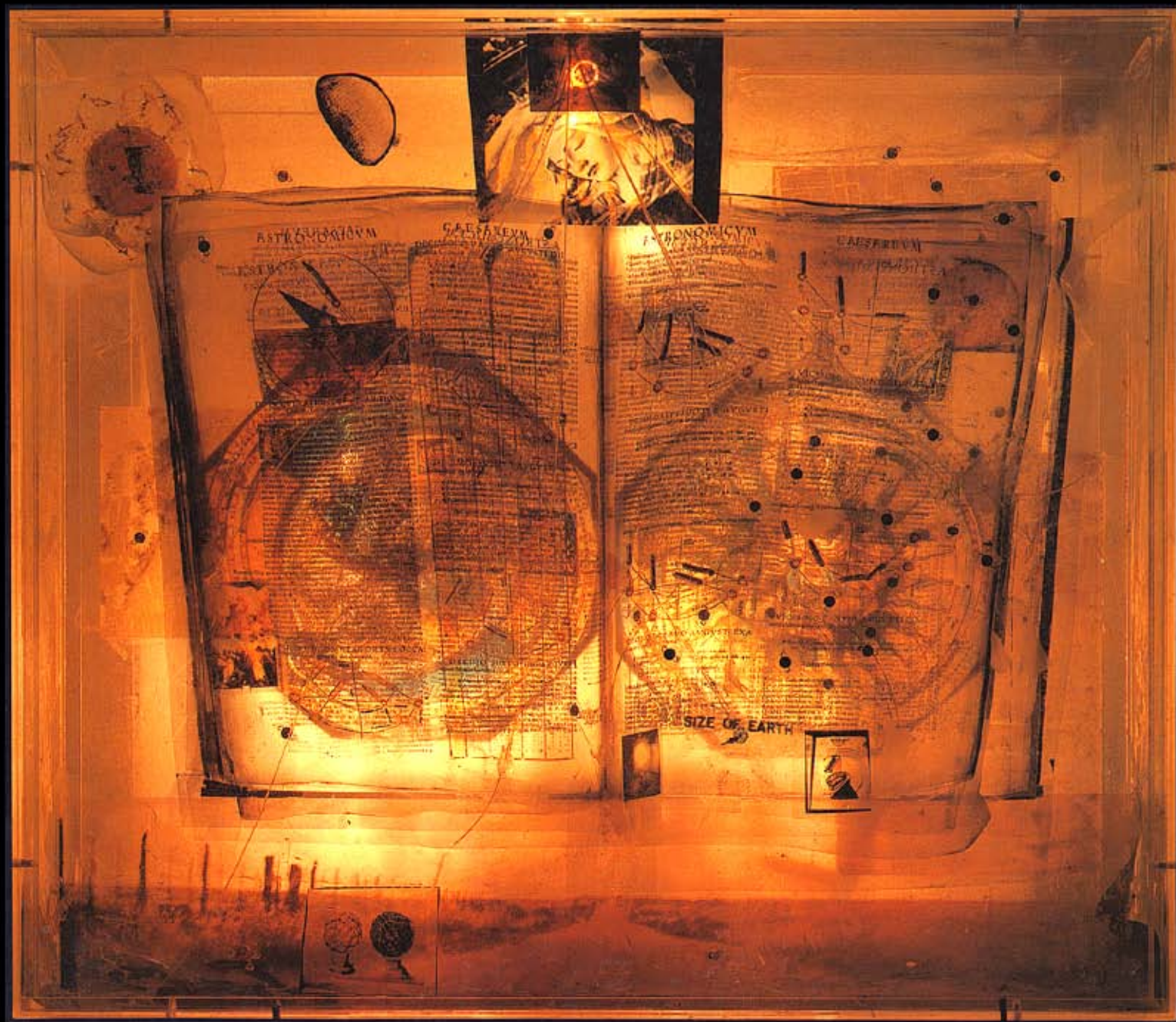


APERTURE



ON LOCATION WITH
LYNN DAVIS MARY ELLEN MARK DUANE MICHALS
RICHARD MISRACH RAGHU RAI LISE SARFATI DOUG AND MIKE STARN

DOUG AND MIKE STARN

BY DIANA C. STOLL

I. A Solar System

Nothing sensible in all the world is fitter to be made an image of God than the Sun, which first illumines itself, then all the celestial and elemental bodies. . . .

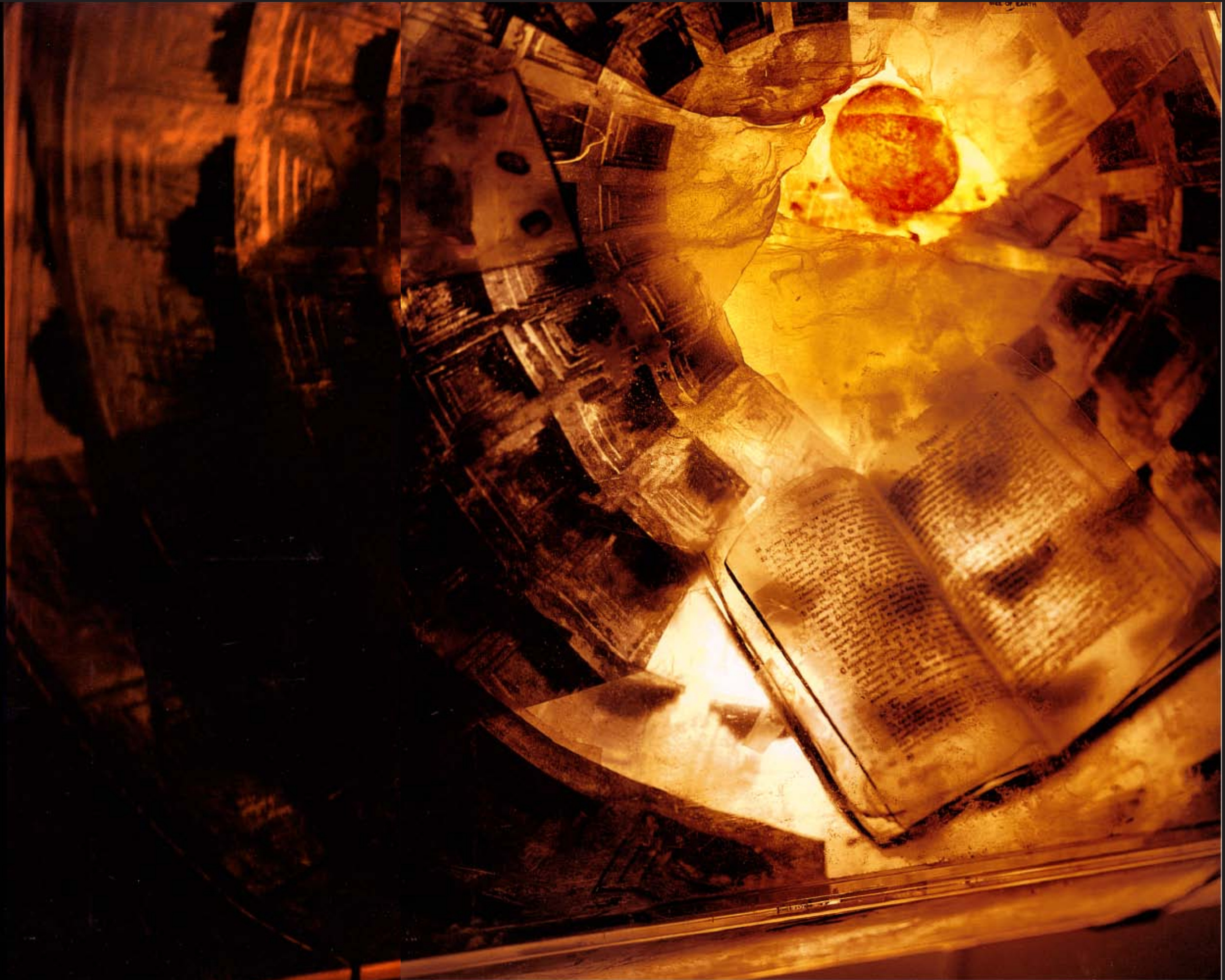
—Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto X

Doug and Mike Starn are not sun worshipers, they say, although their recent work might indicate otherwise. Like those suicidal summertime moths you find on their nightly pilgrimage toward the filament of the porch lamp, the brothers are headed inexorably toward the solar core. Their path has led them into myths, sciences, and other belief systems: from Sol Creatrix and Sol Invictus (the Roman gods of creation and victory) and the Japanese sun-goddess Amaterasu to NASA's Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (acronym SOHO); from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (in which the sun dies every evening to be reincarnated every morning) to Dante's light-filled *Paradise*.

Form follows notion in many of the Starns' sun works: scattered images and texts in light-boxes; beaming, golden planes that seem to maintain their own gravitational balance.

As the Starns point out, the presence of the sun forces into shaming scale our tiny planet. "SIZE OF EARTH," read little signposts within these glowing collages—and an arrow points to a small dot. "This shows the earth as nothing but a meaningless silhouette in the face of the sun," the brothers say. "But it also leads us through a lot of other concepts—besides the disconcerting view of humanity's goals and achievements. It shows the relative similarities of earth to sun, sun to galaxy . . . and still further, to an optimistic view of the individual and humanity." And indeed, the brothers have begun to move beyond awe of our own solar system and our place in it, to the next logical step: the place of our galaxy within the larger context of infinity. NASA has recently invited the Starns to join as official artists-in-residence of the NASA Art Program. According to the agency, previous artists in the program—including Robert Rauschenberg and James Wyeth—"have provided NASA with a historic record of achievements and have given the public a new and fuller understanding of U.S. aerospace advancements." While the Starns are not sure exactly what their role will be in this effort, they seem inspired by it. "We've been using imagery from NASA for five years, but this direct access to the engineers, scientists, and satellites will give a more dynamic element to this work."

Still, this can be unnerving territory. It threatens with incomprehensibles, with theoretical physics, with ideas too enormous for us to absorb—the size of *me* in relation to the earth, in relation to the sun, in relation to endlessness and eternity.



II. The Music of the Spheres

The rich physical quality—the optical allure—of the Starns' work acts as a magnet with which they manage to convey us toward this dark cosmos of science, spirituality, and infinitude. The sun pieces are visually glorious: three-dimensional light-constructions, layer over layer of sparkling transparent film printed with symbols and texts both ancient and modern (from Plato's treatise citing the movement of the stars as evidence of their living souls, to a recent paper on "Particle Dynamics in Two Colliding Plasmas"). These texts are illuminated manuscripts, so to speak, incorporating helio-thematic elements, such as the spiderlike image of the sun encircled by a jagged wheel of erupting plasma, and the recurrent face of the placid "Petrus Christus Frau" (an embodiment, say the brothers, of the sun itself). Recently, they have been moving further into three dimensions with their sun works, creating Plexiglas orbs, more like bubbles than planets, that contain small lights or, again, the image of the Christus Frau. They have also been investigating digital representations of the *sound* of the sun—gases moving around and steadily exploding—to accompany future sun works as an atmospheric undertone.

But, despite that physical allure, the Starns say that their work is not "purely ocular," as it has often been described. "We've always been frustrated that the work is thought of that way. Even back in art school, our intentions were to open photography up, and take away the idea of the sacrosanct two-dimensional image." There are a number of unavoidable concepts at play here, among them—an important one—the idea of *age*, and how artworks (like people, like the planet) are transmogrified as time moves on. "Art changes," they say, "not only physically but in its concept—how people think about it."

The Starns acknowledge the physicality of photography, and its fragility. They embrace time and change. Their attitude toward their own artworks is refreshingly unprecious, and they are impatient with the dogmatic perfectionism of many photographers: the doctrine of the dustless negative, the inviolable print. "We started in photography when we were in our teens," Doug says, "and we loved it except for that doctrine." They welcome dust into their pieces, and in fact they are now talking about inducing an "aging process" in their art by releasing live silverfish and bookworms into a work-on-paper atmosphere, so that the living creatures will make lacework of the piece. (In a related vein, they have also recently been photographing those suicidal moths and other light-attracted beings.) They are making a multilayered metaphor, encompassing themes of age, transformation, society, and—literally—life itself.

III. The Starns Aligning

For the past seven years, the Starns' studio has been set up in the Red Hook area of Brooklyn, just a block off the haphazard large forms and detritus of the waterfront. Their studio space is divided into sections: an enormous darkroom, a shop stacked with wood and Plexiglas—where many of their photo-and-light con-

structions are put together—and a central room that is scattered with more haphazard forms and detritus, as well as works in progress and finished pieces. This central space, when I saw it, was darkened, lit only by gold-glowing artworks hung at apparently random heights or propped against the wall, beaming like a surrounding constellation.

Much has been made of the Starns' identical twinship and the consequent uncanniness of their collaboration. Theirs might be the visual-arts equivalent of what musicians know as "family blend"—two voices that combine with a kind of perfection that can only be the result of genetic closeness. It's true that the Starns complete each other's sentences, and they claim that they rarely disagree when thinking through their art. "If we do," says Doug, "it usually means the piece isn't working anyway." Generally, the brothers evince a quiet, almost bashful modesty about the work, yet without a trace of diffidence.

The Starn Twins (as they were known at the start of their career, before the moniker began to grate) hit the ground running in the mid 1980s, just out of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, with a style of work that some critics dismissed as "sentimental," and others found a relief—"sheer beauty"—in an airless postmodern climate. The sense of palpability in their work of the eighties—large photo-collages, frequently in ancient-looking sepia tones, spliced together with the Starns' signature cellophane tape—is part of what gave their art object-status. Nonetheless, many of their subjects were loaded—the Mona Lisa, a dead Christ figure by Philippe de Champaigne, a portrait by Rembrandt; for these pieces, the rubric "object" seems almost coy. Today, icons such as these are barely identifiable as images, shuttered as they are behind layers of history, culture, and interpretation; there is no escaping their conceptual substance.

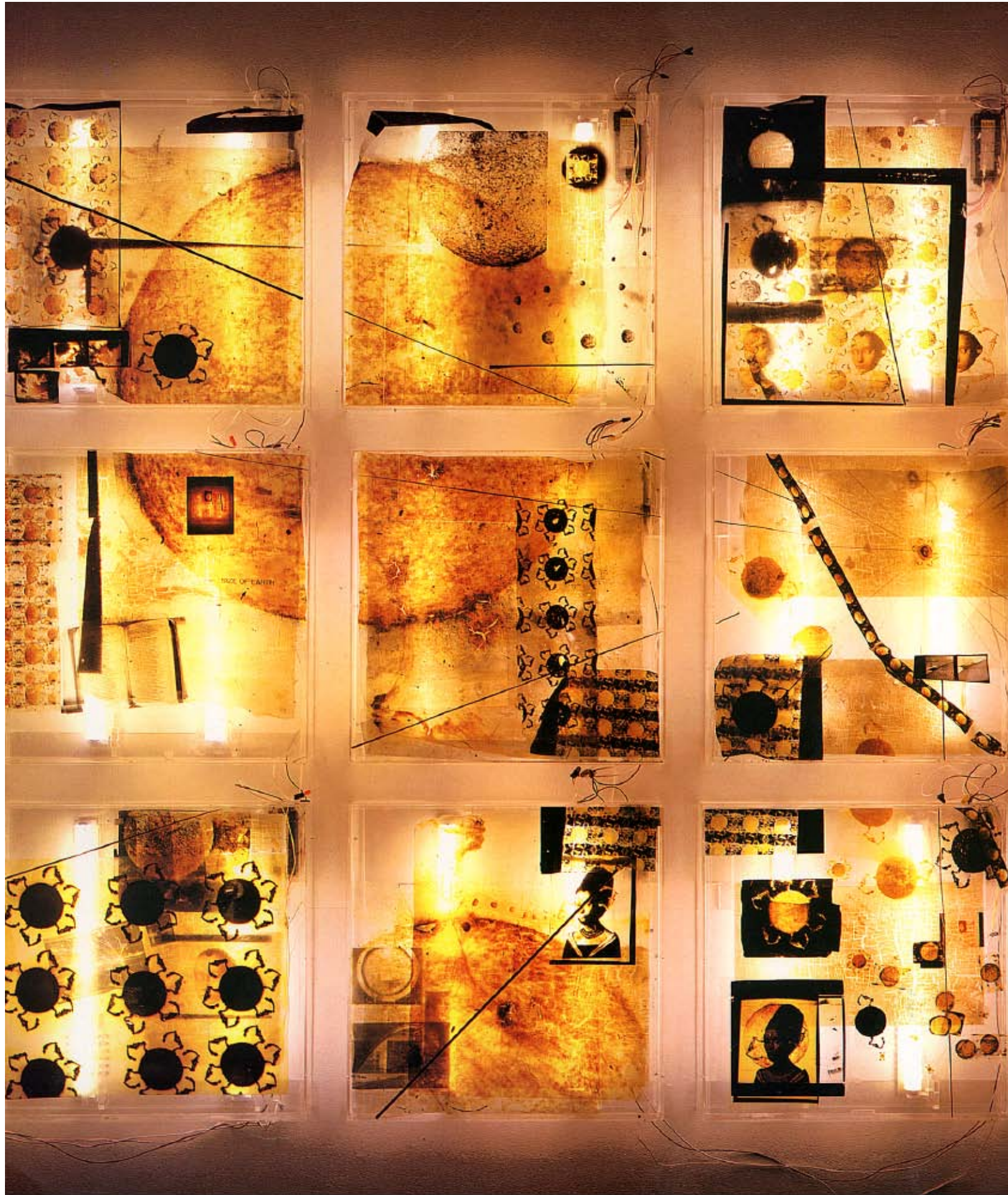
Now older, sturdier perhaps on the footing of their ideas, the Starns are open about the conceptual relevance of their images. About the sun works, which unquestionably combine the scientific and the artistic with the spiritual, they say, "This is, for us, a way of bringing something personal to a universal level."

IV. Illuminated Manuscripts

"It's not enough to look at books: you actually have to read them." This dig appeared in a review in the *New York Times* in response to the Starns' 1995 exhibition of "Heliolibri" at New York's Pace/Wildenstein/MacGill Gallery. In recent years, the brothers have been incorporating texts into their collages, and more than texts, entire book-forms, page after page printed on transparent film—so that, in effect, the whole book is presented to us in a piece, all the information in a mass that cannot be sorted out in any linear way. "The idea," they explain, "is to make all the pages incorporeal, with all of the knowledge and thoughts shown at once—layered, as they're stored in your mind."

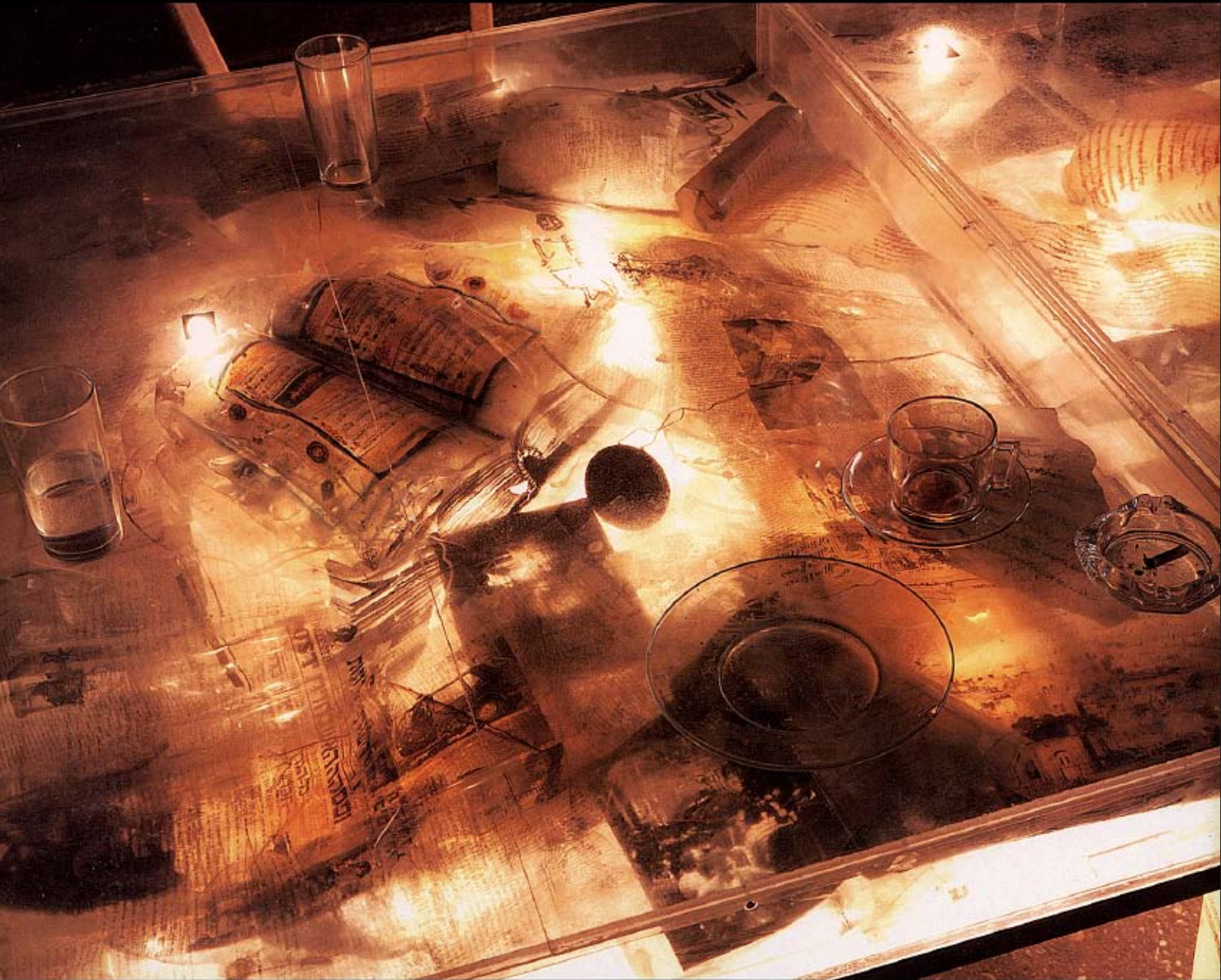
The book is an object—and these objects have plenty of visual grandeur: Renaissance tomes on the planetary systems, complete with colorful maps of the universe, delicate script of the Japanese



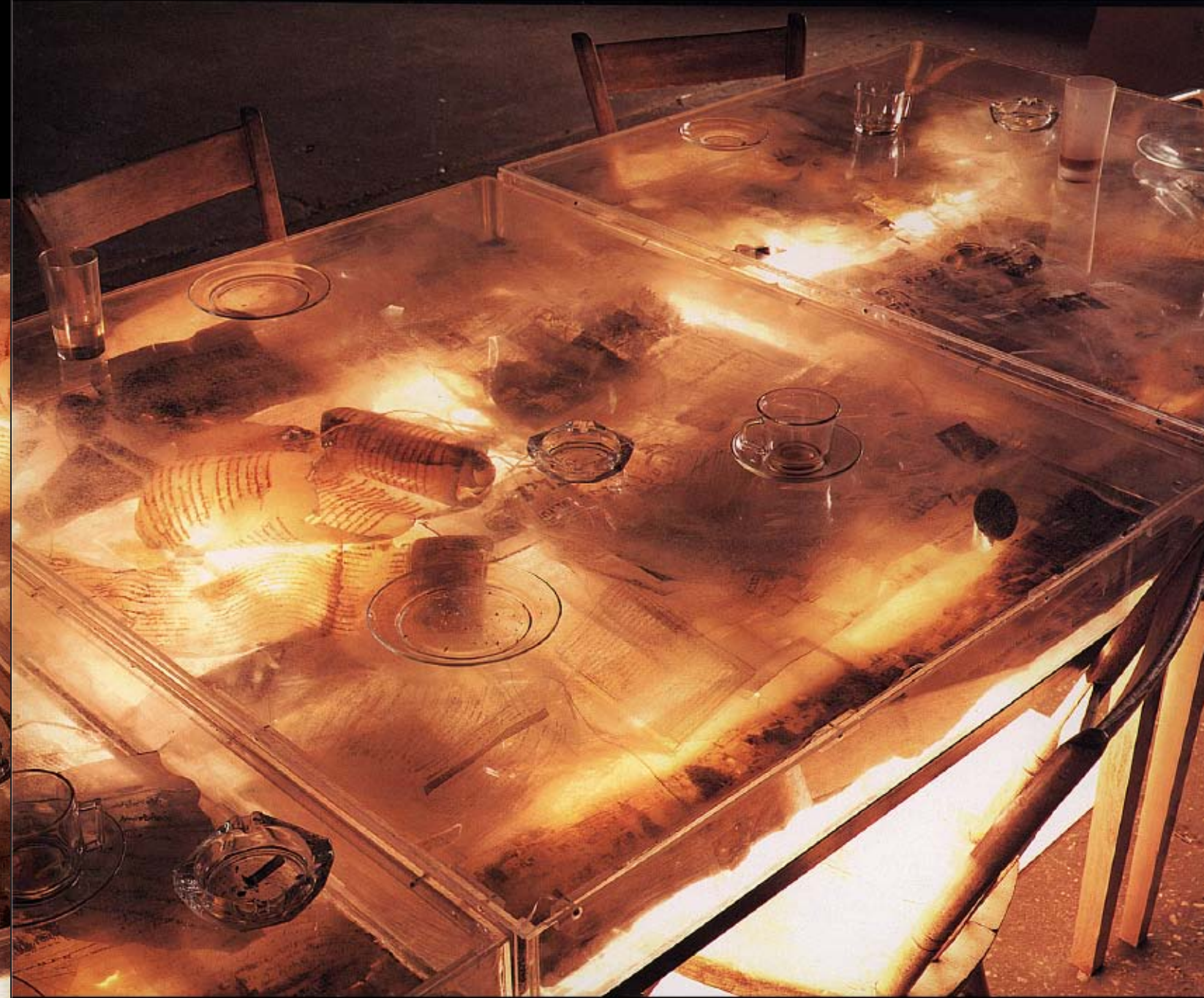


Doug and Mike Starn,
Hydrogen Filled Lungs, 1996

Usually, archaeology is artifacts or ruined structures; this is archaeology over archaeology over archaeology, of written accounts of the fighting and occupations of Jerusalem.



Above and opposite: Doug and Mike Starn, Rampart's Café (detail), 1995–1996



The texts are transparent so you can see the history all at once, the paper of the photographs is taken away leaving the thoughts, the events, the memories. The books are photographed page upon page, these ideas from four thousand years ago, warped, corroded, dust-filled over time.

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Nihongi, the chronicle of ancient matters, withering pages from Dante's *Paradiso*, et cetera. Some of these texts come from an ancient, geocentric universe, a place of deep spirituality, where communications were set down in ciphers, in hieroglyphics, on parchment scrolls, in codices; where monks worked in *scriptoria* and scholars copied page after page of formulae and speculated about the shape of the cosmos. We do not need to read these texts for them to have an impact on us: we know that they are visitors from those bygone worlds, but that many of the passions and beliefs they reference are still very much alive in our world. The Starns say that their series of "Heliolibri" is about "accumulated knowledge, complex thought, and experience through time. They're portraits of all that." And, as with any portrait, the mute face can speak, and can tell you a certain amount (sometimes a great deal) about what is behind it.

For the third-millennium anniversary of Jerusalem last October, the Starns were asked by the Jerusalem School of Photography to create an installation at the Tower of David Museum. The result of this commission was *Rampart's Café*, a very personal reaction to the city itself. "It's a place that seems very secular, in a way, very chaotic," says Mike. "But after a while there, you get a sense of ancientness that almost seems to come up from below the streets." Following this idea, they have made a series of three Plexiglas tables, set with plates, glasses, and eating utensils. The tables might seem prosaic, if they were not transparent so that you can see what is embedded in them, right under your nose if you are seated at them: three massive texts—the Koran, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a twelfth-century Crusader Bible—all open and tattered, lit from below with golden light. As the Starns describe it: "The texts are transparent so you can see the history all at once, and the paper of the photographs is taken away leaving the thoughts, the events, the memories." To accompany this bread breaking, the Starns have added the ambient element of sound: tapes of prayer songs and chants, which permeate the installation space—the voices of the children of light.

Illuminated manuscripts: the latest incarnation for the Starns are books of their own scrawled notes about their sun pieces—printed onto transparent film pages (which can be turned and read), woven with super-thin fiberoptic lights, glowing veins in the leaves. The light and the book have become a single entity.

The artists are not yet ready to let people read these diaries. But even without the beaming notes, it's clear that the Starns are moving further and ever further into the ineffable gravity of light. It seems, in fact, that they are closing in on the very wick.

Doug and Mike Starn, *Rampart's Café* (detail), 1995–1996

