

Profundity and plasticity for the greedy

CHRIS ROPER | JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA - Feb 05 2010 06:00

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"Jessica, a trained and practiced printmaker, had a growing interest in new media, time and space, and Nathaniel continued to investigate composite work that lives between the digital and traditional."

Good grief. Is this a homage to that fateful first meeting of Princess Leia and R2D2? No, it is the opening paragraph to the catalogue for *Passing Between*, the collaborative show by Jessica Meuninck-Ganger and Nathaniel Stern now playing at the Art on Paper gallery.

Time and space, you say? To the Batcave! Ah, artspeak. You can get tired of it, although it is useful when you're in the mood to poke fun. But, sadly, there is no other way of doing justice to works that demand critical respect. And despite the disturbing image I've just conjured, of Stern as a chirping, egg-shaped robot, he and his collaborator earn our respect with this show.

The work is funny, pretty and accessible, but it's also complicated, surprising, exceedingly well crafted and rewards a long-term relationship. That's your cue to rush out and buy a piece, take it home and plug it in.

I'd better take a stab at describing the pieces in the gallery, although it would be easier all round if you checked out the video of the work on www.mg.co.za/stern. Basically, it's a new-media mash-up. Paraphrasing the artists' own description: they mount translucent prints and drawings on top of video screens, creating moving pictures on paper.

That doesn't do justice to, for example, the mesmerising, joyful experience of watching insubstantial sharks endlessly circling *The Gallerist*. He's depicted kneeling on some driftwood in the middle of the ocean while sketchy vultures hover ominously. And there's a perfect beauty to *The Great Oak*, the central image of which is a drawing of a sturdy tree, already complicated by the digital echo of itself, counterpointed by ghostly figures leaping at its base.

The players are ordinary digital photo frames, LCD screens, PC monitors. If it wasn't for the old-media interventions of the artists, you could call this Apple art -- designed in the United States, made in China. And that's not an insulting description. Stern has a history of online interventions that flatten out easy categories of valuing art and that make evaluating this show's output a much more interesting proposition.

Last year he and collaborator Scott Kildall put up a page on Wikipedia called Wikipedia Art, a self-referential artwork, editable by anyone, that achieved its legitimacy by the publication of articles about itself on other websites. A clever interrogation of Wikipedia's standards and what constitutes archival know-ledge, it resulted in a running battle with Wikipedia editors and a legal challenge on trademark infringement. According to Wikipedia (ha), this saga eventually became an artwork and was included in 2009's Venice Biennale.

So when you wander around the show at the misnamed Art on Paper, or if you're lucky enough to have one of these works on your wall, you can choose. Do you just want to enjoy the playful nature of a piece such as *Twin City* -- whoah! Here comes the flying cow again! -- or do you want to meditate on the nature of the loop, which "without origin or telos ... interweaves the work's time with the spectator's as rhythm rather than succession"?

I know, you're a 21st-century art lover, so you want it all -- profundity and plasticity, facile conversation piece and deep worth. Greedy. But with this work, you can have it all and, in true hypertextual style, leap from moment to moment, constantly recreating desire and satisfaction, in much the same way as the looped video constantly re-enacts the pleasure of watching.

Passing Between shows at Art on Paper, 44 Stanley Avenue, Milpark, Johannesburg, until February 27

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