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PHOTOGRAPHY

Fields of Light

An exhibition of photographs, video projections, prints and handmade books sets out the layered perceptual and conceptual concerns of Mike and Doug Starn.

BY EDWARD LEFFINGWELL



Attracted to light as moths are to a flame, Mike and Doug Starn have in fact spent much of the last 10 years photographing nocturnal moths approaching rural porch lights. During this protracted night watch, they employed a medium-format camera armed with an enhanced macro lens to achieve an advanced degree of magnification. In some cases, the resulting images have been exposed onto mulberry paper treated with silver emulsion, then developed. The prints are tea-stained and sulfured. As bits of printed image flake and wear away, the works begin to resemble the powdery surface of moth wings. Pinned in the manner of entomological displays inside simple wood display boxes, the

photos have the look and feel of things historic—characteristic of the Starns' production.

In "Behind Your Eye," a multimedia exhibition presented recently at the Neuberger Museum on the campus of SUNY, Purchase, these works were placed randomly on long study tables outfitted with chairs and white gloves, under a system of fluorescent tubes dropped from the lofty ceiling of the museum's Theater Gallery. With large digital prints, the 58 boxed images of this "Attracted to Light" series (1996-2003) formed the core of the exhibition. The show also included handmade books, video projections, other prints and an enormous sliding screen of tree images. All were linked by the Starns' interest in light.

The screen—actually two parallel sets of movable shoji-type screens, 10 feet apart, 55 feet long and up to 10 feet tall—defined the entrance to the gallery. Images of trees were printed by inkjet on gampi paper and fitted to one set of wooden frames. Fluid images of tree limbs sweeping across the other set of frames recall exhilarating strokes of sumi ink painting. In this work, titled *Structure of Thought 7* (2001-04), the bilaterally symmetrical branching of trees is seen to resemble the microscopic dendritic organization of neurons.

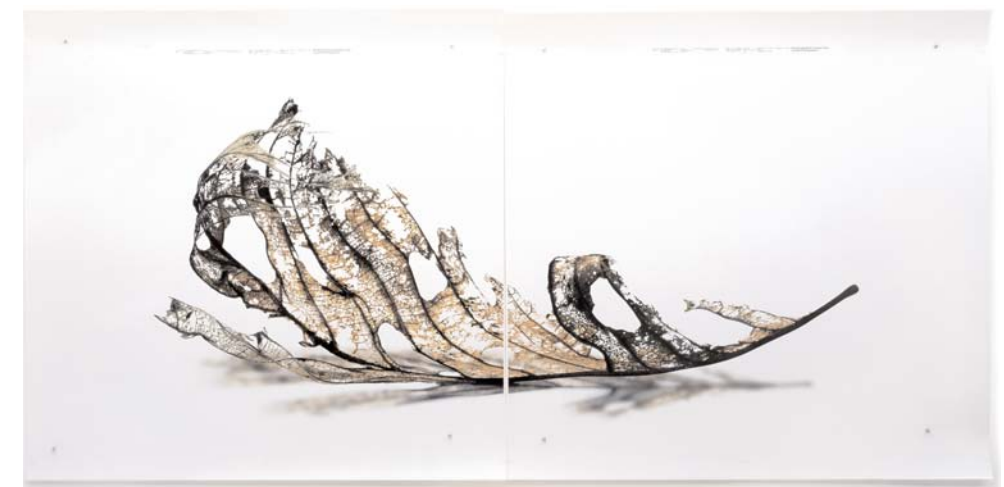
Across the gallery from the screens was a series of film stills. Centered on the end wall, *ATL film still 14* (2000-04) is, at 10 feet high and 30 feet

long, the largest single element of the Starns' "Attracted to Light" body of work. A digital print of moths in flight, the image resembles the constellations of a starry night. Its glossy surface reflects everything it faces, including, here, visitors and the nearby tables with boxed prints. To one side, an aluminum-mounted 10-foot-square still from the same series pictures a moth moving inexorably toward a light bulb in the upper corner. On the

gether. It features actor/photographer Dennis Hopper's reading of the artists' journals as well as excerpts from Dante's *Paradiso*, along with reflections on weightlessness expressed by pioneers in space—the words largely unintelligible, possibly a matter of the pitch and timbre of his voice at the time of its recording, but surely also due to the relatively high volume of its playback in a cavernous dark room. Hopper speaks, appears to float,

ascends, descends. A moth flies by, wings beating slowly as though it were a bird; then a woman, barefoot in a long gown, appears to swim upward in defiance of gravity. There are references to the Starns' previous work and an odd soundtrack of sampled and commissioned music played very loud.

The brothers work out ideas in words as well as images, incorporating both in their own books. They are designing a two-volume monograph for



Black Pulse 17 (Lambda), 2000-04, Lambda digital C-print, 47 by 100 inches

opposite wall an image of the same size captures a moth hovering in a field of light.

Also seen in this gallery, glossy chromogenic prints (2004) from the "Black Pulse" series offer exquisite portraits of desiccated leaves made by scanning and then digitally stripping them layer by layer to reveal their structural veins. These works were printed at large scale, 67 to 100 inches in the largest dimension, and pinned directly to the gallery wall.

In a separate gallery was *Nowhere to Fall* (2001-04), a complex, two-channel video projected side-by-side on a pair of scrims, 10 by 25 feet alto-

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When the Starns print photographs of moths on tea-stained, sulfur-toned mulberry paper, bits of image flake away, and the works begin to resemble the powdery surface of moth wings.

publication by the Monacelli Press, as well as a series of catalogues, all of which were included in the exhibition in various stages of development. Their maquette for the monograph promises a tour-de-force interpretive overview of their past and future work. It has two spines, with the volumes bound back-to-back, and can be opened from either side, as a metaphor for their shared identity (they are identical twins). It contains early images, gate-folds, installation shots and drawings, as well as two scrolls that can be removed and unrolled. Available to viewers on a study table, *The Same but Different* was the catalogue-in-progress for an exhibition titled "Gravity of Light," currently at the Färgfabriken Kunsthalle in Stockholm. Composed of inkjet on newsprint, edges frayed from use, it offered, again, the repeated image of a moth. Another catalogue-in-progress, *Black Pulse 3*, continues the "Black Pulse" series with inkjet images of desiccated leaves on a glossy film, taped together and artfully composed to resemble falling leaves,



Nowhere to Fall, 2001-04, two-channel video projected onto scrim, 10 by 25 feet.

along with a single line of running text. In the darkened second gallery were two booklike works involving electroluminescence or fiber-optic light. Mike and Doug Starn have been insufficiently exhibited in the New York area in recent years; "Behind Your Eye" offers a full reckoning of where they've come from and how they've arrived at where they are now. □

"Behind Your Eye: Doug and Mike Starn" was curated by Dede Young for the Neuberger Museum at SUNY; Purchase [Mar. 7-Aug. 8]. Moth photos and film stills were also

shown at Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York [Feb. 21-Mar. 20]. "Gravity of Light" is on view at the Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, along with a solo exhibition at that city's Bjorn Wetterling Gallery [Nov. 13-Dec. 31]. Portions of the Neuberger exhibition travel to the National Academy of Science in Washington, D.C. [Mar. 1-July 15, 2005], including the "Black Pulse" and "Structure of Thought" series. A two-volume book from Monacelli Press will be published in late 2005 or early 2006.

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