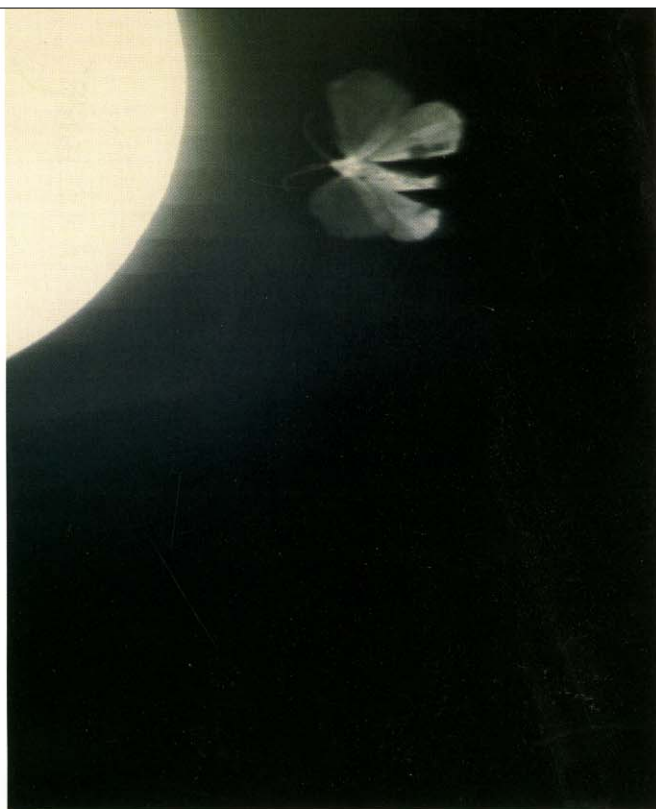


Finding Gary Schneider // Aaron Rothman Outlines a Startling Reality // The Starn Brothers are Attracted to Light // Publishing the Photography Book



ATL FS 5



Moth as Metaphor

A journey to Brooklyn in search of the Starn twins leads our Editor DARIUS HIMES into a realm of rich metaphors.

FOR MYSTICS AND ARTISTS alike, the natural world has served as a fertile ground for spiritual speculation, a land of signposts wherein each created thing embodies a set of traits that, when carefully read, point to the Other, the Divine, the One.

Walking into Mike and Doug Starns' cavernous studios in Brooklyn, I immediately get the sense that there is both studiousness and fervent activity happening simultaneously, all of which revolves around the reading of grand metaphors.

I came to discuss their newest body of work, just published by powerHouse/Blind Spot Books, entitled *Attracted to Light*. The book measures some 12 inches square, and reproduces nearly 100 illustrations from the *Attracted to Light* series—silver prints on hand-coated Thai mulberry paper, Polaroids, and video stills. The book features excerpts from two Russian authors: a fictional piece by Vladimir Nabokov (in which the narrator's father, a connoisseur of winged insects, published a four volume work entitled *The*

Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire); and a short fictional piece written last year by Victor Pelevin, reprising two protagonists, Mytia and Dima in their quest for light/enlightenment (from his novel, *The Life of Insects*, published by Faraf Straus and Giroux, 1998).

After seeing their monumental works scattered around the studio and models of exhibition spaces layed out on tables, I became anxious to discuss the greater implications of their work—to dive into this world of metaphors, with the attractiveness of light a particularly potent one. The attractees, in this case, are moths, the "poor stupid cousins" of butterflies, as the brothers call them. For the past several years they have been assiduously gathering moths, luring them in droves onto their porch with hot lamps. Suspending a sheet behind the lights, they photograph at will.

Moths, in their own humble, mysterious way, serve as incomparable symbols in our world—physical beings whose sole intent is to reach a source of light. In fact, certain breeds of moths don't have mouths. They seem to consume light, and this speaks poignantly to the themes of sacrifice, spiritual quests, and single-mindedness.

All of this is not to say that Mike and Doug are on some deep spiritual quest. If they are, it's private. But they are attentive in their approach, both in observing their subjects and creating the finished pieces. There is a priority of contemplation to action in their work that is, well, attractive.

Mike and Doug Starn studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in the early 80s. Their work actively blurs the lines between painting, sculpture and photography with a particular emphasis on the physicality of the photographic print. They employ all means and methods, both traditional and digital, towards the ends they envision.

For the past several years they have been engrossed with several, diverse bodies of work simultaneously, involving the moths, Camperdown Elm trees, fallen leaves, photosynthesis, carbon arc

invited to image him in advance of extended renovations to the temple. Originally covered with gold-leaf, Genjin's surface wore away over the centuries, leaving the more exposed areas bare and the recessed



ATL 1

lamps, and even an 8th century Buddhist monk. Through this disparate collection of items, an inquiry into the nature of human reality emerges as an overarching theme. Each item within this minipanthéon serves to illuminate an element of human nature, at once revealing a truth and indicating a deeper question.

In both the images of the leaves and the Elm trees, the brothers isolate the skeleton of carbon that courses through the sap of their specimens. Through the biological process of photosynthesis plants transmute light into energy. Carbon, a dense element that plays a foundational role in the chemistry of life, is at the core of this process. The photographs of the trees in particular—rich, black branches that meander around the frame or burst out of corners of the compositions—are structurally and dynamically identical to brain neurons, sparking musings about the relationship between pure chemistry, the transformation of energy at the biological level, and those effects on human activity.

The Starns also became interested in a Japanese statue of Genjin, a blind 8th century monk that reformed Buddhism. The keepers bring out his sculpture once a year. In 2000, the Starns were

with a beautiful glow. His spiritual vision all the more potent because of his blindness, Genjin represents an elegant comment on sight and light. This gentle metaphor emerges in the Starns' images of the sculpture—the shadow areas of the stone retain the brilliant gold-leafing, emphasizing a reverse relationship of inner and outer illumination, and the conundrum of black as the void of light as well as the complete absorption of it.

The Starns' willingness to remain open to the abundant metaphors of the natural world—to the microcosm/macrocosm relationship of all created things—is at the heart of their diverse activities and is the strongest aspect of *Attracted to Light*. "The moths are delicate, fleeting figures, who emerge from the night, drawn to the light in the same way that we are held to the earth by gravity. There is the sense of a natural law above and beyond raw instinct." On a larger scale, our solar system is set up the same way. The earth revolves around the sun by gravity, but in a very real way, we are held in place by the light of the sun.

Attracted to Light, published by powerHouse/Blind Spot Books, New York. 123 pages, 90 color illus., Cat# PY091H \$85.00