



This page: the artists estimate that their team has used around 26km of nylon rope to lash together around 2,500 bamboo poles. Opposite: Doug (left) and Mike Starn at the Tallix Foundry, New York, in front of *Big Bambù*



# TWINS' PEAK

In a gigantic warehouse in New York State, the identical Stam brothers, Mike and Doug, have been at work – with the help of a team of rock climbers – on a giant evolving tower of bamboo poles lashed together with nylon ropes. The chaotic and spontaneous network is a microcosm of life itself, discovers Pernilla Holmes. Photography: Annie Schlechter











Opposite: the Starns employ between eight and 15 mountain climbers to work on the piece at any one time. In the foreground is a new sculpture that Doug and Mike are developing. This page: from the initial tower, the constructors formed a cantilevered arch, which became the basis for a new tower – thus the work ‘walks’ its way across the studio ‘almost like a Slinky’, as the Starns put it



**'THE TRICK IS** to use your arms and trust your upper body strength,' says artist Doug Starn, who along with his identical twin, Mike, has created the massive bamboo network of chaos that the three of us are climbing up into. 'Even if a piece snaps,' adds Mike, somewhat less reassuringly, 'the fibres should hold it together. It should still support you.'

Currently about 16m high and 37m long, *Big Bambú*, the sculpture in which we end up sitting, is as big as a large house, made out of some 2,500 bamboo poles randomly lashed together with approximately 26km of nylon rope. Not far from the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, New York, the piece is currently walking its way back and forth across the vast industrial space of the old factory that the Starns, who have made art together since their teens, have hired as a studio. 'Walking', because Doug and Mike, along with the eight to 15 mountain climbers they hire to work with them, have for the past few months been taking poles off one end and adding them to the other, creating a slow but constant movement.

'It's like an organism,' says Doug. 'It's a reflection of what it is to grow, change and develop anything – a person, family, city... whatever. Whether it's individual molecules in a body or entire societies, they are all made up of individual parts that are catalysts that affect and change one another. The progression of life is chaotic.' This intellectual starting point becomes viscerally clear from inside *Big Bambú*. There is no decipherable logic. There is plenty of room to move and the bamboo is relatively easy to climb, but it's an extremely unconventional architectural space with no steps or clear routes to follow.

'The human mind constantly looks to find patterns and make sense of things,' says Mike. This desire to create order was a challenge for the Starns and their climbers when they first began building the piece in September 2008. It turned out to be difficult to build something without a preconceived, linear idea in mind, and although the Starns prescribed that the piece have great, cantilevered arching sections, making it resemble a giant wave, within the structure itself there are no straight lines or right angles. 'Basically, life doesn't work like that, and we wanted the work to be like a microcosm of life.'

Born in 1961, the Starns grew up in New Jersey in a small town near Atlantic City called Absecon. 'We really didn't fit in,' says Mike. 'We just had different ideas about everything,' adds Doug, who is now married with two children (Mike is also married, with one child). 'We were kind of loners together. We didn't really need anybody else.' The brothers describe the town as 'pretty standard middle-class' and remember feeling starved of culture, with a strong desire to see pictures and go to museums despite the conspicuous lack of art around them.

By age 13 they began working together on photography projects, taking college classes while still in high school. 'We really hated people like Aaron Siskind and Ansel Adams,' recalls Mike – 'all the stuff that was considered good art photography in the 1970s.' What bothered both brothers were the very formal rules these practitioners imposed on their craft. 'You would hear photographers complain about being separated from the art world,' says Doug, 'and it was like, "Well, you're separated because you're not thinking like an artist."'

The Starns' desire to work with photography as a contemporary art form led them to the School of the Museum of Fine

Arts in Boston (they applied and were accepted with a single portfolio) and on to New York in the 1980s, where they were quickly picked up by legendary gallery-owner Leo Castelli and included in prestigious shows at the Whitney and Metropolitan Museums as well as the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

One early influence they cite is the great American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, who spectacularly broke down barriers in art by introducing non-traditional materials – such as a tyre or a stuffed ram – to his work during the 1950s. In the 1980s Doug and Mike similarly transformed their photography into a conceptual practice, taking pictures of reproductions of old master paintings and historical figures, manipulating them in the darkroom and then tearing, crumpling and repiecing them together using masking tape, effectively turning them into works of sculpture.

Since then, the scale of the Starns' boundary-breaking projects has grown considerably, and now incorporates architecture and design. In 2005 they were commissioned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York to transform a 75m-long section of the city's South Ferry subway station with *See it Split, See it Change* (completed in 2008), a permanent, built-in, site-specific installation. 'Part of the work is based on a topographical map of Manhattan from 1640, which we then overlaid with a contemporary street grid,' explains Doug. Other sections are long, glass panels of silhouetted trees. Conceptually the piece addresses the subway as the circulatory system of the constantly changing city, but perhaps most impressive is its less tangible effect. As anyone who ever travels the New York subway can tell you, it's normally an aggressive space, moved through as quickly as possible over the course of a journey. The Starns' installation transforms this feeling completely, creating a rare tranquil moment amid the commuter bustle.

It was while working on the South Ferry project, which required them to collaborate with a range of architects, bureaucrats and fabricators, that the Starns came up with the idea for *Big Bambú*, a project they could work on on their own, free of compromise. The football-pitch-sized building they found to house it is a kind of testament to the philosophy of change behind the work. Called the Tallix Foundry, for 40 years it was home to a massive-art fabricator, where works by artists such as Jeff Koons, Frank Stella and Louise Bourgeois were made. The space still carries remnants of this past, with vast industrial machines and odd bits of sculptures lurking in dark corners.

At present the Starns are funding *Big Bambú* themselves, meaning that money made from every work sold or private commission is funnelled back to the studio. Looking into the future, they're considering moving it to an art institution, where they could re-create the work outside, 'perhaps even in an urban setting,' says Mike. 'It's certainly possible to have it climb up buildings, for example. Basically our ideal would be to keep the project going, in some form or other, indefinitely.'

Eventually it is time to make our way down through *Big Bambú*'s branches. Seeing me pause at an awkward spot, Doug offers some gentle advice: 'You can find yourself in a dead-end sometimes,' he says. 'You just have to traverse your way across and find another way through' ■

*'Big Bambú' can be viewed by appointment only. For details, ring 001 718 522 7027, or visit [starnstudio.com](http://starnstudio.com)*

Opposite: just as building *Big Bambú* is a balancing act, so too is the structure itself – a network which responds to its own stresses to successfully navigate its own habitat. 'It represents me,' writes Doug, 'in that I am who I was, and I am completely different to who I was when I was a little boy'



