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**Altered states: Contemporary Calgary exhibit asks deep questions about how we process art, time, space and reality**  
**October 20, 2023, by Eric Volmers**

There is a specific order to things at *Three Dimensions*, the three-installation exhibit by Toronto artists Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins that opens at Contemporary Calgary on Oct. 19.

Sure, the exhibit has a decidedly open-ended and open-to-interpretation vibe to it, but there does seem to be a set path to follow to have the optimal experience. Visitors are first invited to check out and interact with *Balancing Act*, which features an oversized, user-controlled, claw-crane game that allows participants to stack foam shapes and form their own sculptures. It is surrounded by paintings that depict various possibilities and groupings that can be created using the same geometric shapes.

“The crane game has a long history,” says Borins, who joined Marman at Contemporary Calgary to launch the exhibit earlier this week. “It’s completely recognizable. Everybody has seen claw-crane games in arcades, in fairgrounds. It has a long history connected to the gold rush or the building of the Panama Canal. Why did that get gamified is a question that no one asked. But it was something that we thought was relevant to our practice. We make kinetic art. We make interactive art. There is an industrial-design quality to some of our projects.”

So visitors are free to contemplate deep questions about the strange history of this gadget, artistic construction and deconstruction or the moral complexities of extraction while manoeuvring the giant claw machine. Or, they can simply have fun.

“Promoting agency and participation in the museum setting is something we’ve been interested in. Not just looking at pictures but actually becoming engaged with artworks.” Borins adds.

The *Balancing Act* had its debut in New York, but *Three Dimensions* as a whole was envisioned and built specifically for Contemporary Calgary’s Flanagan Family Gallery and there are plans

to have it tour to other spots in Canada. All three installations have interactive elements and offer a playful mix of painting, sculpture, kinetic art, video, virtual reality, pop-culture allusions, sci-fi narratives and interactivity. It runs until March 17.

While all three installations feature a similar pallet of cheery, pastel colours, visitors will be in for a bit of a jolt when travelling from the fun, if occasionally frustrating, claw-game shenanigans to the second part of the exhibit, *THX2020*. Named after and loosely inspired by George Lucas’ pre-*Star Wars* 1971 dystopian film, *THX1138*, this installation invites visitors to first take in a short video. The visuals are made up of pleasing and colourful abstractions, but the calm voice-over narration – which was produced by Artificial Intelligence for added creepiness – seems to be ominously hawking various products that produce unsettling results: “Substances which produce physical disablement, such as paralysis of the legs, acute anemia and weakness and other complications” or “substances that alter personality structure in such a way that the tendency of the recipient to become dependent upon another person is enhanced.” Some of the same abstract, geometric combinations on the screen are found in paintings as visitors exit the video space and walk toward a computer.

“It’s kind of intense,” Borins acknowledges. “It takes a bit of a dark turn. It also starts to set up this idea of artwork in context. So it’s building context for the reasons these paintings look the way they do. Can you ever see them the same way? Or are you going to be influenced by some power of suggestion or narrative that has been overlaid on top of the exhibition? You don’t have to get that intense about it, but we’re investigating altered states or altered dimensions for how art is absorbed.”

After passing through the “hall of mirrors”, visitors are then invited to don a pink energy-dome helmet like the ones New Wave weirdos Devo wore in the early 1980s and sit in front of a computer surrounded by screens displaying a slideshow of similar geometric shapes. When the helmet is placed on, it apparently “responds to bio-feedback by moving shapes on video screens.” So, yet again, the viewer has become the creator.

The third and final installment, *ABCD*, comes with a heady sci-fi narrative that involves “intergalactic bureaucrats” wearing colourful robes that feature elaborate designs. Those designs are echoed in paintings around the room and there is also a stark tree behind the video screen (which Borins says is meant to recall the tree in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, which is the only set piece in that play). The four characters are central to a 15-minute video that finds them loading simulations into the tree that are meant to avert “some sort of unknown crisis,” Marman says. There is also a robot that lies face down on the floor. But when the visitor puts on virtual-reality goggles, the surroundings are altered. The chatty robot comes alive and floats around the room while spouting a seemingly nonsensical soliloquy. It’s clear we are in the same space, but perhaps a different dimension or time, Marman says.

“We are playing with different temporal states,” she says. “We’re in one room, but different things have happened in this room. With the robot, we see evidence through the VR experience where we go back into a different dimension and different time through the VR goggles and the robot is no longer lying on the floor, it’s flying through the space and animated. In the narrative video, as in the VR experience, the one thing that anchors the characters is the tree. So we understand that the characters were once in this room. We’re watching something unfold that may have happened at a different time but in this space.”

Yes, it’s all very trippy. Borins and Marman, who have been working together since 2000 when they both attended the Ontario College of Art and Design, have often navigated big philosophical questions in their large-scale, mixed-media installations. But they stress the exhibit – with content that covers A.I., how we process art, temporal states, claw games, robots and Devo helmets – is meant to provoke questions rather than supply answers.

“It’s a complicated exhibition,” Borins says. “Nothing against looking at pictures, but in the spirit of this space, it shows potential for interdisciplinary art, multi-media art, mixed-media, multiple installations. I think that’s what we want people to get (from the exhibit) and to have an open mind about it. There are no right answers: Ask questions, come to conclusions, have an enjoyable experience.”





<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/cristin-tierney-gallery-in-nyc/5909>

**Balancing Act: The User-Friendly Industriart of Marman and Borins at Cristin Tierney Gallery in NYC**  
July, 2023, by Steve Wozniak

“What is a game?” Marx said. “It’s tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. It’s the possibility of infinite rebirth, infinite redemption. The idea that if you keep playing, you could win. No loss is permanent, because nothing is permanent, ever.”

— Gabrielle Zevin, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*

“The Industrial Revolution has two phases: one material, the other social; one concerning the making of things, the other concerning the making of men.”

— Charles A. Beard, political scientist and historian

“The job of material culture is to shed light on the tasks of production in our country, and also to discover the place of the artist-constructor in production, in relation to improving the quality both of the manufactured product and of the organization of the new way of life in general.

— Vladimir Tatlin, Constructivist artist

A few hundred years ago, the original Industrial Revolution set off a wave of creativity, reproduction technology and the sheer excess of expendable unitary matter in the western world. Resounding benefits, deficits and the unforeseen soon followed. On the positive side, everything from revitalizing medical breakthroughs and long-term food preservation to rapid urban construction enriched the desperate and downtrodden quality of lives that many led. How did artists respond in their work? Several initially paid homage to the machine, lionized its power and nuzzled its carbon steel bosom. Why not? They reeled from extraordinary circumstances, like abject poverty, ruthless wars and the doldrums of disaster, death and disease. Machines seemed to offer a way out, but it was a complicated relationship. From part-time Purist cityscape painter Georgia O’Keefe, and steeply

ironic readymade Dadaist progenitor Marcel Duchamp, to inflatable industrial Pop object sculptor Claes Oldenburg, everyone seemed to get in on the action. Their artwork appealed to our sometimes-misguided sense of the profane, sleek machinations and products of the Industrial Revolution, and sometimes offered analogical narratives that only sexy, funny, grinding metal gadgets seem to generate within our softened, squishy, very human lives.

Over the years, artists leapt beyond grease and gears, as subsequent, distinct technological revolutions unfolded. After World War Two, consumer purchasing power increased – just in time for silicon computer chips, widespread Basic language home computing, complex global Internet communication, the ambush of ubiquitous AI algorithms and annoying, doom-scroll-session social media advertisements. So, what did the clever and bold Canadian art team of Marman and Borins do about it in 2023? They gave the interactive, mechanized power to the people in the form of a centerpiece retro kinetic crane game sculpture and accompanying brightly hued geometric figure paintings in the new exhibition *Balancing Act* at Cristin Tierney Gallery in NYC. And you know what? It’s totally timely, it’s really relevant – and it’s *very* good.

Visible from the street in the ground floor gallery space – like prismatic fish in a floor-to-ceiling aquarium – Marman and Borins’ extra-large classic arcade game is arresting, friendly, and dare I say, beautiful, even. It’s not like the crass flashy casino crane games that vaguely tempt us with plush stuffed animals or Swiss watch prizes, but instead offers gallery goers the opportunity to build “endlessly reconfigurable” compositions from basic forms. Audience intention and participation are key components to this effort. It effectively gives them fundamental control to create and build rather than accept consumer narratives spun by corporate leaders who simply want to sell stuff. To me, that’s huge. And it’s done in such a playful, inviting, spoonful-of-sugar manner that those lessons go down and are learned easily in *experience*.

Throughout the gallery are several modest-sized paintings of what look like sculptural combinations that result from game installation user activity. A number of these flatworks remind me a little of rectilinear abstract David Smith and Joel Shapiro sculptures mixed with children’s plastic Lego bricks. Figurative totems are featured therein as solos, duos and trios. Some cast shadows

and others look like friends posing for smartphone selfie photos. There's a life within these blocky colorful figures. They are at once dressed up objects, yet also emerging personalities. While the artists indicate that the paintings "reference both geometric abstract art and the Surrealism movement," I also see the work of Russian Constructivist architect and artist Vladimir Tatlin who thought art should be a "union of purely artistic forms for a utilitarian purpose." In the case of *Balancing Act*, it's likely a loose reverse: the use of utilitarian products for artistic forms and purposes.

Games and gaming provide a protected place for millions around the globe today. Participants can enjoy their competitive electronic sphere in a way that they cannot manage their messy complex lives. They get to press the reset button so that "no loss is permanent." And while the act of play is critical to our connection and development as humans, the obsession with its fantasy and escape hatch value has torn us asunder. The work in *Balancing Act*, on the other hand, accomplishes a type of enjoyable here-and-now engagement – and even risk – with what were once perceived as merely "viewers" in art institutions but, to me, are now both audiences and authors in their own right, as they've always been but couldn't see.

Within the artifacts of arts and letters, we always stand at a conceptual crossroads, able to mull through rich new ideas – then debate our interests and conflicts with impunity before moving on without instituting change. But today, we have already passed the practical point of no return, as we experience the fundamentally distinct, highest-tech Fourth Industrial Revolution. Managed by the artificially intelligent, driven by altruist advancement, some goodwill and some avarice – it's critical that we keep the dialogue open about our involvement in its expansion and utilization. Exhibitions like that of *Balancing Act* squarely address the issues at hand and, importantly, give us an almost existential arena to activate and identify our roles as onlookers, consumers, contributors. We see the production, we see the products, we see the people and, hopefully, the imagined life-or-death-styles that result. It is our job to strike the balance and take it out into the world beyond.



<https://sculpturemagazine.art/engagement-and-agency-a-conversation-with-jennifer-marman-and-daniel-borins/>

**Engagement and Agency: A Conversation with Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins**  
July 5, 2023, by Ray Cronin

For more than two decades, Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins have been making sculpture, installation, and media art in Toronto. They often break conventional barriers between viewer and artwork, using interactivity to engage beyond the visual. Their work is steeped in a critique of Modernism, often, as they write, “referring to and reassessing 20th-century art history: its utopias, polemics, and formal one-upmanship.”

Balancing Act, their current project, recently premiered at New York’s Cristin Tierney Gallery, where it remains on view through July 21, 2023, and will be included in a major solo exhibition at Contemporary Calgary in Alberta this October. *Balancing Act* invites viewers to build their own sculptures using a mechanical crane custom-fabricated by the artists to manipulate geometric forms made of foam covered in brightly colored felt. Marman and Borins’s claw crane is a greatly scaled-up version of the once familiar arcade game. Paintings depicting abstract “figures,” which reference possible arrangements of the forms found in the sculpture, round out the exhibition.

**Ray Cronin: How does collaboration work in your process?**

**Jennifer Marman:** We’re both makers. Quite often we’re making things that need four hands instead of two—I’ve accidentally referred to my third hand in the past. It’s a back and forth. We’re good at maximizing each other’s talents. Sometimes, because you’re working collaboratively, you do things that you wouldn’t try individually.

**Daniel Borins:** For example, these foam/felt shapes. There’s no stereotype of masculine/feminine divide. Jennifer was on the table saw. She excels at very precise geometry. A bevel cut in foam is not easy to do: How many different jigs did you need to do that?

**JM:** That was the easy part.

**DB:** See, I don’t think that’s easy.

**JM:** The foam and felt were very challenging; it was hard to figure out how to cut the shapes on a table saw, because the foam is relatively soft—it can melt. You need that jig because the felt is

not a solid, so when you’re putting it through the saw you really need to support it, so there is even pressure going through the saw blade so that the felt is never pulling with more force one way or another. Otherwise the table saw would burn it, or it would jam, and you’d get a messy cut. Even temperature makes a difference: in the summer, it’s much more difficult to cut than in cooler temperatures. The blades constantly need cleaning because of residue buildup from the glue.

**DB:** I’m good at finishing and coating. I put the contact cement on to adhere the felt on the foam. Jennifer was cutting these angles, and I was doing the needling (the felt corners are needled together), roving, and felting. It was new to us, but we found all the tools. It was a real division of labor. There have been times when we would make serial paintings, where Jennifer did much of the technical setups, and since I happen to be good with a brush, I did the brushwork.

**RC: You say that you start with a subject or an approach. What’s the subject for *Balancing Act*?**

**DB:** Construction, deconstruction, post-construction, reconstruction—those are the themes in *Balancing Act*. The line of thinking was an observation, a stance, or a perspective, then shaping that into an art installation that includes narrative and paradox.

**JM:** Quite often previous projects influence ideas for future ones. This could be a progression from an earlier kinetic work, *Pavilion of the Blind* (2013), literally a mechanical painting made from motorized blinds and roller shades; or from *Person Place or Thing* (2017), a stop-motion video installation in which we animated everyday objects combining into large-format sculptures, with arrays coming together and falling apart in a constantly changing tableau.

**DB:** We were part of a group show at the National Gallery of Canada in 2008–09, “Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer.” There’s an aspect in our work of a participant and another person as viewer, looking at somebody else absorbed in the art—an example of engagement and agency combined.

**JM:** We were thinking about different levels of viewing and narratives in one piece.

**DB:** We’re communicating the idea of a speculative narrative, too. Is it true what we’re positing about claw crane games? Are they the historical offshoot of some grand public works scheme to reshape massive territories into modern, logical spaces? Like the Panama Canal? A historical narrative of modernizing the world? A child controls a toy; but the claw crane game contains

unfulfilled desires at the arcade. Also, there's the popular belief that anyone can be an artist, so we've made an artist's play on the viewer: "You want to be the artist? Try to build something with this." We definitely wanted to do something that was fun, and that anyone could partake in. It's a "gamification" scenario that has an inherent inclusivity to it. Most people will find the shapes attractive, the paintings uncanny. The structure is quite imposing. There are elements of Minimalism mixed with kinetics mixed with abstraction. The impetus is how to make an attractive, design-oriented installation that appeals to a large audience, then to re-codify and encode age-old questions and contradictions; yet, you don't need to know any of those things to enjoy the installation.

**RC: Is play part of what you're thinking about?**

**JM:** Well, if you interpret play as having an element of humor as well, that runs through a lot of our work, along with paradox, seriousness, and irony, too.

**DB:** Yes. There's playfulness in the work. We're not merely interventionists, and we have been misconstrued as tricksters. But sometimes we don't know what the end result is going to be, so while total control of fabrication is important, once the work is installed, it has a tendency to resonate differently in different spaces.

**RC: Can you talk about how the sculpture and paintings work together in the exhibition?**

**JM:** You might envision the paintings from the shapes in the claw crane game. You might make sculptures from the painted compositions.

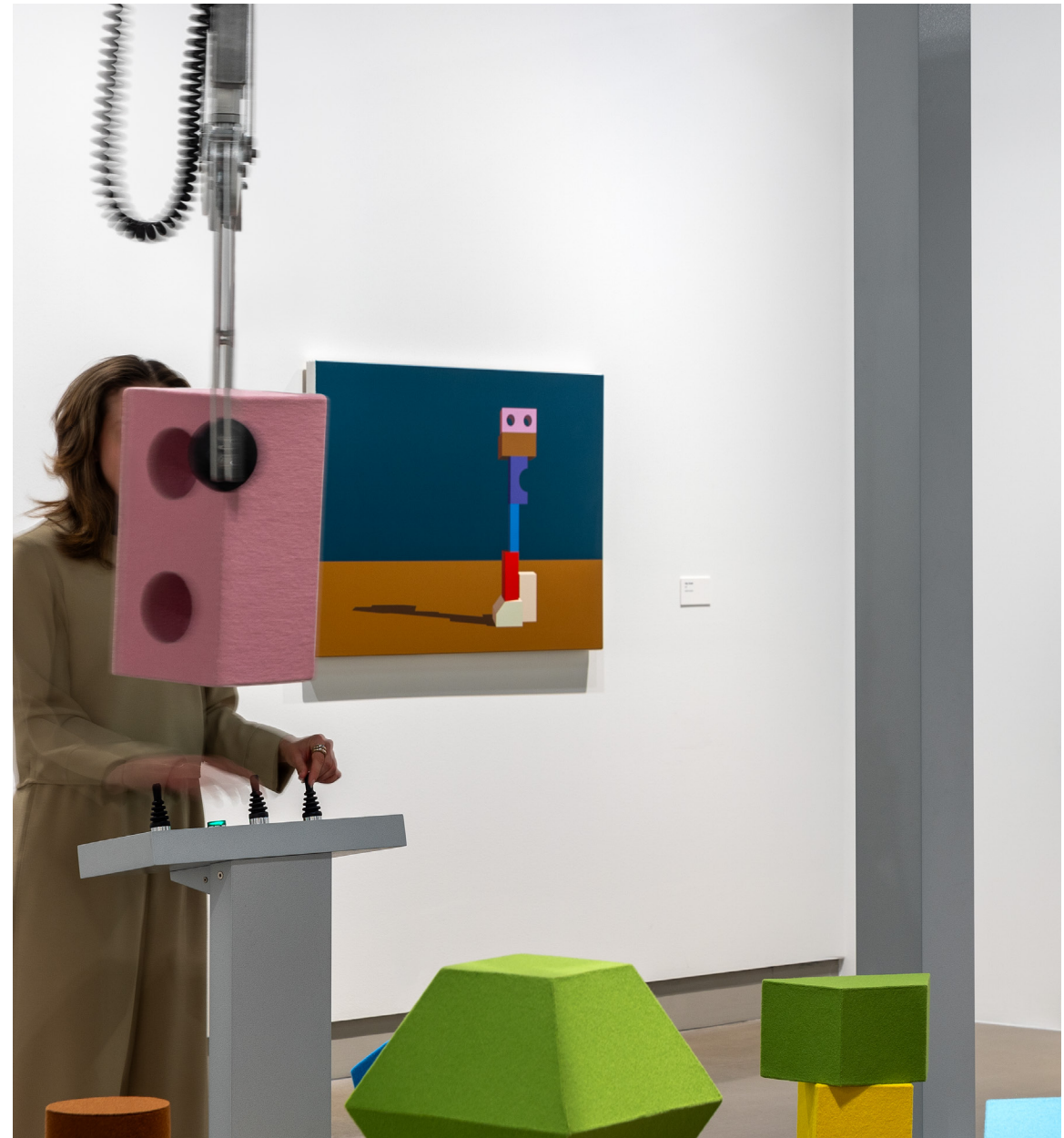
**DB:** The paintings are like the dance steps that come with a dance album, or an architectural rendering before the building is built. They're akin to: let's make a rendering that is so idealized, so cinematic in light and shadow, that has such saturation from its surroundings, that it is a little bit tragic and highly idealized, in precarious balance. Can they compete with the sculpture? And vice versa.

**RC: In Balancing Act, viewers are set up in a scenario where they are solving problems with tools, acting out the studio process.**

**DB:** Definitely, we're playing with the idea of the mythology of the artist.

**JM:** We've gone one step further, because before it was viewer as performer, and now it's viewer as creator, or co-creator.

**DB:** It's a different way of saying, "Be careful what you wish for." It shows a desire to put viewers into some kind of commitment in terms of how they absorb the work, so they're not just a set of eyes. Often, the appreciation of form is not enough for us. A gesture can be built up, and here it can tumble down.



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