

ArtSeen

## Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins: *Balancing Act*

By Clare Gemima

Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins's *Balancing Act* takes control of Cristin Tierney Gallery with a ginormous, interactive claw crane and a new series of paintings depicting what it could or couldn't possibly construct. Incorporating new and more familiar devices from their last twenty-three years of collaboration, the Canada-based duo employs abstract and representational techniques to critique the unstable relationships found between fine arts and entertainment, humans and machines.

Standing impressively at almost ten feet, *Balancing Act* (2023) features more than sixty uncanny shapes that participants can manoeuvre, demolish, or stack. With endless abstract formations to pick and choose from, the artists provide no need at all for their audience to think outside the box. The exhibition's crux sculpture harkens back to its early American lineage, with the first of these claw machines built as early as the 1890s. They were once simple entertainment boxes for children and known to many as popular games of luck used to simply pass the time, and maybe get a bit of candy. By 1932, cranes were hardwired with electric motors, which allowed the claw to move all over the prize pit as opposed to its once fixed up, down, and grab function. Over decades, these machines evolved into money-making spectacles and quickly dominated arcade game halls all over the planet. Unlike the claws one could play today at places like Chinatown Fair, Chinatown's neon gem of a gaming hall, Marman and Borins's 2023 sculpture does not offer rewards as uninspiring as plastic trolls or as expensive as iPhones. In fact, it doesn't offer any prize at all.



Installation view: *Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins: Balancing Act*, Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artists and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

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In the gallery, vibrant acrylic paintings (all 2022) fall into place like Tetris blocks in their strategic installation around the larger-than-life sculpture. Bubblegum pink backdrops a licorice-like, white and black stack in *Staring*, where inconsistently sized spheres, squares, and semi-circular shapes securely sit atop a royal blue base, centerstage and in the eyeline of

the viewer. *Same Thing* showcases two equally focused and identical stacks, one facing us, and the other rendered from its side. Viewers can decipher the mimeries or slippages across the two stacks, which have been helpfully coded shape-by-shape in kindergarten-friendly shades. Alongside the monochromatically spearmint *Green Tower*, both works present as easy-to-follow pictorial diagrams for the show's most active participants, a mix between a traditional fine arts color wheel, and an arcade game cheat sheet—if ever such a tool were to exist.

In a less didactic painting, *Dude Duo*, two stacks seem to face and flex their geometrically unique forms towards one another. Towering at the exact same height regardless, the two stacks' (or two dudes') individual pieces' precise tonal shifting maintains a high level of dimensionality even in their most flattened depiction. A vocabulary of shapes recurs across all ten paintings at first glance, but upon closer attention, the shapes seem more accurately to reappear with subtle nuance, both in color and structure. *Hey Dude* portrays only one stack of



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shapes, this time equipped with its own sizable shadow. The solo pile becomes personified in light of its abstract, but also slightly figurative, outline, which consequently highlights each block's unique characteristics. Marman and Borins's painted assemblages remain unrepeated across the remaining paintings, further suggesting their physical reconstruction may be just as unrepeatable too.

*Balancing Act* challenges viewers' levels of participation, visual perception, and manual precision—a considerable number of actions needing to take place in a gallery setting, let alone anywhere outside of an arcade hall. While the artists' collection of mechanically sharp paintings eviscerates any indication of their painterly hands, their huge interactive game contrastingly engages its participants to become their own blatant sculptor. The artists' research behind *Balancing Act* tightropes between gaming and fine arts cultures, and considers the attention span, focus, and reward systems pertaining to each of these groups. Without any commercial incentive, a queue of delirious and loud gallery visitors wrapped around the huge claw crane to simply play with it on opening night—a surprising feat to achieve in New York's disastrously transactional climate. As a formation of people patiently waited for their turn to construct, an opportunity to ponder the show's paintings naturally lasted longer than the dismal thirty seconds audiences generally spend looking at art on average, perhaps accounting for Marman and Borins's biggest prize, and hardest balance, of all.