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To whom it may concern,

Please accept this letter as a passionate and heartfelt recommendation of Marilène Oliver for the 2020 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts prize. I am a business owner, as well as an active art collector and patron of the arts. I have worked with many artists locally, nationally and internationally for the last 20 years.

I first became aware of Oliver's work in her solo show "Under Surface" at the McMullen Gallery in Edmonton in 2018. The exhibition showed Oliver's talent and capacity to create a large volume of diverse art. More importantly, I was surprised to see how interactive and accessible the exhibition was to the public.

The piece I am nominating for the 2020 Eldon + Foote prize is *Deep Connection*, which was presented at the *Dyscorpia* exhibition at Enterprise Square in 2019. *Deep Connection* was a 3D art piece which combined art, science and technology. The work innovatively combined both sculpture and virtual reality, to create an emotive experience centered around the human touch which in the present day is increasingly mediated by technology (please see page 3 for a more in depth description of *Deep Connection*). What the work pointed to is that technology is creating a virtual touch, but in fact what humanity craves is a physical connection. It is only through touch that we feel connected and part of something, without it we feel isolated, disconnected and alone. Marilène Oliver's *Deep Connection* enables us to be human on our own terms. Oliver's work has the capacity to connect the viewer to themselves and to the world around them and cuts through the psychological fragmentation of a changing world driven by digital technologies. It helps people in a very unique and special way to feel safe in their own world, which is their body and their relationships with others. Like many cities, Edmonton is very fragmented and we need guidance towards a sense of place and belonging and their place in the universe.

I am very suspicious of technology, I do not like texting and I do not use computers. When I went to the exhibition to see *Deep Connection*, Marilène was there and encouraged me to try the VR experience. When I put the headset on and saw the figure I felt safe: I trusted it and I felt it trusted me. It was a body floating in mid air. I was able to feel the bones, muscles, and organs and interact with the body. I did not feel separate, but integrated with it. I was able to make the heart beat and lungs breathe when I held its hand. I felt like my touch, a simple touch of the hand, gave this body life. I visited this exhibition several times in order to experience this work and to understand it more deeply. My observations of other viewers experiencing the work and later conversations with members of the public, confirmed that they also had similar powerful feelings and experiences with *Deep Connection*. This fine balancing act of combining art science and technology demonstrates that she is working at a very high level of consciousness, that makes art accessible to an average person which is desperately needed.

Furthermore, I admire her entrepreneurial, risk taking nature. *Deep Connection* was a complex endeavor, and required considerable technological innovation and the forging of partnerships with other artists and scientists in Edmonton. She is a very inclusive artist who acknowledges the holistic nature of any successful project and the need to think beyond the individual artist and encourage collaboration and community engagement.

As a professor at the University of Alberta, in 2019 Oliver taught my partner Vera in printmaking. It was at this time that I became aware of Oliver's non-hierarchical approach to teaching. Her true nature is to lead by example. Oliver has a natural ability to guide and inspire students to listen and trust their own artistic vision. In addition to teaching at the University, tending to her own art practice, Oliver is also married and has two children.

As well as creating *Deep Connection* for the *Dyscorpia* exhibition, Oliver also curated the exhibition which included works by over thirty local, national and international artists, as well as undergraduate and graduate students. This was a huge amount of work, which exemplifies her ability to balance making opportunities for others which her drive to push the boundaries of what art can be. The *Dyscorpia* exhibition was a positive experience for all, for which Oliver sacrificed the mind, not allowing doubt and fear to choke the amazing opportunity to bring 36 artists together as a successful exhibition. This was acknowledged by the considerable media coverage (which can be accessed via the *Dyscorpia* website (<https://www.dyscorpia.com/press> and includes video documentation of the exhibition) and also that it was extended by six weeks.

Marilène's ambition is not fueled by ego but by the inner call of art. An artist who understands the importance of answering the call in service to others. Oliver has the capacity to create art that is accessible for all. She removes barriers and brings to Edmonton a new infusion of ideas and insights into art. As risk takers, entrepreneurs and supporters of the Edmonton art community, I strongly believe that Anne and Elden Foote would agree that Marilène Oliver should be awarded 2020 Eldon + Anne Foot Edmonton Visual Arts Prize.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joe Clare". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Joe Clare

Statement about **Deep Connection** by Marilène Oliver

Deep Connection is an installation and virtual reality artwork made using high resolution magnetic resonance imaging data which was acquired specifically for the *Deep Connection* project in collaboration with the Peter S Allen MR Research department at the University of Alberta. I have been working with medical data since 2001 to create sculptures, videos and installations (marileneoliver.com). *Deep Connection* is the first work I have made using virtual reality and was inspired from experiences using the Body VR app which allows 3D medical scan datasets to be loaded into virtual reality space as a semi-transparent block of data. The potential of working with medical data to re-present human figures in virtual reality is incredibly exciting, especially in order to explore notions of intimacy, privacy and subjectivity in the Digital Age. At present however, there are very few, if any, high resolution full body MRI datasets therefore medical VR apps typically only allow sections of bodies to be loaded into VR. The primary aim therefore with *Deep Connection* was to create a VR experience with a whole and complete digitized body that could be explored and empathetically 'connected' to.

At the time that I was working with radiologists and computer scientists to make a full body scan dataset, my mother was very ill in hospital and so I spent many days at her bedside holding her mother's hand, watching her sleep, her chest rise and fall. The experience of being the companion for my mother at such a vulnerable and emotional time inspired me to create an experience where an embodied human becomes the companion for a virtual body.

When the viewer enters the *Deep Connection* virtual reality space they see a scanned body lying prone in mid-air. The dataset is very high resolution with a high degree of realism. The data has been coloured to look fleshy, but not quite real, as it is piqued with high intensity cyans and magentas. The transparency of the figure allows the user to see the suggestion of bones, fat, muscles and organs inside the body. The user can walk around the body and inspect it, they can lie underneath it and walk through it. The user can put their head inside the body: dive inside and see its inner workings, its lungs, spine, brain. Being inside the body is like being inside a pink cloud, users often say they feel their breath is restricted (it isn't). Once they have finished exploring the inside of the body the user looks down to where their hand should be and sees a semi-transparent hand that opens and closes as they press buttons on the controller. Using this virtual hand, they can take hold of the figure's outstretched hand. Holding the figure's hand triggers a 4D MRI dataset, making the figure's heart beat and the lungs breathe. When the user lets go the figure's hand, the heart stops beating and the lungs stop breathing.

Deep Connection has an interactive soundscape made by Edmonton sound artist Gary James Joynes made from recordings of the MRI scanner. There is a 'room' soundscape when the user is outside the body that beeps and whooshes - it is both mechanical and soporific. Once the user puts their head inside the body, the soundscape shifts as if underwater. When the user holds the figures hand a human voice sings a beautiful mourning song which lasts 8 minutes.

The VR experience is part of a sculptural installation created using the same MRI data in the hope of invoking Martin Heidegger's concept of a 'standing reserve,' where humans are destined to be both a *resource for* and *enablers of* technology.. The installation is comprised of a row of 3 sculptures of bodies into which the VR hardware is embedded/housed. The sensors are embedded in the chest of the outer two figures, and the inner figure holds the headset, controller and guards the workstation. Each sculpture is made using the MRI scan data used to make *Deep Connection*. Projected onto the

figures is a green laser light crosshair, suggesting the bodies to be a targeted location.