

sculpture

October 2010
Vol. 29 No. 8

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org



Reveling in Chaos Doug and Mike Starn

BY CHRISTINE TEMIN





Big Bambú, 2010. View of installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.



Stately and symmetrical, the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art opens into rigorously ordered spaces that guide viewers systematically along a rectilinear path. But now, and through the end of October, those visitors who make their way to the elevator that leads to the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden will enter a world of chaos. Intentional chaos. On top of the Met, viewers confront a forest of 5,000 bamboo poles, each one 30 to 40 feet long, lashed together with 50 miles of brightly colored nylon cord. The installation comes across as a giant habitable nest—and a lot of other things.

Big Bambú: You Can't, You Don't, and You Won't Stop is the creation of Doug and Mike Starn, identical twins best known for the pioneering photography that they began to produce in the 1980s. The title of the Met piece has two references. “Big Bambú” is the name of a 1972 LP by drug-era comedians Cheech & Chong. The original album, which included such tracks as “Let’s Make a Dope Deal” and “Unamerican Bandstand,” had a sleeve made of rolling paper like the kind manufactured by a company called Bambu. The Starns chose the name because they needed a working title and they’d listened to the album a lot, admiring its rebellious ‘70s spirit. “You Can’t, You Don’t, and You Won’t Stop” is the title of a 1994 hip-hop/rap song by the Beastie Boys. The Starns say that they liked the attitude of the piece, its rule-breaking joy. Everything is evolving and changing, they say; nothing is stagnant. They pay more attention to the driving rhythms than to the lyrics. The Beastie Boys feature in a wildly varied soundtrack, from Jimi Hendrix to World Music, that plays while *Big Bambú* is being continually constructed on site by the Starns and a team of professional rock climbers who dangle from various pole intersections in order to create an extravagant web. The soundtrack doesn’t exactly fit what the Starns call “the Met’s sense of decorum.” They say that “it was hard for them to break out of that mold.” But they did.

Met curator Anne L. Strauss, who has been closely associated with *Big Bambú*, says that it is without doubt the most ambitious and adventurous of the 13 solo sculpture shows that have appeared on the roof garden. It is a work in progress until it closes on October 31. There isn’t a single right angle in the piece, which completely contradicts the presentation of conventional museum displays.

Above and detail: *Big Bambú*, 2010. Installation view.

The Starns planned everything out at floor level, using a model made of willow reeds, but above that the climbers have leeway. The twins give general directions as to the ebb and flow of the piece, and then leave the climbers on their own. Some of the poles, the Starns note, are there for aesthetic rather than structural reasons, so that the work grows from thick to thin, as they wanted. The piece changes with the weather and the time of day: on cloudy days, it has a quiet mystery; when the sun is shining, it casts magical, irregular shadows on the roof’s stone floor, temporarily overpowering its regularity and sense of order. Strauss says that her favorite time of day is “when the sun is going down. The shape takes on greater definition then. You can see a greater range of colors in the bamboo. In the bright sunlight, they’re washed out.” Speaking in June, she noted, “The bamboo has already faded since April.” She points out that there are four different kinds of bamboo in the piece, each with its own hue and texture: “The installation





Above and detail: *Big Bambú*, 2010. Installation view.

seems to be at risk for sun-bleaching. Then when it rains, the water refreshes the color." To keep the bamboo looking as it does in the wild, Strauss says, the Starns haven't stripped off the leafy bits that still cling to some of the poles. She also notes that while the piece is rebellious in the context of the Met, it also has a traditional aspect. In the age of digital art, *Big Bambú* is a throwback to fine craftsmanship. Those climbers know their knots.

Most unusually, there's an audience participation component to the piece. Visitors can enter it, but under carefully controlled circumstances; the Met, understandably, wants to avoid lawsuits. Rubber-soled shoes are required, and the small group tours are cancelled when it's raining. *Big Bambú* is not wheelchair accessible, nor is it appropriate for small children. The Starns say, "The piece is different for people who experience it from the ground. The chaos really starts when you climb. That's when the piece comes to life." They make the piece sound like an episode from Tarzan, with the jungle hero swinging away in the trees.

The guided tours take visitors up a network of bamboo ramps that remind me of the swinging wooden bridges found in rain forests. Every once in a while there are platforms where you can stop and examine your surroundings. Being inside the piece is like being inside a cocoon. It would take someone with an acute case of acrophobia to be frightened by the experience. There is almost no way to fall to the ground: anyone who tumbled would end up cradled in a lower level of the gigantic maze. The exception is one central section, a 25-foot oval void open to the sky and traversed by a





bridge. Crossing the bridge and looking down might make some visitors nervous. The Starns say that if the work had been off-limits to visitors, they would have given it an even steeper incline. But public participation was central to their concept.

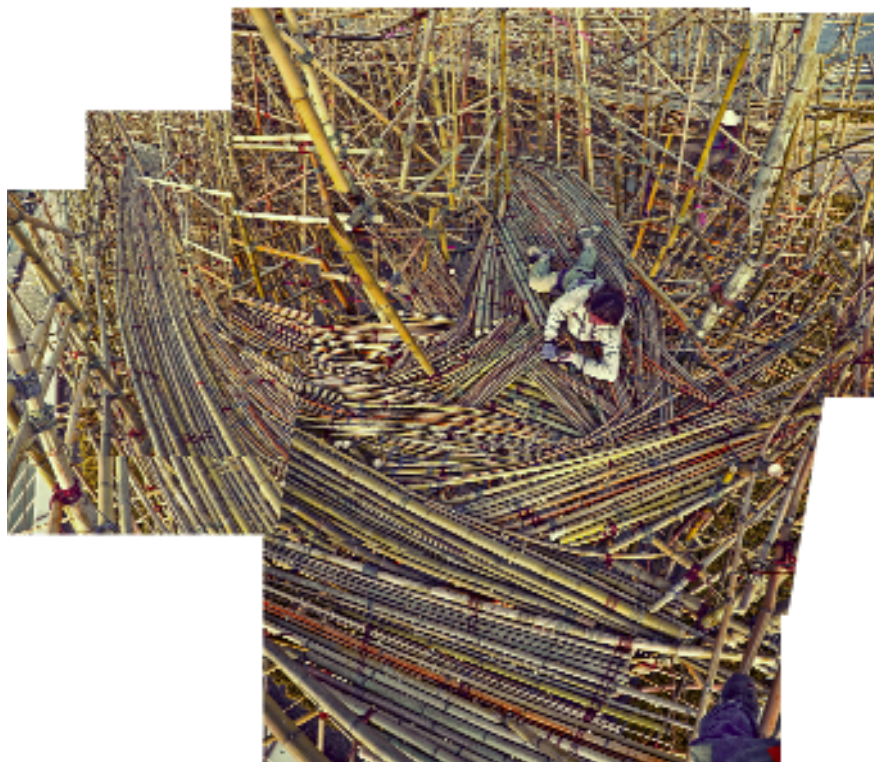
Big Bambú invites multiple interpretations. Inside, you feel that you're in an extremely weird sort of housing constructed by gigantic creatures—dinosaurs or extinct birds, perhaps. From the outside, though, if you step back, it takes the shape of a vast cresting wave. Movement is always implied, and there are visitors inspired to go surfing—imagine, the Met making you want to surf.

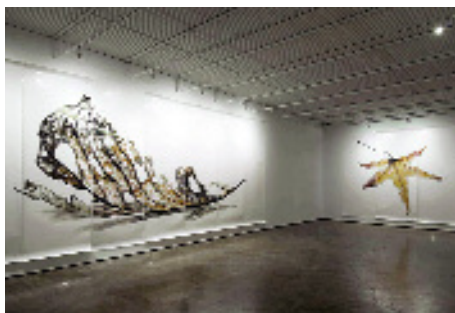
“Chaos” and “interdependence” are the two words used most often by the Starns to describe *Big Bambú*. They are allergic to “static.” Nothing in their work suggests stillness. Take, for instance, their photographic series “Horses,” which started in the 1980s. *Multiple Horse of Artemision* consists of eight horse heads tacked directly onto the wall and climbing up it until the final two heads turn a corner and rush onto the ceiling. Along with the horse images printed on sheets of ortho film, the Starns incorporated what sometimes seemed like the entire contents of a hardware store. The horse and rider in this series occupy their given space in the same way that Greek sculptures inhabit the pediment of a classical temple. But instead of white marble, the materials include metal pipes, clamps, and raw wood—less formal, but no less

Above and detail: *Big Bambú*, 2010. Installation view.

robust. *Double Horse with Pipe Clamp* curves onto a black metal rod: it looks like a banner that might be carried into battle. At the top, a clamp puts on the squeeze. Even in these early works, the Starns were venturing into sculpture.

The chaos in *Big Bambú* is instantly evident. As for the interdependence, it has at least two aspects. The more obvious one is how the poles are joined. The Starns deliberately chose cord in vivid, eye-catching hues so that people would understand what holds the piece together. But the interdependence is also the result of a shared lifetime. The Starns, whom I've known since their days at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, still complete each other's sentences. When they were children, their mother took them





Above: Installation view of “Absorption + Transmission,” with 2 examples from the “Black Pulse” series, 2006. Right: *Black Pulse 7 (Lambda)*, 2000–07. Lambda digital C-print, 56 x 65 in.



Christmas shopping individually so they could pick out gifts for each other. They both chose the same plastic construction game (a first venture into sculpture?), and after that they gave up on Christmas presents. They’re 49 years old now, but their appearance and attitude are very much a holdover from their Museum School days. They come across as middle-aged teenagers. I have never been able to tell them apart. Anne Strauss can, perhaps because, by coincidence, she herself is a twin. She paints herself as an amateur twin, though: she’s fraternal, while the Starns are identical. She says that she can tell them apart more by their voices than by appearance.

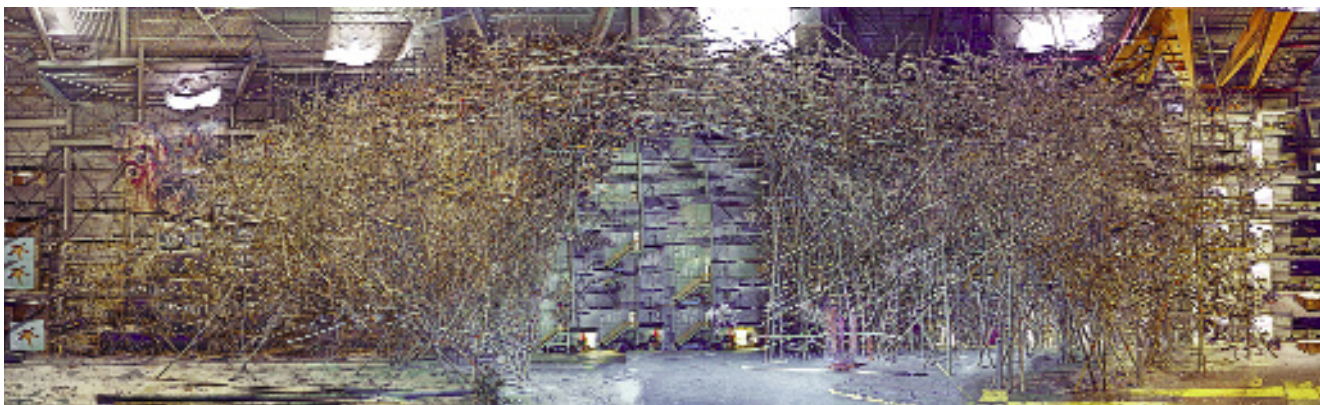
The Starns don’t think of themselves as photographers or sculptors or part of any other art category. They say that they come up with an idea first and only then does the medium for carrying it out occur to them.

August 13th, 2009, 2009–10. Archival inkjet print on gelatin-coated zerkall, dimensions variable.

They don’t view the Met piece as sculpture. “It’s an organism,” they say. In 1986, they started bending photographs, and they count that moment as their move into three-dimensional art. They also became known for ripping photographs and putting them back together with Scotch tape. The tape is the equivalent of the cord in *Big Bambú*.

Since the ’80s, the Starns have soaked up art historical references. *Big Bambú* responds to the bamboo art that turns up in the flower arrangements of Asia, where the artists have traveled and exhibited. Decades before this piece, they used sepia tones in photographs to lend an antique air. And their *Stretched Christ* (1987), which appeared at the Whitney Biennial that year (when the twins were just 25), was based on a single negative of Philippe de Champaigne’s painting of Christ on the anointing stone. The Starns stretched Christ through a series of paper inserts, like a car sliced in half and enlarged into a stretch limo. Always attentive to the idea of photo as object, they built a bier-like box around the work, so that it could sit on the floor instead of hanging on the wall. Before the Starns’ then-dealers, Stefan and Linda Stux, bought the piece, fashion designer Norma Kamali considered using it as a coffee table.

Usually, sculpture is meant to be viewed from the outside; it’s not something you enter. *Big Bambú* is different, but so are house-like works by other contemporary artists, including Patrick Dougherty and Andy Goldsworthy. Dougherty works with saplings and twigs, creating temporary architecture—some of it looking like the results of a tornado, some of it with a grand, lopsided sense of humor—that visitors are invited to explore. Goldsworthy has also worked on the Met roof, fabricating his *Stone Houses* there in 2004. The houses looked like hives, made of split wooden rails from New England and stones from Scotland. Like *Big*



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Structure of Thought 13, 2001–06. Archival inkjet prints with wax, encaustic, and varnish, 13.5 x 72 in.

Bambú, Goldsworthy's piece responded to the manicured cityscape of Central Park and the towering West Side architecture beyond.

The Met piece is the latest chapter in a saga that began with iron poles. In the late 1980s and early '90s, the Starns worked with metal rods, ultimately rejecting them as too expensive, clunky, and perhaps even dangerous. A visitor to an iron pipe installation could conceivably get whacked on the head. "The pipes were so dead and heavy," they now say. "There was nothing organic about them. We thought that bamboo was a more natural choice."

So bamboo has become their primary material, at least for now. They buy it from a farmer in Georgia. "We're his best customer," they say. *Big Bambú* isn't their first bamboo piece. At 100 feet long, it is certainly big, but its predecessor, which lives in their gigantic studio in Beacon, New

York, is three times that length. Some of the rock climbers working now at the Met also worked on the Beacon piece, which is not open to the public. Strauss had an unusual curatorial opportunity in Beacon: "I climbed up 40 feet with them," she says. "It was not the usual place to have a conversation about an art show."

After the Starns came up with their rough willow model for the project, the negotiations were intense, says Strauss. She talks about the bureaucratic nightmare of public art. Not even the mighty Met could avoid getting permissions from several city agencies so that the project could go ahead. "In Beacon, they could do whatever they wanted," she says, sounding grateful that they were willing to go through the process to see the work accomplished. On the other hand, she notes, quite correctly, that "having the Met behind them was important." They are now in the first rank of artists in their generation, and they have the credentials—if not the wardrobe, haircuts, or attitude—to show it.

Big Bambú marks the Starns' second foray into huge works destined to be experienced by a wide public. In 2008, they created *See it Split, See it Change*, a 250-foot site-specific installation at Manhattan's South Ferry Station. Among its images are photos of giant tree branches and historic maps of Manhattan, re-created in marble mosaics. The tree branches are layered, creating a sense of three-dimensionality that reminds me of the scene in the original *Superman* movie where the bad guys are shipped to outer space after being flattened onto a glass plate—another case of three dimensions into two.

Will *Big Bambú* have an afterlife? Yes. The Starns are diligently recording it in time-lapse photography and in video, intended for gallery exhibitions. They did something similar with the Beacon piece, and the resulting photography of the giant installation was shown in 2009 at the Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm. They are currently negotiating with several international institutions for another bamboo piece, but whether they can re-use the poles from the Met will depend on how they survive their months of exposure to the elements. Meanwhile, Strauss notes of the Starns' Met roof gig, "They say they haven't been this happy since childhood."

See it Split, See it Change, 2008. Fused glass, tesserae mosaic, epoxy, and stainless steel, 9–14 x 250 ft.

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