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sculpture
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Engagement and Agency: A Conversation with Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins

By Ray Cronin



Installation view of “Balancing Act,” Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo: Adam Reich

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.”

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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.



Installation view of “Balancing Act,” Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo: Adam Reich

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

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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.



Installation view of "Balancing Act," Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo: Adam Reich

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

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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.



Installation view of “Balancing Act,” Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo: Adam Reich

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,

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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.



Hey Dude, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 42 in. Photo: Courtesy Cristin Tierney Gallery

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.