

## The Part, The Whole, The Art of the Starns

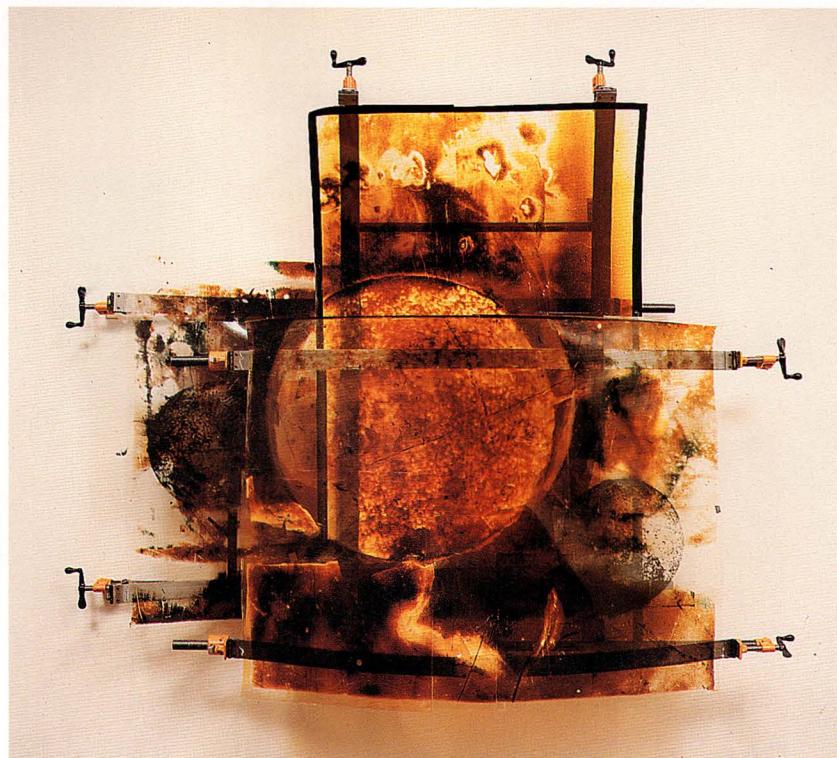
Edward Weisberger

Although Mike and Doug Starn are photographers, the works they create go beyond the limitations of traditional photography. In order to break free of two-dimensional flatness, their photographs—whether printed on paper or, more often, on toned ortho film—are torn, crumpled, and pieced together. This breaking down, or distressing, of the photographic surface is done not only to give it shape, but also to age it, to place the photograph firmly within time and therefore subject to life and death in equal measure.

It is a truism that photographs preserve moments of reality. But it cannot be said that photographs freeze time, for there is no hope of reanimation, no hope of any thaw or resumption. It is an oddity of our relationship to photography that we seek to deny the mortality confirmed by the act of being photographed. We choose instead to look upon photography as an ennobling activity that makes its subjects immortal whether in images of celebration or devastation. Instead what we see in any given image is something not suspended in time, but something that has passed away into time. All photographs are *memento mori*, and, free of its myriad associations, any photograph is meaningless in and of itself. It is the separation of photography from life that the Starns fight against, and through their work they seek to acknowledge the inseparableness of life from death.

The Starns push their photographs further into three-dimensional space by giving them sculptural/architectural shape, which they do by making structures that are integral to each work. Fundamentally the Starns method involves a layering and piecing together. The works are never seamless, the handiwork is always apparent, and the structures are always assembled in visible sections so that they may be easily broken down and reconstituted. The structures are composed

of materials—steel bars, iron pipes, clamps—that make physical force visible. The clamps emphasize the exertion and release of energy in opposing directions, that is, they visualize the equilibrium of an active physical system. Even when their approach is more reductive and the artists simply tack their photographic work to a wall, in essence they are borrowing the structure of the wall/the room/the building, and the push pins become the focus of all physical tensions.



*Sol Invictus*, 1992

The artists' method causes us to directly examine the works' constituent physical structures. At a given moment, each work may appear to be at rest, but any impression of stasis readily gives way to a perception of living structures. Indeed, each work is a representation of form as a function of movement and force. In essence, each is animated by life, and there is a constant cross referencing between macro and micro systems. What is at play is an architectonics of physical and metaphysical systems. For example, formed by toned ortho film, steel, and clamps, the structure of *Sol Invictus* (the invincible sun) may be seen as a reference to our efforts to harness the power of the sun or even more metaphorically our efforts to control our destiny. But such efforts are put in more truthful perspective when we regard the sun as an invincible force beyond our control. In that context the clamps and steel can only suggest the tremendous physical force that releases the sun's energy.

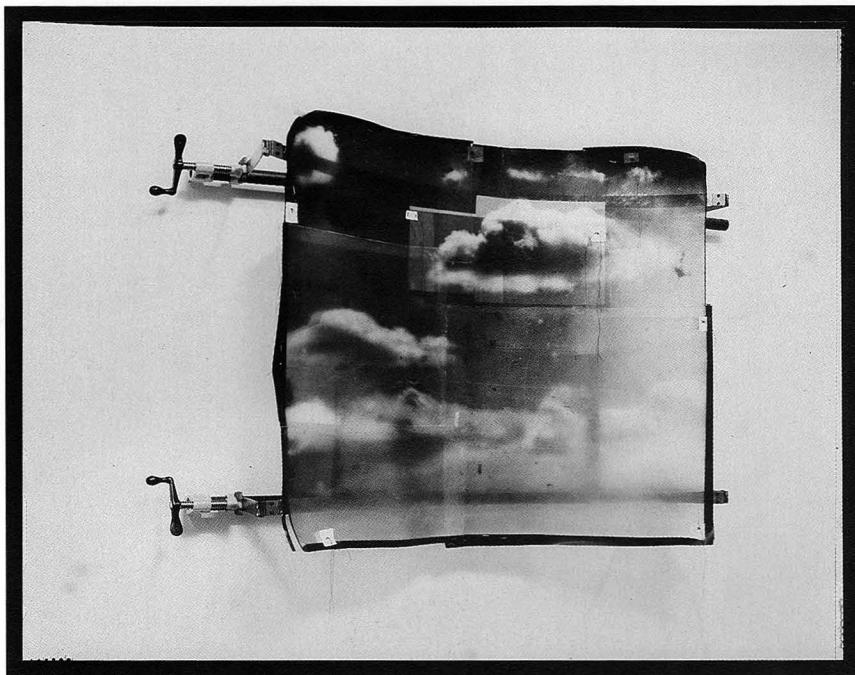
Again, steel bars and iron clamps form/hold together the Starn's cloud pieces. In some pieces the force is exerted to create convex forms, in others, concave forms. Taken together the two shapes constitute the atmosphere that delineates the sphere of the earth. The cloud pieces are filled with repeated images of the type of individualized and large, billowing clouds that move in patterns across the expanses of the Southwest (which is where the Starns experienced and photographed them). Clouds establish scale, acting as



*Sphere of Influence, 1990-92*



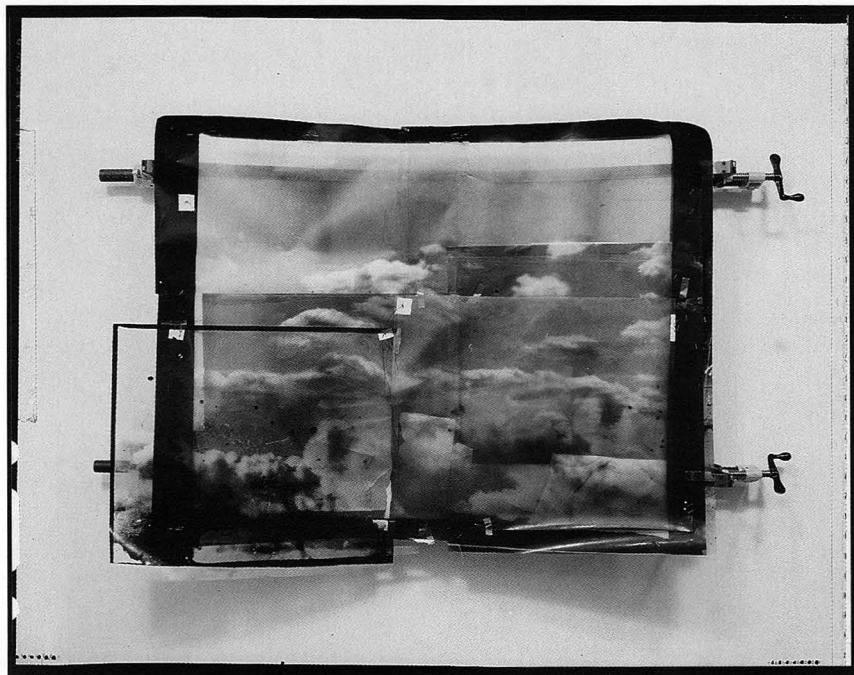




*Concave Cloud 1, 1991-92*

the nearest points of reference for the infinite space beyond the earth's atmosphere. Within this eternal vastness, clouds establish a sense of intimacy and a sense of the immensity lying beyond.

The Starn's most ambitious work to date, *Sphere of Influence*, measures roughly twenty-three feet from top to bottom, including the motor from which it is suspended. After rotating in



*Concave Cloud 2, 1991-92*

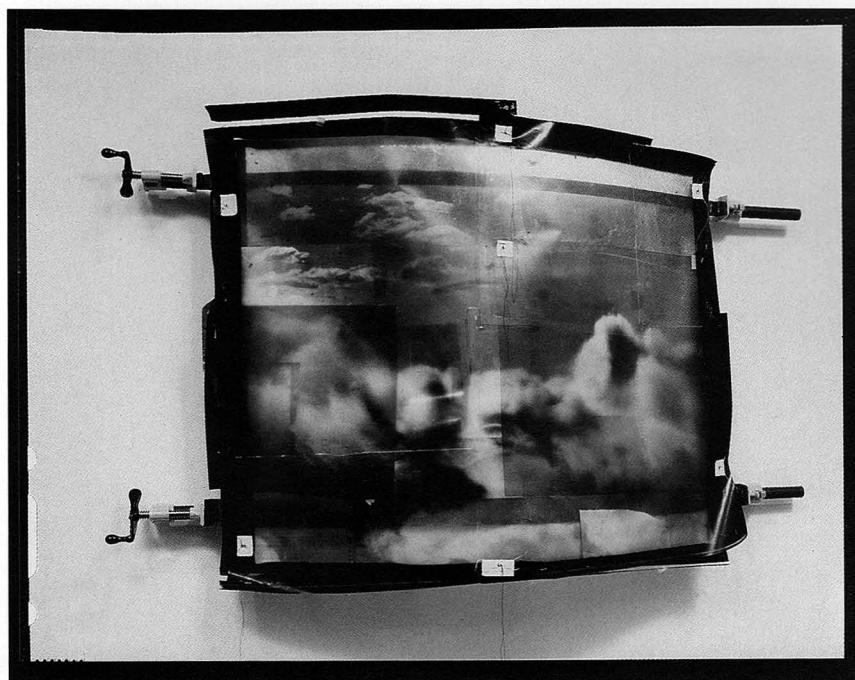
one direction, the motor reverses and rotates the entire work in the opposite direction. By adding this mechanical dimension—by setting their creation in motion—the Starns are able to more fully visualize the dynamics of such forces as matter and history.

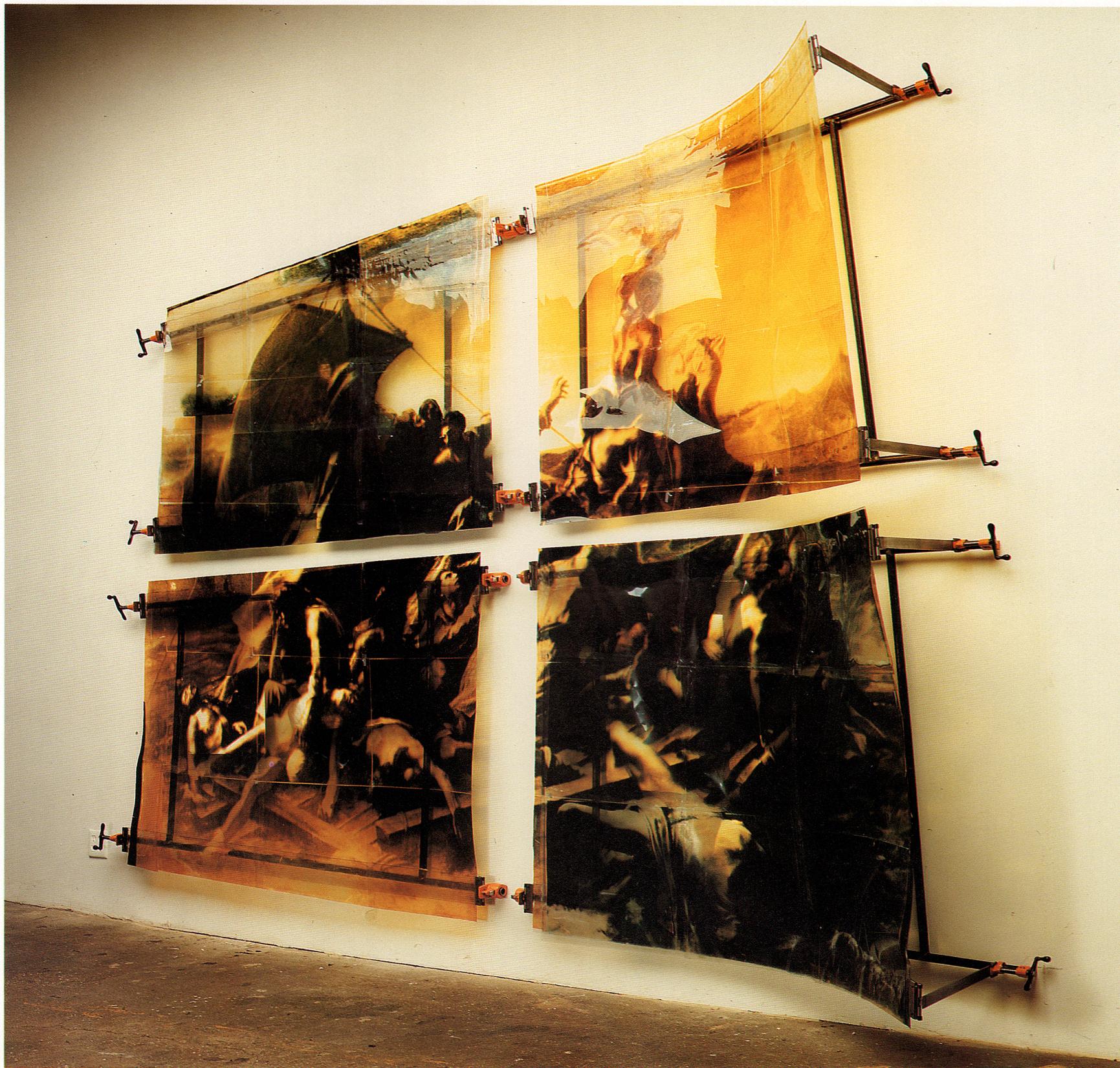
Its outer structure of iron pipes and clamps create and control the earth's surface. The representation of this surface is pieced together from transparent photographic film segments of an out-of-date globe. The Starns photographed that globe, with its demarcations of a colonial past, sequentially as if by a satellite. But any illusionary appearance of a solid, pedagogic globe is rapidly dispelled by a vision of the earth's solidity as it expands and explodes into a discontinuous surface of land masses, oceans, and empty spaces.

The sphere of outer scaffolding suggests the celestial sphere within which the earth and its immediate atmosphere are placed. Its pipes and clamps delineate the vault of the heavens surrounding the planet, and this iron

structure is a visualization of continuous physical energy extending outward to infinity. With a void at its center, the sphere of the earth is a world in the process of constant degeneration and regeneration. The planet is a disordered mass passing through space and time and through which space and time pass reciprocally.

The sun, clouds, drops of desert rain in water, the earth—using these subjects the Starns fill their work with images of scale and infinity. In breaking down and revivifying the images' forms, the artists both acknowledge each form's specificity and emphasize each as a symbol of underlying spirituality. The artists give full attention to questions of meaning, give full allusion to organizing principles. The Starns are less concerned with the preciousness of the art object and more concerned with the place of all parts within the greater whole. Not least, this interrelatedness encompasses the past and ongoing experiences, the individual and joint experiences, of Doug and Mike Starn themselves.





*Yellow & Blue Raft of the Medusa, 1990-91*