

MIKE & DOUG STARN

Identical twins Mike and Doug Starn gained international prominence through the 1987 Whitney Biennial in New York. Their work has earned them numerous prestigious prizes, as well as many international solo exhibitions. 'Absorption of Light' comprises four bodies of work from over the past five years, in which the Starns explore the metaphors of light through real symbolic representations from nature and a sculpture of Ganjin, the 8th century monk who reformed Japanese Buddhism.

How long have you been working as artists?

We've worked together since we were kids and we've been photographing and doing our own darkroom work since we were thirteen, which is almost 30 years now. But our first exhibit was in 1986.

Have you always worked together as a partnership and has this been harmonious and successful?

Yes, we finish each other's ideas. Everybody has their own internal monologue and debate system and we have a chance to make that something that's external. Work always has a debate system built into it, to explore ideas and to try avenues of realization. Very often we come to the studio fresh with the same ideas.

Do you think that this is a result of being identical twins?

Of course. Identical twins are clones; we have the same DNA structure. But even in genetically identical people epigenetic influences ensure that by the time you are born every nervous system is unique. That is who Doug and I are, identical but unique, photographic reproductions yet existing as individuals. Maybe this leads us to our view of reality.

Do you have different roles or is your input split equally?

It's quite strange, the ideas behind our work are totally shared and the approach of how they're presented physically, it's a 100% combination, totally combined.

Do you ever argue or disagree?

Sure, of course. Not as much as when we were younger.

Does this help develop your work?

Yes, absolutely. As we said before, through the debate answers are found.

What motivates or inspires you both and how do you compile your ideas?

It's just kind of life... from literature to just being, to having this need to create. To us, the way photography is normally presented is so limited and misleading. People have this idea that photography is really representative of vision and actually it's such an abstraction. Photography is literally a recording of light, a space and a moment. And vision is something so much more complex. It's got nothing to do with recording, it's a construction in your head, of all your senses at the same time and everything you've ever experienced. We are attempting to present that construction, presenting photographs constructed of parts. The way we're constructing things using the scotch tape is a representation of the very personal interpretation, the personal construction, that goes on in everyone's head every moment of their life, and the ephemeral nature of memory.

What are you trying to communicate through your work?

That's a really tough question. That's something we spend countless hours working on and trying to verbalise in our writing and in what we make. Our way of expressing things is through our art and to do it here in a short answer is impossible. It's a philosophy that we try and present in our work and it deals with timescale and frame of reference of everyone as individuals. We try to put that into perspective of how small that really is, but also that it is connected to something that is very huge and we are externally all part of that immensity, yet that immensity internally as well, within/without, it's all the same. We express that with a broad lexicon.

What about the scale of your work? Is this important?

It's very important. We make work that is very small, just a few inches, up to seven meters. It has to do with

everything about scale and your position in the universe.

Why primarily black and white?

It's a simplification, a distillation of the physical reality of light. Light and no light. There is something about black and white that has a connotation of study and we want that to come across in the work and hopefully that brings it into a range of something to explore rather than just something to look at.

Do you print your own work?

Everything is printed in our studio, it has to be. We developed the photographic process to mimic a moth's wings. It took a couple of years of experimenting with different papers, different emulsions, different ways of treating the paper to accept the emulsion and it allows it to disintegrate during it's development, just like a moth's dusty wings disintegrate in flight. We have a lot of assistants these days, but we oversee everything.

Nature obviously plays an important role in your work, is it therefore important that the printing technique and the overall visual appears very natural and hand made?

Yes. We want to present a humbleness, something that you can relate to as a part of the world. To try and bring the real world into photography, not have it separated, machine-made. But our most recent work are Lambda photographic prints, which are directly computer to photographic paper and there's no hand at all. It brings science and biology to the Black Pulse series.

Nature obviously plays an important role in your work. Why is this?

Whenever anybody points it out it always comes as a surprise as we don't think of ourselves as nature



© Willy Joly

photographers. We notice coincidences of our metaphors with facts of natural phenomena and photograph these.

In contrast what is the significance of the Buddha image, Ganjin, in the exhibition?

Ganjin is the anthropomorphized representation of our concepts in the show. Ganjin was an 8th century blind Buddhist monk. Over the centuries much of the gold leaf on the raised features has worn off the sculpture, which exposes the dark clay underneath. But the gold leaf brilliance remains in the recesses, where there should be shadows. This has created a very odd negative appearance, a coincidence of opposites, darkness in the light and light in the dark. Like Ganjin's eyes that see nothing but black, filled with light.

Why do you divide your images into squares?

Squares are just the natural form of the paper. It's an easy building block, everything in our work is about being part of something else or made of something else, so we build from pieces.

It's a reflection of one of our themes. Everything is connected and nothing is whole, comprised of only itself. Physically, we're made of molecules, molecules from atoms; atoms are made of their components. But we are not the end, we make up our populations, we are inhabitants of the planet, and it goes on in this direction also...this also applies metaphorically.

Does the fact that you're twins have any bearing on your work?

It comes up a lot in the diptychs and also about things

being the same but different, each section in this grid is a sheet of paper, so in that sense they are all identical, but each one exists as itself. We are both identical and unique. So, that comes up naturally in all of our work.

The past five years you have pursued your explorations on the essence of light, can you give a brief synopsis of this?

The title of this exploration is the Absorption of Light, and it is a merging of four bodies of work. Each body has a unique presentation as well as complex and interrelated themes and concepts. Metaphorically, light for us is all that motivates and controls everything we do. We see that as an extension of the classical metaphor as light as knowledge and information,



© Doug and Mike Stam / Black Pulse #17 / 56"x96"



© Doug and Mike Stam / Ganjin / 82"x82"

Enlightenment. We are what controls us. Very briefly, trees (Structure of Thought) are a recording of light, made of light and grow towards the source. Leaves (Black Pulse) are where the light is absorbed and are used to separate the carbon from the air to build the tree. Carbon represents the absorption of light. The moths (Attracted to Light) are us. Living in darkness, but the gravity of light pulls them out. And Ganjin we've already briefly explained.

What's next?

The Structure of Thought series is based on our idea of the architecture of the mind and its workings, being layers and connections. We actually physically shot some of these trees at a campus of a laboratory that photographs neurons within a living brain. And they're remarkably similar to the dendritic structure of trees. The continuation of this series will have neuron images and we are working on a film of this, which brings the trees and the neurons together.

Will your monograph scheduled for 2004 be a definitive collection and include both old and new work?

Yes, it goes all the way back. And the book itself is an artwork in the way that different series are portrayed and layered.

Are you up to speed with new techniques and developments and looking to explore these?

There are a lot of processes that are available that we cannot afford to do; we are hoping to move towards and develop these.

What's different about your work?

Our photographs are meant to be metaphors in themselves of vision rather than just something that's representational. The work is very conceptual although very visual, so much conceptual work tends to bury that side of itself.

How do you view the future of photography as a fine art?

No idea, but it's quite exciting to see how powerful it's become. When we started it was nothing, just a small little ghetto... now it's central to art and that's great.

[TEXT ADDIE VASSE]

Doug and Mike Stam are currently designing a 400-500-page monograph to be published by the Monacelli Press in the spring of 2004. It will feature their fifteen years of creation and will accompany an international travelling exhibition opening at the MEAD Gallery in the United Kingdom in the spring of 2004. In the fall of 2003, Blind Spot, in collaboration with powerHouse Books, will launch a comprehensive and elegant book on their Attracted to Light series. It will also accompany the international tour of their exhibition. In 2004, the Färgfabriken Kunsthalle in Stockholm will inaugurate the worldwide tour of the Stam's Gravity of Light show.

Absorption of Light

11.01.2002 - 08.02.2003

Torch Gallery | Lauriergracht 94 | 1016 RN Amsterdam

The Netherlands | ☎ +31(0)206260284



© Doug and Mike Stam / Attracted to Light #4 / 2002



© Doug and Mike Stam / Structure of Thought #6 / 2001