

'Gravity of Light' goes to church

Mount Adams plays host to exhibit of photos and sculpture

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Hanging like a curtain in front of the altar of Holy Cross Church and Monastery in Mt. Adams is the 30' x 40' Tale Off Your Skin, It Ain't No Sin from the Doug + Mike Starn Gravity of Light installation. / PROVIDED/Cincinnati Art Museum

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When you walk into the "Doug + Mike Starn: Gravity of Light" installation at the Holy Cross Church in Mount Adams, you're in for an "immersive experience," according to exhibit materials.

Identical twins born in New Jersey in 1961, the Starns have been art-world darlings almost from the time they graduated from the School of The Museum of Art Boston in 1985. They are known for their skill in combining different media – here photography and sculpture – into engrossing site-specific installations.

"Gravity of Light," organized by Stockholm's Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, debuted in a disused paint factory there in 2005. Three years later it occupied a derelict Victorian pipe factory in Pittsburgh under the aegis of Wood Street Galleries.

the horrific tale of the head

A horrific story surrounds the head in "Take Off Your Skin, It Ain't No Sin." According to contemporary reports, recounted by the Starns in the monograph accompanying the exhibition, the 18th-century scientist Raimondo di Sangro (1710-1771), Prince of Sansevero, was purported to have had people killed to study their bodies. Here he injected a servant with a solution of mercury and lead. This was carried through the body "metalizing" its vascular system. Then the flesh was dissolved, leaving the skeleton and eyes encased by the solidified veins, arteries and capillaries. Actually the head is part of an "anatomical machine," one of two bodies made by the anatomist Giuseppe Salerno in the 1780s for di Sangro. The veins, arteries and capillaries are actually made out of iron wire, silk fibers and colored waxes.

If you go

Where: Holy Cross Church, 1055 Saint Paul Place, Mount Adams.
Dates: Wednesday through Sunday till Dec. 30.
Hours: Noon-5 p.m.
Admission: Free.
More information: cincymuseum.org

captivated by the architecture and the potential that it held for this site-specific installation," relates Crump.

The ruined state of this once sacred space with paint flaking from its walls, beams of the barrel-arched ceiling exposed and plywood sheets covering rotted floors must have particularly appealed to them, because the Gravity of Light is all about dualities: light as natural phenomenon and symbol of the divine and of knowledge, light and dark, life and death, growth and decay, chaos and order.

And Crump calls "Gravity of Light" "part scientific laboratory, part art exhibition."

As in previous incarnations, the Starns installed mural-sized photographs from five series. Each photo is composed of multiple sheets of paper assembled into a single image.

Situated in the center of the church like the sun, the carbon-arc lamp illuminates eight photos. Modeled after first electric light invented by Sir Humphry Davy in 1804, it almost blinds you.

When you enter the church, you are issued protective eyewear and must sign a release acknowledging that the carbon-arc lamp produces "ultraviolet rays at about 45,000 watts." It burns at 6,000 degrees, twice the melting point of steel, and is so bright that the ever-present "keeper of the flame" – an attendant charged with replacing the carbon rods as they burn out – must wear SPF 50 sunscreen.

Gravity of Light is not a "drive-by" exhibition. You can't just cruise in and out in 10 minutes.

First, you must really look at the photographs, appropriately the medium that records light.

In the "Attracted to the Light" series, light is destructive, luring

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moths to their deaths.

But light also gives life. Through photosynthesis, the energy of the sun is transformed into food for plants. Yet in the simply beautiful Black Pulse series, the Starns have scanned dried-out leaves against a white background. They have decayed leaving a lacy network of veins.

Those leaves might have come from the bare trees in "Structure of Thought." Silhouetted against the sky, the branches reach out to snag the unwary. But they also look like a nerve network.

Another network is seen in "Take Off Your Skin, It Ain't No Sin," the largest photo in the installation – 30 by 40 feet. Here the skin has been "stripped away" from a realistic 18th-century model of a human head to expose the circulatory system.

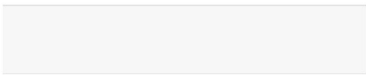
A network of vessels covers the face and could be interpreted as thorns to suggest Christ. And the prominent X crossing the face is the Greek letter chi, which symbolizes Christ. This interpretation is reinforced by the photograph's location, hanging like a curtain in front of the altar.

A photograph of the portrait sculpture of Ganjin (688-763) faces it from the choir loft. The blind Buddhist monk attained enlightenment by looking within. His eyes are closed in meditation unlike the grisly head's eyeballs that bore into you. This serene image contrasts with the tortured skull in front of the chancel.

After taking in each of the wall-sized photographs, climb the spiral stair to the choir loft. From here you get a real sense of the scale of the installation, which seems much larger than when you're on the floor.

If you turn your back to the arc lamp, you cast a sharp shadow on Ganjin, quite literally making the installation the "immersive experience" promised.

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