

What is the Light? Doug & Mike Starn: Gravity of Light

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What is the Light? Doug & Mike Starn: Gravity of Light

by Chis Reeves

The ambivalence towards light is something particularly relatable to this author. Having a macular condition known as Myodesopsia, aka "eye floaters," I understand that while a bright sunny day can be a blessing, it can also be a burden. This idea that light, symbolically, literally, and otherwise, is something of a generous and cruel force, is the cornerstone of Mike and Doug Starn's exhibition Gravity of Light. Light's heaviness on our world is on display with big themes such as religious allegory (in both the East and West), obsession, life and death, meta-critiques, and science. It seems only appropriate that such broad and big themes be on view in an exhibition dealing with the source of life.

Appropriately enough, all of these themes manifest in the anchor of this exhibition, a thirteen-foot arc lamp. Manned by an attendant sitting a small distance away at a table covered with dials and switches that connect to a large power source, the lamp requires constant attention and appears unpredictable and demanding (the attendant assured me this was the point after it went out completely for a minute or so). In a way, the Starns with their creation of their own fickle light source that makes or breaks the accessibility of their artistic universe, play God, hiring (capital is 21st century religious currency?) an assistant (disciple?) to carry on their most important work. The religious exposition on my part could seem a bit heavy handed were it not for the fact that this exhibition takes place in an abandoned monastery (in Cincinnati's Mt. Adams neighborhood's no longer functional Holy Cross church) and the title of the arc lamp is rife with religious connotations.

Entitled Leonardo's St. John or This is My Middle Finger, it alludes to both the sacred and obscene. Leonardo's renaissance painting of the saint of salvation, John the Baptist, of which the title refers, is an effeminate rendering of the saint shrouded in darkness, but illuminated by no particular light source, a smile on his face and a finger pointing towards the heavens. The darkness surrounding St. John in this painting alludes to the biblical notion of him as "a light that shineth in the darkness." The arc lamp, being the sole source of light in Gravity of Light is literally "a light that shineth in the darkness" but is also, if we were to look at the first part of this title, thought of as something of an attempt at a rendering of a holy relic, much like Leonardo's painting. On the other hand, there is the second part of that title, that refers to the lamp as an obscene gesture, a bit of a punk rock move that says "fuck track lighting, this is how you're going to view our exhibition because light doesn't want to and won't be controlled by anybody; it's not holy except in the sense that it can be profane, and religion can be a pain in the ass anyway." It's a back and forth between the whimsy and reality of light, an argument between men of science and men of faith.

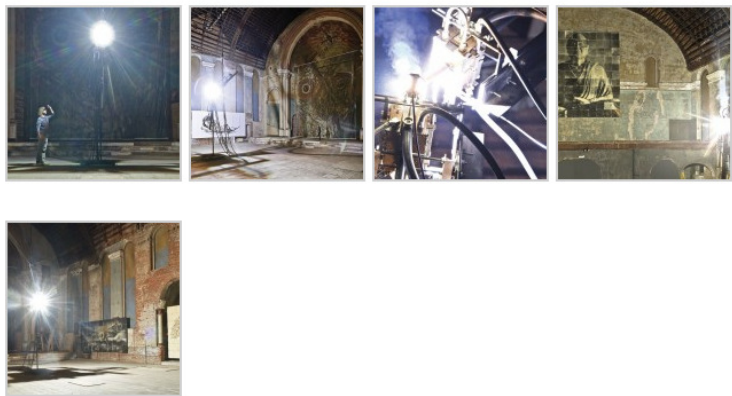
This becomes even more prevalent when considering the old church this exhibition is housed in. The abandoned site evokes religious nostalgia, with the faded paintings of religious iconography chipping away on the walls, bits of debris scattered all over the floor, and the apse in a particular state of disrepair. All of these remnants of a better holy time are covered with products of science, enormous tiled or vertically hung photographs, each dealing with the theme of light's bittersweet effect in their own right. Metaphorically speaking, to reinstate a church to house products of technology aka man-made creation sans a holy "Creator," is a fairly provocative statement. In this way, the arc lamp, standing in the center of the church, surrogates more the sun than the light of a God. Like the planets to the sun, their ability to function (their ability to be seen) relies on the light in the center (and their creation as photographs rely on light in general), and each large-scale photograph is hung on the walls in a way that, when viewing the exhibition as a whole, they could almost be considered orbiting around the arc lamp.

On one end of the church, in the apse, is an enormous curtain sized image entitled Take Off Your Skin, It Aint No Sin. The title references the Tom Waits, Robert Wilson, and William S. Burroughs' collaborative musical from the 1980s The Black Rider. The musical is a bit of an update of the German story of Faust, a cautionary tale of murder, love, and selling your soul to the devil. I'm not entirely sure how the title works into this piece aside from being a clever way to describe the image itself – two enormous eyeballs peering at the viewer from an exposed series of human veins – "an 18th century alchemist's experiment revealing the abstraction of the human body's system of networks" according to Steven Rosen's conversation with Chief Curator of Cincinnati Art Museum, Curator of Photography and curator and Gravity of Light, James Crump. Perhaps the idea of magic, both prevalent in the musical the title is based on, and a whimsical take on the act of photography itself, is at play here, but this is the only photograph, when looking at it standalone in the exhibition, that I was unclear as to how it played in as a whole.

On the other hand, it works well in tandem with the piece opposite to it at the other end of the church, an image of the Buddhist monk Ganjin, who was blind, but saw light inside of himself. The idea of inner light and religion is one that the Starns have permeating throughout the religious sentiments featured in this exhibition, but this one can be viewed almost with a lack of cynicism, particularly in its placement towards Take Off Your Skin, It Aint No Sin; the former, a ghastly creation of a science experiment the latter, a tranquil reminder of the light inside of us, found through a form of Eastern religious discovery. Perhaps the grandiosity of science can be as horrific as that of religion,

and with this stare down taking place in Gravity of Light it complements the science/religion (and therefore the meaning of light for both) themes throughout.

Gravity of Light presents us with a tug of war, if this idea is not already seen in the examples I've listed. Light is good and bad and its effects on our daily existence are just as dubious. This is illustrated most directly with the images of moths, Attracted by Light and The Same But Different, each showing moths living and dying by the light. Moths are positively phototactic and their insatiable attraction to light often leads to their own demise, as anyone with a porch light and a broom can certainly attest to. The idea that light could be so attractive that you would die for it feeds into a host of symbolic and metaphoric ideas, and apply well in this respect to the prevalent ideas in this exhibition. So, what is the light? Descartes had his theories, but why does it make us happy and why does it hurt us? How do we attain it and what are the consequences of attaining too much of it? Gravity of Light asks these questions in an elegant way, refusing answers but providing plenty of evidence of the good and bad.



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