

# Arts

SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 2005

## It Takes Two: The Starn Twins' Eerily Singular Vision

By PAUL RICHARD  
*Special to The Washington Post*

Twenty years ago they called themselves the Starn Twins. Though now they wish we wouldn't, many people still do. It's a hard habit to break. Twins they surely are. The intimate and eerie bond that makes the Starns a unit is still the strongest presence in their pieced-together art.

They're billed as Doug and Mike Starn in the catalogue for "Absorption + Transmission," their current exhibition at the National Academy of Sciences, and as Mike and

Doug Starn in the press release. For twins as tight as these it's only fair to alternate. Their pictures depict branchings, the big branchings of oak trees and the little ones of nerve cells, and all of this is fine, but another natural wonder vastly more intriguing also shows in every photograph. The mystery of twinship is omnipresent in their art.

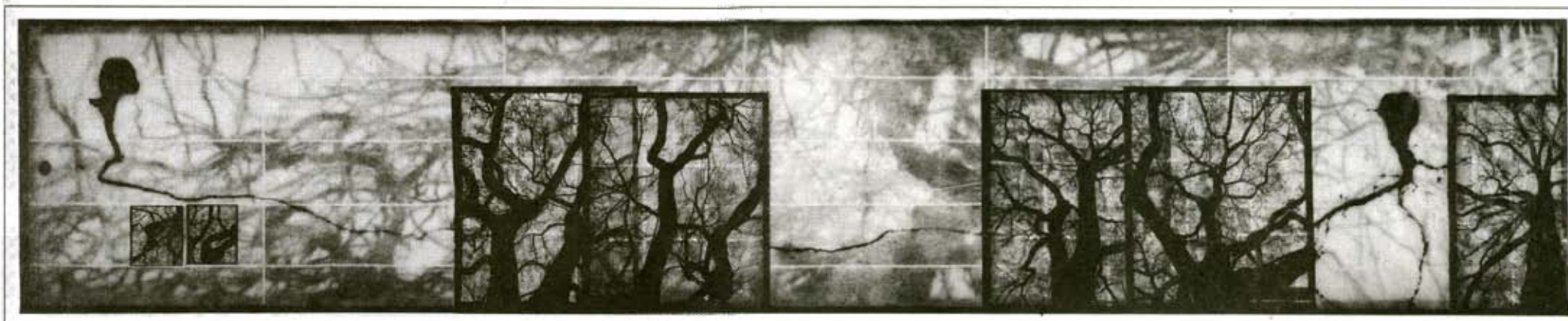
Before the Starns were born, on May 18, 1961, in Absecon, N.J., they were one egg that then split. The act of making art — with its

See STARNs, N10. Col. 1



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The densest mind-meid in contemporary art: Doug, left, and Mike Starn, whose show is at the National Academy of Sciences, with "Attracted to Light 1."



From nerve cells to oak trees, a focus on the intricacies of branching out: The Starns' "Structure of Thought 13," above and in detail, right.

## The Starns, Failing to Compound Interest

STARNs, From *NI*

reachings and excitements and its numberless decisions — has somehow knit them back together. The Starns may be two persons. As an artist they are one.

It's not just that they look alike, or complete each other's sentences, or went through school together; it goes a lot deeper than that. Theirs may be the densest mind-meld in contemporary art.

Most viewers are romantics. We've grown used to detecting personalities in pictures — here's impassioned Vincent van Gogh with fire in his eyes; there's noble, sadyed Rembrandt with his rightly judging human heart. The person in the Starns' art is compounded of dualities seamlessly conjoined.

The merger of the Starns goes way beyond collaboration. Lots of artists collaborate, but that doesn't mean they merge. Ringo and John collaborated, but none of us confused them; so did Fred and Ginger, but we all knew which was which. When W.S. Gilbert fit his witty words to Arthur Sullivan's honeyed melodies, their distinct contributions arrived from wholly different realms. This is not true of the Starns.

The erasure of distinctness is central to their art. You might think, for example, that the shabby and the flawless would war with each other, but in pictures by the Starns they get along just fine. "Black Pulse 10," for instance, is a minutely detailed depiction of a leaf. They made it with a scanner and an MIS inkjet printer and costly Gampi paper — paper that was then soaked until it

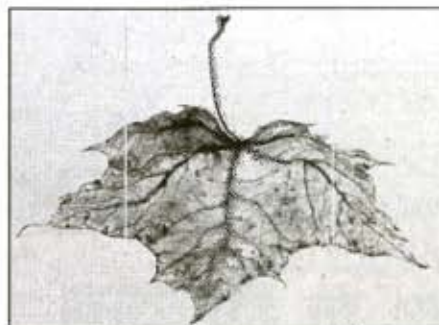
curled, and rudely pierced with nails. The exquisite and the crummy easily cooperate in this work of art.

Art and science sometimes clash, but not in this exhibit. The Starns, like many other twins, are skilled at bridging differences. Their art explores a middle ground between the daring and the safe.

What could be much safer than the image of a rose? Or a verdant mountain valley, or breezes on the sea? The Starns have shown us all of these. Here they offer gnarled oaks. This stuff is in motel room art, and couldn't be much tamer, but their slicings and their grids and their yellowing Scotch tape lends their art a kind of coarse fragility that isn't tame at all.

They also like to photograph antique works of art that would not look out of place in some princely palace — say, a Titian or a Rembrandt, a marble from the Parthenon, or a Leonardo portrait. But then they take these noble images and cut them into pieces, and patch them back together, then stick them up with pushpins, until your mind's transported from some stately mansion back to second grade.

Do the Starn twins ever fight? Do they yell at one another, or storm out of the room? One doubts it from the evidence provided by their work. It feels oddly free of conflict. Willem de Kooning's oils seem to wrestle with themselves. Those of Paul Cezanne suggest restless searching. Two Starns made the pictures on view at the National Academy of Sciences, yet even the roughly



Natural wonders: "Black Pulse 15."

huddled ones, with their piercings and curled edges, seem somehow filled with peace.

That's the one thing in their art that strikes me as uncanny.

I like to think I know something about twinning, its telepathies and discontents, being a twin myself. We shared our parents and our sock drawer and our bedroom and our genes. Such closeness has advantages. But do not overrate them. It also has its strains. At least it did for Donald and Paul. We both yearned for autonomy. We didn't like ourselves enough, much less one another, to cling unto our we-ness for the remainder of our lives.

Once I met the Starn twins. Doug said: "From kindergarten on they put us in separate classrooms." Mike finished: "But it didn't help." Doug said: "We know twins who get really angry at us because we are such friends."

I'm not angry, only mystified. I keep waiting for the schism.

Some art collaborations, true, linger on for decades. The contemporary artists Gilbert and George, al-

though unrelated, also try to show us that they're a single artist, but those two men are Englishmen, and costumed role players as well, and their pictures feel like theater. England's Jake and Dinos Chapman, who are brothers though not twins, also work together, but their sculptures often feel a bit like naughty gags, and telling jokes is easy, and no doubt helps relieve the collaborator's strain. Don't underestimate the strain. Gilbert and Sullivan barely spoke to each other. The Beatles, of course, split. The Starn twins now are 43. Will they forever stick together? Will their old-shoe familiarity enervate their art.

They started with a bang. At the age of 24, barely out of art school (the Museum School in Boston), they became hot Manhattan art stars. They were chosen for the Whitney Biennial. Charles Saatchi of London began buying up their pictures. Before the '80s ended, the Starns had been exhibited at the Pompidou Center in Paris, at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and at the Metropolitan Muse-



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um of Art. Flash Art, which in those days was the trendiest of art magazines, decided that the Starns belonged "among the preeminent talents of our times."

But then not much transpired. The Starns kept making objects. They kept cutting up their photographs, and Scotch-taping them together, and pushing in the pushpins, as one sees in this exhibit, but their art did not improve much, nor did it much change.

A twinning close as theirs may be an undiluted blessing, though I rather doubt it. It may also prove a prison. That's what one suspects before the facile and unchallenging, thor-

oughly professional compound pictures in their show.

**Absorption + Transmission**, in the Rotunda gallery of the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Ave. NW, through July 15. Visitors should enter through the building's C Street door and must sign in and show identification. For information call 202-334-2436. Admission is free.