



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

## A Jungle Of Bamboo Is Growing Atop The Met

By CAROL VOGEL

**O**N a recent summerlike morning, men in T-shirts and women in bikini tops were busily working to the loud strains of Michael Jackson, Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix. Some looked like tightrope walkers, delicately balancing on horizontal poles in bare feet; others could be seen shinnying up vertical poles like monkeys, securing intersections with colored nylon ropes; and still others were building teepee-like configurations on the ground.

But this wasn't a circus tent-raising; it was the scene on the rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Supervised by artists and built by about a dozen rock climbers, an installation in the form of a labyrinthine jungle of bamboo was rising some 25 feet in the air.

The Met has long been a place where the flowerings of different centuries and cultures quietly coexist, an orderly home of Apollonian calm. But the installation, "Big Bambú: You Can't, You Don't, and You Won't Stop," is a startling departure. Where once there were uninterrupted vistas of the city's skyline and Central Park, there are now thickets and elevated

Rock climbers, below, are tying about 5,000 poles into a soaring, strollable rooftop installation.

walkways winding through them.

It's the creation of Doug and Mike Starn, the 48-year-old identical-twin artists perhaps better known for painterly photographs than installations. And while "Big Bambú" may seem like a finished installation when it opens on Tuesday, it is a perpetual work in progress. Throughout the summer the public will be able to witness its metamorphosis as the rock climbers — sans music — continually add to the work until it forms a cresting wave covering an area 100 by 50 feet and soaring 50 feet above the roof.

Museum officials estimate that some 400,000 people (depending on weather) will see "Big Bambú" before it is dismantled at the end of October. All visitors will be able to stroll the roof's main level. The paths above, however, will be limited to guided groups of 10 to 15 people, twice an hour. Those visitors will need timed tickets and a sturdy pair of rubber-soled shoes. Navigating

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the bamboo heights does present challenges, so the Met has trained its guides carefully for all kinds of eventualities, including a sudden attack of acrophobia.

In the center of the construction the other day were the Starns, cameras around their necks, recording the progress. The artists, who grew up in New Jersey, have worked together all their lives and been around the art world since the 1980s. They come across as laid-back hippies, with their shoulder-length manes and scruffy bluejeans, but they are a well-practiced team and finish each other's sentences.

Both were afraid of heights when they first conceived the project.

"Just looking up at the ceiling in our studio gave us vertigo," Mike said. "But we got over it as we started building."

Last year they unveiled a permanent installation in the South Ferry subway station in Lower Manhattan: a 250-foot-long work featuring their signature photographs of trees. Also about nature, "Big Bambú" is far more complex: part performance, part architecture and part sculpture.

The idea grew out of their project "Sphere of Influence," which was first shown in Berlin in 1991 and consisted of a rotating globe about 14 feet in diameter made of metal pipe clamps juxtaposed against sheets of transparent photographs. But for "Big Bambú" pipe was too heavy.

"It didn't have the right qualities," Doug Starn said. "This piece is organic. It's about all the things in your life, including those that aren't planned."

It isn't the artists' first bamboo adventure. The Met project is a more ambitious variation of one they did in 2008 in an old foundry that serves as their studio in Beacon, N.Y. That installation is still on view and will continue growing this summer as well. (Many of the rock climbers at the Met worked with the Starns on the Beacon project.)

They chose bamboo, they said, because it is light yet incredibly strong and can withstand all kinds of weather. And like the work itself, it constantly changes, its colors deepening and fading depending on the light and the weather. (The title of the installation is a play on the brothers' nicknames in high school, Cheech and Chong, whose albums includ-

## ONLINE: UP ON THE ROOF

A video about the installation of "Big Bambú: You Can't, You Don't, and You Won't Stop" on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

[nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)



LIBRADO ROMERO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Workers putting together "Big Bambú" atop the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a process that will continue through the summer in front of visitors.

ed "Big Bambú." "It became the default name" of the work, Mike Starn said. "We liked the vibe.")

For the Met, staging "Big Bambú" is a daring feat. There have been sculpture exhibitions by artists like Jeff Koons, Ellsworth Kelly and Roy Lichtenstein on the roof, but this is by far the most ambitious.

Always on the lookout for rooftop projects, Anne L. Strauss, associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the Met, went to see "Big Bambú" in Beacon in the fall. "Because the Starns' piece is its own microcosm with all its inherent complexities set against Manhattan with its own complexities, I thought it would be a fascinating dialogue," she said.

The layout has been carefully planned, but the sight of the bamboo poles lashed together feels chaotic, a sensibility both artists say they embrace. Mike Starn compared the construction itself to "the arteries in your body or in the city subway system," and added, "We're also talking about

Western civilization, the interconnected dependency we all have on each other but which is changing all the time."

The project will evolve in three phases: first the basic structure will be completed by next week's opening; then the eastern part will be built to about 50 feet up by the beginning of June; finally the west side will rise to about 40 feet by mid-July.

## Care to Climb?

All visitors will be allowed on the main level of the roof, but walking the elevated pathways of "Big Bambú" is more complicated. For that you will need to know about:

**TIMED TICKETS** One per person, available only first come first served, with museum admission, in the Uris Center for Education, at the 81st Street entrance. Morning tour tickets are released at 9:30 a.m.; afternoon tours at noon. On

Months of intricate planning went into making sure the project would proceed without a hitch. They hired an architect to transcribe their drawings for submission to the city's Building Department. "Fortunately the commissioner grew up in Hong Kong, where bamboo is used for scaffolding," Doug Starn said referring to Derek Lee, the department's borough commissioner

Fridays and Saturdays, evening tours are available, and tickets will be released at 3:30 p.m. Bring a photo ID and be prepared to sign a waiver.

**THE WEATHER** Because the bamboo can be slippery, the installation may be closed because of rain (or even rain the night before). Call (212) 396-5300 on the day you plan to attend to check.

**THE RULES** Visitors have to wear closed, rubber-soled shoes and be able to walk unassisted. (No

wheelchairs, walkers or canes, unless the canes have a wrist strap and are used to aid the visually impaired.) Children must be at least 10 and over four feet tall; adults must accompany those younger than 13. Also, no personal items (including handbags, cellphones and cameras) will be allowed; lockers will be provided.

Also informed of the plans were the mayor's office, the Cultural Affairs Department and the Fire Department. A structural engineer had to be consulted, too.

More than 5,000 poles from a bamboo farm in Georgia and a century-old plantation in South Carolina have gone into the project along with 50 miles of nylon cord in three widths and

about 20 colors. The rock climbers are using a variety of knots to lash the poles together, some they learned from climbing or sailing, others improvised.

The artists said they deliberately chose colorful nylon, rather than a more transparent material because "it was important for us to point out the connective tissue," Mike Starn said. "That's something we always do in our work. Our photographs are often Scotch-taped together."

Last week, after a main portion of the first phase of construction was completed, the installation was subjected to load testing, which involved scattering 350 sandbags weighing 50 pounds each and leaving them there for 24 hours. (The project passed with flying colors, Met officials said.)

What will happen to all the bamboo once its over? "We might take some of it to Beacon, or we might save a cube or a section of it as a complete artwork," Doug Starn said. "We really haven't decided yet."

The Met has other rules as well. For a complete list, go to [metmuseum.org/special/big\\_bambu/guidelines.asp](http://metmuseum.org/special/big_bambu/guidelines.asp).