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ART REVIEW

Bewitching Visions That Are Larger Than Life

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

PURCHASE

DOUg AND MIKE STARN, 43-year-old identical twins from New York, have created a clever and beautiful exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art here. Titled "Behind Your Eye," the exhibition fills you with wonder, that feeling of surprise mingled with admiration caused by something beautiful, unexpected or unfamiliar. I roamed the exhibition bug-eyed, like a child, for the best part of two hours.

For starters, the twins have succeeded in radically transforming the exhibition space. This is a difficult thing to do, for the Neuberger is, well, a barn of a museum. In some rooms, the walls soar to a height of 20 feet. But where other, lesser artists have foundered, the Starns found the perfect setting for a new, major installation. This is their first exhibition in a New York area museum in almost six years.

Greeting visitors is an 11-foot-high, 55-foot-wide Japanese Shoji-style screen made of wood and paper covered in images of silhouetted trees. The screen panels slide along wooden rails, presenting viewers with different passageways into and out of the exhibition. Looking at this extraordinary object you will do your share of gasping; I certainly did, exalted by the skill with which it had been built.

Behind the screen is a smaller one, some seven feet high, and then there is an open area of tables and chairs; the tables covered in artists' books and framed black-and-white photographs of moths. Large color photographs of leaves and moths line the walls, while rows of low-hanging fluorescent lights (10 feet high) help create a sense of intimacy. The room looks and feels like a classroom, or a display area in a natural

history museum.

Prolonged viewing — and this is the kind of exhibition that pays dividends on your time — helps you puzzle out some of the themes and patterns of thought linking the images and books. For instance, light is a major reference point here, from photographs of fragile moths hovering close to glowing light bulbs to, in the books, quotations about light from ancient Greek thinkers and modern books on physics and linguistics.

Unexpected relationships in the natural world are another theme for the Starns. For example, dense layers of paintings, scans and photographs in one of the artists' books document visual similarities between the structure of leaf skeletons, neurons, tree branches, and even the human hand. What it all means I do not know, but I can think of no notable precedent for this kind of investigation in recent art.

If the books sound taxing, which they are, sort of, you can just bliss out on the photographs around the walls. Among them are three recently produced digital images mounted on aluminum supports. Two depict single moths near a light or flame, the third, and most impressive, a constellation of tiny white moths floating against the night sky. From a distance, the piece looks like a magnified image of stars in deep space.

Equally bewitching are four photographs of leaf skeletons made from scans of real leaves that have been digitally enhanced, blown up, then printed a lovely, rich gold color on strips of glossy white paper. Their dazzling color hypnotizes, while the digital addition of shadows makes the leaves seem to float on the surface of the paper. I love these photographs, even though I know they are not entirely real.

In an adjacent gallery, which is darkened,



"Structure of Thought," a video featuring the actor Dennis Hopper, is part of an exhibition by Doug and Mike Starn at the Neuberger Museum of Art.

are two illuminated artist books and a new two-channel video projection on a 25-foot-long scrim. (Do these guys ever make anything human scale?) The pick of the room is the Starns' early artist book "Behind My Eye" (1998), consisting of a bound stack of drawings on transparent Mylar pages through which light is carried by copper and electro-luminescent wires. It's amazing.

On loan from a private collector, "Behind My Eye" (1998) is displayed in a protective glass-lidded box. This is pity, for one of the real pleasures of this work is flicking through the pages, looking at the drawings and reading with the help of the internal lights. Fortunately, accompanying the exhibition is a video of the pages being turned. It is not perfect, but it at least gives you an idea of what the book looks like.

Light also seems to be the subject of the video, "Nowhere to Fall" (2001-2204), which combines photographs, moving images, text and sound. Although the soundtrack still seems experimental, there are some beautiful passages of imagery, like a sequence toward the end of overlapping dendrite forms that progressively fill the screen. Slack-jawed with wonder, I stayed and watched the video again.

This is a great show.