

NY CULTURE | MAY 12, 2010

# Branching Out Atop the Met Museum

*With 'Big Bambú,' Doug and Mike Starn Have Erected a Surrogate Forest, At Once Artificial and Natural*

By KAREN WILKIN

From below, it's like wandering through a bamboo grove. We thread among poles, some surprisingly slim, some remarkably fat, gathered in casual clumps that tilt in different directions as they extend upward into an enormous tangle of even more varied lengths of bamboo. Frail multicolored ropes—red, blue, dull green, orange—dangle from above like aerial roots. Alerted by these unfettered lines of color, we spot the countless, erratically spaced nodes of rope, in many colors and many scales, that lash the poles together, some carefully wound, others neatly crisscrossed, still others urgently bundled.



Look up into the tangle, and it all seems graphic and random, a scribble of clashing strokes silhouetted against the sky. Then we notice how high that tangle reaches and how potent the interior rhythms are that punctuate the not-so-random accumulation of poles. Shifts in density created by clusters of strokes—now more open, now more closed—animate and syncopate the upper regions, like variations in the density of a canopy of trees with different habits of growth. Some bamboo canes retain their dried

leaves—delicate brown fronds flicker at the upper edges of the “nest” of poles.

Suddenly, we think we get it. This exuberant invention, “Big Bambú,” a monumental structure designed by the twin brothers Mike and Doug Starn for the Metropolitan Museum’s Cantor Roof Garden this summer, can be read as a kind of surrogate forest, artificial but made of natural materials, with trunks rising from the ground plane and swelling open masses of “branches” overhead. The metaphor seems more plausible when we learn that the brothers describe the work not as “a static sculpture, but as an organism that we are part of—helping it to move along.”

The roughly 30-foot-high, 40-by-100-foot section now complete is just the beginning. Work will continue on “Big Bambú” during its entire stay on the roof terrace—through Oct. 31; the rock climbers who assemble the structure, lashing the lengths of bamboo together, will raise it to about 50 feet on one side, 40 on another, adding poles of varying lengths and thicknesses and creating a network of internal walkways as they go. The installation’s subtitle, “You Can’t, You Don’t, and You Won’t Stop” (after a Beastie Boys lyric), encapsulates the open-ended process. But despite the first section’s potent evocation of a metaphorical grove, the eventual structure, we are told, will resemble a giant breaking wave.



Associated Press

Visitors to the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art can interact with 'Big Bambú.

When we peer upward into the complicated mass of the “forest canopy,” a sweeping arc of densely grouped poles announces itself, cutting across the explosive tangle. If we try to follow the arc’s trajectory visually, we eventually locate a pair of widely separated gates at ground level. Oriented by these entry points, we can more easily discover that they are linked by a generous double loop that swoops, climbs and falls within the tangle; we note, too, along the way, handrails, a balcony, some expedient steps. Can we get up there? We can—if we schedule an appointment with the museum, sign an agreement, and wear flat, rubber-soled shoes; small groups of ticket-holders can take escorted tours of the elevated walkways.

Up there, it’s like walking among tree tops. We see into and through the tangle and begin to comprehend both its density and unpredictability, surprised by its relatively open center. On one side, there’s the man-made landscape of the Met’s roofs, an incomprehensible geometry of masonry, steel and skylights; on the other, the pillowy expanse of Central Park’s treetops, now a delectable quilt of varied spring greens. We look across to the skyline, down at Cleopatra’s Needle. Shifting our attention, we become engaged by the many methods used to lace the poles beneath our feet, a staccato pattern of repetitive loops, assertive X’s, tidy chains. The spiraling path rises steeply, then descends. Too soon, we’re back on the ground, exhilarated and longing to reascend.

Is “Big Bambú” a significant sculpture? No—it’s more of a phenomenon. But it’s a delightful addition to the Met for the next six months—a temporary, ecologically correct folly designed to entertain. Like 18th-century follies, with their references to classical temples or medieval ruins, “Big Bambú” provokes meditation on larger issues. If we can concentrate on anything other than the ravishing views, we can ponder the meaning of growth, the intersection of the natural and the man-made, sustainability, the nature of sculpture, and maybe even the motion of the sea, if that breaking-wave metaphor proves legible. I plan to return at intervals to see how “Big Bambú” turns out—and to walk the next pathway as soon as it’s finished.

—Ms. Wilkin writes about art for the Journal.