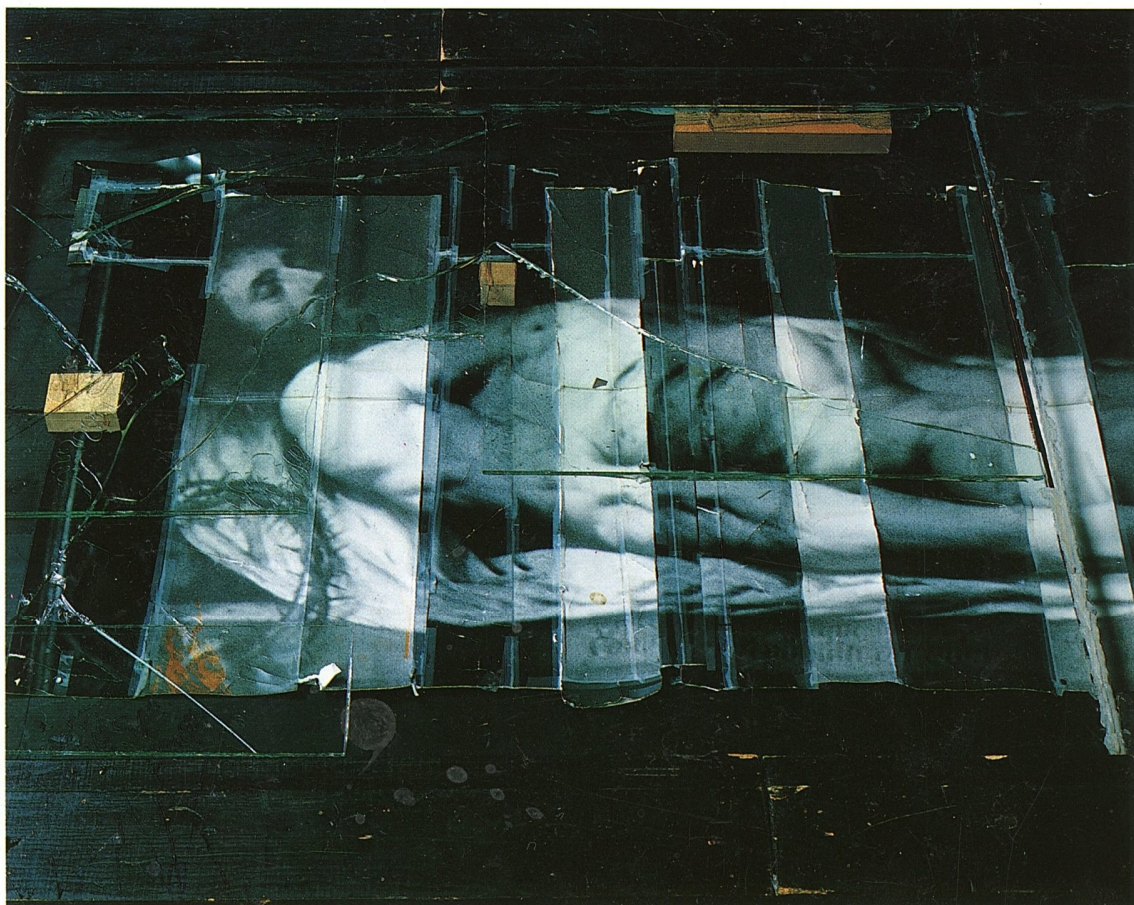


Fresh Perspectives on Contemporary Photography

HOTSHOE

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



Mike and Doug Starn: The Edge of Photography

Tracey Moffatt: Scarred for Life

RolleiMetric: Measuring the Damage

Mel Ashby: Coping with Disaster

Curtis Mitchell: Dissolving the Subject

March/April 2000 HSi107 £2.95

ISSN 0959-6933



9 770959 693011

Jean Wainwright

Close to the edge: The work of

Mike and Doug Starn

Visiting Mike and Doug Starn's enormous studio in Brooklyn was a revelatory experience. The vast space is filled with their photographic work push-pinned to the walls, hanging in specially designed frames, lying on the floor, literally and metaphorically in a state of becoming. Ramparts Café 1995-6 with its glowing light became the interview table, whilst other sculptural works, reminders of past shows, punctuated the floor. This was not a chaotic environment but one of absolute calm.

The Starns, Doug and Mike, are identical twins; they create their art collaboratively. Personally they are very private and contemplative, they appeared to be perfectly in tune with each other in the way that twins so often are. There seemed to be no creative dominance but a harmonious aesthetic, a symbiosis. They do not want their work de-mystified, and would rather its physical presence provoked, although they were happy to discuss their working methods. The brothers have had numerous prestigious shows in America and Japan, are represented by the Castelli Gallery and Pace Wildenstein MacGill in New York but their work is regrettably less well known in Europe.

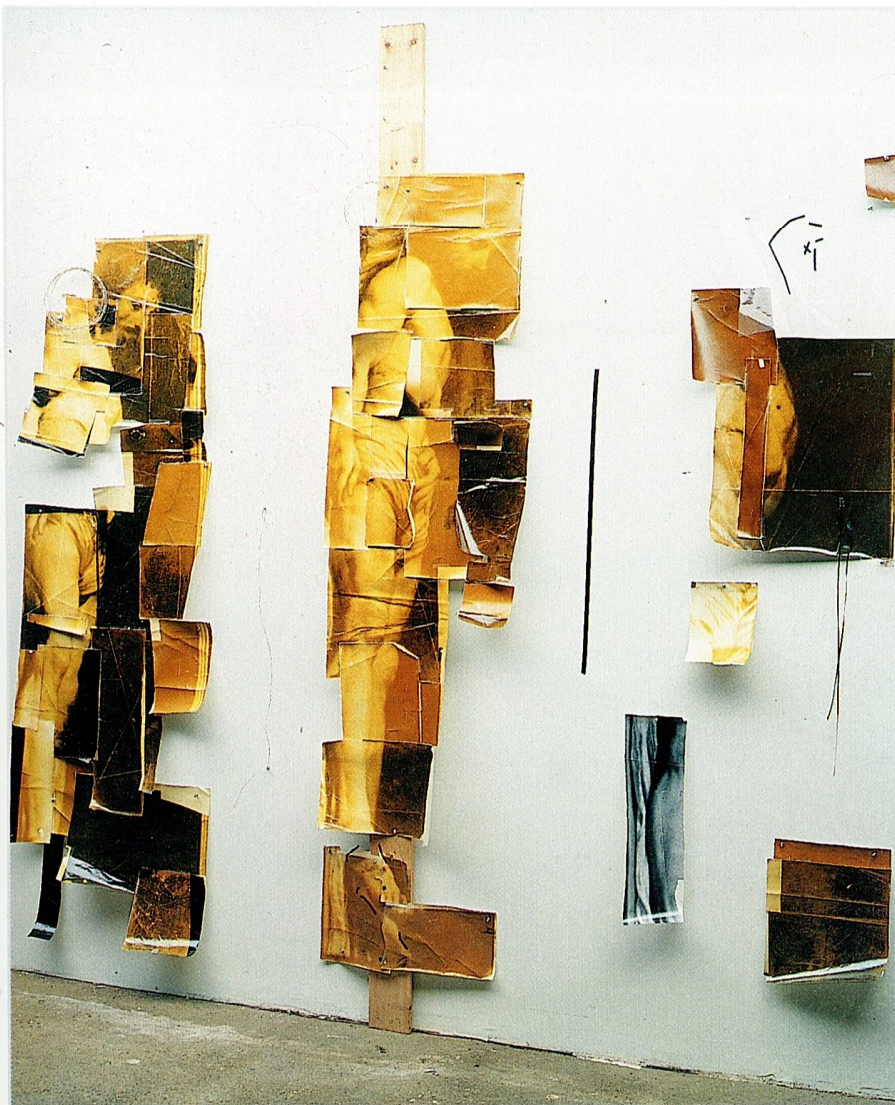
The Starns began developing their own photographs at the age of thirteen, falling in love with the medium. Yet even then they were interrogating, questioning the 'perfection' of the print. The glossy image developed in the photographic lab was anathema to them. Their dilemma centred on rules that they felt alienated by and ones that they perceived had nothing to do with the real, evolving, world and the actuality of life that they were capturing. They were able to confront their anxiety, the perceived imperfections of the medium, when they went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1980. Their work from this period reveals rather than conceals the photographic

process. They literally exposed the fragility of film and paper, a quality that they clearly found seductive. They were developing their own prints, but their desire to work on a larger scale provided them with one of the revelatory moments that often exalts them. The solution was the seemingly crude taping together of prints. The permutations that this provided became a distinctive aesthetic. Here was the metaphor that they had been seeking. Instead of a precious pristine surface they inflicted damage. They decided to age the work from the very beginning, to actually insert the concepts of time, the dust, debris, creases, scratches, and physical ageing of an image that accumulates

over time. Their preferred medium then, as now, was black and white, with yellow, blue, copper, and sepia tones. The Starns were working with their own internal symbols.

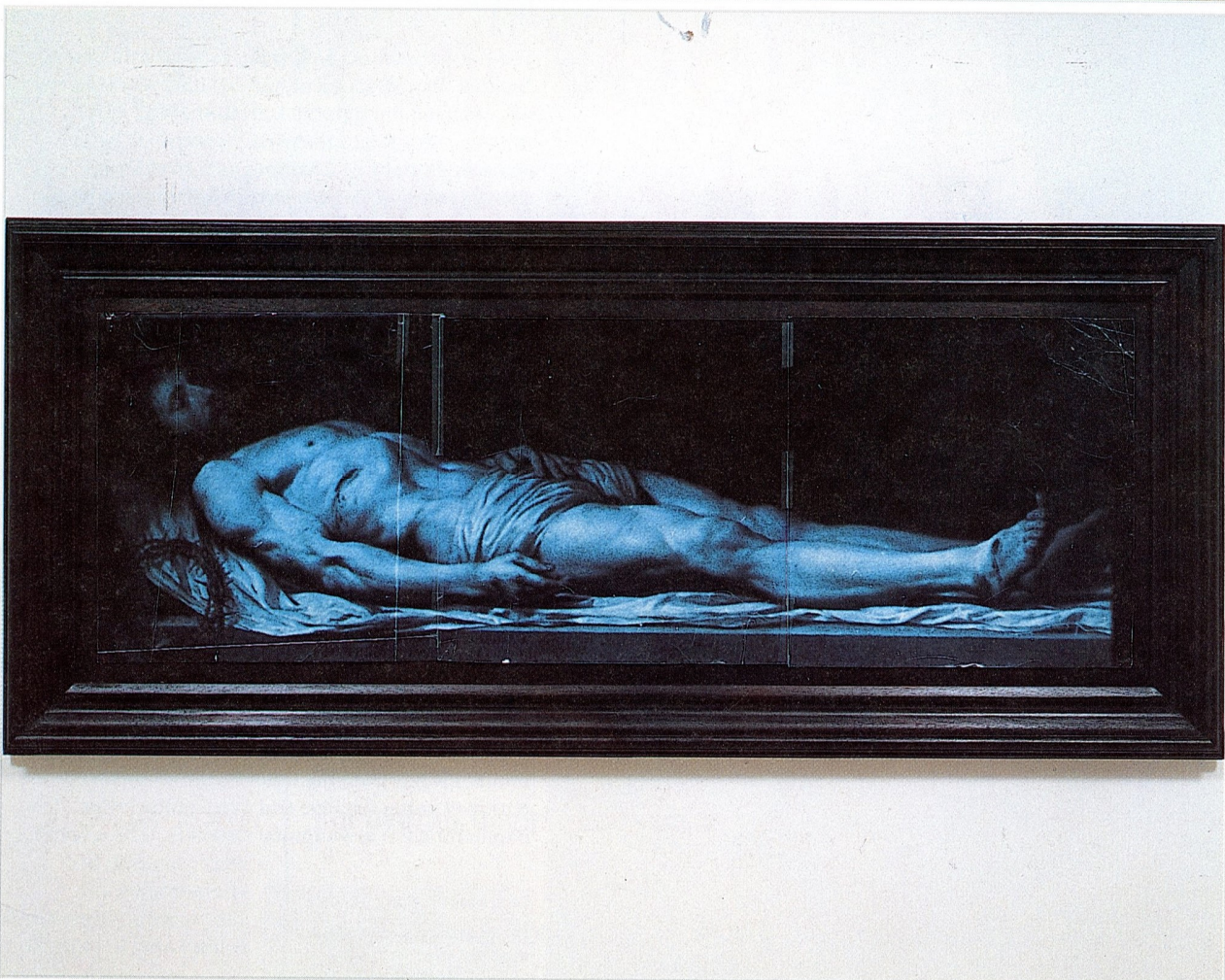
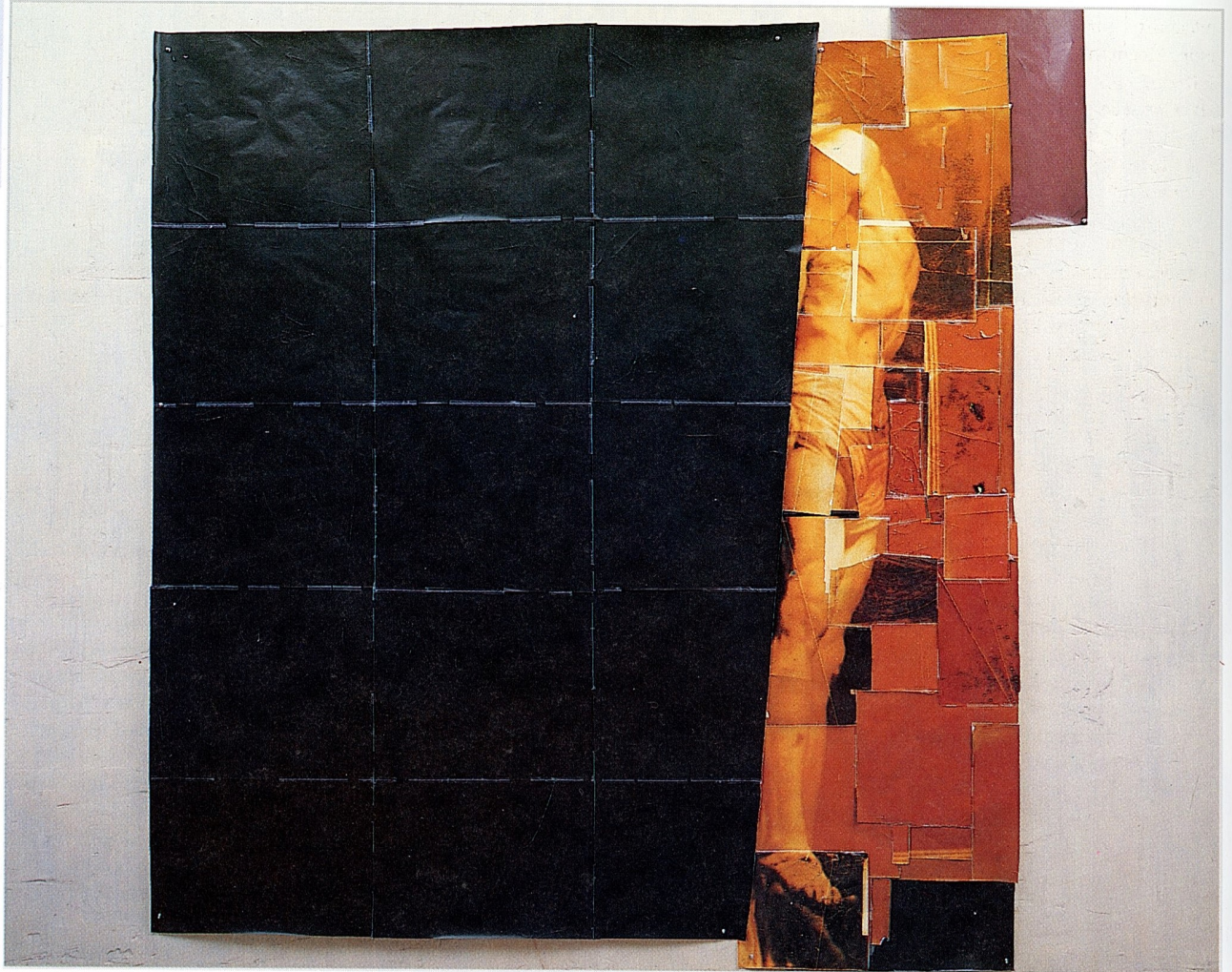
The early work was also literally subjected to history. Another seminal moment had occurred when the twins were walking through the Louvre in 1985. Still students, they found themselves compelled by the image of Philippe de Champaigne's seventeenth century painting *le Christ mort*. Capturing the image on print became the inspiration for the Christ series. Here the brutality of crucifixion becomes contemplative, even sublime. Because of the damage to the print and negative, the scratching and staining, the resulting image appears exposed, reminiscent of an infra red print of an old master at various stages of restoration. They resurrected Christ's image, transporting it onto the contemporary stage, layering and piecing together, peeling off tape, the mechanics of photography exposed instead of being swept under the carpet.

The presenting of a relatively brutal image transposed and somehow calmed, became a theme which they often return to. The Starns see themselves as partially reinstating the original presence of three dimensionality in their source material. These are works fraught with physical tension. Their *Stretched Christ* (1986) is twelve feet long, displayed in a shallow coffin and exhibited horizontally, suspended on legs. In other works from the series Christ is obscured, repressed under the tape and overlapping prints. The frames function as sculptural elements. (The original source material is interesting here as Champaigne painted in a realistic way in order to



Doug and Mike Starn
Crucifixion, 1985-1988
Toned silver print, wire, ribbon,
wood and tape.
Courtesy the artists

Doug and Mike Starn
Small Blue Christ, 1985
-1987
Toned silver print and
tape.
Courtesy the artists
Installation photo by
Tom Warren



Doug and Mike Starn
Vertical Christ with Black,
1985 -1987
Toned silver print and
tape.
Courtesy the artists

make the figure of Christ more acceptable, his suffering more explicit.) The Christ series exudes melancholy, stylistically its images are reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's photo-collages, but emotionally they are about the inevitability of death, and the essence of existence.

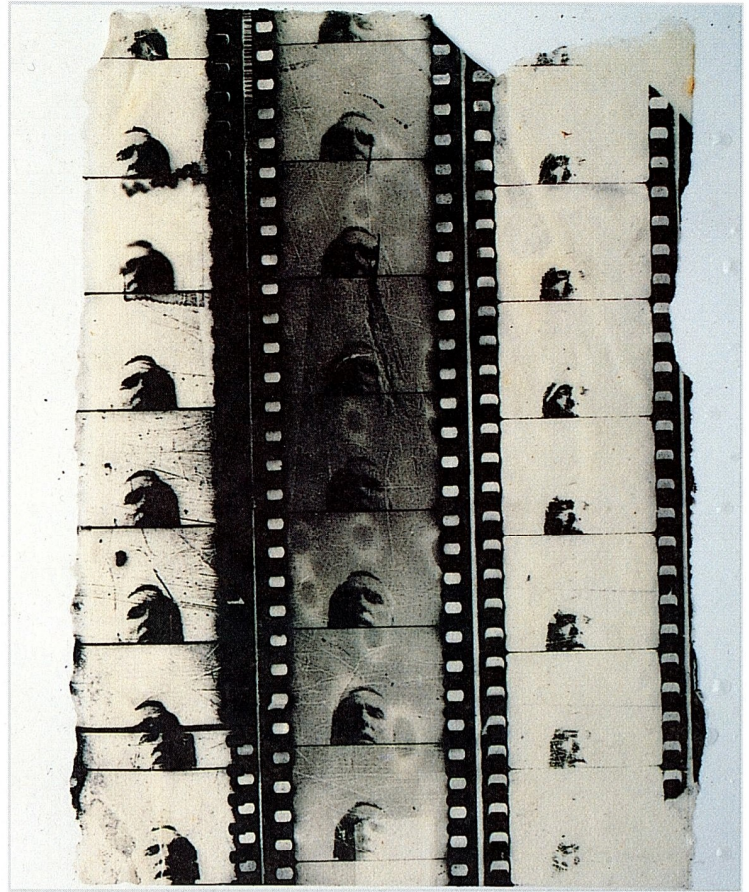
Doug and Mike Starn
Art ephemera from film project with Dennis Hopper, 1997
Toned silver prints from film stock
Courtesy the artists

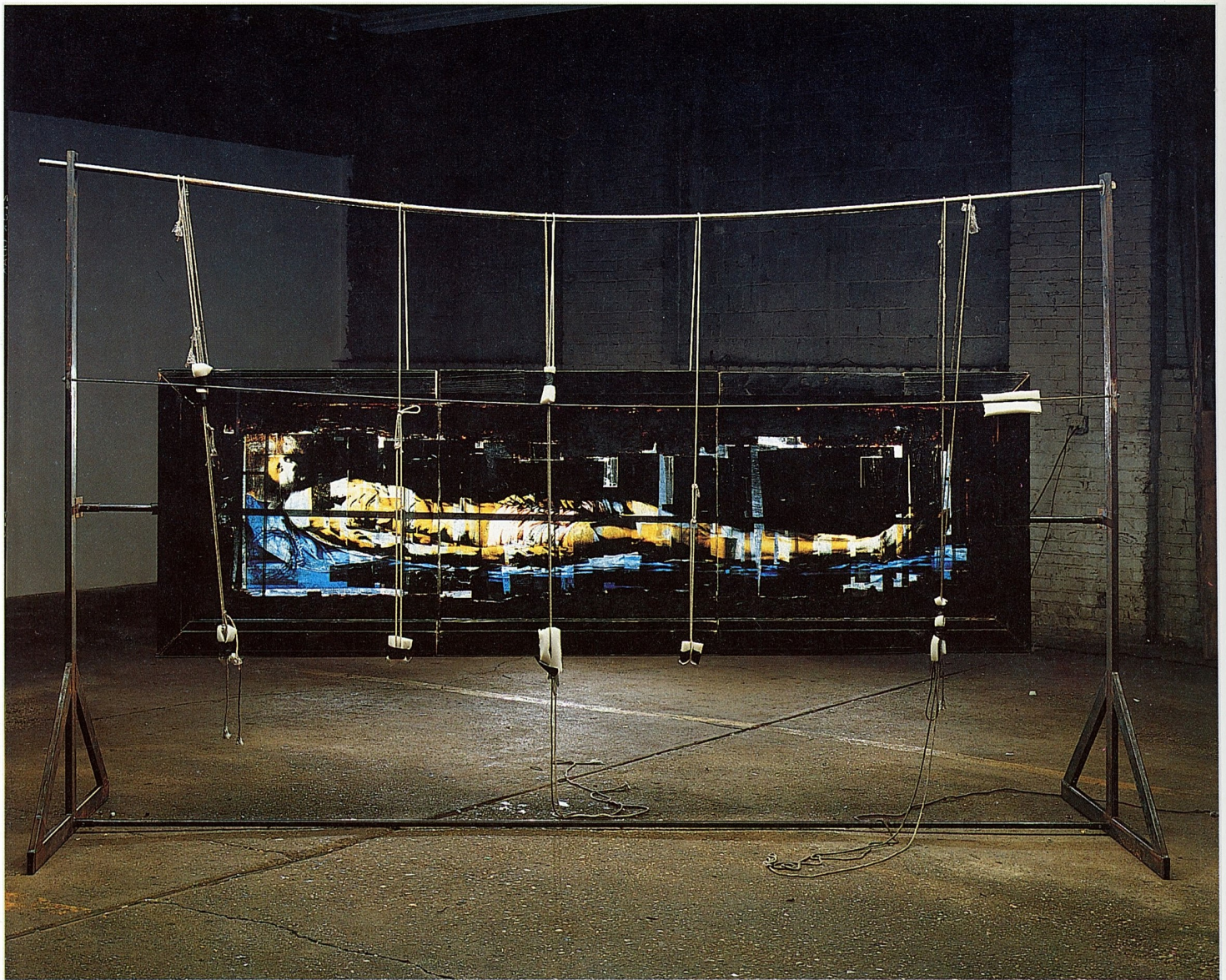
These are not photographic 'moments.' We see in them the reverse of Walter Benjamin's death of the aura of the "original" work of art in the reproduction of photography. The images reinvigorate by rupture, leaving complex surface traces. Steeped in memory there is a haunting quality, power and scale, that will remain throughout all the Starns' later work.

The Starns' photographs are all the product of, and concerned with temporality. The images have long gestation periods. *Rose* 1982-1991, a toned silver print edition, push pinned, scotch taped and creased is one such example. Originally photographed in 1982 in the rose garden next to the Museum School in Boston, the image was a dialogue with the history of photography, and in particular the work of Alfred Stieglitz. Examining concepts of reproduction, seeing if there were more layers to investigate, they sought new levels of significance between painterly, photographic and sculptural modes. The classic image found its way back into their work seven years later. The layering of the rose petals which was explicit in the making of the work, as perfection, over time changes, mutates and dies, becoming implicit. The image worked well,

Doug and Mike Starn
Blot out the Sun #3, 1998-1999
Lysonnic ink jet prints with encaustic on Thai Mulberry and tissue papers
Courtesy the artists

embracing many of their concepts and themes. This emblem of philosophies and religions seemed to contain





within itself 'folded truths.' But perhaps the romanticism of this work, its death and decay, the seductive damaged surfaces, proved to be too easy to insensitively imitate. The Starns found that they wanted to detach themselves from what they perceived as a misunderstanding of their aesthetic.

Moving to New York provided them with a new focus. The work became more physical, as they began using transparent Ortho film and polyester resin combined with steel, wood, and iron pipe clamps as supports for their images. The work included literal tension, and photographic shards of the past. The curling edges of the works were in a state of flux, yet if the clamp was removed the image would discard its three dimensional presence and return to its original state. They began to work more obviously with light, weaving fibre optic cables into books made with transparencies, revealing, when opened, a fusion of metaphor and literal presence. Yet there always appeared to be a mystical undertone, a striving towards their ultimate goal, art as the sublime. The Starns' work was always on a journey towards open ended solutions. Light as well as the lure of history remained their enduring drive.

The *Heliolibri* series and *Ramparts Café* 1995-6 continued the Starns' obsessions. In order to better understand the sun's draw on them the Starns in 1995 committed themselves to in depth historical researches from studies of ancient Egyptian history, the teachings of Plato and Copernicus, and the writings of Dante, to scientific research compiled from radio telescopes. This accumulated knowledge led to the creation of the transparent, illuminated, books called *Heliolibri*, exploring the sun as a symbol of knowledge illumination enlightenment and brilliance. The *Ramparts Café*, a table containing transparent pages warped and corroded over time is a metaphoric documenting of Jerusalem's history of conflict. Encased in the table with its scratched perspex surface are transparent pages from the Koran, the Dead Sea Scrolls and a twelfth century Crusader bible. Each page documents the story of war between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. The Starns also included sound, with Christian and Judaic chanting which quietly emanates from the work. These pieces were complicated intellectual and spiritual responses to a commission to create an installation for the

Tower of David Museum. The result is a very personal response to the city itself.

Doug and Mike Starn
Stretched Christ (Installation view)
Colour and toned silver emulsion
print and tape on glass
Courtesy the artists

The Starns' latest series again embraces grand themes. Life and death, creation and destruction, the absolutes of their oeuvre. *Attracted to Light* 1997-1999 and *Blot out the Sun* 1998-1999 illuminate their obsessions in quite different ways - both in the actual process of making the editions and the recording of the images. *Attracted to Light* began as a series of problems to be solved - how to photograph and print images of moths and bugs that were fatally attracted to light. The brothers perceived that part of the attraction for them to this subject was their consistent and obsessive exploration of light, encapsulated in both the medium of photography and their scientific and humanistic studies. Their journal writings reveal their curiosity with these tiny insects and their inevitable fate.

*Moths - attracted to light in the darkness.
No one understands why. It's neither to
mate nor to eat:*

Many moths don't eat at all; some don't even have mouths. Like butterflies, moths are almost as light as air, but they are their poor stupid cousins; Choosing to live their lives at night, but the gravity of light pulls them out, flying from nowhere towards the end of their lives - their fragile dusty wings in tatters, are our tattered wings

.A moth will bounce across the ceiling, orbit a lamp, fly into a flame. A moth will bash its brains in to get to the light or self-immolate like a Buddhist Monk. The mystery and the futility of the flight for something better.

The futility of the moth's drive was again a metaphor for the Starns' engagement with damage. How could they create a stilled image, in a state of flux, that expressed contemplative violence? Perfectionists, they have been working on the images since 1996, and have now completed the editions (published by Nancy Bressler). Knowing that they didn't want something

Doug and Mike Starn
Attracted to Light, F
Silver emulsion print and tape
Courtesy the artists

standard to present their images, they were inspired by Irving Penn's platinum prints, and especially the quality of light within his work. This was a visual stimulation, a starting point rather than the path that they wanted to travel. Their journey towards a solution took about a year and a half and was in the end, visually simpler than some of their earlier work. The images were set within a vignette formed by the circular edge of the lens.

Technically the filming of the moths was difficult. They used a Mamiya medium format camera with huge extension tubes and a macro lens. There is something strange, moving and timeless about these images. Damaged, fragile, yet enduring, obsessive images of compulsive behaviour. Printed on mulberry paper, the application of the emulsions and treatment of the image after development is the Starns' own secret. The sulphur toner degrades the emulsion and lifts it up while it is washing, but once dry permanence becomes locked into the process, the most permanent treatment in

photography.

Each element of the print is a narrative, the smoky effect, the fragility, the fluttering quality of the moths wings melded to the paper. One large image pinned to the wall is made up of forty two repeated prints. Although the aesthetic is Warholian, the process is not. The Starns are great admirers of Warhol, his obsessive drives, tropes of repetition and fear of death, but their own work is quite different.

Recently they have also been filming the moths with an fibre optic endoscope. This is not the first time that they have worked with film but they suggested to me that this is work they are aching to complete. They have been getting underneath the fluttering images, with the endoscope mimicking the faceted eye of the insect. Their work in progress has the romance of early cinema, of damaged celluloid slipping about the screen. Again they are reinvesting a medium with the power and transmutation of its own history.





Doug and Mike Starn
Attracted to Light, K
 Silver emulsion print and tape on Thai Mulberry paper
 Courtesy the artists

series. The textual qualities are highly sensual, the images radiate light. Seeing them in the studio in soft lighting, they glowed as trees do before a storm, their gnarled silhouettes timeless and enduring.

The Starns' dialogue with the origins of photography continues. For them there is no decisive photographic moment. No matter how fresh art appears, it will acquire an aura of history the viewer's relationship to the work will change. Ultimately the Starns' work is about time, damage, duplication and light, the work revealing the traces of its creative generation as well as its fragility and inevitable decay. There is a slow accumulation of history and memory. Everything is constantly developing, the world is in a constant state of flux. That serenity and transmutation can coexist in the same work is a tribute to their obsessive working methods, their striving for sublime expression. They do not expect to find answers but still question; their embracing of technology and new media strangely at ease with their aesthetic. It is ironic, perhaps, that their chosen medium is woefully inadequate when reproducing the three dimensional quality of their work, transposing it back to the two dimensional ,perfect surface, that they have spent the last twenty years rejecting.

© Jean Wainwright

Looking at the fragility yet durability of these works that carry within them traces of death , this is the work of dreams and visions manifested in obsessive observation both technical and creative. The *Attracted to Light* portfolio seems to invest these minute insects with personalities, they are portraits revealing all the traces of their creative generation fragility and decay.

Like *Attracted to Light*, the *Blot out the Sun* 1998-1999 edition also began life as photographs taken almost a decade ago. The artists' writings again illuminate their ideas:

When we reach for the light ,we create shadows. Just as when trees seek the light they steal it from whatever grows below, blotting out the sun. This is photosynthesis, the process of making darkness from light, but the tiny spaces between the leaves form apertures that project the suns rays onto the ground creating camera obscurae ...light is the past ,nothing is new when it reaches us... the light is crumbled old ideas, burned and dusty beams of illuminations.

These are less damaged works. All the trees in *Blot out the Sun* are photographed reaching for the light. They began as sulphur negatives shot with the same Mamiya that was used for *Attracted to Light*. The trees are silhouettes printed on sheets of Mulberry paper and layered with several coats of wax. A layer of encaustic with hand work manipulated on top completes the process. The manipulation of the encaustic and the wax captures the light and bounces it back out. Most of the images are diptychs recalling earlier work; all portray very old and twisted forms of ancient trees captured on Fifth Avenue and in Central Park.

Blot out the Light is a monumental

Doug and Mike Starn
Blot out the Sun #1-L
 Silver emulsion print and tape
 Courtesy the artists

