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RESISTANCE IS FUTILE
'Cyborg' art is a family affair for Michaela Jordana,
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From X-ray robots to painted cyborgs



PETER GODDARD

Through her name alone, Michaela Jordana Berman — the artist behind "Cyborg: The Human Condition" opening at Headbones Gallery Thursday — will likely trigger multiple associations from her audience.

To the gallery-crawling crowd around in the mid-1970s, Michaela Berman was the soft-spoken young painter newly arrived from Winnipeg with a debut Isaacs Gallery show, "Oceans of Blood," in 1976. Depicting Arctic whale slaughter on 5-metre canvases made her a hot commodity in part due to the conical appearance of the whales themselves, each as transcendental-looking as any Lauren Harris iceberg. Word soon spread. Berman was mentored by Joyce Wieland and collected by the National Gallery of Canada.

Several "Oceans of Blood" paintings are part of the Headbones show. They are a reminder — to the artist if no one else — of the harrowing weeks spent on ice floes back in the '70s with partner Doug Pringle. At one point, Pringle tumbled down a two-metre-deep hole in the ice, only to crawl out again.

At that time, they had to share the same set of dry clothes. They now share a Beaches home, a daughter and Peak Media Collective, producing large multimedia installations.

But to hard-clubbing Toronto punksters of the later '70s, she was the skeletal Michaela Jordana in leatherette so snug it seemed

sprayed on. In performance she looked as if she'd just crawled out of "some scary scene from the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust," a line from "X-Ray Robot," a hit tune for The Poles, the band she fronted with Pringle.

"X-Ray robot, you're my wind-up toy," Jordana screamed in clubs everywhere from the El Mocambo to CBGB's in New York. "Goin' to create, but first we destroy."

The screaming days are long gone — her voice now verges on the whispery — but not the provocations.

"I understand how to create a persona," she says softly as we sip tea in a swank midtown hotel bar, as she connects the dots outlining her career. "It was fascinating for me to go from Michaela Berman to Michaela Jordana the persona. Now it's fascinating for me to create cyborgs with human attributes."

The visual reference for Jordana Berman's digitally tweaked "painted" photos in "Cyborg" is her 28-year-old daughter, Ramona Pringle, a New York-based actress/journalist, who inherited her mother's high cheekbones and her parents' passion for tech and cyber-theory that goes back to the early days when Berman first met Pringle, then fronting the pre-Poles electro-band Syrixx.

The artist also cites William Gibson's 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* as a source of many of the intellectual underpinnings for her interest in cyberia. Visual renderings of Gibson "razorgirl" Molly Millions resemble Berman's black-on-black look, eyes outlined in kohl.

"I understand how much of our life is spent in alternative reality," says Berman. "I've always seen into the dystopian future, this post-

industrial environment with urban decay."

Yet having Ramona be the model for her cyborgs — "she is an actress," says the artist — reflects Berman's essentially positive vision of the future. For all her punk memories — Ramona is named after the Ramones — the artist views herself as a caregiver, a sort of little Big Cyber Mama.

"By using Ramona I'm projecting the image of a cyborg that can feel," she says, "the cyborg as a moral creature projected into all eternity."

• "Cyborg: The Human Condition" with "Paintings from Oceans of Blood" is at Headbones Gallery, 260 Carlaw Ave., Suite 102, until April 25. Peter Goddard can be reached at pepatico.ca

Michaela Jordana, right, in her 1970s incarnation as a punk rocker with The Poles, and top, at Headbones Gallery between artworks past and present.

