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DOUG & MIKE STARN: BEHIND YOUR EYE

A Multimedia Installation

Everything in Doug and Mike Starn's exhibition *Behind Your Eye* seems to belong to the laboratory of a fictional scientist - not surprising for identical twin brothers who were, at one time, artists-in-residence at NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). Born in the United States in 1961, the Starn brothers came to international attention when their work was exhibited at the 1987 Whitney Biennial in New York.

In this exhibit, a series titled *Attracted to Light* (1996-2003) of Japanese-looking screens were printed with the silhouettes of bare tree branches which lead viewers into a room containing several rows of long school tables, on top of which lie a plethora of framed photographs depicting moths and other winged insects. Fragility is expressed by both the photographic materials and the installation's subject matter. The frames resemble entomologists' cases, and the delicate prints - tea-stained and sulfur-toned silver prints on Thai mulberry paper - are pinned down like butterfly specimens.

The eerie atmosphere of the room is further accentuated by the white gloves that visitors are invited to wear while handling the book mock-ups that are also displayed on the tables. One volume, entitled *Same but Different*, features a single photograph of a moth, replicated on every page - each print, however, is slightly different. The accompanying text alludes to a relationship between genetics and the photographic process: "Same but different. Identical twins are clones. We have the

same DNA structure, but even in genetically identical people, epigenetic influences ensure that by the time we are born each nervous system is unique".

The moth prints have a bizarre quality, a sort of retro sci-fi whimsicality reminiscent of the black-and-white stilted frames of old silent movies. The dark tones that pervade the majority of these images are eroded by white spots and patches, giving them a hazy, spooky ambience. Some of the moths appear to be caught in moments of perfect stillness, facing directly into the camera's lens like a deer in headlights - unaware that they are being observed - and utterly helpless. There is both a sense of aching glory and pitiful irony because the voyeur knows that the fragile moths will die when they hit the light they are all hovering toward. Yet these simple insects persevere, unknowingly putting on a freak show for the lens, like Roman gladiators playing out the ultimate human drama before an audience.

This beautiful, sad circus is set to music that wafts in from the next room, where we see a video projection of a flying Deadelus-like man, the fragile moths again striving toward the light, two identical faces talking, and what appear to be images of neurons in a human brain. It's a combination of science, magic, and madness where the humble triumphs of nature's frailest creatures are being played out as some awesome and yet absurd spectacle. In the background, an instrumental recording bleats out the notes to "Smile Though Your Heart is Aching," the bitter-sweet tune that Charlie Chaplin wrote for his 1936 film *Modern Times*, in which a man struggles against the mighty machine. Chaplin, like the moths appears larger than life on the screen, and yet is quite small and fragile in the context of his factory surroundings.



Photo: Doug & Mike Starn