

New York Times
ART REVIEW
18 June 2004
E30

Behind your Eye: Seeing the Cosmos in Its Moths and Trees
By Ken Johnson

PURCHASE, N.Y. — Fresh out of graduate school, the Starn Twins — or, as they prefer to be called now, Doug and Mike Starn — hit the New York art world with a bang in 1986, the year of their first solo exhibition. In their expansive collages, images of roses, horses and old master artworks were romantically seductive, but what mattered was what they did to photography. Scotch-taping together multitudes of faded, murky, torn, wrinkled and otherwise distressed photographic prints, they gave photography an astounding painterly and even sculptural physicality, opening the medium to a whole new world of expressive possibility.

The Starns were almost instantly famous. They were selected for the 1987 Whitney Biennial and went on to participate in major art festivals all over the world. They showed regularly at the venerable Leo Castelli Gallery, have had museum retrospectives on four continents and have been the subjects of coffee-table tomes.

For all that, it is still possible for a New York gallerygoer to wonder, whatever happened to the Starn Twins? Their influence lives on in the aggressively physical ways that many artists use photographs these days — Wolfgang Tillmans, for example. The Starns have continued to experiment adventurously with the material presentation of photography, but their preoccupations with nature and antiquity have seemed obscure or irrelevant to an art world transfixed by the effects of modern culture and society. An exhibition of much-enlarged images of moths last winter at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, the Starns' first New York show in six years, did not project any new feeling of urgency.

Now a large and impressive exhibition of recent work at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, organized by the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, Dede Young, gives a clearer picture of what the Starns have been up to. Judging by "Behind Your Eye," the short answer is they have become visionary cosmologists. Now 43, they are producing a holistic, New Age blend of science, philosophy, poetry, spirituality, theater, art history and photography. That may not sound good, but it is all grounded in a coherent set of conceptual connections that remain mind-stretching to contemplate, even if you tire of the formulaic, faux antique aesthetic on which they

continue to rely.

What you initially face at the museum is confusing. An enormous, two-track shoji screen stretches across the opening to one of the two large galleries occupied by the show. The screen has sliding panels of varnished paper bearing black photographic images of leafless trees. Passing through an opening in the screen, you find rows of beat-up tables on which more than 50 framed, faux-antique photographs of moths are casually laid out as if for close-up examination by photography or entomology students. On some tables are handmade photographic books filled with images of moths and trees that you may peruse.

Large photographs from two different series hang on the walls. Each of four glossy two or three-panel prints on paper presents the greatly enlarged image of a leaf on a white background. Printed in rich combinations of red, blue and gold, the leaves are partly decayed; mostly only the veins remain, leaving lacy skeletons.

The other wall-hung works are enormous, blurry stills from a video of moths shot by the Starns on a front porch in the country. (They are laminated to aluminum panels.) In one measuring 30 feet wide, moths are illuminated by electric lights that flicker against the darkness like stars in the night sky.

Lest the viewer think there is nothing more here than an overproduced play with photography's material possibilities, paragraphs from the artists' writings are on the gallery walls. "Light is power, knowledge, it is what we want, it is what we need, it is satisfaction, fulfillment, truth and purity," one declares in part. Another reads, "Trees are a recording of light, light turned into carbon through photosynthesis — the transformation of light into dark physical matter — an architecture of inky black darkness, growing towards the source."

The writing doesn't explain everything, and you may be put off by its portentous tone, but it sets you thinking fruitfully along certain interpretive lines. You begin to see how, for the Starns, photography becomes the source of a metaphysical revelation in which darkness and light are the essential poles of a transcendently intelligent universe.

Here is not the place to work out all the implications, but we may note some basic ideas: that the moth is like photography in its response to light; that trees, like photography, feed on light; that the branches of trees and veins of leaves are like the veins and arteries in the human body; that light corresponds to divine spirit and darkness to the terrestrial body; that the moth is drawn to light as the human soul is drawn to God.

In a second cavernous gallery, this one dark, the Starns have set up a 25-foot-wide projection screen diagonally across the middle of the room. Visible from both sides is a streaming montage of digitally processed imagery: flying moths and birds, trees, clouds, pulsating eye pupils and the actor Dennis Hopper, who speaks in an ominous, slowed-down rumble and floats up into the sky.

The Starns have manipulated image quality in all sorts of ways: altering color, layering images, enhancing clarity or graininess, framing pictures within pictures and so on. The flux of imagery is optically engaging and, with the aid of music from sources like Beethoven and the movie "Midnight Cowboy," it casts a vaguely mystical spell.

What the Starns have done with video, however, is not as groundbreaking as what they did with photography. Making a busily streaming montage is an obvious thing to do with the medium. They are also taking their personalized religion awfully seriously. They could use a little more humor, if not irony. Nevertheless, there's an invigorating amplitude to the Starns's enterprise. Many artists are good at doing one small, narrowly defined thing; if the Starns fall short, they do so on a grand scale.