

Martha Friedman: "S.F. gallery's 'Tenterhooks' gets inside the brain with blend of visual art, dance"

By Tony Bravo

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Silas Riener dances among the works of Martha Friedman in "Tenterhooks" at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco.  
Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / Special to The Chronicle

The neuronal pathways, connective tissue and cells contained in the human brain set the stage for "Tenterhooks," a two-day dance performance in conversation with a new visual art show at Jessica Silverman that opened Friday, May 6.

Choreographer and dancer Silas Riener's 40-minute work took place amid artist Martha Friedman's "Brain in Hand," her first solo exhibition at the San Francisco gallery. The art, on view through May 28, takes inspiration from drawings of the human brain by 19th century Spanish neuroanatomist Santiago Ramón y Cajal.

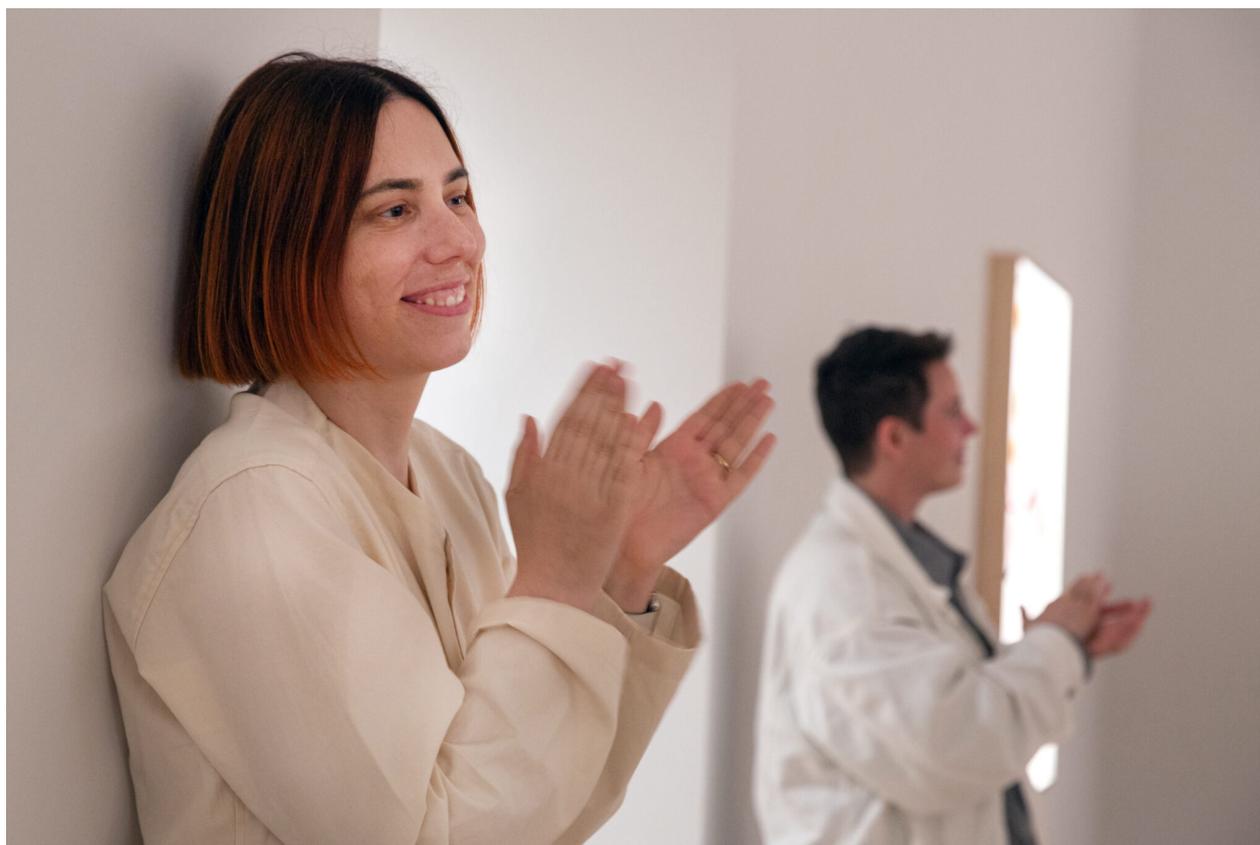
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"It's interesting to see people's response before they know the work is inspired by neurology," said gallerist Jessica Silverman. "There's something compelling about drawing what's inside of us that looks so beautiful, but in our bodies feels so challenging."

Friedman's cast-rubber light boxes were created through a process of manipulating liquid rubber and pigments until they settle into her desired lines and shapes. A sculptural installation consisting of 20 large bands, created by the same rubber used in the light boxes, are stretched on hooks from floor to ceiling and are at the center of the performance.

"My hope is that people see a sort of liquidity inside (the work) and that it reminds you of your body," said the 47-year-old artist. "There's a beauty and vulnerability to this sort of liquid body we're in, and yet, we experience it as a solid thing. I think that also relates to the performance."



Artist Martha Friedman applauds after the dance performance "Tenterhooks," which showcases Friedman's solo exhibition "Martha Friedman: Brain in Hand" at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman gallery. Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / Special to The Chronicle

"Tenterhooks" is the first dance event Silverman has hosted in her [Chinatown space](#), which opened last May. About 40 people were present for the intimate show, which also has two performances scheduled for Saturday, May 7.

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Both currently based in New York, Friedman first met Riener, 38, at Princeton University where she is a faculty member. The dancer came to the school as a representative of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. When Riener was unable to use a work by artist Robert Rauschenberg as a backdrop for his performance, Friedman was drafted to create a translucent rubber screen. The two have been close collaborators in the decade since.

The process of constructing the dances begins in Friedman's studio as she creates the light boxes and other sculptures, and Riener responds to the works.

As the performance began Friday night, Riener entered the gallery wearing a flesh-toned leotard that left little to the imagination, part of both artists' interest in reversing the usual convention of male visual artists objectifying the bodies of female dancers. He started by walking through the arrangement of rubber bands, testing his weight against each. The elasticity of the bands allowed them to be stretched and pulled several feet before Riener carefully returned them to their starting place.



Silas Riener performs among the works of Martha Friedman in "Tenterhooks" at Jessica Silverman in San Francisco. Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / Special to The Chronicle

After unhooking the bands from the floor, he let them lift his body in the air. Throughout the performance, Riener twisted, braided and reassembled the bands into arrangements that he used to climb up the wall, swing and bounce.

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As Riener contorted the bands and his body within the formation, the performance began to resemble the lines and shapes in Friedman's light box images. With the work "Floating Thought" hanging directly to the left of the bands, the communion between dancer and image felt even more immediate.

He concluded the performance back on the floor with the bands unhooked and floating from the ceiling, freely swinging.

"Martha and I approach choreography through improvisation," Riener said after the performance. "I have a road map in my mind, I know what I'm trying to hit. Because of taste and aesthetics there is a little wobbliness in the articulation of the choreography, but that's totally intentional because of the unpredictability of the rubber, fatigue, the amount of sweat. It's a really specific arc."



People visit the solo exhibition "Martha Friedman: Brain in Hand" at San Francisco's Jessica Silverman gallery. Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova / Special to The Chronicle

**"Tenterhooks":** Noon and 3 p.m. Saturday, May 7.

**"Martha Friedman: Brain in Hand":** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. On view through May 28.

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