

Irene Hanenbergh is by no means an easy artist to define. Her work manages to appear both old-world and otherworldly as it straddles a realm somewhere between landscape and fantasy, the painterly and graphic illustration, old style painting and new technologies.

Born in Holland, Hanenbergh is a comparatively recent denizen of Australia. She lived and worked in The Netherlands, Athens and London between 1988 and 1998 before settling in Melbourne in 1998. From her European background and travels she has brought along amongst her luggage much of the labyrinthine superstitions and beliefs of the old world. Her work seems infused with folklore and the mythology of long ago.

That is not to say that there is anything old-fashioned about Hanenbergh. While from a distance her paintings appear rendered in a swirling morass of acrylics or oil paint, in reality they are generated on a computer and produced as zund prints on aluminium, a form of cutting-edge signage technology.

There are contradictions aplenty in these works. Her studio resembles that of a more traditional artist. Along with masses of laser prints of works in progress, there are papers and pencils everywhere, sketches, more traditional finished drawings – the usual detritus of a painters' studio. One would barely notice the clapped-out looking computer that is central to this practice, a tobacco-stained ancient PC that barely looks like it would have the energy to save a Word document. But appearances can deceive; Hanenbergh is an artist who has truly embraced technology; she has rebuilt the inside of this innocuous hunk of plastic into a machine that can let her paint and draw with a staggering array of paintbrushes and pencils and in every colour of the spectrum. Forget the slickness of a new G5 Apple Mac – the ratty, almost homely appearance of her PC is, she says, “almost like an old paintbrush. I feel comfortable with it.”

Equally telling may be the stack of books on the table, ranging from a huge tome on Caspar David Friedrich (She readily admits to her fondness for the 19th century romantic painter, but says: “He’s a bit too neat, which is probably the part I don’t like.”) through to books on magic and superstition and a well-thumbed catalogue for a Tony Clark survey show.

There is a darkness in Hanenbergh’s imagery that seems prevalent in much recent contemporary Australian art and this is no doubt one aspect that has led to her comparatively rapid rise. She has held exhibitions at Melbourne’s Centre for Contemporary Photography, MOP Projects in Sydney and TCB Art Inc. in Melbourne and has recently been picked up by Melbourne’s hottest new gallery, Neon Parc. She has also been curated into a number of strong group shows alongside the likes of Sharon Goodwin, Ronnie van Hout, Tony Garifalakis, David Noonan and Lisa Roet, all of whom, like Hanenbergh, carry a fascination for the darker side of popular culture.

The works shown up until this period have been small, intimate affairs that resemble easel paintings, hinting at bizarre landscapes from which emerge what could be werewolves and banshees. Her newer work, to be shown at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, is far more ambitious in both scale and colouration. For this showing her small zund prints will grow Godzilla-like in size to 120 x 180cm, 15 kilo aluminium plates, engrossing the viewer in her moss-like abstractions. These will be her strangest, yet most seductive works to date.

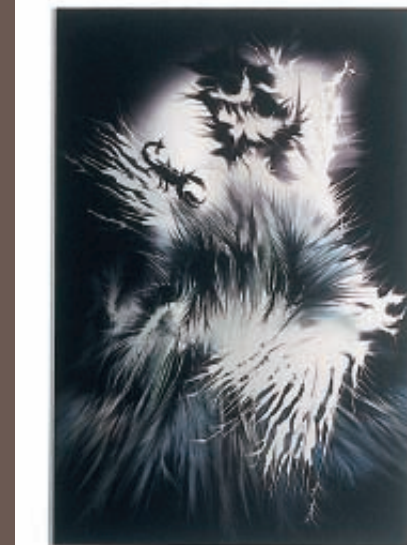
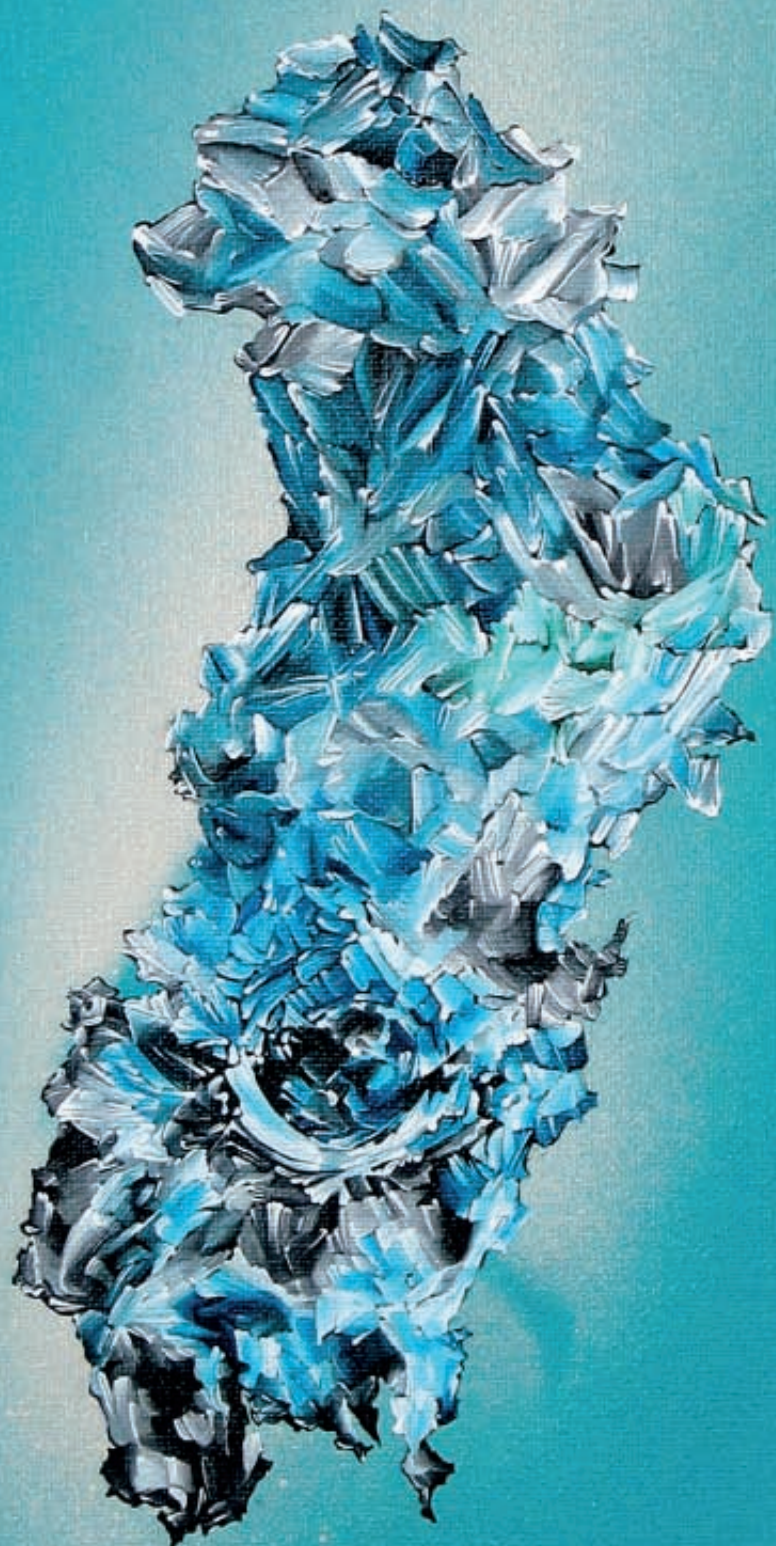
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Irene Hanenbergh, *Sunny boy*, 2007. Zund-print on aluminium,  
180 x 120cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NEON PARC, MELBOURNE.







This page: (left to right) Irene Hanenbergh, *Higher*, *Supernature* and *Magnetic Trinity*, 2004. Zund-print on aluminium, 60 x 40cm each. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NEON PARC, MELBOURNE.

Opposite page: Irene Hanenbergh, *Higher (for Vlad July)*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NEON PARC, MELBOURNE.



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Indeed, in a separate body of work being produced alongside her large abstractions there is a series of almost literal, albeit still fantastical, landscapes. Hanenbergh is unlikely to go plein air painting however – these remain very much landscapes of the imagination. “I like to question what it is that makes up a landscape,” she says. “What are its components?”

In her latest works landscape as such is barely discernible. What we have is some kind of strange organic explosion, a morass of fibrous, thread-like growths threatening to corrode the very aluminium they sit upon. There is something wraith-like about these forms, haunting the air they float in. She has also pushed her palette to extremes, including strange ochre-browns that have been sourced from Middle-Eastern stationary and stamps, giving the works a strangely old-world sensibility; a hint of Persian mysticism and Sufi sorcery.

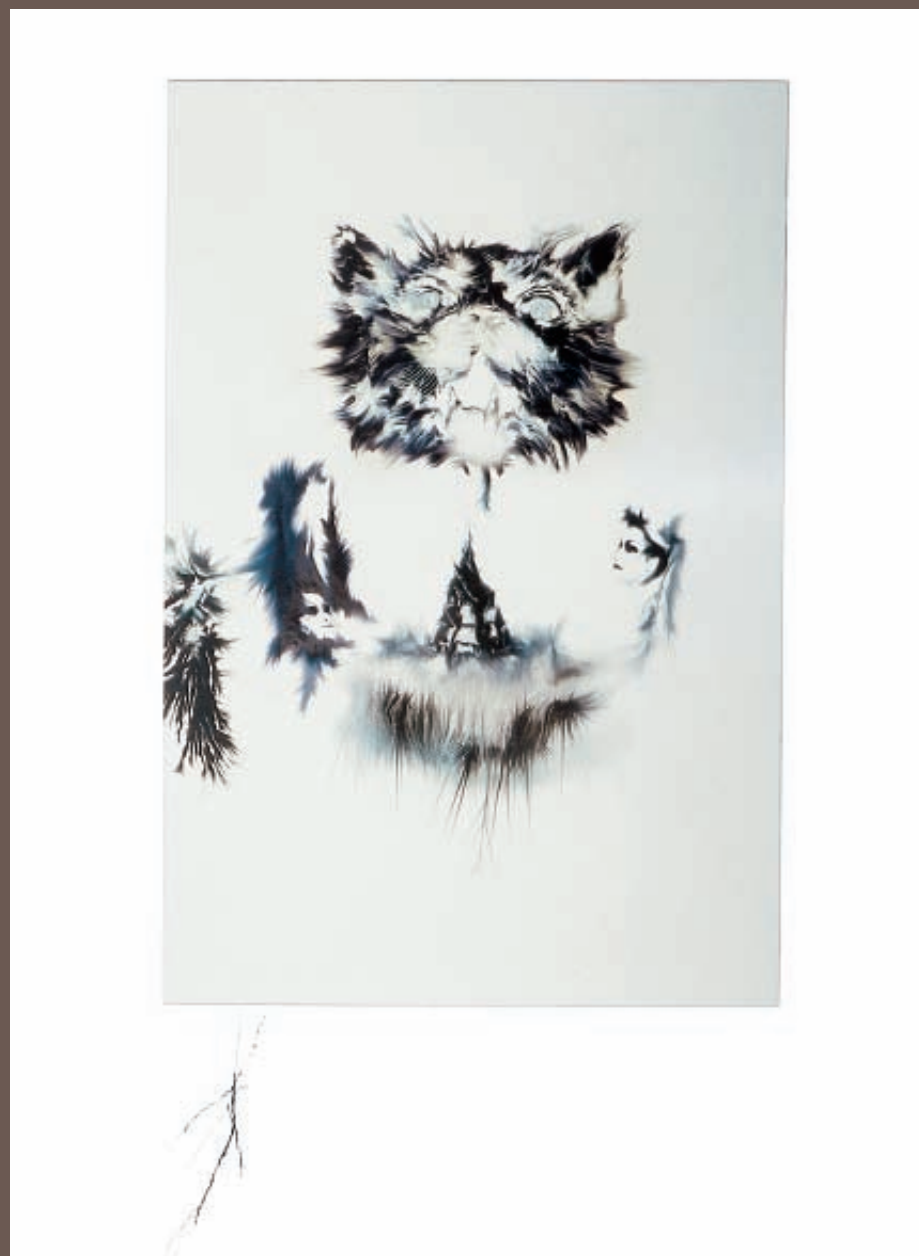
“I think it is very hard to pinpoint where fantasy art becomes ‘low art’ or considered bad taste. I’m not quite sure as to when, at what point exactly, and where, that happens. I guess it’s a very fine line depending on personal taste and experience as well. I think my work relates to it, or has references to it, but puts it in an almost unrelated context by mixing in somehow more readable, ‘down to earth’ influences and reference points, ranging from Byzantine rock-painting, to a furry seal, a dolphin, a cat, a human waving hand or just a feathery ‘thing’.

“By using elements of these marginalised art-practices merged with more classical ‘high-art’ painting and printing techniques, I believe my work slips between, and comments on ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture. Incorporating the above elements, the work also transcends them and aims to be unique and other worldly.

“I am also interested in finding out why nowadays the super-and sub-natural are so rapidly becoming popular in mainstream culture – the increasing use of mythological archetypes, the occult, darker supernatural phenomena and Fantastical Nature...”

Hanenbergh is also obsessed by process. “The core of it is that I make a digital file as a completely blank image, there’s no other digital input of scans and so forth. Every pixel basically is painted as in ‘conventional’ painting,





This page: Irene Hanenbergh, *Presence*, 2003. Zund-print on aluminium, 60 x 40cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NEON PARC, MELBOURNE.  
Opposite page: Irene Hanenbergh's Melbourne studio photographed by Kirstin Gollings.

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using the type of brushes (created in software) and the same strength and physical dynamics as what I would use if I were painting with oil on canvas. The paintings are created using classical techniques (oil on canvas, layering, transparent glazing, extensive brush detail) and formal composition.

Where most technology-based art appears relentlessly cool, Hanenbergh's suggests a visceral painterly style, her subjects hint at a seductive, Shamanistic shape shifting. There's eroticism aplenty, but never overt. There are stories being told, but never literally. She let's the magic take over the technology, a *deus ex machina* – the ghost in the machine.

"The main thing here is to have an almost absolute control of the type of colours that appear in the final piece, and to create the image exactly as I envisioned it to be. An intricate opacity versus luminosity interplay, which can be slightly compared to classical chiaroscuro techniques, is accomplished due to the polished silver surface simultaneously reflecting and absorbing the changing ambient light, adding depth and mystery to the work. The ink areas vary from being very opaque to a translucent or bright (really quite artificial) metallic appearance. By using this technique of light and shadow – opaque ink areas and luminous metal – the work obtains a strange sense of three-dimensionality and depth."

In June of 2003, Hanenbergh attended the V Salon Y Coloquio Internacional de Arte Digital (Fifth Exhibition and Colloquium of Digital Art) in Havana, Cuba. It was a clash of cultures that couldn't have been better for Hanenbergh – a conference on new-media art on an island where old belief systems die hard. This is very much what her work seems to be about – the old meeting the new in a strange, unholy marriage.

Hanenbergh tells a story about staying in a deserted hotel in Greece. It was a huge and dilapidated building booked out only by the ghosts of previous clients, not unlike those in **Stanley Kubrick's** *The Shining*. There was a huge mahogany staircase leading to the ballroom and an emptied swimming pool. "You could stay in a different room every night," she says. It is the kind of environment that one can imagine being ideal for Hanenbergh's works, removed from any sense of reality due to its desertion; cut off from the real world and becoming a cavernous, echoing shell where mosses grow in the corners and spider-webs adorn the furnishings and where strange apparitions are caught out of the corner of the eye.

While the viewer will inevitably – and correctly – sense her fascination with the ethereal, what we might even dub the spirit world, these paintings have a tendency to trigger strange memories. For me these would be the clammy air-ferns and trailing mosses of the bayou country around New Orleans where Voodoo rituals clash with the superstitions of the Cajuns. There is no one reading of these works; like dreams they seem to have an intensity of the moment but elude clear definition. They are the ghost in the machine. They may be painted on a computer screen, but that makes them no less fine paintings, indeed, Hanenbergh may be one of the first to adapt new technology in a way that the painters of old would have enjoyed. ■

Irene Hanenbergh's next exhibition will be at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne from 18 May to 16 June 2007.

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Irene Hanenbergh, *The heathen pearl*, 2003. Zund-print on aluminium, 60 x 40cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND NEON PARC, MELBOURNE.