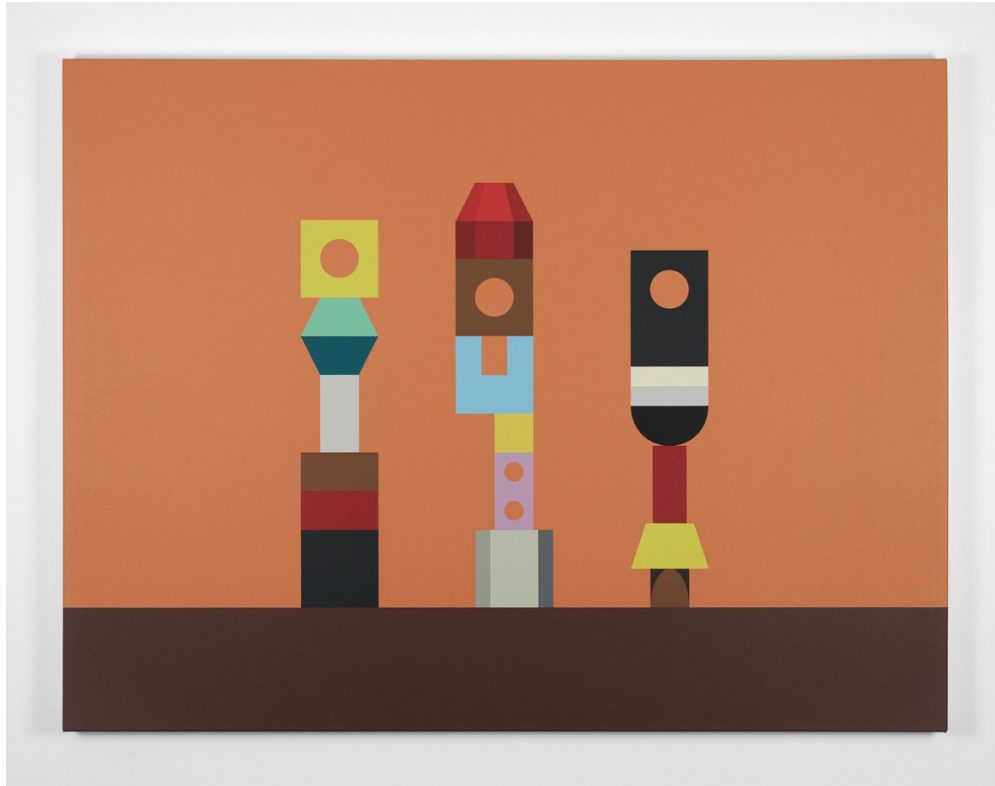


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Balancing Act: The User-Friendly Industriart of Marman and Borins at Cristin Tierney Gallery in NYC



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By Stephen Wozniak

“What is a game?” Marx said. “It’s tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. It’s the possibility of infinite rebirth, infinite redemption. The idea that if you keep playing, you could win. No loss is permanent, because nothing is permanent, ever.”

— Gabrielle Zevin, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*

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“The Industrial Revolution has two phases: one material, the other social; one concerning the making of things, the other concerning the making of men.”

— Charles A. Beard, political scientist and historian

“The job of material culture is to shed light on the tasks of production in our country, and also to discover the place of the artist-constructor in production, in relation to improving the quality both of the manufactured product and of the organization of the new way of life in general.

— Vladimir Tatlin, Constructivist artist

A few hundred years ago, the original Industrial Revolution set off a wave of creativity, reproduction technology and the sheer excess of expendable unitary matter in the western world. Resounding benefits, deficits and the unforeseen soon followed. On the positive side, everything from revitalizing medical breakthroughs and long-term food preservation to rapid urban construction enriched the desperate and downtrodden quality of lives that many led. How did artists respond in their work? Several initially paid homage to the machine, lionized its power and nuzzled its carbon steel bosom. Why not? They reeled from extraordinary circumstances, like abject poverty, ruthless wars and the doldrums of disaster, death and disease. Machines seemed to offer a way out, but it was a complicated relationship. From part-time Purist cityscape painter Georgia O’Keefe, and steeply ironic readymade Dadaist progenitor Marcel Duchamp, to inflatable industrial Pop object sculptor Claes Oldenburg, everyone seemed to get in on the action. Their artwork appealed to our sometimes-misguided sense of the profane, sleek machinations and products of the Industrial Revolution, and sometimes offered analogical narratives that only

CRISTIN TIERNEY

sexy, funny, grinding metal gadgets seem to generate within our softened, squishy, very human lives.

Over the years, artists leapt beyond grease and gears, as subsequent, distinct technological revolutions unfolded. After World War Two, consumer purchasing power increased – just in time for silicon computer chips, widespread Basic language home computing, complex global Internet communication, the ambush of ubiquitous AI algorithms and annoying, doom-scroll-session social media advertisements. So, what did the clever and bold Canadian art team of Marman and Borins do about it in 2023? They gave the interactive, mechanized power to the people in the form of a centerpiece retro kinetic crane game sculpture and accompanying brightly hued geometric figure paintings in the new exhibition *Balancing Act* at Cristin Tierney Gallery in NYC. And you know what? It's totally timely, it's really relevant – and it's *very* good.

Visible from the street in the ground floor gallery space – like prismatic fish in a floor-to-ceiling aquarium – Marman and Borins' extra-large classic arcade game is arresting, friendly, and dare I say, beautiful, even. It's not like the crass flashy casino crane games that vaguely tempt us with plush stuffed animals or Swiss watch prizes, but instead offers gallery goers the opportunity to build “endlessly reconfigurable” compositions from basic forms. Audience intention and participation are key components to this effort. It effectively gives them fundamental control to create and build rather than accept consumer narratives spun by corporate leaders who simply want to sell stuff. To me, that's huge. And it's done in such a playful, inviting, spoonful-of-sugar manner that those lessons go down and are learned easily in *experience*.

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Throughout the gallery are several modest-sized paintings of what look like sculptural combinations that result from game installation user activity. A number of these flatworks remind me a little of rectilinear abstract David Smith and Joel Shapiro sculptures mixed with children's plastic Lego bricks. Figurative totems are featured therein as solos, duos and trios. Some cast shadows and others look like friends posing for smartphone selfie photos. There's a life within these blocky colorful figures. They are at once dressed up objects, yet also emerging personalities. While the artists indicate that the paintings "reference both geometric abstract art and the Surrealism movement," I also see the work of Russian Constructivist architect and artist Vladimir Tatlin who thought art should be a "union of purely artistic forms for a utilitarian purpose." In the case of *Balancing Act*, it's likely a loose reverse: the use of utilitarian products for artistic forms and purposes.

Games and gaming provide a protected place for millions around the globe today. Participants can enjoy their competitive electronic sphere in a way that they cannot manage their messy complex lives. They get to press the reset button so that "no loss is permanent." And while the act of play is critical to our connection and development as humans, the obsession with its fantasy and escape hatch value has torn us asunder. The work in *Balancing Act*, on the other hand, accomplishes a type of enjoyable here-and-now engagement – and even risk – with what were once perceived as merely "viewers" in art institutions but, to me, are now both audiences *and* authors in their own right, as they've always been but couldn't see. Within the artifacts of arts and letters, we always stand at a conceptual crossroads, able to mull through rich new ideas – then debate our interests and conflicts with

CRISTIN TIERNEY

impunity before moving on without instituting change. But today, we have already passed the practical point of no return, as we experience the fundamentally distinct, highest-tech Fourth Industrial Revolution. Managed by the artificially intelligent, driven by altruist advancement, some goodwill *and* some avarice – it's critical that we keep the dialogue open about our involvement in its expansion and utilization. Exhibitions like that of *Balancing Act* squarely address the issues at hand and, importantly, give us an almost existential arena to activate and identify our roles as onlookers, consumers, contributors. We see the production, we see the products, we see the people and, hopefully, the imagined life-or-death-styles that result. It is our job to strike the balance and take it out into the world beyond. **WM**