

Festival of Firsts: 'Gravity of Light' attracts us to flame

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



"Gravity of Light," an installation by Brooklyn artists Doug and Mike Starn in the Pipe Building, a 10,000-square-foot industrial warehouse in the Strip District, includes large photographs on the walls hung around a 40,000 to 50,000-watt carbon arc lamp the brothers constructed.

A carbon arc lamp glows with fierce white fire in the midst of a cavernous abandoned industrial space. And we are the moths.

That's one way of thinking about Doug and Mike Starn's "Gravity of Light," a visual art presentation of The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts. It will make its North American debut at a reception from 5 to 8:30 p.m. Friday at The Pipe Building, 3000 Liberty Ave., Strip District.

The Starns, identical twins born in 1961, have set the international art world aglow with their explorations of the physical and metaphysical qualities of light since they attracted critical attention at the 1987 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial in New York.

The Festival of Firsts installation, in a way a compilation of several of their photographic projects, actually grew out of intervening decades of experimentation, research and creation.

In the middle of the atmospheric space, the 13-foot high lamp gleams and sizzles like some mythical

creature rearing on its hind legs and emanating fire. Around the room's circumference individual artworks hang, illuminated only by the lamp, analogous to planets in orbit around the sun.

Among these is an oversized photograph from the series "Structure of Thought 5 & 6," a composition of silhouetted trees, which the artists describe as "light written in the calligraphy of the sun."

Another, the skeletal structure of a weathered fallen leaf from their "Black Pulse 3 & 17 (lambda)" series, is reminiscent of networks within the human body -- skeletal, circulatory, nervous. Magnified multiple times, the huge form is substantial yet graceful and the Starns hope that it conveys the renewal that will follow the return of the leaf's elements to the natural system as well as the decay that is a reminder of our shared mortality.

Moths, creatures of darkness and of light, are the subject of the "Attracted to Light 1 & Attracted to Light G (grid)" series. More disconcerting than the leaf in its science fiction-film supersize, the insect

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also engages, through curiosity as well as the tactility of the Thai mulberry paper it's printed on, which is reminiscent of the texture given moth wings by their tiny scales.

The artists' influences are many and range from the mundane -- the everyday of light that we move through almost without notice -- to spiritual considerations, whether the enlightenment of knowledge or of religious teachings.

"The sun pulls the planets around itself, the back porch light pulls the moth from the darkness. Trees, made from light, grow toward it. The gravity of light is so broad and vast it is not noticed. We exist in it; we exercise our will, but only within its parameter," the Starn brothers write.

"Light is power, knowledge, it is what you want, it is what you need, it is satisfaction, fulfillment, truth and purity. It is history, the future and spirituality. Light is what we fear and hate. Light is what controls every decision and action we take. Light is thought, light has gravity, light is what attracts us."

Readers may recall seeing some of these images, which appeared in a 2006 exhibition of Starn works at Wood Street Galleries, the Pittsburgh producer of "Gravity."

The newness of "Gravity," other than its configuration as installation, is the opportunity to present very large works together, linking series and, more significantly, raising questions of interrelationship.

Wood Street curator Murray Horne points out the "nice contrast between the rawness of the space that used to be the pipe building and the pureness of the work."

Because of the intensity of the light, visitors to the exhibition will be provided with dark glasses to wear while walking about the 40,000- to 50,000-watt lamp.

The installation makes its U.S. debut in Pittsburgh, traveling next to the Detroit Institute of Arts. It premiered in Europe at the Fargfabriken Kunsthalle in Stockholm, Sweden, which commissioned the piece in 2005.

"Gravity" continues through Oct. 30. Admission is free. Exhibition hours are noon to 6:30 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday and until 8:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 412-471-5605 or visit www.PIFO.org.