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— Nathaniel Stern

Scanning the World

MILWAUKEE-BASED ARTIST CHALLENGES HOW HUMANS RESPOND TO THEIR ENVIRONMENT

BY **ROCHELLE MELANDER** | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MATT HAAS**

To call Nathaniel Stern a Renaissance man might be an understatement. An associate professor of art and design in the Peck School of the Arts at UW-Milwaukee, Stern is a Fulbright grantee, published author and TED Talk speaker; his artwork has been exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide, and he's on the forefront of using scanner imaging photography. Stern is also the co-founder and core team member of the UWM Student Startup Challenge and the Lubar Center for Entrepreneurship, along with Dr. Ilya Avdeev, UWM assistant professor of mechanical engineering, and Brian Thompson, president of the UWM Research Foundation.

In viewing Stern's vast expertise and interests, a common theme emerges: interaction. He wants people who view his art and the entrepreneurs he coaches to think about who they are, who they can be, and how they relate to the world and one another. As he said at the conclusion of his TED Talk, "Think about the kinds of relationships and environments we'd have, if we thought more about the relationships and environments we have."

Stern did just that when he created his stunning visual images, playing with how our interaction with technology and the world produces beauty. He strapped a desktop scanner, laptop and custom-made battery pack to his body, and then wiggled and jumped, capturing images as he moved. The image you see in the gallery might be a result of his breathing, or cracks in the glass, or a fly attracted to the light of the scanner beam. Then, as Stern says, "The dynamism between the three — my body, technology and the landscape — is transformed into beautiful and quirky renderings, which are then produced as archival prints." Stern's visual images were displayed most recently at the Tory Folliard Gallery this past summer during Gallery Night and Day. (Tory Folliard represents Stern's artwork in the Midwest.)

Perhaps the best way to understand Stern's work is to participate in his interactive art. Stern has hacked full-bodied gaming controllers so that viewers trigger animation, spoken words and more by moving their bodies. In a sense, the interaction between the viewer and the technology creates the art. For example, in "Stuttering," the viewer's movement produces words on a screen. Move slowly, and a few words appear, spouting zen-like wisdom: "Take a deep breath." "Read." "Consciousness." Move quickly, and the screen stutters, lighting up with a cacophony of phrases. But as with everything Stern makes, the art is more than just art. "I like to think that 'Stuttering' helps us practice listening and performing in the world with a little more care," he says.

Stern witnessed this firsthand when all four of his interactive works were displayed, alongside the work of Tegan Bristow, in a show called "Meaning Motion" at the Wits Art Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa. He watched people move from one interactive exhibit to another, sometimes stopping to teach a friend or stranger how to interact with the art. At "Elicit," a piece in which every movement evokes a sea of text, he watched viewers silently invite each other to dance. "Their relationships to each other and themselves and the art shift, and they leave that space thinking, moving and interacting differently," Stern says.

Milwaukee residents can interact with these works when "Body Language" is shown this November and December at the INOVA gallery at UWM's Peck School of the Arts. **M**

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