



The art of Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins engages with multiple media from photography to sculpture, painting, electronic and public-art projects. Their work is exciting to the mind and eye and uses unusual and common devices – like mechanized window blinds and custom software – that create complex combination of color, geometry and material that celebrate minimalism and abstraction. They explore ideas of surveillance and viewership, mass culture and media politics, and they play with recognizable art history themes. Marman holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of Western Ontario, and Borins holds a BA in Art History from McGill University, both artists have also obtained advanced degrees from the Ontario College of Art and Design, where they first began collaborating producing works in multiple dimensions. Architect Gabriela Amerio chatted with the duo this past month and recorded this conversation.

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What was the spark, the thing that made you start working in public art? We started working in public art because of an opportunity that arose from the Toronto Sculpture Garden. The organization seems to be on hiatus now, but for over twenty years it commissioned semi-permanent installations that would last six months in duration. We did a project called *In Sit You* – a rotating billboard with a matching multi-colour park bench. From there opportunities arose in public art competitions through the one percent for public art program that the City of Toronto administers. The advent of one percent programs comes from an understanding of the role that creative professionals play in an urban context, as well as the need to identify new areas a city and to create a sense of place.



The idea of bringing new artists from other parts of the world to exchange and collaborate with, is this a strategy for your practice to go global? Bringing artists from other parts of the world has existed for several hundred years; obviously with the advent of air travel, this movement has become accelerated and global in reach. We do

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not think of this as a globalist agenda in a negative sense, but really more of a patterned sense of circumstances relating to exchange of ideas and commerce. Cities, as city states, need to illustrate that they are open to ideas, and in doing so, they illustrate that they are open to business. Traditional alpha cities have reflected this tendency for quite some time – perhaps for as long as international expositions have been in effect. Cities in developing nations want to show that they can participate in international exchanges of ideas and business too.

As practitioners, our perspective is different from this cursory analysis. We tend to position ourselves within an understanding of creativity in urban settings, and the ways in which well thought out urban planning can come to fruition. We think that quality of life is paramount in good cities. Good design and good art reflects a commitment to public space that fosters a sense of belonging and a sense of place. We would argue that public spaces, bicycle networks, and connective paths for mobility function along side public art. So really, our position is that public art emanates from the good ideas surrounding new urbanism.

Have you had commissions for public art pieces outside of Canada? Most of our opportunities for public art have arisen in Canada. However, we are interested in doing projects internationally. Open calls for artists internationally are not that common. A way in which we can promote our practice is to build on our portfolio and for awareness of our work to grow.



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When you design a special commission project, do you team up with architects, landscape designers, others? The nature of a project informs how we decide to respond. If a project has a definite site that is prescribed, and the footprint is designated clearly, we might decide to compete as a duo. If the site is large, and it already involves a landscape architect, then essentially a greater collaboration will form. In some cases, a site involves complex engineering, or has even called for us to participate in an architectural sense; for example, Simon Fraser College Bridge that we completed in 2015. For that project we chose to work with architect James Khamisi, and he has collaborated on other projects with us like *The Water Guardians*. Another form of work that we are interested in is integrated art and landscape architecture. In that case James might work with us, or recently we have worked with the firm DTAH in Toronto.



Would you say that your knowledge in philosophy and history complements your art design? It cannot hurt to have an understanding of philosophy and history, but in a contemporary sense, well informed art might not function solely on that basis in a public setting. We try to reach a broad audience first, and then if there are viewers who are more informed about art history, we think we speak to them as well. Our project *Speech Bubble* is simultaneously about abstraction and speech. While the project looks contemporary and electronically inspired in form, it also literally refers to the history of

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geometric abstraction and the manifesto writing artists of the avant-garde. The videos that play on *Speech Bubble* are paintings from the 1920's and 1930's are re-imagined by us as digital animations.



When you define colors and materials, do you make it to stand out or become part of the landscape? We work site responsively and site specifically, and we usually are working in a stakeholder situation with many different municipal agencies; so it depends on the context we are facing. Implied here is that we do not see colour as deeply personal. On the other hand, we want to get it right! In several projects recently, we could say that we have conducted extensive colour studies. Another matter we consider is material that stands up well to the elements of nature; for example stainless steel is excellent and it can be appreciated for its inherent aesthetic qualities. Probably what we are saying is that we do not do solely further our studio and museum practice with the goal of perpetuating an authorial style in public. The decisions we make are responsive to context – if a site calls for colour, then of course, we will bring out the paint brushes.

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Like the *Speech Bubble*, has the social network become important to the movement and feeling of your art? Social networks have become an important part of public art and all art. We are always happy to see a project become ‘instagramable’, or for people to take ‘selfies’ with a project. All artists should consider how a work will be received by the public and possibly they should see social media as one of many barometers of a work of art’s success. We are increasingly becoming involved in the outreach surrounding a public work of art – whether that is through public engagement in advance, or, through education opportunities once a work is installed.

Do you believe that the culture of the place, can that be successful in other parts of the world? Ideas for Toronto work somewhere else? Public art brings art to the public so that it belongs to everyone. Public art also solves the dilemma of social engagement that some museums suffer from. By introducing art to the public we all benefit from proximity to the visual arts and hopefully this encourages good architecture

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to perpetuate. Without a standard for art and architecture a place might be relegated to a utilitarian lifelessness. We certainly hope that some of our examples will be influential outside of the cities that they are situated in. In the past year we have received international editorial attention, and here we are speaking to you from Toronto to Milano.

How do you approach technology and discovering ways to incorporate it into your work? We would like to point out that we have a studio practice and that we exhibit in galleries and museums. We have always been fascinated by materials and the methods used to deploy them. We have also taken risks with materials and the ways in which they can be used. It is likely that we would not repeat material use too often, or get too comfortable with a certain approach. The situation is much more a case of what is next? What else can we try? Our process is both physical and digital. Recently we have been working with 3D colour printing of sculptures, and currently we are interested in several different forms of CNC machining. Recently we have scanned some of our sculptures. A combination of 3D drafting programs and 2D digital programs helps us to design, but does not necessarily make things easier. In the future, we hope to use Virtual Reality and stylus based 3D drawing tools to assist our designs. We also keep abreast of design and architecture. Of course, we travel to see art exhibitions, and we also visit design stores and clothing stores.

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Born in Italy but has lived in Venezuela almost all her life, Gabriela Amerio is an architect with a fourteen years experience in architecture development. She has designed, developed, and coordinated commercial, residential and office building projects globally. Her architecture degree is from Jose Maria Vargas University. Today she is studying an MA at the prestigious Politecnico in Leadership in Glocal Design, studying the connections of architecture and design across global cultures.