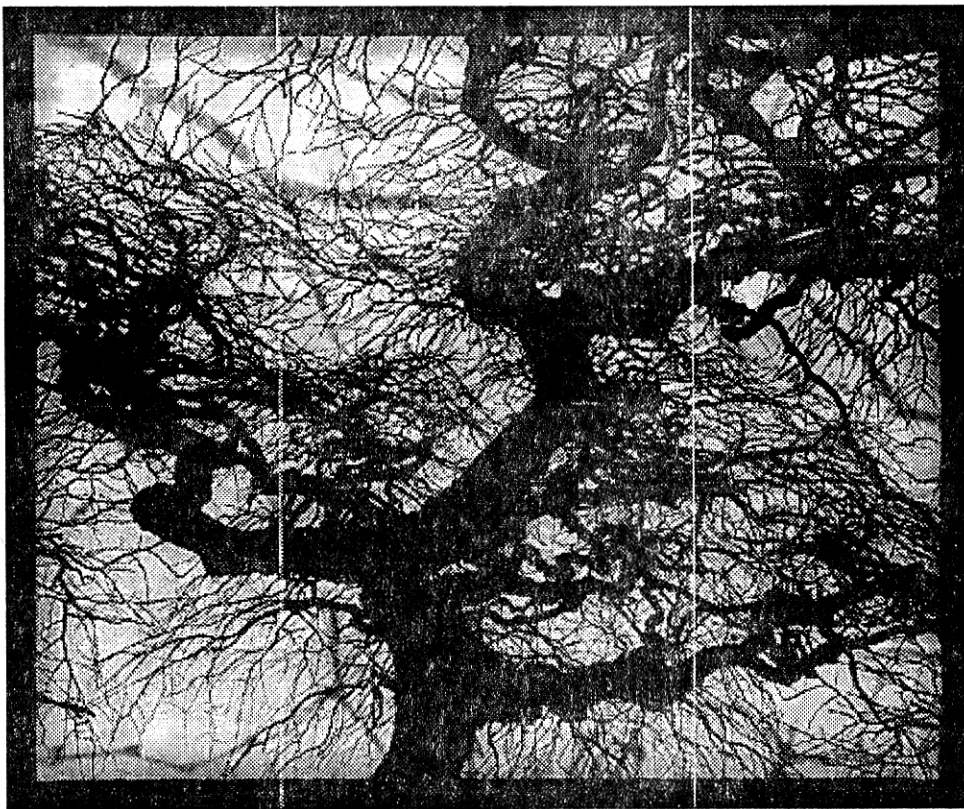


Doug and Mike Starn's "Absorption + Transmission" exhibit at the Wood Street Galleries includes "Structure of Thought 14," part of a series that compares tree and neuron branching.

These twins see light as an illuminating metaphor



By Mary Thomas
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art review

Most interesting discoveries have at least one good story behind them.

Such is the case with Doug and Mike Starn, identical twins and Brooklyn-based artists, whose exhibition "Absorption + Transmission" and video installation "allevythingthatishyou" opened over the weekend at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.

The Starns were out in the field, as they tell it, photographing trees, before they leafed out for their "Structure of Thought" series, which comprises looming shadow and light images of thick trunks and multitudes of tapering branches that remind the brothers of animal neurological networks.

Guided by the book "The Great Trees of New York," they were searching for the tree they felt best reflected those networks, a black willow, the largest state example of which was on the grounds of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, Long Island.

When they arrived at the picturesque facility, part of a 19th-century whaling port, they looked for someone who might direct them to the specimen tree. Though a Sunday, they found an office open and walked in, concerned that they might not be able to adequately relay what they were looking for.

Then they looked up and saw a poster, and on it was what they were trying to describe. It was in actuality imaging of neurons accomplished through a process developed at the famed lab that uses bioluminescence as a marker.

As with all good stories, there is more to it than that episode.

There is the example of the serendipitous — or perhaps inevitable. There is the metaphor for life as a search whetted by curiosity and investigation and openness. There is the notion of the complexity and interwoven quality of living things.

All of this is relevant because it is also the story of the Starns' artistic pursuit, which has been both physical and metaphysical.

The brothers made photographs together from the time they were teens in New Jersey, and in early professional exhibitions their work deconstructed the process and product of photography.

In more recent years, they began exploring light — its physical quality and contribution to seeing and to photographing, but also metaphorically as a path to realization and even philosophic truth.

They've been celebrated by the art world, having exhibited in numerous national and international exhibitions, including the 1987 Whitney Biennial, which brought them critical attention. They are the recipients of two National Endowment for the Arts grants and are represented in such collections as those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

But the breadth of their success — reflecting that of their inquiry — is indicated by the fact that the show at Wood Street originated at the National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.

Cross-disciplinary work is rather common practice today, but winning the respect of insti-

tutions outside the art world isn't always achieved.

Included are six works from "Structure of Thought" and four from the "Black Pulse" series, one of them a video animation.

They are simultaneously representational and conceptual, and each is aesthetically sumptuous. All are complex, pieced, layered; extraordinary form is exposed.

The dramatic dark lines of "Structure" reveal more than they conceal. "Black is the absence of light," Mike says, "but it's also the complete absorption of light." More implications.

In an atypical work, a linear row of what look like trees on the veld turn out to be repeated cerebral neurons.

"Pulse" comprises actual tree leaves, scanned and digitally skeletonized and colored.

Sounds simplistic, but at approximately 11 by 24 feet — monumental, highly detailed and lushly printed on high-quality glossy paper — "Black Pulse 17," for example, is an encompassing presence that invites the viewer to draw near, following its complicated and numerous lines inward, to the structure of the leaf and to the center of one's being.

As Andrew Solomon writes in the academy catalog, the images encourage "mental and psychological sophistication: you can contemplate outcomes and make what we call informed decisions. You can become wise. These photographs translate wisdom into a visual iconography."

The installation is a bonus, making its debut in Pittsburgh as a 15-channel projection. The viewer stands in the center of oversized, tumbling snowflakes, each photographed by the Starns

with precision (and with difficulty), some of them digitally colored. The motion is up, from the floor, tilting perspective, at times dizzying.

The snowflakes themselves are not precise, some having failed to achieve symmetry or having become damaged as they fell to earth.

Revealed again are the notions of complexity, of layering, of the inconceivably voluminous architecture of things microscopic and macroscopic, of the external and internal universe.

The accompanying handout is a richly argued, moving, poetic meditation that compares the building of an igloo with the construction of a world view within one's head (snowflakes and information both gather).

The words tie the piece together, along with the rest of their work, along with the rest of life, of history, of time.

The Starns make the discovery inevitable, and in unabashedly beautiful fashion.

"Absorption" continues through June 10 at 601 Wood St. Hours are noon to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays and noon to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Admission is free; 412-471-5605 or www.woodstreetgalleries.org.

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