

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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**ART REVIEW**

## Where 'black illuminates'

By **PATRICIA C. JOHNSON**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

**M**ANY layers — of papers, of light and darkness, art and science, meaning and metaphor — coalesce in *Absorption and Transmission*, a series of photoworks by Doug and Mike Starn.

The austere beautiful images are from two interrelated series. One, titled *Black Pulse*, shows dead leaves blown up to gigantic proportions so that each cell and vein is clear and navigable, the burnt ochre to charcoal tones as sensual as burnished metal.

The second group, *Structure of Thought*, features gnarly trees mostly silhouetted in velvety black tones against light backgrounds, their branches and twigs creating a complex web of fine lines.

Both series seduce to reveal the metaphysical side of science. In both, the artists, who are twin brothers and collaborators, allude to the complexity of the nervous and cardiovascular systems, and by extension, to the intricate weave of mind, body and emotion.

The exhibit opens tonight at the New World Museum, anchoring *The Earth*, one of the themes of Houston FotoFest.

The Starns, born in 1961, came on the art scene in the mid-1980s with photographic images that they appropriated, literally tore apart, then reconstructed in low-tech, seemingly helter-skelter ways. Segments were re-attached with adhesive tapes and push-pinned to the wall. They turned flat photographs into sculptural objects.

In the current series, though, the surfaces are whole and the image captured by high-tech



**AT FOTOFEST:** Doug and Mike Starn's *Structure of Thought #15* (2001-2005)

**DOUG AND MIKE STARN: ABSORPTION + TRANSMISSION**

■ **Where:** New World Museum, 5230 Center; 713-426-4544

■ **When:** Reception 7-9 p.m. tonight. Noon-5 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays through April 2

endo- and microscopic cameras that the Starns handle themselves.

A 2½-minute video titled *Black Pulse* is at the entrance to the current exhibit. It's a virtual voyage into a pile of leaves. The camera burrows and turns, exposing fragile textures and structures of the decaying vegetation in a rainbow of ochre tones and in simulacrum of endoscopic exploration of a vascular system.

*Black Pulse #17*, a portrait of a single dry leaf shown in profile, dominates the gallery of still images. It is printed across seven sheets of photographic paper to reach some 20 feet in

length. The empty, sharp and glossy white of the paper casts the lacy delicacy of its structure in a relief so sharp it feels architectural.

Smaller works in this series consist of images printed on different papers — waxy and matte in the background, varnished for transparency in front — and overlaid to create shadow play. The objects photographed are neurons the Starns re-imagine as grasses or seedlings, and trees, where the reverse holds, the tangle of branches echoing nodules and tendrils of nerves and the synapses that exist among them.

The visual connection between biology and formal studies of shape and line are not new. But in this body of work, the Starns make the connection in an especially elegant way.

"Black is filled with light, black is a reservoir of light," writes J.D. Talasek, of the National Academy of Sciences where the series was first shown. "In the Starns' conception, black illuminates."

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