

>ART

[BY ADAM GROSSI]
INFO@STEELCITYMEDIA.COM



ABSORPTION + TRANSMISSION

continues through
June 10. Wood Street
Galleries, Wood Street
and Liberty Avenue,
Downtown.
412-471-5605

Photo Synthesis

A SINGLE WITHERING LEAF assumes epic proportions in "Black Pulse 17," a pieced-together digital photographic print which commands about 20 feet of wall space in *Absorption + Transmission*. The leaf sits on an invisible plane in a pure

If you were a tree: "Structure of Thought 10,"
by Doug and Mike Starn

white void, inviting clinical examination yet offering no reliable scale of measure. And while the leaf's veins take on an architectural scale, they remain delicate, ready to vanish with a sudden gust of wind or shatter under the assault of an inevitable downpour.

Doug and Mike Starn, identical twins and co-creators of *Absorption + Transmission*, seem compelled to create artwork that positions itself comfortably at the collision of conflicting forces and contrary concepts.

How can a process so uniform as reproduction, for example, engender such difference? Wood Street Galleries' upper gallery is commanded by a matrix of 15 video projectors which emblazon the floor with a grid of snowflakes, zooming in and out of each other in various states of formation. The effect is both disorienting and calming. The Starns seem fascinated by the transience of intricate structures as they endlessly coalesce and dissolve in the natural world. Though the exhibition's title explicitly refers to light, it also lends itself easily to growth and decay, life and death.

"Structure of Thought" is a dramatic series of compositions that depict gnarled and sinewy tree branches, analogizing these forms and the dense network of connections in the human brain. The visual metaphor is an obvious one, but rarely is it pursued with such labored intensity and studious craft: Translucent papers are layered with dense black inks that create a luscious but ungainly space, at once flat and dimensional. Equally important, the metaphor has been made literal — these works derive much of their imagery from microscopic photographs of actual neurons. Here as elsewhere in the gallery, the process of photography — hardly the newest of new media — is rendered as intriguing as the kinetic and robotic technologies upon which Wood Street has developed its high-tech reputation.

Absorption + Transmission, which was commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences and curated here by Wood Street's Murray Horne, also tackles the conflicting forces of art and science, fusing the two in fascinating and awkward ways. The artists largely avoid communicating their methodologies, leaving viewers to contemplate the images and videos on an aesthetic plane. I had to do outside research to uncover some of the Starns' complex photographic processes. For example, viewers should understand that the enormous leaves in the "Black Pulse" series are derived from photographs of actual leaves, and are not solely computer graphics (as their digital prints and animation might suggest).

Puzzlingly, the show neither overwhelms with sensory interest nor diligently communicates its conceptual underpinnings. The clunky snowflake images at the heart of the video-projected meditation, for instance, are less than mesmerizing. In light of the Starns' clearly abundant talents as aestheticians, you wonder why the twins embellished the hell out of some images and not others.

Perhaps the answer is hinted at in a bizarre and wonderful written statement that accompanies the exhibit, which almost gets lost amidst the advertising clutter of the gallery attendant's desk. In a few paragraphs, formatted like a quick e-mail, the Starns succinctly explore the igloo and snow as a metaphor for the skull and thoughts. A grand idea is conveyed without embellishment; an efficient "transmission" of a concept. The snowflakes, too, are quick references to their subject matter rather than paeans to their own physical presence. Maybe "absorption," too, has its distinct place within the Starns' practice; for some ideas, one must be absorbed in the substance of finely weaving branches, lost within the warm black core of a neuron, breathing electricity in the wind. ☞