

Tortured Artists By Monika Burman

You can never predict what fact, event, image, or phrase, however big, small, important or insignificant inspires artists. Part of the great beauty of art is the unexpected. And this idea of the unexpected is never more literal than in the work of art super duo Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins.

The two art partners were commissioned by the Art Gallery of York University to create an installation in its galleries. The show, called "Project for a New American Century" is comprised of a large construction in the main gallery, and companion paintings, and sculptures in the adjacent gallery.

The jumping off point for this installation? Well, in part, it is a little-known fact out of history. During the Spanish Civil War, anti-Franco anarchists used "psychotechnic" torture, a technique where prisoners were confined in coloured cells, designed on the tenets of abstract and surrealist painting.

In their updated version, Marman and Borins reference Op art, lining the walls of their cell with brightly coloured imagery, in geometric patterns. Each wall has a unique look, but none match, so in every direction you're confronted with colour and pattern in constant competition. Dizzying lines and shapes, random, and deliberate churn around the cell.

The Op art themes continue in the paintings in the second gallery: more colour and more geometric forms. The works in the second gallery are a product of the artists putting themselves inside the prison, becoming part of the experience and then sharing the results.

For the cell itself, the artists cite some of the 1950's and 1960's architecture found on the grounds of York University, like the Ross Building. It's a cold, massive structure with angular faces at one end and the stark overhead lighting you would expect from a prison. It's constructed from wood and concrete, with Georgian glass and two-way mirrors straight out of an interrogation room on your favourite TV cop show.

If this all sounds far out, it is. But not so far out in the realm of Marman and Borins' work. Their practice is based in tension, juxtaposition and confrontation, often referencing history, pop culture, and politics in a conceptual way, but presenting it a very physical form that viewers interact with and experience. "Project for a New American Century" re-imagines an old torture device into a contemporary art object calling to mind the politics of torture, modern warfare and radicalism. It traps the artists in their own creation until the final day of the exhibition when the prison self-destructs. Yes, you read it right, it self-destructs, and in the process sets these tortured artists free (to do some more unexpected work).

"Project for a New American Century" by Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins. Through March 29th, 2009. Art Gallery of York University <http://www.yorku.ca/agyu/>

Cover: Untitled, 2009, Acrylic on canvas, 56"x56". Page 11 top: Untitled, 2009, Epson prints, 96"x48". Page 11 bottom: Untitled, 2009 Epson prints, 96"x48".

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