

Dynamic Stasis





Dynamic Stasis

essay by
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Beginning with the cyberspace enthusiasm of the early 1980s, we witnessed a chorus of critical and theoretical claims that digital media would mark the end of print and its associated artistic and cultural forms. Almost every new media technology prompts such claims, as photography was thought to be the death of painting, for example, or cinema the death of literature. In the decades following the so-called “digital revolution,” however, such claims have proven to be unfounded, partly because they impose a kind of progressive or teleological narrative on the history of art and media, in which newer technologies improve on and replace older ones—what Jay Bolter and I have called a narrative of remediation as reform.¹ But new media do not simply replace older media. They re-mediate the formal features or mediatic logic of earlier media. Indeed, *Dynamic Stasis*, the remarkable exhibition created by Jessica Meuninck-Ganger and Nathaniel Stern, can be understood as participating in the remediation of early forms of printmaking (like lithography, etching, woodcut, the letterpress, and so forth) via the medium of digital video.

More interesting, however, is the way in which this series of works demonstrates what I would call "reverse remediation." Remediation does not always involve the refashioning or re-mediation of older media forms by newer ones, but also names the way in which older media forms remediate newer ones. Reverse remediation is one of the many

interesting phenomena happening in *Dynamic Stasis*, whose title refers at the most literal level to how each of the works combines the "dynamism" of moving video with the "stasis" of graphic prints. Each of the main works combines a print (or occasionally drawing) on translucent paper, which is overlaid on a looped video playing on a LCD photo-viewing screen. The

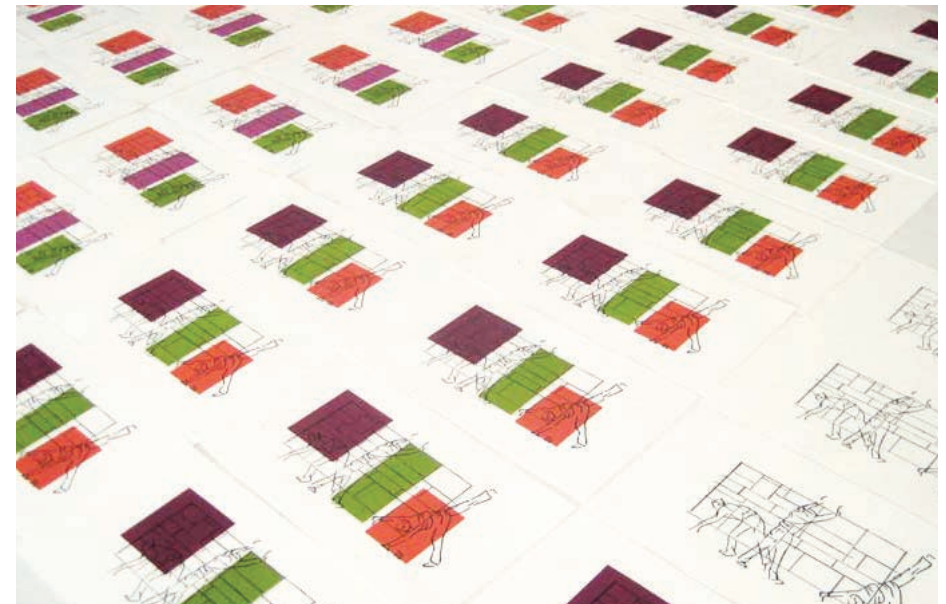
images in the print are drawn (etched, carved, screened, burned, etc) from images that occur in the video at different moments in time. In other words, every graphic element in each image is present at some point in the video. (Inanimate objects remain present throughout each video, since the videos are shot from a fixed point-of-view with a fixed focal length.)

Dynamic Stasis involves both remediation and reverse remediation: of print by digital video, and of digital video by print. Rather than simply digitizing earlier print media, the artists produce static graphic prints from the medium of digital video. What is to be made, then, of the three artworks, *Im-mediate*, *Interval* and *Animal Abstraction*, which



Media Arc
(left)
LCD video,
letterpress on
varnished Thai
mulberry paper
edition 3
318 x 420 mm

Media Arc II, III
(right)
letterpress on
Rives BFK
2 editions of 18
140 x 216 mm



are not prints in multiple editions, but one-of-a-kind drawings? How can individual drawings change print media? Paradoxically the three drawn works provide the most direct examples of how *Dynamic Stasis* uses the older medium of printmaking to remediate the newer medium of digital video, because they dramatize one of the most conceptually radical implications of these works—their transformation of digital video into something like a virtual matrix for the prints, which are selectively actualized from the plenitude and potentiality of the video matrix.² Each of the other images has selected and printed elements, turned into another, earlier medium of artistic reproduction through the intermediary of a graphic matrix (the copper plate of the etching, the wood block, the lithographic stone, or the photopolymer plates of the

letterpress). It may not be immediately apparent how they participate in reverse remediation, insofar as they deploy traditional technologies from the history of printmaking. But in the three works that employ drawing, not printing, the LCD screen completely replaces the printmaking plate. What becomes clear here is that in *Dynamic Stasis*, it is digital mediation rather than mechanical reproduction that constitutes the (virtual) matrix for the graphic image.

Part of what might be called the “game” in looking at or watching these works (and you do both watch and look at them, as you would watch a video or look at a print) is to try to identify the moments when the video from which the prints are made match up with the various elements in the print or drawing, when a human or nonhuman moving



Interval
LCD video, ink on Thai mulberry and Canson papers
420 x 318 mm



Dynamic Stasis (detail)
LCD video,
lithograph on varnished Thai mulberry paper
edition 3, 318 x 420 mm

through the video, for example, lines up with its image on the paper. Such ephemeral moments of conjunction call to mind Roland Barthes's distinction between the "punctum" and the "studium" in photography. Barthes

defines studium as the formal, shared, conventional elements of a photograph (as portrait, say, or landscape). The punctum, on the other hand, refers to that moment or detail in a photograph that wounds or punctures

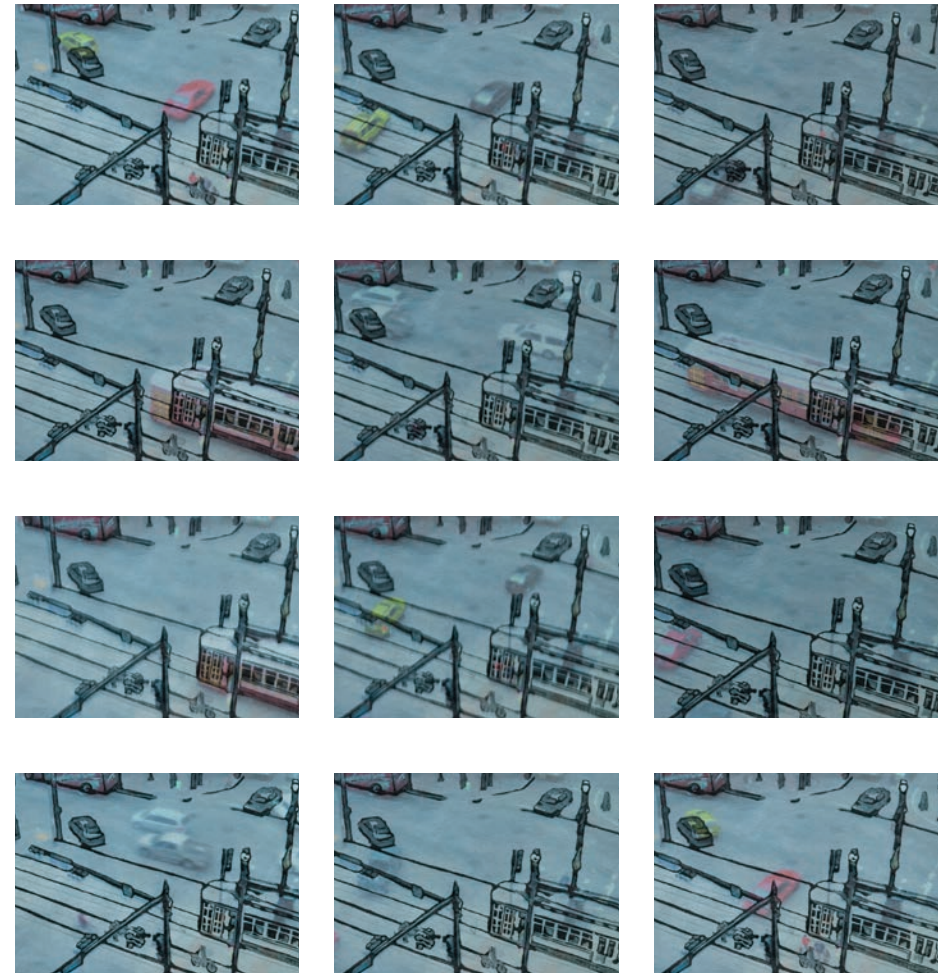
a viewer, a moment captured accidentally by the photograph, independent of the photographer's intended purpose.³ One might think that the occasions in which something moving merges with its static

graphic image provide the punctum of the piece, its moment of surprise. It makes more sense, however, to see these occurrences as part of each work's studium, its convention or logic of composition, its "dynamic stasis." If the matching up of the graphic image with the video is part of the artistic studium or "study," then, do the works provide other punctums, or moments of wound or surprise? What are the accidents of these artworks, which constitute what Barthes would understand as "puncturing" viewership?

One example of the Barthean punctum can be found in Meuninck-Ganger and Stern's *Cross Current*.

In the moment almost immediately following when the streetcar in the video joins its drawn counterpart, and then passes out of the frame, a pedestrian in the video who had stopped to let the train pass crosses the track right where the door of the streetcar appears in the print. Here the pedestrian in the video seems to walk out of the door of the printed streetcar, which is stopped, fixed in stasis in the etching both prior to

and after the streetcar in the video has moved right through the printed image. This moment of surprise, presumably not part of the work's studium, which was focused on the lining up of the videated and graphic train, forms, I would argue, a punctum in the piece, a kind of affective surprise that is an accidental artifact of the innovative technical mediation of the art's form.



Cross Current (full image and details)
LCD video, etching and aquatint on varnished Thai mulberry paper
edition 3, 318 x 420 mm

Pantograph
LCD video, lithograph on varnished Thai mulberry paper
edition 3, 318 x 420 mm

Thinking about these works in relation to Barthes's account of photography also lets us highlight another meaning of "dynamic stasis." It calls attention to the telling differences between how immobile, stationary, or static objects in the video (e.g., roads, buildings, street signs, poles) interact with the prints, and how moving, dynamic, or animated things (such as people, cars, trains, bowling balls and pins, a clock) do. Although each work in *Dynamic Stasis* has moments when elements of the dynamic video unite or merge with the static forms of the prints, the graphic images are all composites of different moments from their videos. There is never a single moment of unity between them.

From this perspective, one of the conceptually richest works in the show is the one called *Pantograph*, which refers to the apparatus mounted on the roof of an electric train or tram to collect power through

contact with an overhead catenary wire. The term "pantograph" stems from the technology's resemblance to mechanical pantographs used from the 17th-century onwards for copying handwriting and drawings. The work *Pantograph* dramatizes again the ways in which all of the pieces in *Dynamic Stasis* function in some sense as games or puzzles to be solved, as the spectator/viewer waits for the video image from which the lithograph was sampled or distilled to line up with its printed forms.

Pantograph also helps to dramatize the interesting temporal reversal or disruption common to all of the works in relation to the graphic depiction of figures or objects in motion, the fact that for the viewer the experience of the graphic image temporally precedes the digital video image from which it is selected (and precedes it spatially in that the print is superimposed on top of the LCD



screen). What makes this reversal most telling is that for the artists (and for the works themselves) the digital videos precede both the plate and the print. They function, as I suggested earlier, as a kind of virtual matrix: both for the printed image, and for the physical matrix of the printmaking medium (the plate, the stone, etc.) from whose surface this image is printed. In our experience as viewers,

however, it is the print, not the plate, that constitutes the work, and this is the medium through which the plate, the graphic matrix, and the virtual matrix, are all expressed and made visible. In other words, the relationship of the digital video to the graphic matrix and surface remedies the relation between plate and print, but does so in opposite directions for artists and viewers.

Pantograph is exemplary of the rich and multiple ways in which the different works in *Dynamic Stasis* can be experienced. Considered as a graphic work, *Pantograph* directs the movement of the viewer's gaze from left to right via the images in the print (the woman and children in the left are oriented towards, and about to move towards, the right). But the video itself has multiple movements in multiple directions—cars going into the pictured depth on the video from the right to the left are not represented on the lithograph, for example, nor are people moving in that direction into the depths of the pictured space. The left-to-right movement of the lithograph encourages a kind of proprioceptual leaning or attentional tendency which is disrupted at various moments by people and cars moving in the opposite or contrary direction. As the video unfolds, the viewer discovers that the mother

and daughter in the lower left are not together with the boy in the carriage, even though in the lithograph they appear as a family unit, a misreading which is encouraged by the left-to-right orientation of the print. But this left-to-right movement is by no means

totalizing, even in the print. One of the most dramatic exceptions to this movement involves the train that moves through the video from right to left in the middle distance and which is oriented that way in the lithograph as well. In the video when the gates

for the train go down, traffic stops, and the videated and printed images of people and train momentarily line up with one another in "dynamic stasis."

Like *Dynamic Stasis* in its entirety, *Pantograph* brings together



Pantograph (detail)
LCD video, lithograph on
varnished Thai mulberry paper
edition 3, 318 x 420 mm



Midst
 LCD video, woodcut on varnished
 Thai mulberry paper, maple & pine
 edition 3, 318 x 420 mm (center),
 140 x 420 mm (left & right panel)

multiple systems of transportation and communication, other forms of mechanical media technologies not unrelated to the technology of printmaking, or having their historical origins in a similar pre-digital, pre-video moment of media history. The pantograph connects the train to the overhead wires for its power; the track and power lines precede and make possible the transit of the streetcar; plate and press make possible the print; the digital photo frame makes possible LCD moving images; and the virtual matrix of the video makes possible

the works on paper in *Dynamic Stasis*. In this way the show participates in the media logic I have elsewhere called "premediation."⁴ The moment in which the train comes through on its track mirrors the merging of the video and graphic image, and the graphic image pre-mediates "dynamic stasis" for the viewer. When the front of the train in the video lines up with the front of the train in the print, both drawn and videated pantographs also briefly align.

What is most interesting is that this moment premediates, or makes

possible, *Pantograph's* punctum. After the juxtaposition or merging of the videated power lines with the graphic ones, the cars of the train continue through the picture plane for several more seconds, and their connection to the pantograph and the contact lines above persists. They continue to be visible in the lithograph, even though the connection is no longer present in the video. This interesting meeting of dynamism and stasis is further emphasized at the end of the video segment, where the train moves through with its last car (an engine in reverse), its cable connected

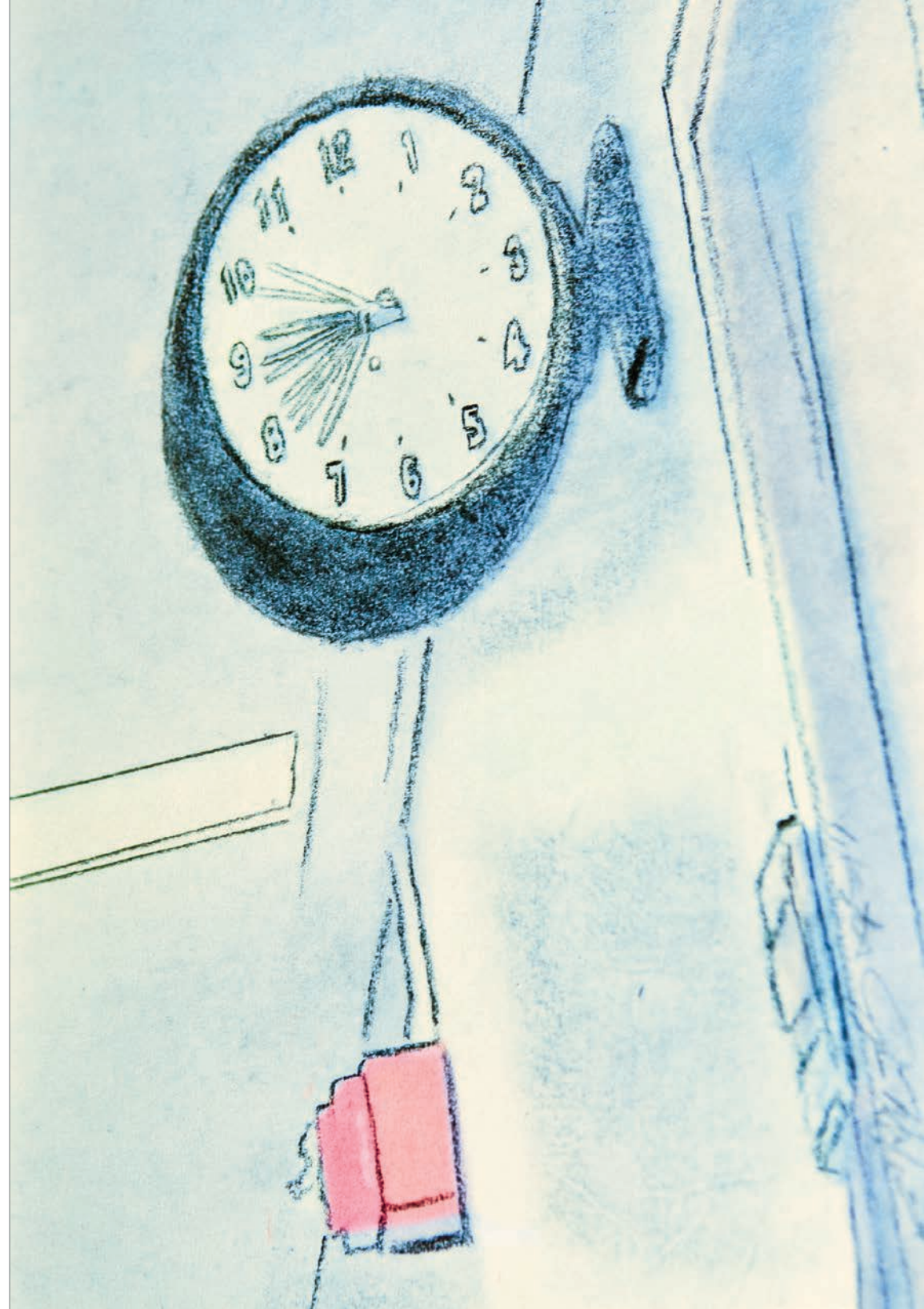
to the power lines at opposite angles. Rather than merging with the lithographic image, these lines run contrary to them, reverse them, underscoring the tensions and discontinuities of the work, which are equally as important as the momentary continuities and their static traces. This discontinuity points as well to the reversal of stasis and dynamism at play in these works, the realization that the static prints are themselves dynamic while the dynamism of the video can appear to be static both in the fixity of the camera and in its endless, automatic looping.

The remediation of dynamic digital video for the purposes of creating static graphic prints is not of course unique to Meuninck-Ganger and Stern. Jim Campbell, who is clearly an artistic interlocutor for this show, has in very different ways deployed digital video to remediate print forms. He too is interested in bringing together the dynamism of moving video images with the apparent stillness of the graphic arts. Campbell's *Illuminated Averages* are illustrative both of the similarities and differences between his work and *Dynamic Stasis*.⁵ *Illuminated Averages* are static two-dimensional prints, distilled down or averaged out from moving images over a fixed period of time. He captures and renders static, for example, the entirety of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, or short videos shot by his viewers. A subset of these illuminated averages includes several prints titled *Dynamism of an*

Observer (to which *Dynamic Stasis* may in fact be alluding) in which the motion re-presented is meant to be that of the observer, not of the object or medium observed. One of these images focuses on a clock that is recorded over a period of several minutes; the work distills down both the movement of the clock's hands, and the movement of the observer's hand holding the camera.

We can see Campbell's inspiration on Meuninck-Ganger and Stern most directly in *Im-mediate*, which consists of a video of a clock over a period of approximately 13 minutes. The video appears sped up—the intervals between minutes are in fact edited out—and loops forwards and backwards, jumping between numbers. *Im-mediate's* drawn image depicts the minute hand in several positions, providing multiple moments in which the video matrix lines up with its corresponding charcoal lines.

Im-mediate (detail)
LCD video, charcoal on varnished Thai mulberry paper
420 x 318 mm





Mediation (full image and detail)
 LCD video, etching on varnished Thai mulberry paper
 edition 3, 318 x 420 mm

The temporal game of reversals built into *Im-mediate*, along with its allusion to mediation, bespeaks another way in which *Dynamic Stasis* comments upon our current media moment. Together with *Mediation*, in which bowling pins are set up and knocked down, and *Interval*, a drawing

that layers the same, translucent video on top of itself, *Im-mediate* produces a temporality that is distinctive to games and to digital reversibility generally—as games give us the opportunity to reboot when, for example, our avatar dies. But the falling and then resetting of the pins in *Mediation* also allude

to the Lumière brothers' famous film of the tearing down and magical rebuilding of a wall, which serves to remind us of the way in which digital video remediates cinema. The automation of the pin changer, which is not reversible in a bowling alley yet reverses itself in the video, speaks also to the contrast between digital video and printmaking in that the print is part of a unidirectional, mechanical

process. Even when a print is run through a press more than once for different ink colors or effects, the automation of the printmaking process (plus the iterative repetition of the editioning process) is connected up with or called attention to by the pin-setting machine.

This link to printmaking, and to the reverse remediation that *Dynamic Stasis* deploys, is also



evident in the two triptychs in the show, *Animal Abstraction* and *Midst*, which both serve to foreground the materiality of the printmaking process. *Animal Abstraction* does so through highlighting the paper itself—its fibers and texture, its torn edges and variability—in the hyper-minimalist images that flank the central LCD screen. As alluded to earlier, this work highlights the ways in which the digital video

serves as both the virtual and graphic matrices for the piece: the seagulls flying through the video provide the birds outlined both on the overlaid drawing, and on the surrounding paper sheets. Just as *Animal Abstraction* underscores the key role played by the materiality of paper in the history of printmaking, so *Midst* calls attention to the materiality of the wooden block used in woodcuts. Itself a woodcut,

the image of *Midst* is anomalous in that it is the only work that depicts an image not in the video component of the work—the fanciful Eastern-influenced dragon, centered in the upper half of the image—and thus the only one in which there is an image that never matches up with the video. Although *Midst* is also unique in that the maple reliefs that flank the central image are extensions of, not copies of,

images in the video, what ties these reliefs to the project as a whole is that they, too, have been “printed” by means of a CNC Router, a computer-programmed shaping machine. While the dragon-centered image over the video has been printed from a wooden block, the maple relief works that sit on either side of the video-print have been printed from a digital, computerized matrix. In this sense, *Midst*,

Midst (detail)
LCD video, woodcut on varnished Thai mulberry paper, maple & pine
edition 3, 318 x 420 mm (center), 140 x 420 mm (left & right panel)





like all of the extraordinary works in *Dynamic Stasis*, plays out the reverse remediation of new digital media through some of the oldest forms of print art media.

Dynamic Stasis not only offers its spectator-viewers a rewarding aesthetic experience of

striking works of art, but also challenges them to rethink their received ideas about the historically rich medium of printmaking, and the exciting new digital media with which we continue to surround ourselves in the 21st century.

Animal Abstraction
LCD video, charcoal Rives BFK and varnished Thai mulberry paper
318 x 420 mm (center), 559 x 762 mm (left & right panel)



Video Documentation
<jessicameuninckganger.nathanielstern.com>

Notes

1. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
2. I am using the term “matrix” here in its technical printmaking sense to refer to the plate or other surface from which ink is printed on paper.
3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1982).
4. Richard Grusin, *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).
5. Richard Grusin, “Jim Campbell and the Illuminated Average of Mediation,” *Jim Campbell: Material Light* (NY: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

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Cover and inside cover:
Animal Abstraction (detail)

LCD video, charcoal Rives BFK and varnished Thai mulberry paper
318 x 420 mm (center), 559 x 762 mm (left & right panel)

