

## Brooklyn twins dazzle museum-goers with their installation piece

By **Kurt Shaw**

**TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC**

Thursday, October 16, 2008

Science is unclear as to the reason, but everyone knows moths are attracted to light. It's not for mating, nor even for food. Nevertheless, they are attracted by light, often meeting their demise by coming into contact with a hot bulb or flying straight into a flame.

Like moths to a flame, visitors to "Gravity of Light," the gallery component of the Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts, have been drawn to the exhibition's key element -- a 50,000-watt carbon arc lamp at the back of a 10,000-square-foot warehouse known as the Pipe Building in the Strip District -- but with far less tragic results.

Sure, the searing light could cause spots in your vision, and possibly blindness. But each visitor is asked to wear protective eyewear. And one could not possibly stare at the blinding light for little more than a few seconds without quickly averting his gaze. The lamp, and the large-scale photographic pieces that surround it, are the work of Mike and Doug Starn, identical twins who achieved recognition as part of a group of artists in the 1980s making conceptual use of photography.

Working together in the territory between photography, video, installation, sculpture and painting, the Brooklyn-based Starns have had numerous solo exhibitions in galleries and museums internationally, since capturing worldwide critical acclaim for their work in the 1987 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial in New York.

"Everyone said this couldn't be done," Mike Starn says about the carbon arc lamp he and brother Doug have dubbed "Leonardo's St. John, or This is my Middle Finger." "It burns at 6,000 degrees. Carbon has the highest melting temperature of any element. So, to be able to hold something like that and not have it melt while it is lit is a big challenge."

Starn says carbon arc lamps still are used in the movie industry, but they are illuminated for only a very short period of time. "The carbon rods are smaller than your pinky," he says. "The rods we are using are about three-quarters of an inch thick."

Part sculpture, part scientific experiment, the peculiar 13-foot-tall mechanical structure took two years to complete. The two carbon rods that burn at the center of it are housed on copper tracks, which have been outfitted with a piping system filled with anti-freeze. The two rods burn together with the aid of a 250-amp charge for just longer than 20 minutes. Then an operator replaces the rods, and the whole thing starts over, repeating the operation for the full six to eight-and-a-half hours each day the exhibition is on display. "In that way, it becomes a performance," Doug Starn says.

The Starns say the aesthetics of the piece -- their most ambitious project to date, with its arching form and two central burning rods -- are based on Leonardo da Vinci's painting of St. John.

In da Vinci's painting, John the Baptist points his

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

*Continued*

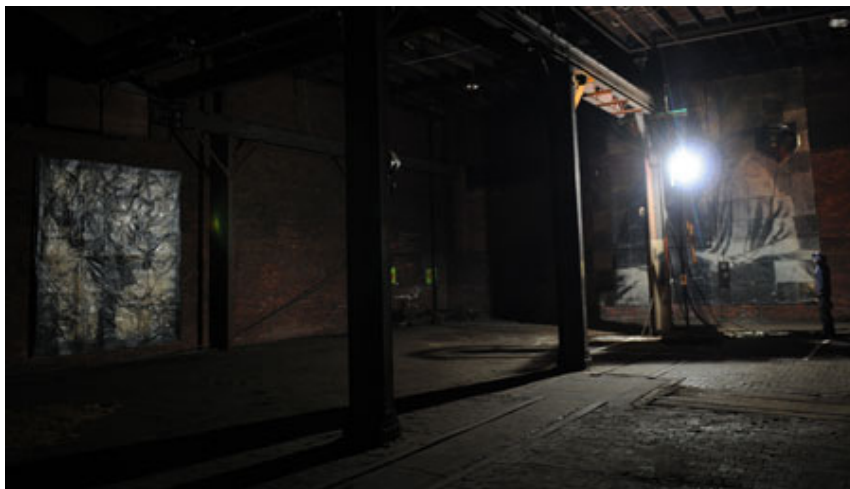
finger to the heavens, indicating the path to enlightenment. In the Starns' carbon arc lamp -- an adaptation of an 1804 model by British physicist Humphry Davy -- enlightenment is indicated by the carbon-rod "fingers" that conduct a current between their respective nodes, producing a brilliant point of light too dazzling for the naked eye.

Since 1994, the Starns' output has referred to light and the sun. They have examined the symbolism of the sun in different times and in relationship to different cultures. From the summer of 1996 onward, they photographed moths and other insects that were attracted by the light on the veranda of Doug Starn's house in upstate New York. The results were portraits of miniature creatures they called "Attracted to Light," just one of the four series represented here in the seven massive photography-based works that fill the warehouse walls, all of which have harnessed the power of light in ways both literal and poetic. The other three series are "Structure of Thought," "Black Pulse and Black Pulse Lambda" and "Ganjin."

In this way, these monumentally scaled photographs become chapels in an industrial cathedral. Their subjects are emblems of and witnesses to the dualistic character of light, with its power to give life and to destroy it, to illuminate and to blind.

The ill-fated moths of the "Attracted to Light" series are caught moments before self-immolation, drawn to the light that kills them, their images pinned, momentarily, on photographic paper.

Across the gallery, abstracted growths that could be trees -- or a neural cell's dendrites -- take root in the "Structure of Thought" series. The gnarled branches are, in effect, the sun's signature.



The leaf, the fruit of the branch, falls away in "Black Pulse and Black Pulse Lambda." Here they are represented in massive photographic prints of desiccated leaves shorn of all their flesh. These desiccated leaves, recorded in filigreed detail, signal both decay and renewal; ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Lastly, there is the towering image of the eighth-century Buddhist monk Ganjin, who, although blind, found illumination within. The Starns have strategically placed the image so that the factory's middle cross-beam support system looks as if it is coming out from the Buddhist figure's mouth.

Altogether, the works in "Gravity of Light" represent a remarkable body of work in which all parts depend on the whole, representing not a flattening of difference but a deepening. Opposites like black and white, light and dark, art and science, the eternal and the ephemeral, are revealed not only as false dichotomies, but as necessarily dialectical relationships -- each casts new light upon the other.

"Gravity of Light" originally was presented at Fargfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, in December 2005 and is scheduled to travel to the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2009.