JENNIFER MARMAN, DANIEL BORINS + JAMES KHAMSI

A team of three—two artists and an architect—is making waves in Toronto’s public art realm and the built environment. By Terence Dick

Location
Toronto, Canada

Established
2000

Selected awards
2012 Canada Council Project Grant
2003 Darwin-Wattie Arts and Canadian Centre for Contemporary Art, Forward Thinking Award

Selected projects
Ongoing
Dodecadandy, Downsview station, Toronto

2015
The Water Guardians, Canary District, Toronto
STC Bridge, Southcore Financial Centre, Toronto
Speech Bubble, Cultural Corridor, Toronto

2013
The Collaborationists, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Canada

2006
In Situ You, Toronto Sculpture Garden, Toronto

marmco.com

BEST PRACTICES

THE WATER GUARDIANS, 2015
Standing 7.2 metres tall, these steel-cut blue figures with illuminated eyes form a playful archway along a main boulevard in the Canary District. Rubberized blue and green mounds in the shape of running water provide a child-friendly soft surface.

SFC BRIDGE, 2015
Inside and out, the elevated pedestrian pathway is defined by a duotone pattern of triangles and diagonals that mimics its trapezoid construction. Made of aluminum and glass, the sloping route takes a sharp turn at the halfway point, connecting the Metro Toronto Convention Centre to the Delta Hotel.

SPEECH BUBBLE, 2015
The latest of three projects to go up in Toronto, this one stands in a parkette on John Street. To avoid the problem of flat screen technology dating the piece too quickly, the monitor is surrounded in a white frame like a cartoon bubble. The abstract animated video, also by the artists, traces a timeline of art history.
As an important aspect of public work, Borins tactfully, he says, “We all agreed on site specificity. Their interest in optical effects, and, more importantly, the kind typically seen alongside a highway, and mounted last summer within a multimedia pavilion on John Street, designed by local landscape architect Janet Rosenberg & Studio. The developer wanted to incorporate an LED screen into a wall of the former Metro Convention Centre and the Delta Hotel. Borins and Marman were invited to vinyl-wrap a commuter train car with vivid abstract graphics. A year later, a municipal directive mandated that developers commission artwork to enliven construction sites. The regulation led them to create a colourful, 10-metre-long abstract work on a stretch of hoarding on Bloor Street, not far from the Royal Ontario Museum. They based the graphics on a timeline that traced the history of the area, from prehistoric times to the present.

**TIPPING POINT**

In 2011, a serendipitous meeting at a gallery opening brought New York architect James Khami into their practice, and gave them a chance to work more closely with architects and builders during the development stages. Khami shares their interest in optical effects, and, more importantly, he says, “We all agreed on site specificity as an important aspect of public work.” Borins concurs: “We’re more about content building than intervention.”

The partnership has culminated in three new works, including the SFC Bridge, which presented numerous structural challenges, given its sloping path and mid-air turn—“geometries that we’ve exploited by exaggerating them with black and white zigzags that mimic the inner structure.” “We treated it like a painting scheme, to echo the framework and unsettle the interior,” explains Borins. Meanwhile, Khami has been tracking the response: “in Instagram, where skateboarders and fashionistas are finding it to be an ideal photo backdrop. Water Guardians, their second project, is a trio of ominous yet welcoming sentinels installed in the Canary District. Toronto’s massive multi-use redevelopment project along the waterfront. Made of cut metal and standing 7.2 metres tall, the blue-giant keep watch with glowing LED eyes. “We were asked to create an outdoor String room,” says Marman. “It had to be something playful that appealed to children and families but wasn’t a straight-up park.”

A similar response to the local community is at work with Speech Bubble, an installation mounted last summer within a multimedia pavilion on John Street, designed by local landscape architect Janet Rosenberg & Studio. The developer wanted to incorporate an LED screen, but was unwilling to cut costs. A year later, a municipal directive mandated that developers commission artwork to enliven construction sites. The regulation led them to create a colourful, 10-metre-long abstract work on a stretch of hoarding on Bloor Street, not far from the Royal Ontario Museum. They based the graphics on a timeline that traced the history of the area, from prehistoric times to the present.

**WE BUILT EXCITEMENT, 2012**

Since art school, Borins and Marman have developed art pieces that are ambitious in scale and rooted in art history, thought with added practical twists. For their sculptural exhibition We Built Excitement, the title refers to a natural pantula jingle from the 1960s.

**WHAT’S NEXT**

Speech Bubble also serves as a bookend to what began almost a decade ago with Sit You. Despite the intervening years, both projects engage the public through mechanisms of mass media—striped of commercial context and infused with art and pure colour. Oddly, the team’s first public commission, in 2005, is just now reaching the construction stage. Part of the new Don Mills subway station, their latest is a steel sculpture that turns Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome into a giant dollhouse with doors disappearing into the wind. “We want to get more involved with urban master planning,” says Borins. “Toronto is building entirely new neighbourhoods of 10,000 to 30,000 people at a time. We’re hoping that a cultural lens can prevail, where we can have a voice in what we think works, what we think is vital.”

**IN SIT YOU, 2006**

Many of their ongoing commissions work to push back to the first public art conversation, which saw overstated readouts of billboards back in a small city park. Fosters were invited to take a seat on a matching bench and become part of the art as it flipped every few seconds. The developer wanted to incorporate an LED screen into a wall of the former Metro Convention Centre and the Delta Hotel. Borins and Marman were invited to vinyl-wrap a commuter train car with vivid abstract graphics. A year later, a municipal directive mandated that developers commission artwork to enliven construction sites. The regulation led them to create a colourful, 10-metre-long abstract work on a stretch of hoarding on Bloor Street, not far from the Royal Ontario Museum. They based the graphics on a timeline that traced the history of the area, from prehistoric times to the present.

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