



nathaniel stern  
Call and Response



*performative prints and iterations*

front cover *Satin Bed* (detail)

2006 archival lambda print

220 x 600mm

edition 5

inside front cover *Satin Bed II* (detail)

2006 aquatint

paper 455 x 370mm image 195 x 245mm

edition 10

right *Emmarentia Lilies* (triptych)

2006 archival lambda prints

500 x 750mm each

edition 5

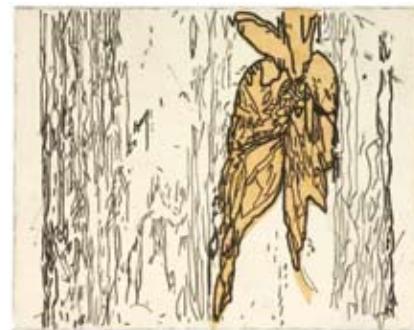
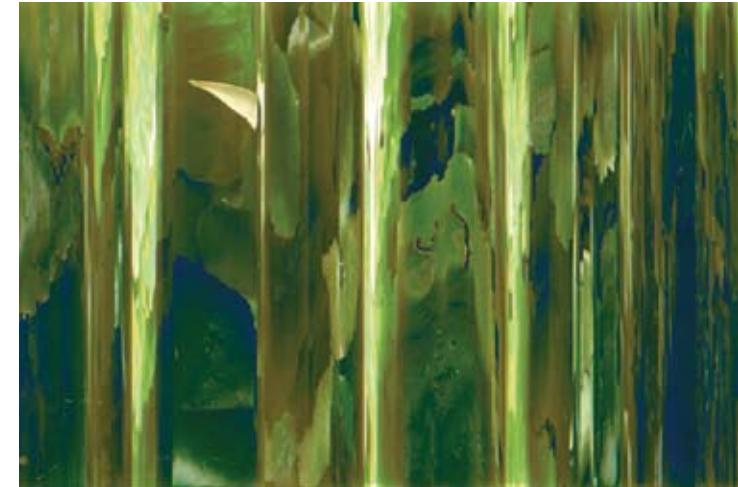
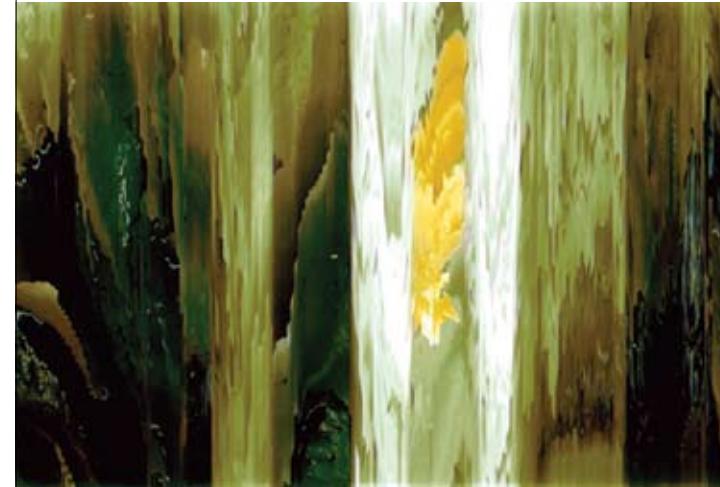
bottom *Emmarentia Lily*

(from the *Response* portfolio 2006)

2006 engraving with chine collé

paper 455 x 370mm image 200 x 245mm

edition 10



## *acknowledgements*

The exhibition and catalogue, as well as the ongoing body of work, would not have been possible were it not for the insight, help, and inspiration I was gifted from many amazing friends and colleagues.

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Also, a personal thanks to my parents, sister, aunt and uncle, and wife and daughter (again), for their ongoing love and encouragement.

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Nathaniel Stern  
www.nathanielstern.com  
Art on Paper Gallery  
info@artonpaper.co.za www.artonpaper.co.za

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Stern scanning the lilies at Emmarentia Dam in Johannesburg with his custom-made scanner appendage. Photo Nicole Ridgway



## *nathaniel stern: the compressionist*

Clive Kellner  
Director, Johannesburg Art Gallery

For the past six years, Nathaniel Stern has been preoccupied with JL Austen's concept of 'performative utterances', when phrases such as 'I do' or 'I declare' transform identity or states of being. His well-known 2004 work, *Step Inside*, for example, is a kind of visual equivalent to Austen's notion, and asks participants to enact and embody selves in the space between space and sound, flesh and concept. This interactive digital installation is akin to Cabaret Voltaire's 'total theatre,' where sound, movement and image create a form of aural and visual poetry, but in this case, it is the audience who takes the stage, provoked to move in ways they normally wouldn't, and forced to see themselves through, and as, bodies.



*Stern claims his interest in the body comes from his early study, and subsequent hatred, of fashion design. That, combined with his musical and slam poetry background, lead Stern towards considering the body as text and as concept, but eventually (and he would say inevitably) steered him to the inverse: the body as performed and emergent. One of the most fascinating aspects of this work is that it does not presuppose the categories of body and language that it works with.*<sup>1</sup>

He creates productive tensions between motion and emotion, and "the preformed and the performed."<sup>2</sup>

Stern's most recent body of work explores similar relationships, but adds to the play of tensions that underpins his work with that between traditional and digital media. Here Stern combines traditional printmaking techniques with new media tools to undertake making what he calls digital performances and analogue archives; bringing each to bear on the other, Stern's 'call and response' between media, between performance and print, and past and present, creates an open conversation into which we the audience are invited.

Viewer-participant performing with *Step Inside* (2004), interactive installation, Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Photo Abrie Fourie



Stern traverses the material landscape in search of, and simultaneously birthing, images. Fitted out with a custom-made scanner appendage and battery pack, the artist wades the lily ponds of Emmarentia Dam, scanning the surfaces of plants, foliage and terrain in a series of poetic gestures often likened to that of Jackson Pollock's topographical painting. Later, Stern selects images from his digital archive, editing and reworking them, stretching and cropping for photographically rich textures, and colouring them with saturated hues. Brenton Maart describes them:

*The result is a series of zones that make up each image: bands that discern between adjacent times and successive views. At first the works seem abstract, but in moving closer the viewer is able to discern, in each band, elements of Stern's subject matter – ripples of water, flower petals, bricks, plastic bags, the sky – each rendered in a sequence that is both cubist and impressionistic. And within each band, and within the series of bands that make up each image, is an incredible and almost overwhelming sense of beauty; that almost religious feeling you get when you view an awesome artwork...<sup>3</sup>*

*Joburg Boogie Woogie*  
2006 archival lambda print  
550 x 850mm  
edition 5



Stern's Compressionist images couple innovative technological ingenuity with traditional formal technique, producing what could be described as *presence*, images that are hauntingly beautiful and technically resolute; these images are layered both literally and metaphorically. Stern says he's "interested in the aches and beauty that come out when we aren't looking, when we experience bodiliness in different ways, when vision is something we gesture towards, rather than own."<sup>4</sup>

Jillian Ross and Nathaniel Stern working the *Satin Bed II* plate before etching (see inside front cover). Photo Niall Bingham

Stern draws the viewer in with lavish and visually tangible surfaces that include, amongst others, the details of a lily, or the curve of a neck, which he has labouriously teased out in Photoshop. Whilst working on his screen, he began thinking about how his work passes through the crucible of the digital and the material, the nature of the labour required to produce the work, and the affect made in its various instantiations. When exploring the iterative aspects of his work – to iterate, as in to utter repeatedly or make repeated use of mathematical or computational procedures – he playfully decided to take his iterations outside of the computational realm and into the traditional. By supplementing his process in this way, Stern is maintaining, extending and re-producing the nature of labour and affect, simultaneously transforming the process of transformation itself.

He approached Jillian Ross at the David Krut Print Workshop, Johannesburg, proposing they fashion hand-made details from his Compressionist prints through other processes.

*What began as tests, with simple transfers from digital images to polyester plates, grew into a year-long creative project, where [they] pushed the boundaries of the techniques and technologies known to [them], whilst re-imagining and re-working their more commonly used forms.*

*[Their] experimental work, which is now bound to be a long-term collaboration, has utilized techniques such as etching, engraving, monotype, chine collé, polyester plate lithography, aquatint, carborundum and more...<sup>5</sup>*



top *Joburg Boogie Woogie II*  
2006 carborundum print  
paper 455 x 370mm image 195 x 245mm  
edition 10



middle *Joburg's Ghost*  
(from the *Response* portfolio 2006)  
2006 carborundum print  
paper 455 x 370mm image 195 x 245mm  
edition 10



bottom *Joburg Lite*  
2006 carborundum print  
paper 455 x 370mm image 195 x 245mm  
edition 10

*Nude Descension*  
2006 archival lambda print  
930 x 500mm  
edition 5



What we see or experience as a result of this artistic process is a mediated outcome in the form of an image or print, which grew out of a performance in the physical world, and was later altered and transformed by the artist's hand. One of the most interesting things about the work is the vestigial traces it carries of the various performances through which it arose.

Compressionism also speaks back to a broader history of art, most notably Monet's *Water Lilies* in *Emmarentia Lilies* (2006) and Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* in *Nude Descension* (2006). Here the work ironically layers itself with ongoing discourses, expanding on the languages of the avant-garde that began with Impressionism and Cubism, re-iterating their strategies of disruption and intervention, creating windows onto the world that condense personal experience, environment and memory into distilled pictures.

*Nude Descension II* (Process Image #7)

The first six proofs for this print consisted of several black and white polyester plate iterations, from the re-worked digital image, and a few colour spit bite aquatint plates, where the texture wasn't quite right. This annotated final proof documents various applications of monotype – including brushes, rollers and ear buds – as well as colour mixing.



For Guy Debord, the notion of 'the spectacle' meant a plethora of images: in the media, advertising, television and film, all of which would replace lived experience. Underlying Debord's reading of contemporary society are the semiotic concepts of the signifier, a word or image used to represent something, and the signified, a concept for which the signifier stands in. In Debord's world, everything is an image, signifiers on top of signifiers, referencing an eviscerated reality.

While Stern's images are certainly spectacular – in that there is a visual spectacle and seduction to them – they do not attempt to replace lived experience with symbolic experience in this way. Rather than tripping along the surfaces of representation, Stern plays with surface and depth, disturbing notions of representation and its relationship to the real. In some ways, Compressionism brings us back to the body, the material, the real, but as always already mediated. Perhaps, rather than replace and copy, Stern asks us to experience again, and iterate.

These pieces attempt to intervene both in the world of art-making – it's taken for granted, its sacred cows – and into habitual ways of seeing, asking us to "look again."<sup>6</sup> Stern's call and response with the audience actively engages in a re-looking at the world around us; it is a call for a more expanded understanding of what constitutes art, the values we subscribe to images, and the complex relationships between self and world.

Nathaniel Stern's artistic production can be understood to be at the forefront of new media and digital art. His work has provided a powerful platform for the exploration of ideas around the body and language, and he has been instrumental in not only producing innovative and complex interactive installations and resonate performative images, but also in equipping and provoking a new generation of digital artists, academics and theorists. Stern has left an indelible mark on the South African art scene, both as a practitioner and as a protagonist.

top *Earth*  
2006 archival lambda print  
250 x 500mm  
edition 5

bottom *Wind*  
2006 archival lambda print  
250 x 500mm  
edition 5

1 Nicole Ridgway, "Between Text and Flesh," in *NY Arts Magazine*, October/November 2006.

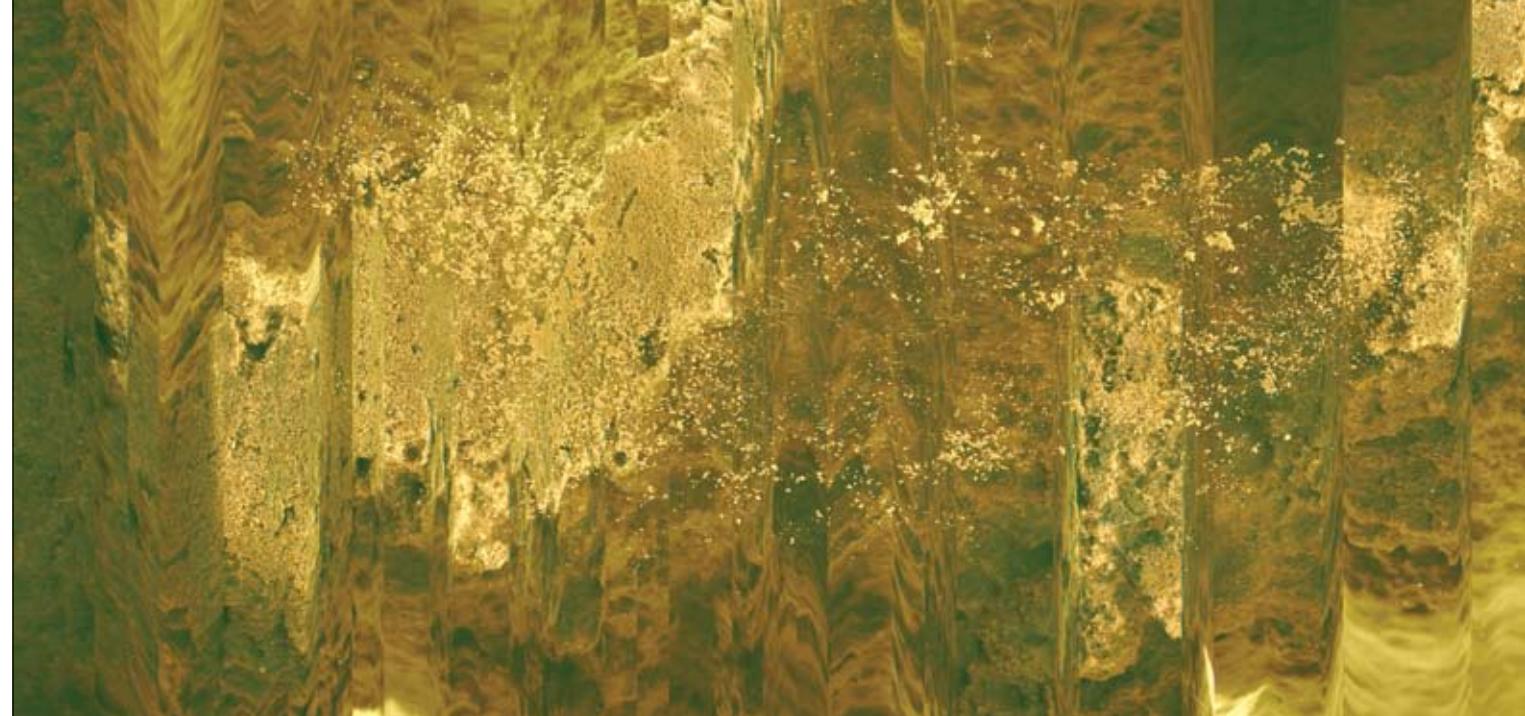
2 Nicole Ridgway, "In Excess of the Already Constituted: Interaction as Performance," in *New Media*, ed. Owen Kelly, (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, Forthcoming).

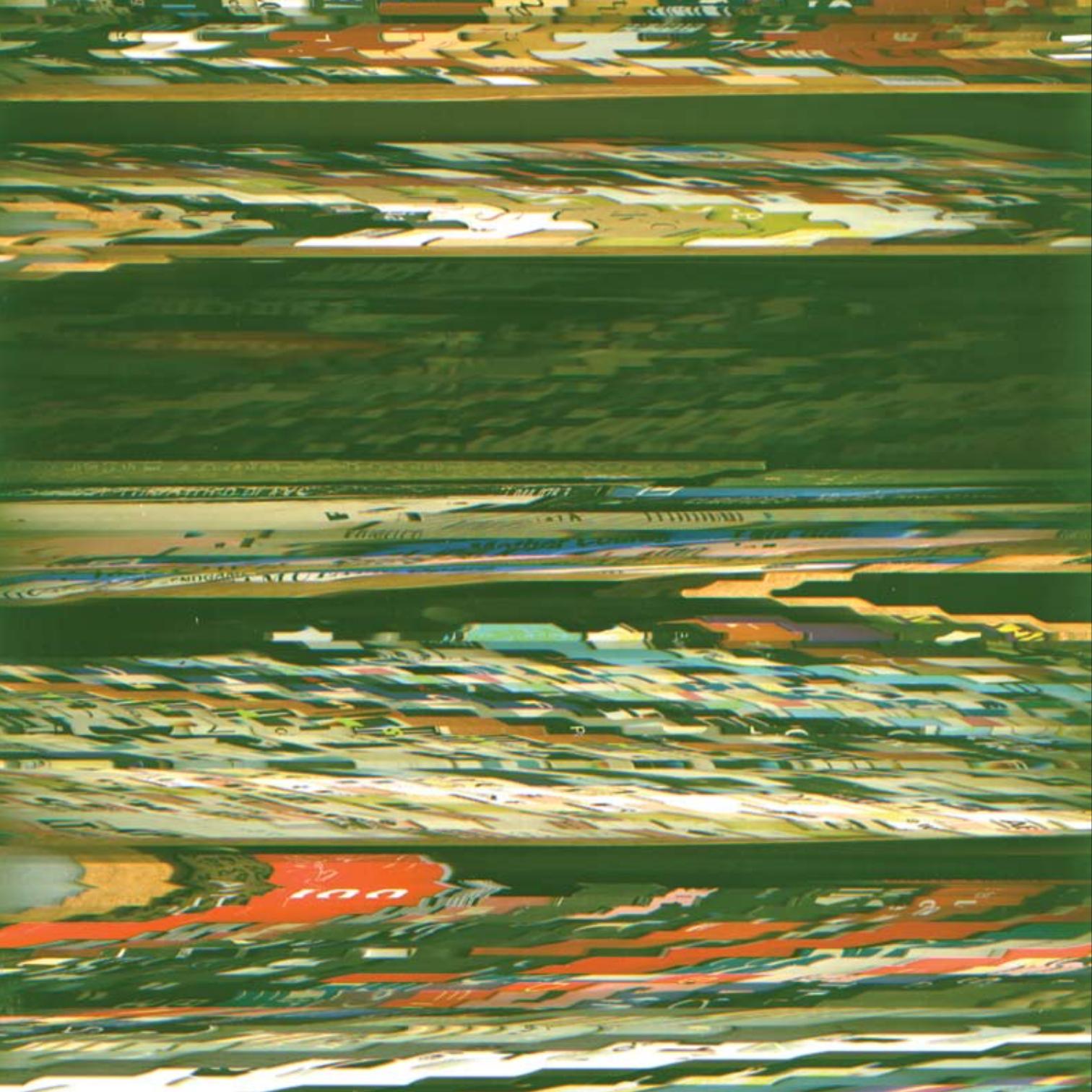
3 Brenton Maart, "Nathaniel Stern | Outlet," in *Art South Africa*, Volume 5 Issue 1, Spring 2006.

4 Nathaniel Stern quoted in "Artthrob ArtBio," by Ralph Borland, February 2006, <<http://www.artthrob.co.za/06feb/artbio.html>> (October 16, 2006).

5 Jillian Ross and Nathaniel Stern, "Response," from the *Response* portfolio, published by David Krut Publishing, 2006.

6 Nathaniel Stern, "bio," February 2006, <<http://nathanielstern.com/details/bio.html>> (February 2006).

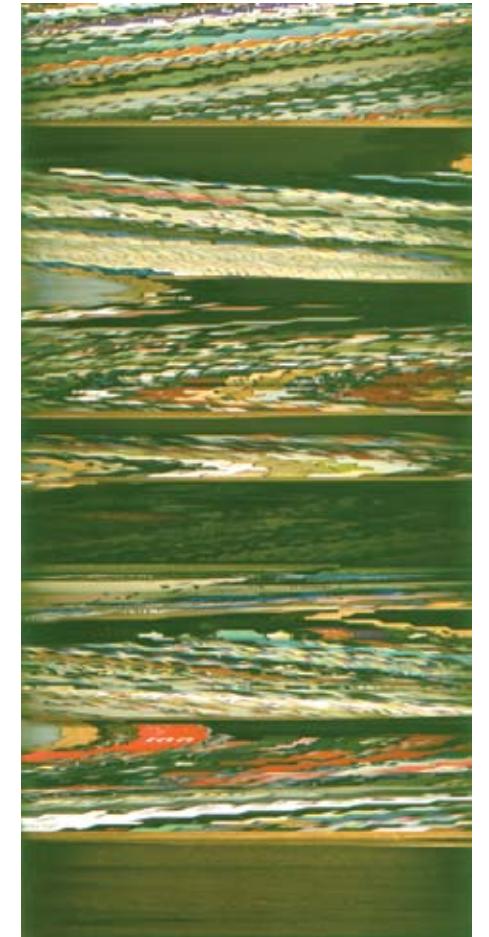




*narrating the database: the performative  
and iterative prints of nathaniel stern*

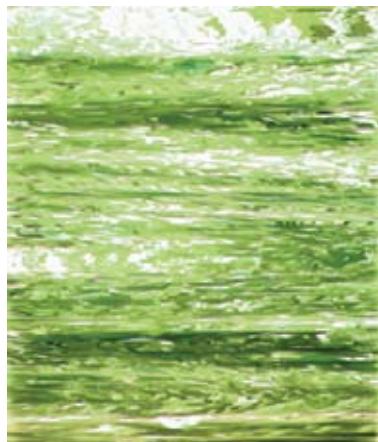
Wilhelm van Rensburg  
Art Educator, University of Johannesburg

As a print artist, Nathaniel Stern's performative and iterative practice is analogous to the art of the 15<sup>th</sup> century typographer. On first impression his prints appear to be aesthetic abstractions of reality, at one time compared to the paintings of Mark Rothko. But closer inspection reveals that each image is constructed in an exceptionally complex arrangement of thin strips of visual data running either vertically or horizontally over the picture plane. In the same manner as the typographer sets letter types, or characters, on the page, Stern arranges these slices of data in a unique way to form a complete whole. The typographer's characters were made from a steel die on which a letter had been carved, reversed, in relief. This die was punched into a small block of copper – the matrix – where it left an intaglio imprint, the right way around. Then the matrix was set in a mould that could be used to cast endless numbers of characters from an alloy of lead, tin, and antimony. Reproducing the character in reverse, these letters could be assembled into the lines and pages of a form. Once covered with ink and applied with the correct pressure to a sheet of paper, the text appeared the right way around (Martin, 2002: 346).



left *Epics and Anthologies* (detail)

right *Epics and Anthologies*  
2006 archival lambda print  
1250 x 600mm  
edition 5



Today, Stern's printmaking is as advanced in technological processing as was 15<sup>th</sup> century typography. His process involves, in a structured sequence: the capturing or 'compressing' of spaces, subjects or objects by 'performing' with such digital tools as moving scanners, thrown cameras and hand-drawn audiotape over and about their surfaces; the editing of all this data in a virtual space; and lastly, the reconstituting of the digital 'parts' in such physical, analogical forms as lambda prints, engravings, and silk-screened aquatints. His images emerge in a different way to those created through conventional mimetic modes of representing reality. Each digitally captured image assumes the role of a cipher, filling a space in a database until such time that Stern intervenes; one has to look at these images as 'editions' of reality rather than representations (or abstractions) of it.

previous *Four Trees* (polyptych of four)  
2006 archival lambda prints  
top three prints 880 x 750mm each  
bottom print 1120 x 750mm  
edition 5

left *Tree Rising*  
2006 aquatint  
paper 1120 x 760mm image 645 x 445mm  
edition 5



By capturing, arranging and reconstituting reality in this manner, Stern operates at the critical intersection of digital art and printmaking. He is the logical successor of John Simon and his famous work, *Every Icon*, started in 1997. Also in the same manner as the 15<sup>th</sup> century typographer, Simon has set out to 'fill in', with black squares (latter day letter characters) all the available spaces on a page: his 'page', an electronic grid, 32-by-32 squares, containing 1024 smaller squares within it. These smaller squares change constantly, as a square black 'character' is inserted in the grid in such a way as to create as many combinations of characters in one single line (of 32 squares) as possible, as well as over the whole page of 32 'lines'. It is, brilliantly and simply, an animated image that displays every possible pixel combination for a desktop icon.

Stern working with digital sketches before moving to hand-made plates. *Photo Nicole Ridgway*

Exhausting the first line of all the possible 4.3 billion variations took 16 months on a continuously operating computer, and the second line would take thousands of years! ([www.numeral.com/everyicon.html](http://www.numeral.com/everyicon.html)) (Rush, 1999: 194). Both Simon and Stern can be likened to typographers, who work to make an 'art of time' in the age of technology. Stern's images, scanned into the computer, then edited, montaged, erased, scrambled, and essentially compressed (and decompressed), can be seen to collapse the normal boundaries of past, present and future in a poetic, lyrical form.

Nathaniel Stern's experimentations with both digital art and the printmaking process are fully aligned with the innovative nature of printmaking in response to technological advances over the ages. His work augments the very nature and definition of the contemporary print. Historically the art of the print was a private affair, reserved for connoisseurial contemplation, published in limited editions, and stored virtually permanently in portfolios. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the print had taken on a more public role with the introduction of such affordable processes as linocuts, and the production of editioned lithographs for public display in the form of advertisements. Not until the 1960s, however, did the print become the main focus of such major artists as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. In the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, the print became much more visible, accessible and affordable. This movement has been reinforced by such printing workshops as ULAE (Universal Limited Art Editions) in the USA that encourage artists to explore the print as creative statement. New technologies have been swiftly co-opted for fine art printmaking, and traditional techniques have been supplanted and modified (and sometimes facilitated) by the photocopier, the fax, and the inkjet printer attached to the Personal Computer (Saunders & Miles, 2006: 8).

Printmaking has never before been so relevant and so radical (Elliott, 2001, Tallman, 1996, Wye, 2004). It has become a truly democratic art form, revelling in the possibilities of replication and reproduction that the digital age has facilitated. Printmaking today co-opts performance and cyberspace, and encompasses such new art forms as billboards, clothes and carrier bags. Digital printmaking has become what Lev Manovich (2005) calls a very powerful 'cultural algorithm', and Stern embraces it, in order to create a new cultural aesthetic.

The impact new communication technologies have on art is often invoked to explain how innovators such as Stern are instrumental in changing our visual languages. Walter Benjamin, for example, honed in on the importance of the medium in art when he espoused the importance of the democratic nature of new technologies, with its concomitant enhancement of human perception, in his seminal essay of 1936, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Various forms of mass production, especially the new medium of the cinema, lead to human emancipation because, according to Benjamin, they promote new modes of critical perception. Nathaniel Stern harnesses digital and print media, without fixating on either one, inviting us to see the world running parallel to the media he used to capture it.

In Stern's case, one has to contemplate the issue of whether or not the content of his work matters less than the structure of the media he uses in his printmaking. Marshall McLuhan provides an intelligent, if somewhat facile theory to explain this: 'the medium is the message', he declared. McLuhan posited that all printed matter isolates the individual and detaches him/her from society. Printed matter can be read privately on one's own; it promotes linear thinking; it represses

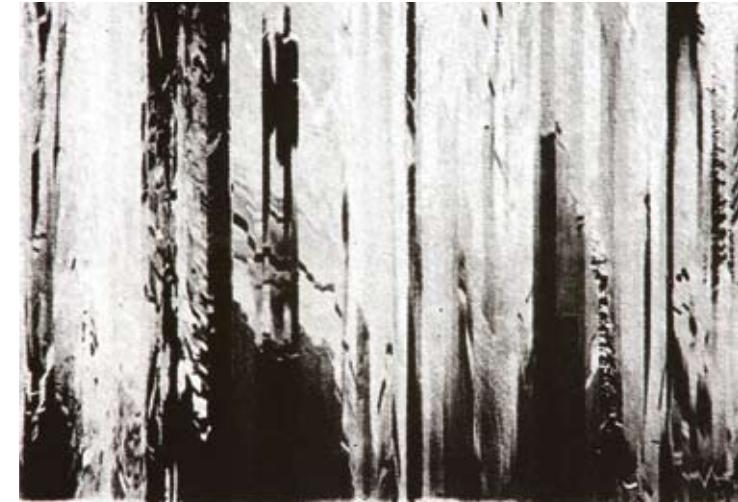
thought and feeling alike; and it leads to overspecialization. New media, on the other hand, promotes connectedness and a new international community, the veritable 'global village'. New media, McLuhan went on to say, offers an aid, a prosthesis, that enhances our senses and even our brains to promote non-linear, 'mosaic' thinking.

Jean Baudrillard provided yet another piece of the theoretical puzzle in understanding the impact of technology on art when he developed his postmodern lexicon to explain the importance of the new canvas of the artist: the computer screen. His lexicon includes such concepts as the hyperreal and the notion of the simulation of reality. Baudrillard, however, is better known for his cynicism with regard to our digitized world, calling it at various points, "evil made transparent", the "flattening of the full-bodied", the "immersion into obscurity", and describing it as constituting the disappearance of reality and our "absorption into the screens of cyberspace and the web" (Freeland, 2001: 132-4). Nathaniel Stern pulls us back from this cynical simulation of reality. The elements of chance, of the unexpected and of error, play an important role in his digital recordings. Sometimes he would plan his performances precisely, whilst at other times a detail might appear simply because he was tired and needed to lean on something while still scanning, or he would loose his grip and the scanner would swing unexpectedly. He then utilizes his 'database' of images to creatively modify our experiences of the world, rather than making simulations of it. Stern sees post-litho and post-digital printmaking as celebrating the inconsistency, the variable editions, and revels in the fleshy and non-information-based 'mistakes' that happen in traditional mark-making.



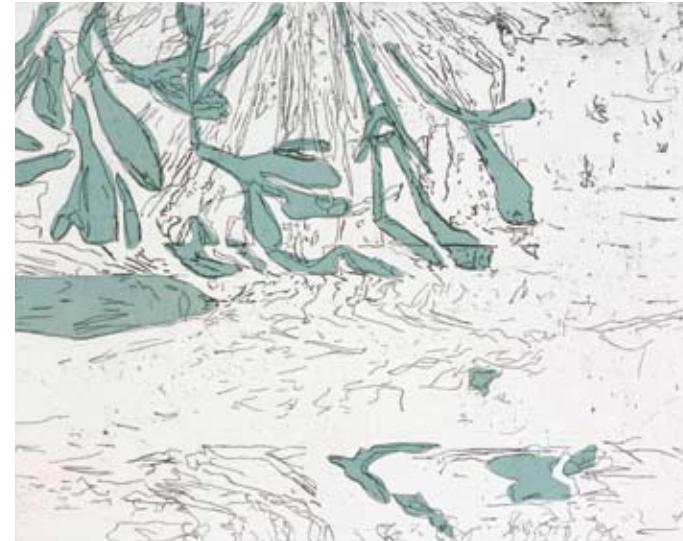
*Subtle Reeds*  
2006 archival lambda print  
150 x 250mm  
edition 5

In Stern's world, cyberspace is not a new form of obscurity and/or transparent evil; it is a place for creative, intelligent, and beneficial sensory exploration, and communal connection in terms of the way he redefines artistic aesthetics. Lev Manovich (2005) gives perhaps the most feasible explanation of the impact of technology on art. He ascribes the pivotal role of any digital medium as that of functioning as database. The digital medium operates, he argues, through the process of 'transcoding', capturing reality by means of whatever digital medium, converting it into usable data, and storing it in a database. Christiane Paul (2003) articulates the same notion, slightly differently. According to her, information has lost its body, becoming an abstract 'quality' that can make a fluid transition between different states of materiality. This information (or data) needs interpretation and the digital artist provides a 'map' and a 'body' to orientate information space. The database is the repository of all images, poised, like the ubiquitous cursor on the computer screen, to assume any shape and size, indeed, any narrative for that matter. The database is the centre of the creative process of the computer age, and Nathaniel Stern has unlocked that base in his prints by narrating the very essence of process. Through sometimes random, always bodily, essentially 500-year and older processes, Stern has become an 'information architect'—performatively 'building' on and playing with, whilst simultaneously revealing, the transcoding of 'information'.



*Subtle Landscape*  
2006 polyester plate lithograph  
paper 455 x 370mm image 200 x 280mm  
edition 10

Elliott, P. (ed). 2001. *Contemporary Art in Print*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions.  
Freeland, C. 2001. *Art Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
Manovich, L. 2005. "The Database". In: Kocur, Z. & Leung, S. 2005. *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.  
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Wye, D. 2004. *Artists and Prints: Masterworks from the Museum of Modern Art*. New York: MoMA Publications.



left *Agapanthus*

2006 archival lambda print

450 x 225mm

edition 5

above *Agapanthus Detail*

2006 etching with chine collé

paper 455 x 370mm image 195 x 245mm

edition 10

nathaniel stern

#### *solo & duo exhibitions*

**2007**

.*Call and Response*: solo exhibition, Art on Paper Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

**2006**

.*Unseen Video*: solo exhibition, Parking Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

.*Time and Seeing*: solo exhibition, Outlet Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa

**2005**

.*experiment02*: duo show with Marcus Neustetter, Franchise Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

.*enter:hektor*: solo exhibition, The Klein Karoo National Arts Festival, Oudtshoorn, South Africa

**2004**

.*the storytellers*: solo exhibition, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa

.*The GetAway Experiment*: duo show with Marcus Neustetter, ArtSpace Gallery, Fairlands, South Africa

.*eat*: solo exhibition, Outlet Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa

**2003**

.Wits School of Arts launch: solo installation, Substation Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

**2002**

.New Media Room featured artist: solo installation, Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York

#### *selected group exhibitions*

**2006 - 2007**

.*D.I.Y. OR DIE*, IAO Gallery in Oklahoma City, Turbulence.org in Boston & Rhizome.org in New York

**2006**

.*t-minus 2006 video art festival*, Monkey Town, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York

.*New Work 2006*, David Krut Print Workshop (DKW), Johannesburg, South Africa; also on view at David Krut Projects, New York

.*35th International Film Festival*, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

**2005**

.*Aardklop: Outlet Exhibition*, Potchefstroom, South Africa

.*Sounds Crazy*: with the Studio for Interactive Sound, The Grahamstown National Arts Festival, South Africa

.*Mooimarkshow-Vienna-Johannesburg*, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria

.*Artinthedark* : Video Art Festival, Johannesburg, South Africa

**2004**

.*Brett Kebble Art Exhibition*, Cape Town International Conference Centre, South Africa

.*Remembering-Repressing-Forgetting (IR|IR|IF) 2004 festival v.2.0* in more than 15 countries

**2003**

.*Brett Kebble Art Exhibition*, Cape Town International Conference Centre, South Africa

.*The Mooimark Show*: presented by The Gallery Expo 3000 Berlin, Johannesburg, South Africa

.*Chiangmai First New Media Art Festival*, Chiang Mai University Museum, Thailand

.*YEsire softserve event*, Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, South Africa

**2002**

.*d.ART 02, dLux media arts*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia

.Electronic Literature Organization, *State of the Arts Symposium*: UCLA, Los Angeles

.*online|offline*, Gencor Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

**2001**

.*12 artists*, Johnson Museum of Art, Ithaca, New York

#### *selected awards, residencies and fellowships*

**2006-09**

.Postgraduate Research Scholarship: for doctoral study at Trinity College, University of Dublin, Ireland

**2007**

.Artist-in-residence: one-month Atelier program, Frans Masereel Centre, Belgium

**2006**

.Creative Commons Artist-in-residence, *iCommons iSummit '06*, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil

**2005**

.turbulence and Greenwall Foundation net.art commission: *getawayexperiment.net*, with Marcus Neustetter

**2004**

.*Brett Kebble Art Awards*: major award for *Step Inside*, South Africa

**2003**

.*International Digital Art Awards: hektor.net* named as 2003 New Media Gallery selection, with international tour

.*Brett Kebble Art Awards*: merit award in New Media for *Stuttering*, South Africa

**2002**

.*FNB Vita Awards: the double room* wins Most Outstanding Presentation of an Original Contemporary Work, South Africa

.Guest Suite Artist: five-month artist residency, Cornell University, New York

**1999-01**

.Graduate Assistant Fellowship: Tisch School of the Arts, New York University

#### *collections*

.CorpCapital Bank, South Africa

.Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa

.The Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media, Cornell University, New York

.Sasol Corporation, South Africa

.South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)

.University of South Africa (UNISA)

.University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa



above *Satin Bed*  
2006 archival lambda print  
220 x 600mm  
edition 5

right *Satin* (detail)  
2006 etching, carborundum print and engraving  
paper 760 x 1120mm image 395 x 795mm  
edition 5

back cover *Satin Bed* (detail)  
see above



