *wildness*, is built from within, there are no scaffolds or anything—part of this artwork, this organism of *Big Bambú*, is the rock climbers that perform this philosophy. They are a great bunch of people that I think



STRUCTURE OF THOUGHT 21, 2008 / 120 x 100.25 in / Collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio



BLACK PULSE 4, (LAMBDA), (detail) 2002 / 110 x 144 in / Collection of the artists



GRAVITY OF LIGHT, 2012 / Exhibition view / Cincinnati Art Museum at the Holy Cross Immaculata Church



Close up on the Starns' 50,000-watt carbon arc lamp: the solo source of light to the seven monumental wall photo-based artworks in **GRAVITY OF LIGHT**

inevitably have, just through their rock-climbing mind-set, understood the fluid nature of the structure...and of course the heights that we build, the climbers are suited to this, you know it's dangerous, the work is literally on the edge.
MS: There are no rules in *Big Bambú*. The people who visit, the museum visitors, feel that and there are always comments about liberation and joy.... This isn't an artwork that you look at and then move on, you exist within the artwork and hang out in it...and feel yourself and others as part of the artwork.

AS IF: How did the idea germinate?

DS: It's our philosophy of the way life works, something we have always talked about.
MS: It existed in our earlier work as well. This is reflected in the photographic work we have been doing since the '80s. We have always worked with the idea of things coming together. Nothing is monolithic in itself; everything is made of smaller pieces. We printed the large-scale photographic pieces in the darkroom on separate sheets of paper and then we scotch taped them together. The earliest work was about vision, which is not raw information, it is perception that is built in your mind. Those photographs were sculptures to us. The scotch tape represented that humble construction of perception that is going on in your mind every

minute of your life, and with *Big Bambú*, we replaced the photographs with bamboo and replaced the tape with rope.

AS IF: What is the purpose of using colorful rock-climbing rope to join the bamboo?

MS: They are the random moments and actions becoming interactions creating connections and it's really the connections that create the strength. That is why we don't use rope that visually recedes, we want to draw your attention to those connections; that's the activity, that's the conversation that the climbers are having and those are the decisions that are being made. This is not a static sculpture in any way. For us, this incarnation is this living object, this performance of life.

AS IF: You've said *Big Bambú* is constantly developing and evolving, it's in constant motion like waves and tides.

DS: So, this moving structure, the first incarnation of *Big Bambú* that we have here in the studio, is made up of maybe two thousand poles; first a mass is built, and then it reaches out as far as it can and then touches down creating an arch, and then we start untying the poles from the far side and feed them through the arch at the front and tie them in creating a new mass—

MS: —generating a forward momentum. The sculpture is always complete, but never finished. It's always the same thing, but always new—
DS: —this forward momentum continues until it reaches the other end of the studio 300 feet away, and then it starts back again in the other direction. It's constantly reinventing itself and is in constant motion.

AS IF: It represents the flow of life.

MS & DS: Yes.

AS IF: Much of your work comprises trees as seen in your photography, and bamboo as seen in your sculptures—what is it about trees and bamboo that inspire you?

DS: A tree is hierarchal structure, it starts with the trunk and it continues out to smaller and smaller limbs, but if you take that hierarchal structure and silhouette it you see the hierarchal structure collapse into a rhizome, a structure where connections happen everywhere. For us, that's the structure of thought. As for the bamboo, we are creating the rhizome.

MS: It's about all those connections—because nothing is monolithic—the strength of anything is in the connections—a lot of our work deals with natural imagery and I guess we are just interested in organic growth and it represents our thought process and our philosophies.



AS IF: Right around the time when your art dealer, Leo Castelli, passed away you began an intense study of how the sun affects life on earth. Your research included astronomy, religion, philosophy, botany, and cognitive science; you were also artists in residence at NASA. Did this eclectic research change the way you approach your work?

MS: Research has always interested us, and that research imbues the things that we imagine and we want to create. But *light*, for us, is actually more than this. You can't get away from the classic metaphors of thought, intelligence, and imagination that light inspires, but for us it's more than that, it's about the *gravity* of light.

DS: In our concept, light is what controls us, what makes us up, who we are. Light is what we love, what we hate, economics, politics; it's what you're thinking about doing tomorrow. To us these are all realized as light.

MS: And we are each drawn to different gravities depending on how much mass each of us gives to these things, like how the tides pull to the moon but they are also held to the earth. Gravities work against each other and that fascinates us, and that took us to studying moths that are living in the dark and are drawn to the light. There is actually no known reason for this behavior: researchers found that this behavior is not for eating, it's not for mating, it's a mystery. We've also been doing seascapes since the '80s, and the reason we are drawn to the seascapes is that they are billions of years old and yet always new, they are never the same thing, like human culture is always new.

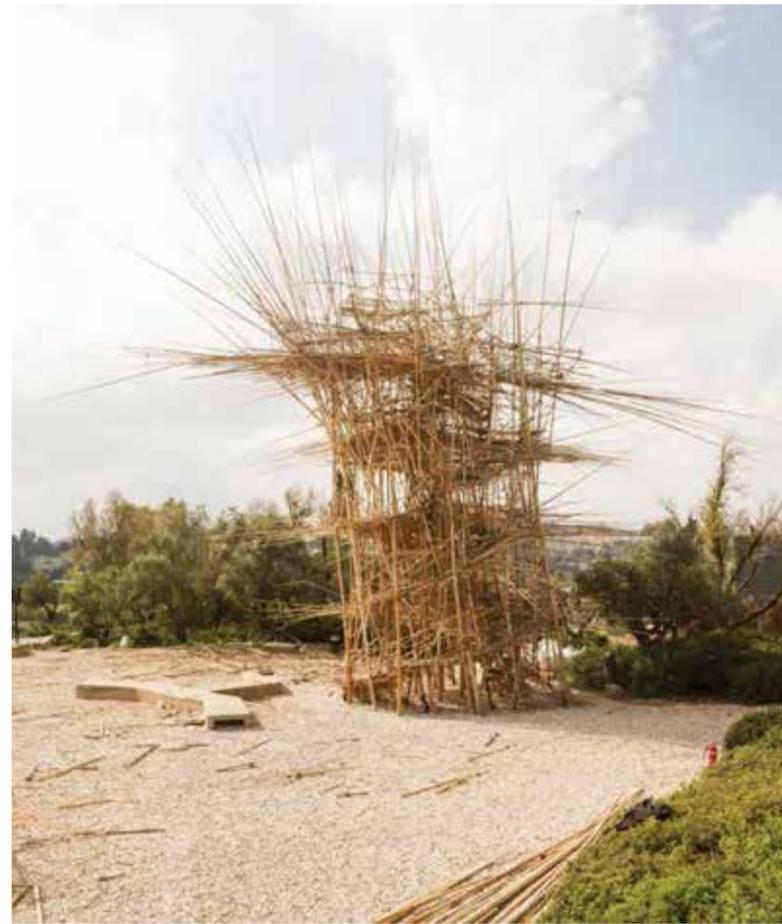
AS IF: Your work is very dynamic, from photography to sculpture, you make the physicality of the materials central to it. In 1986 you said, "we want to make the viewer

feel the photography as a painter makes you feel the paint with drips and brush strokes." You layer and combine various portions of an image to create something very textural. Can you tell me about how you approach your photography, and by that I mean what you see, what you use to capture it, and at what point does the manipulation of an image start to begin?

DS: Photography is a tool we have been using since we were working in the darkroom at 13 years old. It's something that we are very comfortable with and it's our outlet. We discuss a lot about what we want to work on, and when we actually do go out and shoot, we pass the camera back and forth, then we look at the images on the computer and work in Photoshop. **MS:** Sometimes we are just exploring images for months and figuring out what's in them. We have so many pictures we haven't done anything with, and once in a while we'll go back



BIG BAMBÙ, MINOTAUR HORN HEAD, (detail view), 2012–2015
MACRO, Testaccio, Rome, Italy



BIG BAMBÙ, 5,000 ARMS TO HOLD YOU, 2014–2015
Permanent installation / Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel



BIG BAMBÙ, 5,000 ARMS TO HOLD YOU, (work in progress) 2014
Permanent installation / Collection of The Israel Museum Jerusalem, Israel

CONVEX DEAD!, 1991

75 x 40 x 12 in / Collection of the artists



to them and make something out of them. It's a long process.

DS: In the studio there is a lot of experimentation using different mediums to see how they contribute to the work. We might use rice paper or glass, for instance.

MS: We want you to see a record of the artwork's making, we are not hiding it, we want you to see how it came together physically. It's the same thing in regard to the bamboo structures where we cut out sections and hang them on the wall after the project is over. You are seeing the conversation that the climbers had together and a sense of their activity.

AS IF: What does your work say about you?

MS: Well, this idea that nothing is monolithic might come from the fact that we are one thing, one artist, yet also separate things. We are identical twins—one fertilized egg split into two....

AS IF: How would you describe the type of artists you are?

DS: I don't really have a good answer. That's for somebody else to say.

AS IF: The *New York Times* published a piece on your *Big Bambú* MET installation, *You Can't, You Don't, And You Won't Stop*. You had over 600,000 visitors and the *Times* called it a "blockbuster." It was interesting to have an art installation being referred to as a blockbuster. How do you feel when you see so many people being drawn to your work?

MS: We are very shy, we don't interact well, we are socially awkward, but there is always that desire to communicate, so it was very humbling



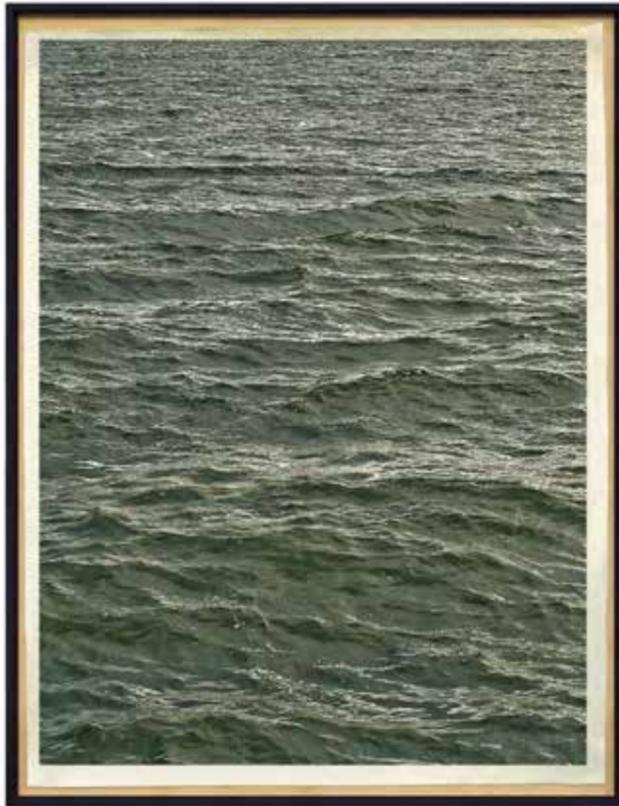
STRETCHED CHRIST, 1985–1986

28 x 142 x 45 in / Private collection

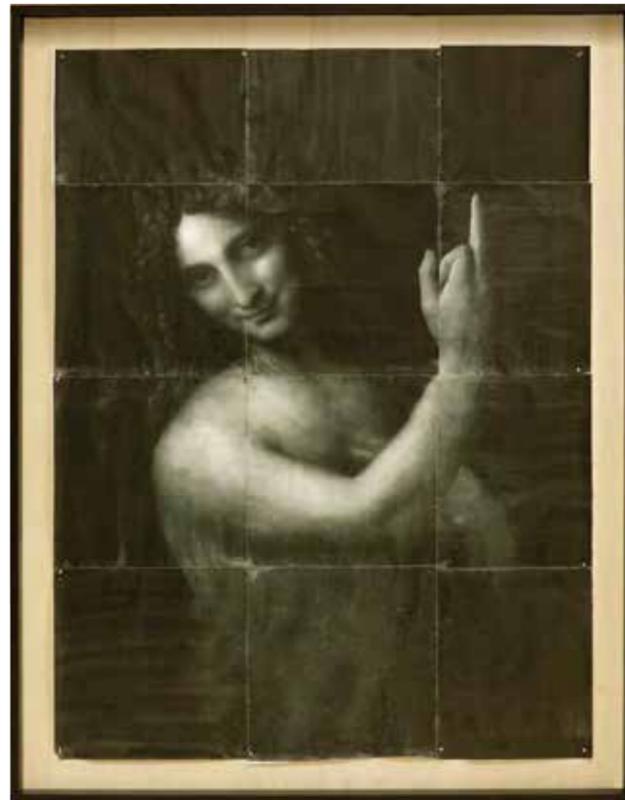


SPHERE OF INFLUENCE, 1990–1992 / 168 in diameter / Collection of the artists

SEASCAPE 5, 2008
75 x 58 in. / Private collection



AND GOD RIDES HIGH UP IN THE ORDINARY SKY, 2004–2010
77 1/2 x 55 1/8 in / Collection of the artists



SNO GUANYIN, 2005 / Artist Proof / Private collection

and rewarding to be able to communicate so well to so many people. Most of the visitors are not getting everything of course, but I think they are getting the germ of the idea: the freedom and rebellion, and the wildness that we all have inside ourselves.

AS IF: Mike, describe Doug's creative process.

MS: (Laughs)

DS: Are you going to ask me the same thing (laughs)?

MS: I wish I had an answer.

DS: It's basically what we already talked about. It starts with a conversation that develops.

MS: There's legend of twin languages and this is our language, art making, and it's really fluid between us.

AS IF: Do you ever have arguments?

MS: Sure, we fight.

AS IF: Who wins?

MS: Whoever is the least fed up at that point. Furniture sometimes flies!

AS IF: How influential has your generation been to your work?

MS: Well, I think rock 'n' roll was a pretty big influence. The creative flow of bands is similar to the way we work with embellishing and thinking, adding to it, listening to it, deciding to change it.

DS: And the volume, the freedom, the rebellion, melody.

AS IF: Do you ever shock yourselves?

DS: Yeah....

MS: While working with light we got interested in black. Black is two wonderfully opposing things: it's the complete absence of light, but it's also the complete absorption of light. Carbon in science is known as a black body radiator, meaning it absorbs all light, but in the right circumstances can emit that same light...and one way that is done is to take two carbon rods, send 600 volts through them, creating a plasma between them. Plasma is the fourth state of matter: it's not liquid, gas, or solid, it's something else—when electrons leave the nucleus, it creates an unbelievably bright light, an open flame that burns at 6,000 degrees; we use it to light up a museum exhibition titled *Gravity Of Light*. It's brilliant, violent, and it always surprises us when we find ourselves in its light.

AS IF: The Big Bambú; You Can't, You Can't, You Don't, And You Won't Stop; The No-Mind Not-Thinks No-Things; To Find God Not The Devil's Insides; AllEverythingThatsYou. How do you come up with some of these titles and what are you doing when you come up with them?

DS: (Laughs) It's the hardest part, sometimes we just take lyrics from songs like, *You Can't, You Don't, And You Won't Stop*, which is from the Beastie Boys. We've used some Nick Cave lyrics too.

MS: *No-Mind Not-thinks No-Things* is Buddhist. *Big Bambú* came from Cheech and Chong, it was an album that we loved back in the early '70s. We are twins, we have long hair and looked like stoners....people came up with nicknames for twins and we got Cheech and Chong. So,

when we started building this giant bamboo structure we started to refer to it as the *Big Bambú* and it seemed to be appropriate.

AS IF: What do you listen to when you are working?

DS: A lot of Stones.

MS: Nick Cave and Beastie Boys.

AS IF: Your Big Bambú series is created in response to the venue they are in to characterize the place where they are constructed. So, it's AS IF you were to create a Big Bambú in Abu Dhabi. What would it say?

MS: We actually were thinking about doing a project in the Emirates. Well, when I was over there I was so struck by the water. You have the desert of course, but the water is such a huge presence and it was the source of their trading economy for centuries because of the Gulf, and they have an old boating culture there. Now the Gulf is where the gas comes from. So the idea that comes to mind is inspired by the natural gas rigs that are there, so we would have to do a floating *Big Bambú* out on the Gulf, maybe as a giant gas rig.

BBÚ JUJU PAINTING MV3, 2010–2011

105 x 205 x 35 in / Fragment from *Big Bambú* installations on the roof of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the 54th Venice Biennale / Collection of the artists



