

# Diplomat

Page B-10

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## Photography Double Vision

### *Starn Twins Put Unique Twist on Conventional Subject Matter*

by Daniel Brill

The world must look different when you're seeing it through two sets of eyes. As identical twins, world-renowned photographers Mike and Doug Starn certainly seem to have a unique point of view.

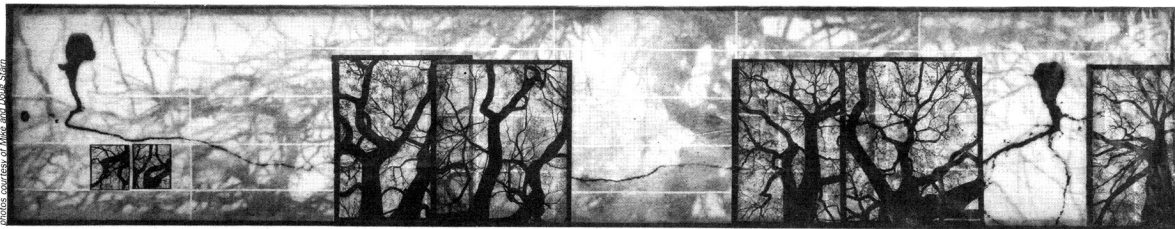
Since the age of 13, they have been translating this perspective into their artwork, and have received much critical acclaim in the process. Expressing fairly conventional subject matter through wildly unconventional media, the Starn twins have developed an original style



other exotic materials. This collection of eight fossil-like photographs of leaves looks like something that might be found down the road at the Natural History Museum. Here, the Starns have again allowed for the wrinkled paper and underdeveloped images to add a strange sense of ancientness to the less than five-year-old prints.

Some of the leaves appear complete while others look torn apart, as if they had been picked up off the sidewalk, but all are fascinating in detail. These works lead one to wonder how such successfully calculated "mistakes" were accomplished, although the exhibit provides no answers to the Starns' mysterious methods.

While moving through the exhibit, however, there

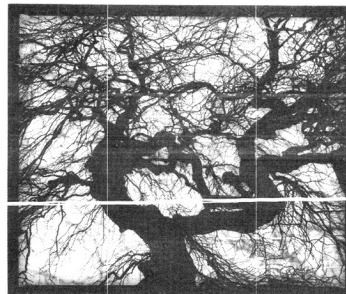


that embraces the duality of light and dark, and bridges a connection between the traditional and something entirely new. Selections from their new collection, "Absorption + Transmission," are now on display at the National Academy of Sciences.

The Starns' ability to manipulate the power of shadow is particularly evident in the photographs from their "Structure of Thought" series, which accounts for half of the exhibit's 10 works. Deep black silhouettes of snarling, barren trees are cast against brighter skies, creating a menacing contrast that could very well be accompanied by a horror movie soundtrack or a reading by Edgar Allan Poe.

These hulking trees, stripped of the colorful foliage that would make them a prime subject for a different breed of photographer, become ghoulish images with hundreds of tiny branches seeping darkness out to the very edges of the photograph's frame. Yet the Starns make sure to carefully nourish the brighter light that waits in the photograph's background, desperately striving to overcome the hulking mass of darkness that precedes it. The result is an intriguing combination of opposites, presenting a look at the underbelly of nature—the way things would be if we turned off all the lights and allowed ourselves to appreciate the simplicity of our complex world.

Complexity is a familiar word when describing the Starns' work, particularly when it comes to their photographic printing methods. The "Structure of Thought" series was created by the use of inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, gampi and tissue papers with wax—hardly a selection at your local one-hour photo shop. These allow for the prints to have a more rugged feel, and the Starns let natural creases and wrinkles ripple throughout the



Identical twins Mike and Doug Starn developed their own unique photographic style using light and dark imagery that has garnered them international acclaim.

photographs, developing a controlled chaotic feeling that is perfect in its imperfections.

It is this originality that garnered the Starns notice in the mid-1980s and has kept their popularity growing ever since. Straying from the traditional use of photography, the brothers keep their work fresh through the use of sculpture, painting, installation and video. The Starns have been featured in Europe, Australia and Japan, as well as prominent U.S. locations such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim. The exhibit at the National Academy of Sciences is part of an international tour that will include gallery exhibits in Stockholm and Tokyo, among others.

The Starns' choice of media even provides some comic relief in the "Black Pulse" series, as the accompanying description matter of factly states that the prints have been created with "Scotch tape and glue," as well as

appears to be a clear method of lifting the shadows and celebrating the more vibrant side of nature. In "Structure of Thought #16," a long, rectangular panel stretches across the wall, resembling a lengthy row of plant roots or a thin line of dripping paint. Yet before you pass it off as another stark image, walk back and forth in front of the piece and a strange, almost holographic movement will appear, created by another layer originally hidden behind the foremost image.

The next room is full of motion and a much-welcomed addition to the collection: color. A circular screen hangs flush against the ceiling, inviting the viewer into a vibrant, extremely close-up journey through a world of colorful leaves. The images are almost psychedelic, spinning and swirling and flooding the screen with activity but occasionally slowing down to take an almost sensual pan across the body of a maple tree.

In keeping with the modern feel of the room, two enormous pieces are nailed to the walls, offering a detailed look into the inner workings of two differently shaped leaves, revealing why many people have said the Starns' work with foliage often symbolizes the makeup of the human cardiovascular system. Color is again magnificently applied in these works, although one is clearly the more vibrant of the pair. Leave it to identical twins to make everything seem a little different.

*"Absorption + Transmission: Work by Mike and Doug Starn" runs through July 15 at the National Academy of Sciences, 2100 C St., NW. For more information, please call (202) 334-2436 or visit [www.nationalacademies.org/arts](http://www.nationalacademies.org/arts).*

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