

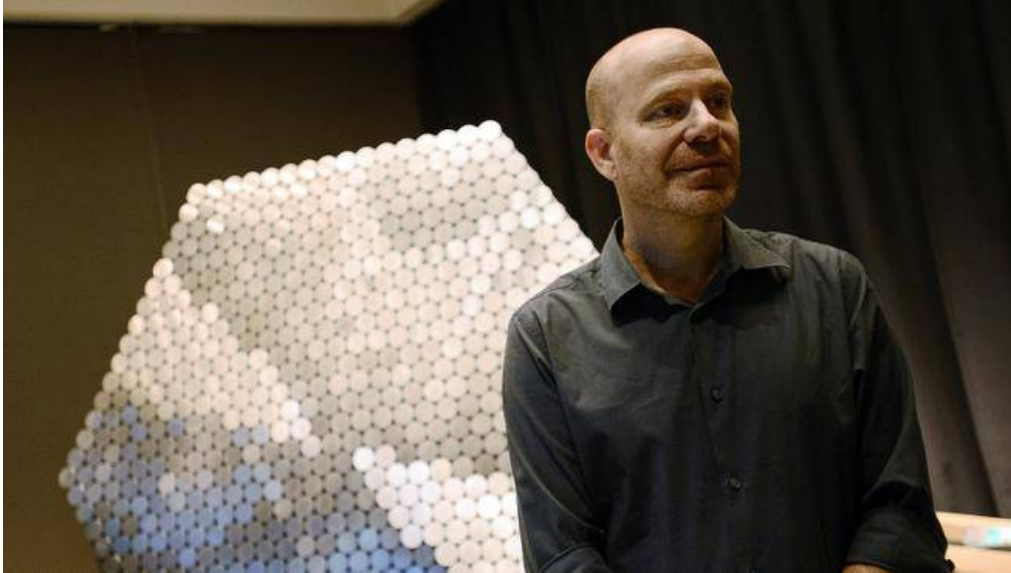
AT THE GALLERIES: Exceeding expectations

ELISSA BARNARD AT THE GALLERIES

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Rethinking Art and Machine reveals playful work rooted in the human experience



Daniel Rozin stands near his piece, Brushed Metal Mirror, part of RAM: Rethinking Art and Machine at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax. (Staff)

Manfred Mohr was egged at the Sorbonne as he lectured on art created by a computer.

That was in the 1960s. Today, the computer is a widely accepted part of an artist's tool kit, but then "people screamed 'You are destroying art!' I got thrown out of galleries," says Mohr.

He joins international new media pioneers Angela Bulloch, Jim Campbell, Alan Rath and Daniel Rozin in Toronto curator Marla Wasser's award-winning RAM: Rethinking Art and Machine, first exhibited at Kitchener's THEMUSEUM and now at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia to March 22.

Wasser designed the exhibit, winner of the Waterloo Region 2011 Art Event of the Year Award, to show the Waterloo, Ont., area, known as Silicon Valley North, a different side than technology.

"Is this what you expected?" she asks me on a media tour. "What did you expect?"

"Something scientific and hard on the head," I mumble.

RAM is far from it. The art is playful, imaginative, interactive and rooted in human experience.

Particularly awe-inspiring are Rozin's mirrors activated by viewers to produce their reflections, Campbell's hanging Commuters sculpture of 1,152 white LED lights with video of walking figures taken from Grand Central Station and Rath's playful robots like Positively, which figuratively embraces the viewer in arms of peony-pink feathers.

"I'm trying to break down the barriers of people's perception of technology and related art. Everybody's going to love it. It's wondrous."

The five artists, each exhibiting a mini-retrospective, "use a computer as a tool similar to artists using a paint brush," says Wasser.

RAM starts with Mohr so "people can see what computer-generated art looked like from the start." The German-born artist, who lives in New York and came to Halifax for the opening, says he is "the first step from fine art into technology. I had to redefine everything."

A musician and abstract painter, he became frustrated with working emotionally.

“Slowly I realized that we should have in our time a more rational art that came from thinking and not feeling.”

All of his work — paintings, drawings, animation and laser-cut steel lines that look like symbols in a foreign language — is based on computer-generated algorithmic geometry — in particular, variations on a six-dimensional cube.

“We cannot imagine how a six dimensional space looks like. We can mathematically calculate it.”

Mohr describes his work as “a visual poetry of logic.” With no interference made by his hand, “my thought is reflected as pure.”

“There is something absolute about the work. You think about something and it shows you the absolute truth to the thinking. There is no error.”

New York artist Rozin, also in Halifax for the opening, didn’t start making art until he was almost 40.

“I was a product designer, and when I took a break to go to graduate school I learned electronics and I decided I wanted to create my own art.

“My art not only uses the media but it is about the media. I’m interested in the creation of image and the perception of image. It’s a very tight package.”

For the last 17 years, he has focused on mirrors.

The massive Rust Mirror, 2010, has 768 tiles of rusted steel that move with a clicking sound to reflect the viewer.

“When I was investigating the idea of mechanical reflection, I was looking for the material that is least reflective. I started playing with rust, and I love the texture of it.”

He also liked the clicking sound and decided to make tiles drop down from the top like rain.

“Eventually, it becomes a storm of these droplets coming down — the water and the rust.

“Most art, you control the experience because you decide how long you want to look at it. These pieces actually start to control you,” says Wasser.

“In order to get the full effect, the piece ‘choreographs you.’ It commands you to move around.”

His fascinating series based on Darwinian evolution includes two never-before-exhibited mirrors that he’ll put in a solo exhibit in New York City in May.

Rozin used algorithms based on Darwin’s “description of evolution as something that happens with random incidences followed by selection.”

As the viewer stands in front of the mirror, the computer selects lines from a random generation.

“According to Darwin, that’s how species developed. We have to stand and not move because it takes time to make us.

“I don’t love technology. I love what it lets me do. I’m a professor at NYU, and I teach artists how to program and do electronics.

“I love seeing what introducing a creative person to these tools can do just like it did for me. It opens up a whole new world.”

Rath and Campbell are both MIT graduates living in San Francisco.

“They’re highly focused right and left brain,” says Wasser.

Campbell uses light, photography and home movies that he de-pixelizes to blur an image and engage the viewer intellectually in perception.

Two of Campbell's works are inspired by his parents. In one, individual photographic portraits of his mother and father flash in time to Campbell's breath and heartbeat.

"Both of Jim Campbell's parents were severely handicapped," says Wasser.

When he was a boy walking with his parents, he was aware of how onlookers were uncomfortable.

For Motion and Rest #5, he took video of a handicapped person and de-pixelized it "so you could watch how a handicapped person moved and not feel uncomfortable."

Rath, who hand-builds all his pieces, is a good example of an artist pushing his vision forward with ever-advancing technology. His 1989 piece Waiting includes cathode-ray tubing and is full of wires, ending in a small moving image of Rath's hand as it taps out time. The 2010 Handful is made of LCD screens with images, in ever-changing colour, of the artist's hand in rapid motion.

Rath's artist statement has two revealing sentences: "We look at art; why shouldn't it look at us?" and "We are cyborgs already."

RAM has a throwback to early 20th-century technology in Canadian artist-musician Angela Bulloch's listening room with a functioning turntable and records selected by Bulloch, who has her own label, and by Eleanor King, a Nova Scotia artist and musician exhibiting upstairs in Eleanor King: Dark Utopian.

The listening room's walls are yellow, inspired by Kandinsky, whose works Bulloch saw in a Munich museum.

"She views yellow as the colour of music," says Wasser.

Bulloch, who graduated from Goldsmiths, University of London in 1988, lives in Berlin and was shortlisted for Britain's Turner Prize in 1997.

"I spent a long time trying to find the right female artist," says Wasser. "Back in the 1970s and 1980s, women weren't doing engineering. It's become a hot topic now — women and technology."

Also featured are works from Bulloch's Pixel_Box series of sculptural cubes representing the computer pixel. They have holes referring to British Op artist Bridget Riley's paintings and are lit from within, with a continuously changing light pattern.

"Her algorithms create 16.7 million light permutations."

RAM is on view at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia to March 22. The Mary Pratt exhibit continues to March 1. Eleanor King: Dark Utopian is on view to March 20.

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About the Author»

ELISSA BARNARD AT THE GALLERIES

E-Mail: ebarnard@herald.ca
Twitter: [@CH_ElissaB](https://twitter.com/CH_ElissaB)

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