

Compost Figures Liz Magor's New Sculpture

Liz Magor's latest sculptures, *A Concise History* and *Compost Figures*, were exhibited at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria from January 9 to February 11. They will also be shown at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery from March 1 to 30 and at Lethbridge's Southern Alberta Art Gallery from September 2 to 30.

Liz Magor's new work must come as a bit of a surprise to those who know her work, as well as for the uninitiated. A brief look at earlier sculpture is useful. The differences between work from, say *Four Places* (VAG, March-April, 1977) and the new pieces are obvious enough, but the connections (and they are numerous) are more interesting.

For several years, Liz Magor has been gathering eccentric, charming combinations of natural materials to form outfits for strange occupations and bizarre hobbies. *Birdnester*, for instance: a little pull-along cart with trays of nests to aid an ornithological merchant in some quixotic world of the imagination. *Beaverman*: a similar paw-drawn arrangement with live-in facilities and all the necessary apparatus for beaver-dam building. Another sculpture provided the complete set-up for a web-maker. There were *Breast Nest Pressers for the Perching Birds of Canada*; a *Hornby Island Tool Kit* with wood and bone utensils whose utility one might speculate about for years; and complete equipment for *Sowing Weeds in Lanes and Ditches*.

One thing these sculptures all had in common, besides immaculate, elaborate craftsmanship, was the absence of their owners. Each piece was the imprint of some extraordinary creature, a lifestyle without a life, suggesting how little we know of one another. Bones were much in evidence, and pickled things in jars, and dried-up plant forms. There was a museum quality to the exhibits, hints of time past and human ephemerality, a certain preoccupation with death, relieved by organic detail.

These deeper preoccupations, these "metaphysical things," as Magor calls them, are more evident in her new work. She has simplified her approach, tried to reach the bare bones rather than get lost in the creative fascinations of the art process. The painstaking, whimsical excesses of her occupational tool boxes were deflecting the viewer from looking beneath the surface of the work. "I got tired of people telling me bird stories," she says. She has not grown tired of birds, of course, just people who view her work as the brainstorm of a mad nature lover.

This is partly her own fault. There is a

self-indulgent, almost fetishistic, quality to many of the early pieces, a quaintness which says that the artist cannot resist throwing in every last possibility. The overall imaginative integrity of the work overcomes this weakness, but the new pieces are in some measure a reaction to a slight lack of control, and reaction is a delicate neck of the woods for artists. A clarification of one's intentions can result, a corollary freedom from distracting idiosyncracies and influences (as I feel happened with the *Compost Figures*). Regressive harping on a theme which has been already resolved can also occur.

A Concise History consists of about forty-five men's old jackets and overcoats dipped in a mixture of plaster and various pigments then hung on coat-hangers from coat-racks made of rusted pieces of pipe. There are six of these racks, each supporting seven or eight jackets. Some jackets contain trousers hung suit-style and one or two coats are hung directly from the rack. One pair of pants swing separately. Magor brought most of the coats back with her

from a trip to Europe and Egypt in 1977, and her observations there have played a role in the formulation of this current work, especially with regard to colour.

The large number of coats and their careful, rather contrived regimentation initially (and intentionally) diverts the viewer from considering the work's meaning. It seems that Magor is caught in a bind: viewers either get the point too quickly or have to be sent on a diversionary aesthetic goose chase, or else have so much fun playing with the piece they never bother to get the point at all. The point, here, is that the coats are the husks and relics of human lives, the discarded shells of humanity, and that man is blind to these rich trails he leaves behind, this glorious garbage and divine debris.

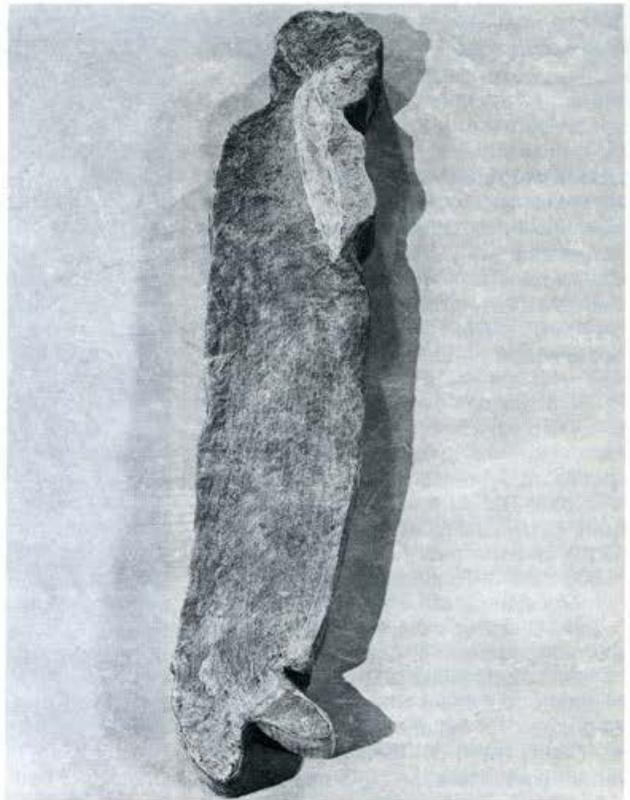
For colour, Magor has recalled the earthy pastels of Greece and North Africa. For texture, she has made the coats architectural, given them the plaster surfaces of old walls, old rooms where generations of human lives were played out. Ochre, sienna and umber evoke Italian memories,

Installation view of Liz Magor's *A Concise History* and *Compost Figures* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

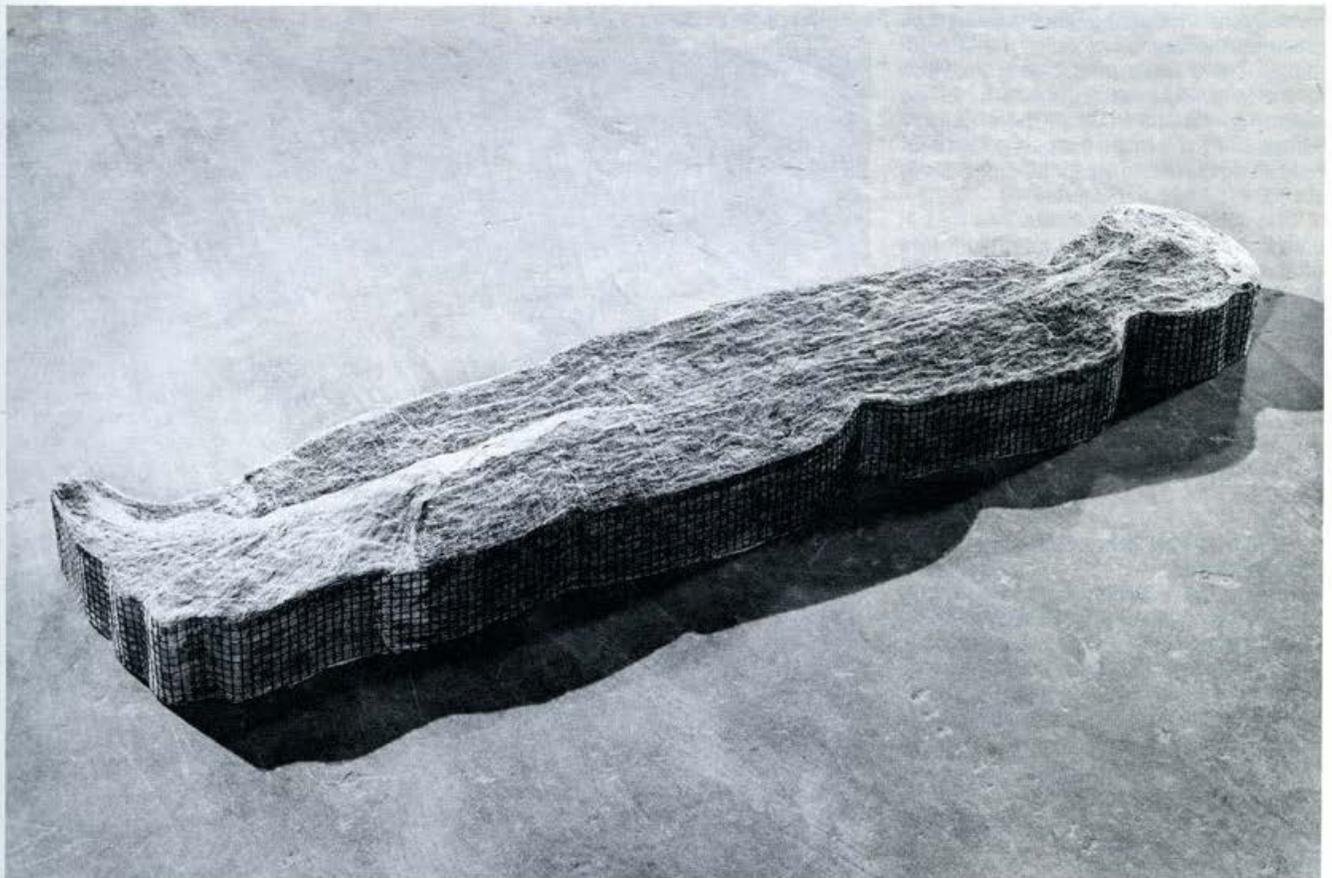




Compost Figure-Leaf (1978), wood, cotton and natural materials



Compost Figure-Mulch (1978), wood, cotton and natural materials



Compost Figure-Grass (1978), wood, cotton and natural materials

On facing page: *Compost Figures-Man and Woman* (1978), wood, cotton and natural materials

Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Photos: Robert Keziere



Andrew Scott, 'Compost Figures, Liz Magor's New Sculpture' Vanguard Magazine, March, 1979



A Concise History (detail) (1978), coats, plaster and pigment



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while peach, salmon, beige and aqua blue and greens continue the Mediterranean theme. Art history echoes off these pieces and there are contemporary links with the figurative plaster works of Kienholz, Segal and Colette Whiten, but the overall effect of *A Concise History* is one of artifice. The past remains stiff and sad.

Magor, who claims that she cannot paint and that her drawings are ineffectual, seeks painterly effects with sculpture. Some of the coats work like drawings; the colouring is chalky and light, and the shadows have been highlighted with graphite. Others are more heavily plastered and act like paintings. The entire work offers a range of art-conscious clues in this vein. The *Compost Figures* continue the sculpture-as-painting ideas using cheesecloth as line and compost as pigment, but offer a number of physical and intellectual contrasts to the coat section. These figures are less acutely art-historical although the recent cut-outs of Anne Kahane, and some pieces, again, by Colette Whiten come to mind.

Magor has taken profiles of human figures from photographs and blown them up full-size to make plywood cut-outs for the base of her sculptures. Then, using a weldmesh or chicken wire mold, she has filled it with a five or six inch layer of wet compost. The resulting object has been wrapped with cotton cheesecloth and set to dry so that the cotton is stained by the organic matter. Some pieces are without cheese-cloth; an outer ribbon of pop-riveted sheet metal is filled with compost, rocks and a strand of old cloth, covered with pine needles, cones, twigs, bits of wood, bark and moss, then sprayed into solidity with acrylic bond-fast — casting in compost. Magor rejected the idea of using a surface of living turf.

The human outlines are disguised and abstracted by the drapery lines of the clothing. Some figures are grouped together: male and female shapes face each other and touch, creating beautiful negative spaces between them. Three figures fit together, emphasizing shared lines. A number of other pieces are slung, coffin-like, on a vertical drying rack. Several kinds of compost are used — grass, leaves or mulch — resulting in different coloured stains to the cotton. The fabric often appears as a lichen, extending the organic nature of the materials used. In one case, the cloth itself has been coloured before use.

Influenced by Egyptian tomb imagery, Magor has created for us a rich overlapping of sensory, intellectual and emotional experiences. The gauze scrim suggests a shroud, and the natural surfaces are like grave plots. The superimposition of the human figure points to the cyclical nature of life, while the "painting" of compost on cotton gives surprising visual results.

Andrew Scott