

OBSERVER

ARTS

Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being: Art in Three Dimensions

By playing with history and our senses, one interactive exhibition might just help us gain greater perspective, act naturally and swim safely in the seismic sea of A.I. and virtual reality.

By Stephen Wozniak —01/11/24 3:31pm



A viewer experiences one of Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins' works. Courtesy Contemporary Calgary

As you walk through bare Brutalist concrete corridors towards the entry to the new Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins multimedia art exhibition “Three Dimensions,” you might wonder what you’re doing there. The place is immense and austere—like an ultramodern wartime bunker built to protect you from flying artillery shrapnel. Instead, color explodes at the start: brightly hued paintings of building-block figures flank the first white-walled room. In its center, a giant open Minimalist cube sits in stolid silence but is anchored in arcade fantasy with a hefty crane that hangs from above. On the floor, museumgoers become much more than passive viewers of easy artwork; they are creators of the current moment, making discrete decisions by grabbing a joystick that enables them to guide the centralizing overhead jaws of life and construct innumerable

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combinations of Lego-like felt-wrapped modules into abstract forms and identifiable figures below.

The results *could be* like those of the flat picture planes on the walls but are instead 3D objects that museumgoers author with their feet on the ground. To me, the title of the room containing this interactive work, *Balancing Act*, alludes to the relationship between our lives as passive observers and the ones we consciously act out and navigate daily. The title could also serve as a metaphor for additional emotional and physical balancing acts we perform in our frenetic lives between rest and work, people and machines, past and present, advancement and exploitation, ideas and experience, seeing and being. Along with the other principal segments that make up this show, the heightened hall of mirrors *THX2020* and the greatest-hits, virtual-reality, sleight-of-hand showstopper *ABCD*, the team of Marman and Borins creates a vivid world of wonders that tests our very perception in a manner that might just put smiles on our faces, butterflies in our stomachs and a purpose in our steps.

It seemed rather appropriate when I discovered that the museum space where art about technological revolution, virtual communications, mind control, artificial intelligence and the surveillance state in *Three Dimensions* used to be the Centennial Planetarium in downtown Calgary. There's a certain kids-science-museum-meets-carnival-funhouse vibe to the exhibition. That's part of the point. Bright lights, sassy colors and a bit of hands-on gaming invite audiences inside. Once there, the show routinely inspires visitors to raise a hand, ask some questions and learn just enough to open their field of vision and widen their perspectives. Greatly aware that we bask in the glory of and balk at the throes of technology, the artists have created an expansive show that—in its unique way—helps enact a reconciliation of sorts between us mere soft-underbelly humans and the many machines we have mothered since the first Industrial Revolution. But let's take it in small bits and bytes, one installation at a time.

“We're always interested in environments, narratives and history. We present the work in a playful way. We're playing with audience expectations. But it's history we're playing with, ultimately.” - Jennifer Marman

After leaving *Balancing Act*, users—we wouldn't dare call ourselves “viewers” today—exit into a long rectilinear room that makes up the trippy bio-fed *THX2020* installation. Off to the side, a supporting-act short video primer plays in a small dark theater. There, I sit on a bench and view animation of colliding colored modernist triangles, orbs and waves, as calm audio aphorisms about pharmacological experimentation effects fill my ears. Feeling a bit woozy, I leave, re-enter the big room and promptly sit down again—this time in a sexy '70s yellow swivel chair at a white circular Scandinavian table. I strap on a hilarious pink update on the stepped conical headgear worn by the '80s new wave band Devo. But this is a serious matter. Or is it?

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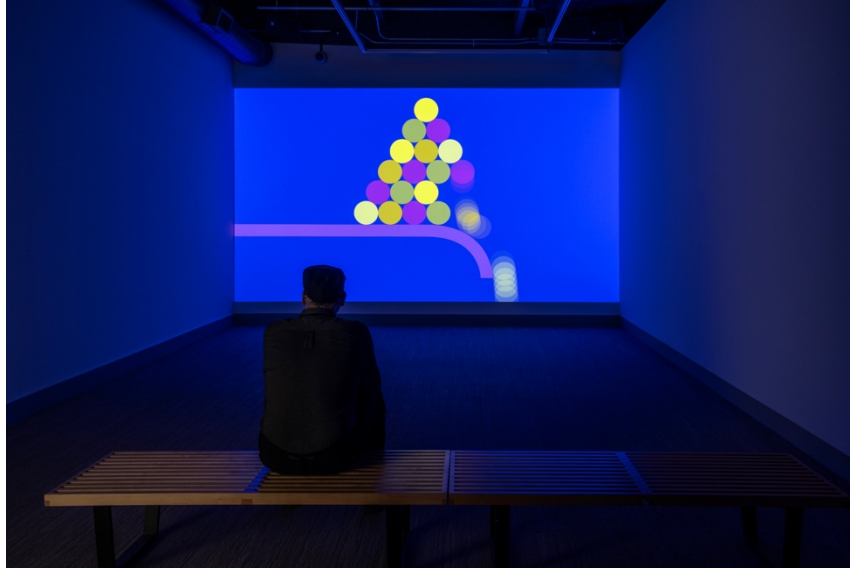


'Balancing Act.' Courtesy Contemporary Calgary

After I survey the room and view small canvases similar to the video images, my gaze lands on the large Apple monitor in front of me showing wildly abstracted versions of those paintings, as if EEG impulses from my pixel-drugged mind conjured and commingled them. Did I create these new images? I see more of them on TVs to my left and right. I'm surrounded by the effects of my mind's control. Can I author art without lifting a finger or jerking a joystick? I honestly don't know how it's done—but it's pretty cool! Or is it? This almost telepathic action seems symptomatic of our increasing armchair lifestyles that enable imprudent, repeated, online Amazon purchases—or anything else that's not getting us up off our asses to engage with the world directly. But the work is not a symptom—it's helping me learn. Hell, I'm learning and it was easy! To defy my leisure, I get up and look at the wall label. The title is taken, in part, from the 1971 George Lucas dystopian futurist sci-fi movie *THX 1138*, which portrays a world where state-issued, mirror-faced robot cops manage medicated human factory laborers. The meds suppress sexual appetite and innate intimate desires, love and other messy modes of being human in society. Today, the power of Big Pharma is even bigger than the state, growing greater as society advances. We indulge in problems created and sold to us by mega-corporations and, in turn, *other* corporations offer pills with claims to heal our sickened bodies, minds and spirits.

Luckily, in this installation, Marman and Borins remind us once again that we have a choice to take agency over our lives even when their heaviness bears down hard. Mindfulness of the possibilities in our creative action helps us connect with one another and gain momentum in life. Noted psychologist Dr. Ellen J. Langer would suggest that, “we let rules and routines guide our behavior but *question* them as we find ourselves in new and different *contexts*.” I posit that this openness to the new keeps us alive and I suspect Marman and Borins do, too.

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Part of 'THX2020.' Courtesy Contemporary Calgary

The last section of the show, *ABCD*, feels like a head-spinner. Not exactly a finalé—since Marman and Borins’ work prioritizes ongoing user engagement and open learning over absolute closure and resolution—the installation acts as a show-within-a-show that helps users identify the context of their entire experience up to that moment. The work also suggests alternative events that overlap with our hands-on, mind-grappling tour of the work. As I walk in, I encounter a multi-video screen piece entitled *ABCD Remember Then Forget*, featuring four wiggled-out women and men in brightly-colored kimonos. They speak and sing in philosophic phrases that allude to Baudrillardian “simulations” and offer short poetic platitudes like “To love is humble. To teach is futile. Loyalty is idiotic.” As peaceable as these characters are, they sound like bureaucrats, obscuring communication with one-way, low-calorie commandments and, later, with a chorus of cacophonous quadruplespeak, which teeters on the mostly-compelling and maybe-annoying axis.

I take a break, then I take in the wide view of a spindly barren *Waiting for Godot*-like tree-of-uncertainty set-piece, featuring outmoded data media drives, as well as large kimono wall works, just-seen “pharma” paintings and other could-be art objects. A docent suggests I approach a curved yellow rail and wear yet another headset—this time a set of VR goggles. I put them on and—poof!—it looks as if everything in the room has disappeared except for a lo-fi mutated ‘80s Mac computer. It floats around the room in the foreground; the plain smiling face on its monitor talks in a measured synth-made English accent. Casually, the voice emits innocuous but ostensibly helpful adages: “dress appropriately,” “form allegiances,” “look, listen, assess,” but also unhelpful advice like “eat pizza,” “drink coffee” and so on. That *Godot* piece, now an opposite anchoring tree-of-life symbol, persists in the VR view of the empty room.

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An installation view of "Three Dimensions." Courtesy Contemporary Calgary

I scratch my head. Who was that Speak and Spell robot and what did it want? Did it clear the room somehow—in a different time and dimension? This oh-so brief VR video alternative-dimension suggestion made my heart hammer like a good suspense movie moment. But it also pointed to just how *suggestible* we are. We read a blog anecdote and sublimate it as truth, or we covet video TikTok dance moves that supplant reality around us for an escapist moment. We hopefully recognize over time—just like the summative quality of *ABCD*—that our perspective and awareness will be transformed by the input both flooding into us through the Internet and A.I. and trickling in through our friends who rely on the same sources for their core ideas, alliances and identity even.

I take off the goggles and regain my bearings. Whoa! Everything's back—because it never left the building. I left the building. I left my body while my sight and imagination took the upper hand. But I look over at the end of the room and see a few eerie things: flame-charred text on the far wall that reads "Abs, Argo, Away," "Bang, Bingo, Bongo," "Congo, Couples, Czech," and so forth. Next to this grouping is a small Polaroid photo of the Mac robot laser-printing that same text into the wall. I take a deep breath. Fuck, it's learning. Then I see the dead robot on the floor. Whew! Relief. What does this imply? A lot, of course. Predictive A.I.—in top form—is also a kind of curator. While now there's no authorship in predictive A.I.—doing its finest to complete a sentence resembling learned data—one day, that'll change. There's always a lot lost in translation between humans. What about between humans and A.I.? What will A.I. learning bring us and what will it take from us? How will it affect our perception, how we act or—the opposite—how we recede from life out in the world? And why is the representation of advanced A.I. of *ABCD* set in an aesthetic of the past? Of course, more questions emerge, so I reel it back in, raise a hand and ask a few key art world professionals about the essential nature of the work crafted by these artists-scientists.

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To test my senses, lab-developed opinion and philosophical interpretation of this rich and quizzical show, I reach out to get answers from some who have closely worked with Marman and Borins over the years, including Tim Rodgers, Director of the Museum of Art and Design in New York City; Jennifer Matotek, Director of Art Windsor-Essex; Ray Cronin, arts author, curator, NSCAD professor and former Director of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia; former Calgary Contemporary Chief Curator Ryan Doherty; seasoned Toronto visual arts writer Earl Miller; and Toronto art advisor Olivier Fuller.

“What do you believe Marman and Borins’ art is fundamentally about?” I ask. *Three Dimensions* curator Ryan Doherty pauses a moment, then says, “It’s about exploring the truth—multiple truths. Their work scrambles what you’re seeing. They really have a direct way of making you question your perception. There’s something phenomenological about it: you run it through your body, your brain—and *all* of your senses.”

“For me, they take the language and forms of Minimalist sculpture and painting—then imbue their work with humor to help us examine unexpected critical issues, which I find rather funny and engaging,” explains Tim Rodgers.

Olivier Fuller has known the duo and their work for decades. “They’ve *always* pushed boundaries. They are constantly, consciously creating work that advances cultural discourse in organic, evolutionary *yet* unorthodox ways. Their work looks at accepted norms vs. the avant-garde. Importantly, they hover in between—*beyond* the binary—never declaring the best route but exploring it all. I also love how deceptively simple their works are. Some of it seems so cute but also piles on layers of meaning about surveillance, objectification and power.”

Jennifer Matotek sees freedom and flexibility of thought for users of their work that helps them “...take things that are serious, unseriously. And that which may seem silly can actually be quite serious. There are continuous inversions in their work—just when you think you know what it is, it flips and surprises you.”

“They take the most relevant frameworks developed in the 20th Century, and connect those to making and talking about art, bringing them to contemporary conversations,” Matotek adds.

Earl Miller links the duo’s rewriting of early modernist historical frameworks in their art to how we look at A.I.: “There’s a modernist element, a relational aesthetic component and dialogue about how we understand artificial intelligence. When I think about *Balancing Act*—with elements like rearranging blocks—it’s an entirely new dialogue yet made from older forms.”

He goes on: “It’s also interesting to see where user authorship comes out of it, which you don’t see in A.I. With the old-school crane piece, there’s this analogous interaction with

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users like creators of A.I., rather than the artists. So, the user's directly related to it, like Chatbot, where you're directing a text command, as opposed to the claw, where you're *directly* manipulating objects. While you see the *end* product in A.I., you see the *whole* process in the Marman and Borins piece."

While the interactive component of the artists' work has been noted, rarely has the performative aspect of it. Users—in the case of *Three Dimensions*—perform differently in each of the rooms that make up the show of paintings, gaming, video viewing, biofeedback activation, virtual reality and a consciousness-shifted return into the tangible world. As users must change their type of performance in each segment, that succession is likely to raise existential awareness of their emotional response, decision-making and subsequent actions. Ray Cronin puts it this way: "A lot of artists are essentially performers projecting an idea about themselves and their work at all times. It's a one-way street. But Marman and Borins are much more like *producers*. They're creating a scenario in which any kind of performance can happen, right? Now, that's an open road."

I also suggest that by virtue of being collaborators, Marman and Borins inherently make art for group dynamics that lead to some sort of agreement. Daniel Borins tells me a story. A half-dozen 20-something users surrounded the *Balancing Act* crane game at a show in New York City in the Cristin Tierney Gallery to help the operator strategically find key object pick-up points. They rooted vocally for the player and "naturally created a *networked* group" with a hive-mind goal that kept them fluid and engaged—enough to continue playing and build blocks high. Did they bond, empathize and recognize common interests? Most likely. They also got caught up in the moment, out of their heads and into the world, gauging life with right-here metrics, instead of algorithmic suggestions. And that is fine art indeed.