

ART REVIEW

Sculpture Is a Trip for Twins and Met



Big Bambú: This walk-on sculpture on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Doug and Mike Starn will continue to grow — as high as 50 feet up — over the summer as more bamboo stalks are added.

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Published: June 3, 2010

Summer on the Metropolitan Museum's roof has typically meant circling a pedestal or two before moving on to cocktails and the view. But with "Big Bambú," a walk-in/walk-on, site-specific, thoroughly exhilarating sculpture by the twin brothers Doug and Mike Starn, the museum has raised the bar.

Five thousand bars, actually, each one a 30-to-40-foot stalk of bamboo. Roped together in crisscrossing formations, they make up a giant wave that crests some 50 feet above the Met's rooftop. Winding ramps tunnel through the sculpture, turning visitors into dazed, tentative surfers.

"Big Bambú" is a calculated risk, but a risk nonetheless. The Met has never done anything this transformative and interactive with its roof, although the annual summer installations have been getting more ambitious over the last couple of years. In 2006 Cai-Guo Qiang used smoke shells to generate a black cloud over the museum each day at noon; last summer Roxy Paine took up most of the roof garden with his stainless-steel lightning bolt, "Maelstrom."

Naturally, erecting the Starns' giant jungle gym on top of the city's largest museum involved much legal and technical

wrangling. The Starns have an earlier version of "Big Bambú" in their Beacon, N.Y., studio, but its construction was largely improvised; at the Met they had to work with architects and structural engineers. The curator Anne Strauss, who invited the Starns to do the project after seeing the upstate "Bambú," wanted visitors to be able to appreciate the sculpture from the inside.

The city's Fire and Buildings Departments had to give their blessings. Rigorous tests, with 17,000 pounds of sandbags, were performed. Timed tickets and guided tours were established, along with airport-strict rules about footwear (no heels or sandals) and carry-ons (all bags, cameras and other loose items must be stashed in lockers).

At ground level "Big Bambú" functions in much the same way as Mr. Paine's immersive "Maelstrom." You come off the elevator and into a canopied bamboo grove, walking among the stalks that support the ramps. Only when you emerge into open space at the south end of the roof can you apprehend the sculpture in its entropic, towering glory.

Right now you can only tour the western half of "Big Bambú," which rises some 40 feet above the roof garden; by midsummer

"Big Bambú" rises some 40 feet above the roof garden at the Met.

The bamboo is roped together in crisscrossing formations.



the slightly taller eastern portion, which is still under construction, will be open.

Your guide, who might be a rock climber or an art history major, leads you and about 14 others up a ramp to a south-facing platform. After a brief talk, which allows you to find your sea legs, you move up another ramp to the north side (currently the highest accessible point).

From here you can see all the way to the George Washington Bridge. Then the ramp loops back on itself, and you're headed south again, pausing to sit in a clever built-in chair that overlooks Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park. The tour concludes at a platform in the southwest corner, with open views of the Midtown skyline.

Along the way you feel the ramps flexing under your footsteps. You run your hands along the stalks and hear the wind moving through the leaves that crown the sculpture. (Sound is one of the stranger elements of the experience; it's not quiet up there, exactly, with the Met's air-conditioning equipment on a nearby roof and the crowd chattering just below, but the rustling sounds overhead make you feel very far away.)

As you ascend, you can see the artists and their assistants working on the eastern half of the sculpture — clambering hand over foot as they lash stalks together with brightly colored mountaineers' twine. It wasn't always so easy for the Starns; the brothers say that they made the Beacon version of Big Bambú partly to get over their fear of heights. (A word to the acrophobic: Don't look down at your feet, because the spacing of the bamboo allows glimpses of the roof's floor below.)

The Starns aren't conventional sculptors. They emerged in the late 1980s as photographers. Until "Big Bambú" they were best known for torn-and-taped photo-objects that linked photography to bodily systems and the natural sciences.

Photography has a role here too. The Starns have positioned cameras at the top of the sculpture, recording the construction process and the movements of visitors. They plan to turn these images into a book or a digital time-lapse portrait.

But as the guides will tell you, "Big Bambú" isn't a photo set so much as a vascular system or a giant piece of connective tissue. And as you trek through it, you do feel a bit like the scientists in "Fantastic Voyage."

Other kinds of mind-body trips come to mind. The Starns, after all, took the name "Big Bambú" from an album by Cheech and Chong. Their subtitle, "You Can't, You Don't and You Won't Stop," borrows from a Beastie Boys refrain and is more innocuous; it's meant to remind you that the sculpture is a perpetual work in progress.

As anyone who has been up on the High Line knows, an elevation of just a couple of stories can shift your perception exponentially. "Big Bambú" is like this; technically it's an extension of the roof garden, but it has a very different relationship to the museum and the city below.

It's organic and architectonic, a seascape and a skyscraper. It's as highbrow as Richard Serra's "Torqued Ellipses" or as lowbrow as the Coney Island Cyclone. It's as versatile and yielding as the material it's made of, which is used for fabric, food, scaffolding and many other things.

And it's all the things the Met normally isn't: flexible, ephemeral, permissive.

"Big Bambú" continues through Oct. 31 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710; metmuseum.org. Visitors who want to walk on the sculpture must pick up tickets for a guided tour and wear flat-soled, closed-toe shoes (no sandals allowed). The full list of rules is at metmuseum.org/special/big_bambu/guidelines.asp.