



Gravity of Light



PHOTO: JESSE FOX

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The Scariness and Brilliance of the Starns' 'Gravity of Light'

BY STEVEN ROSEN

As an assistant to artists Doug and Mike Starn approached with safety goggles at Mount Adams' decommissioned Holy Cross Church, I got more than a little scared.

I knew in advance that their photography-related installation *Gravity of Light* involved a carbon arc lamp with light so brilliant it could cause eye damage if you stared at it unprotected. (A key part of the FotoFocus celebration, it opens with a 5-7 p.m. reception Wednesday with artists present at the church at 1055 St. Paul Place, and regular hours begin Saturday.)

But I wasn't prepared for the lamp's size (13-foot-tall) and its noise — like explosions on the sun. Placed in the center of the former sanctuary, it made intermittent sounds as its light cycled off and on in the otherwise-dark space that were shudder-inducing — screams, hisses, moans, angry little shouts. It reminded me of the Monster of the Id in the film *Forbidden Planet*, or an anachronistic time machine as Jules Verne might have imagined it.

Coupled with the dilapidated, spooky nature of the building itself, it makes for a powerful first impression: Abandon all hope ye who enter here.

The Starns, New York-based identical twins who were in town a couple weeks ago to do an advance test of the work, assured me my fear of harm was unwarranted. They, in fact, are so used to *Gravity of Light* by now — this is its third presentation since a 2005 debut in Sweden — they can walk around without safety glasses. (They don't stare into the light, however.)

"For us light is what controls you, what you love and hate," Doug told me. "It's your goals, your past. It's politics, your insecurities. ... It's all these things that are your life. All these things drive your decisions and it's how you're trying to move your life."

The exposure to this intense light, and the humbling preparation for it, is only one part of *Gravity of Light* experience. The other is what that light allows you to see intermittently emerging from the darkness. In this case, light is not a clichéd metaphor for beauty any more than the Velvet Underground's "White Light/White Heat" is a love song.

The Starns refer to the lamp itself as "This Is My Middle Finger." It's inspired by Leonardo da Vinci portrait of John the Baptist pointing up toward the heavens. But, they have written, there's a profane as well as sacred interpretation to the title — light here doesn't exist to please us. With true illumination can come horror as much as enlightenment.

The walls of the old church are lined with monumental-sized examples of the Starns' distinctive photographic series, in which an image — or repeated imagery — has been created by "tiling" or via vertical strips. This signifies the fragility of preservation and thus the importance of its survival, and serves to increase their solemnity and importance.

The first one I saw in the brilliance — hanging from sheer material, curtain-like, in what once was the apse — was shocking enough to make me pray for darkness. From a distance, it looks like a giant leering skull with bulging eyes. The Starns told me visitors refer to it as "the creature."

It's actually titled "Take Off Your Skin, It Ain't No Sin" and is a portrait of an 18th century alchemist's experiment revealing the abstraction of the human body's system of networks, according to James Crump, chief curator of Cincinnati Art Museum, which is sponsoring *Gravity of Light*.

Other photo installations are "Attracted to Light," (an airplane-sized moth headed toward flame), "Structure of Thought" (gnarled tree branches that suggest our bodies' own withered veins and arteries) and "Black Pulse and Black Pulse Lambda" (desiccated leaves approaching the end of their life cycle). Above all this, high up on a wall opposite "the creature," is the image of an eighth century Buddhist monk named Ganjin, whose blindness, it is said, taught him patient acceptance.

To me, the word "gravity," as used in this show, means "seriousness." And this exhibit is as serious as light, itself.

For information about visiting *Gravity of Light*, visit www.fotofocuscincinnati.org or www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org.

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