

Rethinking art and machine

RAM exhibit at Themuseum explores interplay between art and technology

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RAM curator Marla Wasser sits by Jim Campbell's Exploded View, part of the RAM exhibit at Themuseum. - David Bebee/The Record

KITCHENER — Ram: Rethinking Art & Machine is more than a catchy title for an exhibition investigating the interplay between art and technology.

Curator Marla Wasser interprets the title both literally and metaphorically.

The Toronto-based arts consultant and independent curator is back at Themuseum with what promises to be another blockbuster.

It's her second collaboration with the downtown Kitchener museum. Two years ago she organized Andy Warhol's Factory, devoted to the controversial American Pop icon.

Wasser was anxious to work with Themuseum again.

“Doing the Warhol show was a tremendous experience,” she recalls in an interview prior to the opening of RAM which continues through Jan. 22. “I went away thinking I wanted to do this again.”

Not sure what her next project would be, Wasser hit the road, travelling to art fairs, galleries and museums around the world. She also kept in touch with David Marskell, Themuseum’s chief executive officer.

She was familiar with the museum’s mandate and gained a feel for Waterloo Region’s social fabric including the importance of its burgeoning technology sector.

RAM grew out of a paradox.

“I wanted to bring something people were comfortable with, but I also wanted something that would nudge people out of their comfort zone.”

She resolved the paradox by casting her curatorial eye on art and technology.

Wasser expected such an exhibition to appeal to people raised on BlackBerrys and iPhones, Facebook and Twitter.

But she wanted to extend her gaze over the long view.

“I’m all about history and education,” she observes. “I wanted to explore how the partnership between art and technology evolved, not just what’s happening today.”

She developed three main criteria for the \$350,000 exhibition:

- Artists would be living, with something relevant to say to a contemporary audience.
- Artists would have bodies of work that reflect how the relationship between art and technology evolved as technology and the response of artists became increasing sophisticated.
- Artists would be pioneers who mentored younger generations of artists

She selected seven internationally acclaimed artists:

George Legrady

Born in Budapest, Legrady lives and works in Canada. He is one of the first generation of artists to integrate digital media with artmaking. His work was featured at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

www.georgelegrady.com

David Rokeby

Born and raised in Canada, Rokeby won a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in recognition of his pioneering work as an interactive artist. His work was presented at the 1986 Venice Biennale.

homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/home.html

Manfred Mohr

Born and raised in Germany, Mohr lives in New York City. In the late 1960s, he made the transition from abstract expressionism to computer-generated art. His 1971 show at Paris' Musee d'Art Moderne was the first museum solo exhibition devoted computer-generated art.

www.emohr.com

Jim Campbell

Born in Chicago, Campbell lives in San Francisco. A graduate in electrical engineering and mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he is an inventor and filmmaker who first made interactive video installations in the mid-1980s. His work has recently appeared in Vancouver and at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

www.jimcampbell.tv

Alan Rath

A graduate in electrical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rath remains committed to experimentation. His interdisciplinary sculptures combine scientific and artistic innovation.

www.alanrath.org

Daniel Rozin

Born in Jerusalem and trained as an industrial designer, Rozin lives in New York City where he teaches at NYU. He creates interactive digital sculptures and installations in which viewers become integral parts of the artworks. RAM marks his Canadian premiere.

www.smoothware.com/danny

Peter Vogel

Trained in physics and living and working in Germany, Vogel is a pioneer in interactive electronic sculpture. His visual art is inspired by, and incorporates components of, dance and musical composition in addition to electronic technology.

www.bitforms.com/peter-vogel.htm#id=7&num=1

Wasser is sensitive about the absence of females in the exhibition.

“All the artists ended up being men, not because I didn’t look for women, but because no female artists fit the criteria.”

She spent a lot of time in artists’ studios learning how they express their personal interests and passions through electronic technology, light, graphics, robotics and virtual reality.

She asked the artists to prepare statements outlining how their work relates to the exhibition’s goals and objectives.

Expanded versions of their personal stories are included on the RAM website for viewers who want to peel back the layers of meaning contained in the artworks.

It is seductive for people who are not technology geeks to become enamoured with hi-tech wizardry. Wasser resists the temptation.

“I want viewers to connect on a personal level with the artists.”

A viewer can be forgiven for assuming that the 60 interactive works are similar. But it's amazing how different they are in terms of intent and execution.

The artists might share the same tools and techniques, but their approaches vary.

RAM is not about the technological face of humanity; it's about the human face of technology.

“The exhibition is not about technology; it's about art,” Wasser asserts.

“I want audiences to get to know and understand the artists who create the work.”

She is convinced her featured artists are not only important contemporary figures, but will prove significant figures in art history.

“The pioneering work of these visionary artists will become the norm in years to come.”

RAM breaks down traditional boundaries between art and technology, science and creativity, material reality and virtual reality.

The interdisciplinary works span the late 1960s to the present. Some are Canadian premieres.

Although the exhibition could be presented at any gallery or museum, its relevance to Waterloo Region gives new meaning to the term “site specific.”

“RAM is made for this region,” she stresses. “We are creating something unique and original for this place, recognizing it can travel anywhere.”

Wasser intends the exhibition to be controversial — not in an offensive way, but in a way that challenges preconceptions and tests assumptions.

“I hope RAM converts people to a new understanding of how art and technology interface and interact. I hope it changes the way people view art and technology.”

With rare exception, the local high-tech community has been curiously resistant to material culture.

It will be interesting to see whether RAM captures the collective imagination of the community that seems predisposed to understand and appreciate its materials, methods and techniques.

Themuseum's three floors are devoted to art and technology.

An accompanying Beyond the Image exhibition is designed to demystify digital imaging for young viewers.

The exhibition is co-produced by the Sherbrooke Museum of Nature and Science and the faculty of sciences of the University of Sherbrooke, in collaboration with Hexagram, Institute for Research/Creation in Media Arts and Technologies.

A group exhibition by the region's Kwartzlab collective features work by Bernie Rohde, Karl P. Williams, Richard Elsworthy, Craig Musselman and Patrick Wey.

Also on view are works by Charles Playfair from Themuseum's permanent collection. Playfair worked for CBC Television before attending the University of Waterloo in the 1970s where he developed a program enabling artists to "paint" with computers.

rreid@therecord.com

Art exhibition

RAM: Rethinking Art & Machine

Themuseum

Through Jan. 22

Information, hours and tickets: www.themuseum.ca