

CREATIVE LIVES IN PRIVATE LANDSCAPES

UpstateDiary

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Zac Posen
Starn Twins
Annabelle Selldorf
Diana Vreeland
Kathy Ruttenberg
Paolo Soleri
Sebastian Faena



Soleri and his family standing on the earth mound formed for the Pool Canopy at Cosanti, 1973. Photo by Annette Del Zoppo.

STARN TWINNS

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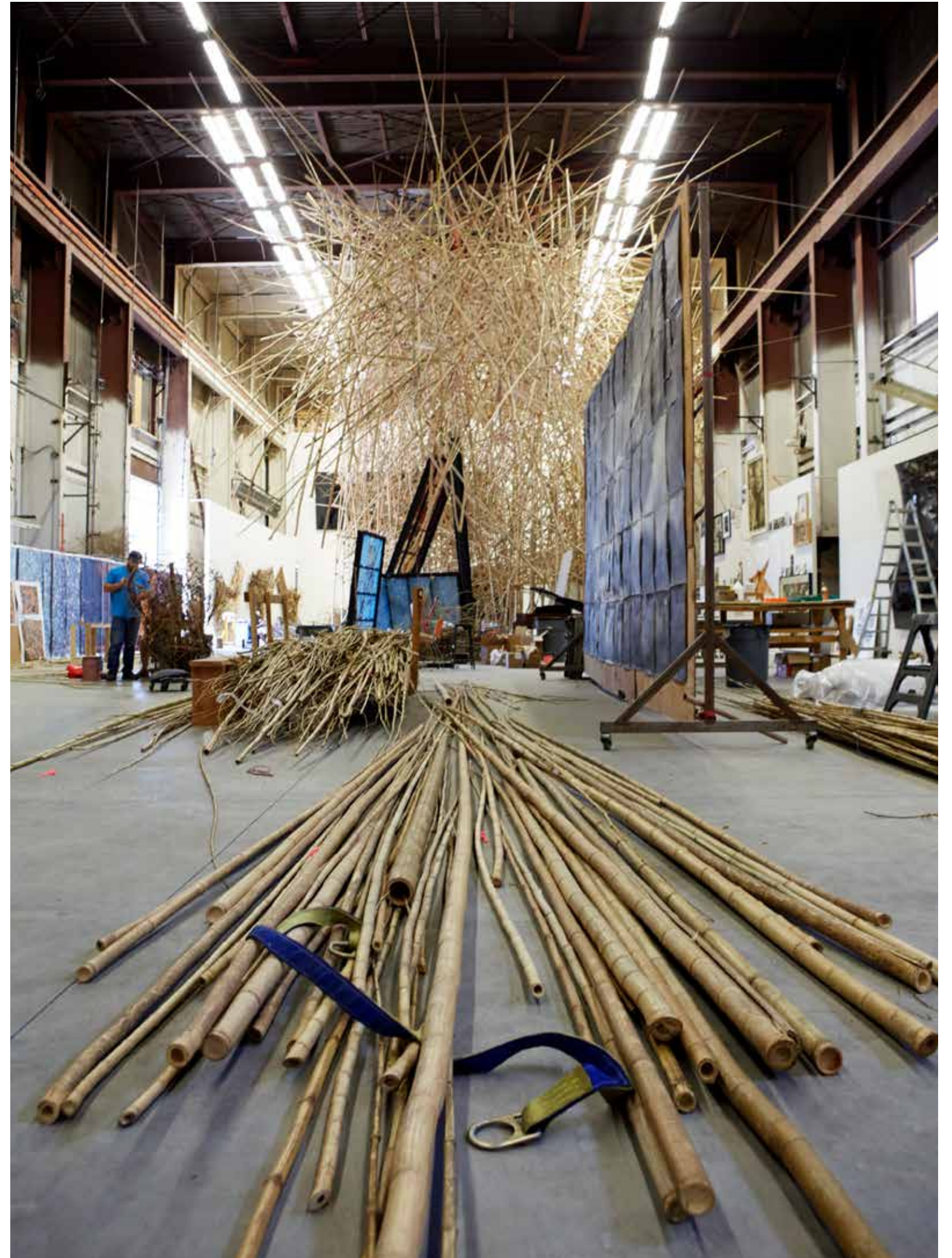
Interview by David A. Ross Photos by Kate Orne



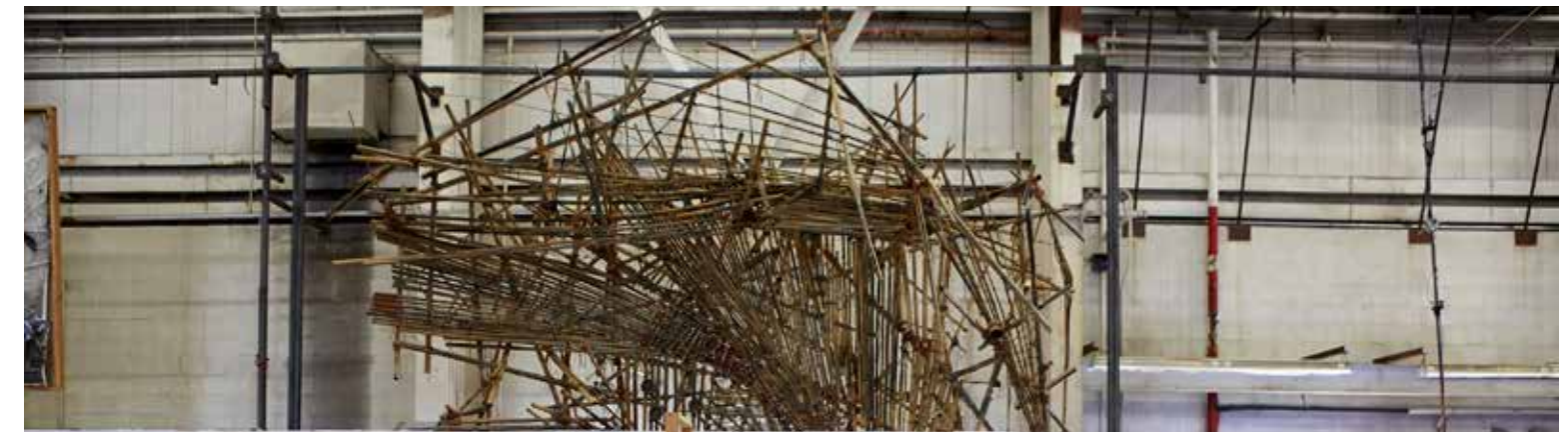
Doug & Mike Starn in their studio in Beacon, NY working on *Joel Animal*, 2017.



Barry, 2016.



Big Bambú #1, 2008 – ongoing.



Column one: (top) *Stretched Christ Purgatorio* 1991. Center: Mike & Doug and their untitled bambu chair in progress, 2017. Bottom: *Big Bambú* album painting, 2010.

Top right to left: *Rolling David*, 2017. *Sphere Of Influence*, 1991 Above: Professional rock climbers tending to an untitled bambu chair in progress, in front of *You Can't, You Won't* and *You Don't Stop: Living Room*, 2010.



David A. Ross: How did you, as twin brothers, emerge as artists working together with a singular collaborative identity?

Mike Starn: We grew up making art like most kids and, as we became teenagers, really loving photography. We shared a camera, working in the dark room together and realizing that our passion was art.

DAR: Did you grow up in an artistic family in New Jersey?"

Doug Starn: No, not at all, it was very sort of middle class. We started in photography as a science project in school; we were initially taken with the scientific aspects of it, the chemistry. It was a technical medium that produced an image and... we just loved it. We were interested in the history of it, we were reading about the daguerreotypes and all that. When we were about 15 years old we discovered the work of Jacques-Henri Lartigue and Robert Frank. It was always a fascination about how life can be recorded. Like most teenagers, we were really into music. It was the 1970s, we were listening to Pink Floyd, the Stones and the Beatles, and we loved the album covers in general, particularly the photographic ones. It was the beginning of our fascination with the photograph as an object.

MS: About that same time we went to the

Philadelphia Museum, which became a major exposure to art – the work of Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg really stuck in our minds.

DAR: As the work began to evolve, was there a struggle between you?

DS: I would say it would have been unnatural for us to work separately – we were always very close. Of course, like all brothers, we would fight with each other but to make art was something that we both enjoyed, so, why wouldn't we do it together?

MS: You can share ideas, discuss, reject, basically the collaboration seems to make everything richer.

DAR: For an artist working alone, that interior dialogue is interior. For the two of you, you have the interior dialogue but also the exterior dialogue – even the critical dialogue. Were you critical of each other?

MS: Never, only of ourselves. We have so many of the same references and inspiration. Sure, there are arguments but it's not often.

DAR: So, in high school, were you already seeing yourselves as artists – committed to being artists?

DS: Absolutely, and yes, we were considered weirdos, we were constantly taunted.

DAR: As a teacher, I often encounter the difficulty many students have making that simple declaration

that they are an artist, they seem to lack the courage to take a stand about who they are. Do you recall when you realized it or were you just like fish in water?

MS: I have a vague memory thinking that to call myself an artist was kind of pretentious, but I knew all I wanted to do was to make art. Early on in our teens it was the direction: to be artists, forever.

DAR: So, your first influences were Rauschenberg and Oldenburg, artists who were engaged at looking at the world in a critical fashion.

MS: Yeah, with Rauschenberg, here was a guy who was using photography in a way that a painter would use paint.

DAR: What about Andy Warhol?

MS: Yes, Warhol was a huge influence, as far as the album covers that he did, and it seemed like a cool way to live your life. While we were trained in traditional photography, we couldn't stand the idea that photography had separated itself; in a way, it was more of a darkroom craft than art.

DAR: Did you run into a situation where you were told that photography isn't art, that, if you want to make art, you had to do something else?

MS: This was long before we had any community at all; we were just on our own.

But as Doug said, going to the Philadelphia Museum and seeing artwork that's got scale, got texture, got expression, these things that we've identified with as art – that was powerful. While photography had this idea of a sacrosanct print that couldn't be touched, how could that be something that's made by an artist?

DAR: So, did the idea of pure formal photography, based on the idea of a perfectly made print, take you aback?

DS: Yeah, we thought it was bullshit, where in the hell is this coming from?

DAR: But, if you were looking at Rauschenberg or Warhol, you saw how it was being used to create silkscreens applied to canvas in a painterly fashion...

MS: It seemed as if artists felt that they were going to use the photographs that they had to turn them into a silkscreen, and photo paper was something for photographers. It was that piece of paper where that magic happened in that dark room, that science of capturing, of recording that light, which was really fascinating to us.

DAR: So in '79 you decided to attend the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

MS: The Museum School seemed like the best place because it wasn't a graded system, it was a review board system, and you could work on your own. It provided the most freedom. They also had access to the Cyclorama, a huge and amazing 19th-century building originally built to house a massive circular painting of the Battle of Gettysburg. And we thought; if we go to that school, we can show our art in that space. We were very drawn to enormous volumes.

DAR: Did you ever get to show in the Cyclorama?

MS: Yeah, we showed our first large-scale Scotch tape photographs – which won the competition.

DAR: Did you develop any influential relationships at the Museum School?

MS: Well, Mark Morrisroe was a year or two older than us, we got a glimpse of some of his works on the drying rack, we thought it was pretty exciting; how real it was. Most photographers are behind the lens and you get this traditional photographic print that is sort of looking at life. But it isn't life. Painting expresses life. A photograph is normally of life, but not life itself. Mark's photographs were approaching the kind of realism that we'd been talking about. We realized that that our work is about trying to present this idea that art is not excused from time. Art is constantly changing. It's changing the second it leaves the artist's studio and it's going to continue to change physically and in

terms of its meaning.

DS: We always wanted to show photographs as objects, so that's why if you want to make a big photograph, you just tape them together, leave the dust on it, you know, let the chemical stains happen. These were all an effort to open up a medium that we love, that we saw all of its process attributes being swept under the rug and hidden. We wanted to bring those out and show that art is changing; it's not something that's perfect. Time happens, and your perception of the art is constantly changing. There's just no reason to fight against time. It's pointless.

DAR: So, at a certain point, the subject of your work seems to become philosophical: the subject is not some image or object in the world but rather an idea or ideas about the underlying structures of the universe – perhaps ideas about the origins of life itself. Can you describe 'Big Bambú' and how it came about?

DS: It's true that our focus and life have always been pretty philosophical. This led us to sort of develop a private philosophy of how everything grows, interconnects and never stops changing: people, nature, weather as well as political, social and economic forces – a random interdependence, all which lead to the construction of society and culture. So, if there is an invisible architecture of life, perhaps it could actually be physically demonstrable.

DAR: As a result of this, you made the remarkable leap from photographing the structure within leaves to using bamboo. Can you explain how it actually happened?

MS: The images of leaves and tree branches were very much about all these interconnections that happen everywhere. One day this idea just became apparent to us – a sculpture that would always be growing and changing, created from chaos. We realized that we had taken this approach before with the *Sphere of Influence* ['91], an exoskeleton of chaos, that holds the planet together.

DAR: What you literally invented with the 'Big Bambú' is the idea that the work of sculpture would never be fixed, that it would always be growing and evolving – that it would be alive.

DS: And remain the same thing but always new. The chaos that is within the work is always there and that's part of the art, proposing again, the interconnectedness of everything. The 'aha' moment of what material to use probably happened within 10 minutes. We had been lost in a bamboo forest in Kyoto, back in the early '90s. Bamboo was strong, lightweight, cheap and flexible.

DAR: Like, scared lost?

DS: Yeah, maybe for about half an hour, but then we found our way out. (Laughing) In *Big Bambú*, you see the results of the individual voices of the climbers making countless decisions and tying countless knots in brightly colored cord – this is where the interconnections and interdependence of thousands of poles happen, this is what creates the unplanned structure, the dangling cords are the evidence. It becomes a very public piece, inviting the public to walk on our art and to remain within it, bringing them up 70 feet in the air – and literally changing their perspective.

DAR: Lately you have been working on portraits based on record album covers. How did this shift come about?

When we put the *Big Bambú* on hold for a while we found ourselves re-inspired by the album covers that first moved us back when we were teenagers. These records have affected lives, changed societies and influenced cultures. There are two different series; there are the portraits, where we work with used album covers that are cut out and magnetized, to be played with like a puzzle, and then the album paintings that include the record album. Both projects are about looking at rock & roll as a lens that we see the world through. Both are autobiographical. With *Big Bambú*, having the public be part of the work really became important to us. We felt we wanted to keep that engagement; we want people to pick up these albums – just like we did when we were kids.

DAR: One more thing. What's the idea behind this 'Bambú Furniture'?

MS: Well, they are habitable sculptures... you need a place to hang out, right? The living rooms in *Big Bambú* grew furniture in them... the pieces featured in our first show of stand-alone furniture: *Sits Like a Man, But Smiles Like a Reptile*, at the Cristina Grajales Gallery, expand on this concept. The collections of chaise lounges, benches, and peacock chairs are made with the same techniques and materials and imbued with the same values as *Big Bambú* but on a more personal, intimate scale.

David A. Ross is the former director of the Whitney, SFMOMA and ICA Boston. Currently he is Chair of the MFA Art Practice program at SVA, and a member of the Hudson Valley band Breakneck Ridge Revue, we featured him in Issue 1.