

Momus

Liz Magor Waits, But Not For You

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A retrospective exhibition should be thick with time. More ephemeral than the objects it displays, it is a stillness that passes, a terrain upon which viewers and artworks coexist within a dynamic that has as much to do with time as space. This breadth of the *now*, the temporary fixing of temporal bandwidth, allows us to listen to what seemingly disparate works have to say to each other when placed in proximity.

Habitude, Liz Magor's first major survey, is at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal until September 5th, where it has been curated by Dan Adler and Lesley Johnstone. In 2017 it will appear in Europe, re-curated by Heike Munder at the Migros-Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, and by Bettinna Steinbrügge at the Kunstverein in Hamburg. The retrospective survey as a form, whether chronologically structured or not, almost always tells us something that's otherwise elusive about the body of works that involve it. This is certainly true at the MACM.

Magor's production appears, at first glance, various. But the consistency of her concerns suggests that she may be, as Stanley Cavell said about Eric Rohmer, more of an artist of *oeuvre* than *genre*. Juxtaposed in the exhibition are works that use completely different casting processes and take bewilderingly different visual forms. A rarely-seen work, *Double Scarp* (1980), sits on the gallery floor near a large selection of small cast pieces, from 2001-2008, arranged on an enormous, white, three-tiered shelving unit developed for the exhibition. Nearby, in the same voluminous gallery, the earliest works in the exhibition, *Bird Nest Kits* (1975) – three neat stacks of found nests delicately packaged in boxes affixed with lovingly descriptive labels, as if to be sold in a gift shop – are among the last to be seen.

Non-Chronology is no more legitimate a tack than chronology for a living artist's retrospective. But for many who are still working strongly, to begin at the beginning and end at the end suggests the end of a career as well. Time looms heavy even though an exhibition's viewers are free to wander forward and back – to take all that time up, into themselves, and at their own pace. Viewing *Habitude*, faced with complex and riddling images made during five decades, one ends up, anyway, attempting to sort out a chronology. Finding this sort of a temporal bearing in the geography of the exhibition helps me sense the pressures and attractions of association among the diverse bodies.

In *Habitude*'s installation of *Production* (1980), a tall, long, immaculately-constructed wall stands before a wooden, debris-splattered, brick-casting press. Magor built the rudimentary machine and then used it to create the bricks that compose the wall – a task that required several months' labor. The bricks are made of discarded daily newspapers collected each day by Magor, before being brought to her studio to become the materials of her production. The newsprint has aged like the pages one finds within the frames of old houses, pages chattily insistent that the past happened (and we with it), frozen in the closely-subjective, restricted visual field of their present, and the concomitant uncertainty of any present moment. Occasionally a date or a place or a time – an ad for air-conditioning, or a fragment of an Associated Press story about the Montreal Alouettes's Spring training – appears intact enough to be read. Mostly, though, the wall possesses a sort of dusty, pink beauty – marbled but also somehow embalmed or intestinal. Small shards, bits of the wall's debris, have collected on the gallery floor around its base: artefacts of its construction, one presumes. As in many of Magor's works, *Production* is evidence of a careful, and even loving labor to preserve and universalize the quotidian, to make time speak as structure, to make the days count, to make them hold up at length.

In Magor's oeuvre, the stuff that surrounds the body often does the speaking. In *Double Scarp*, like *Four Boys and a Girl* (1979), the material that's pressed into a shallow oblong form – in scale and shape inferring the body – is clothing. Rusted steel binds the garments: the press cleaves to its pressings. The fabrics are layered thick and cut to make edges like geological strata, compressed by a great force but fraying a little. Like the words and paper in *Production*, the clothing can be registered in places as it once was: some thin corduroy plainly visible at one of the edges. But mostly they're painted or plastered white, a form suggesting both grave and body at once, the funereal wrappings of some sort of early modern industrial mummy.

Nearby *Double Scarp*, on the shelving unit, are several examples of small silicone rubber pieces called *Sleepers* (1999). These appear to be persons wrapped in fabric almost like a cone so that only the uncanny, orange-blond synthetic hair is showing.

They might almost be tiny babies swaddled at birth (white fabric substituting for womb). When a newborn sleeps, it sleeps so completely that a parent can be forgiven for moving it a little, for provoking a response to confirm that the baby is still alive. Again, at the end, beside the deathbed, it's not always clear if the departed has yet departed. The cusp of life and death are almost unintelligible to the living, and sleep, like death, is a wholly private matter. It's not insignificant that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Mercury was responsible for leading the dead to Hades and for bringing dreams to those who slept. Perhaps the prone or curled-up animals that populate Magor's later work, if they aren't dead, are free from the tempests and desires of dreams. In Magor, one suspects, the only afterlife is the life of art, a stillness in the safety of the gallery or museum, a place of contemplative attention and sustained concentration.

Writing in the catalogue for his 1986 AGO exhibition that surveyed Magor's manufacture from the time she moved from Vancouver to Toronto in 1981, Philip Monk observed:

Every work of art develops its own narrative and history separately from the artist: this is part of an interpretive process that people other than the artist produce over time. Not every work of art, however, is allowed its own physical history – a history of decay, for instance. Rather, there is a massively coordinated attempt to maintain its original identity through the principles and

procedures of the museum. The possibility of a history for an object was taken into consideration as one of the concerns of such Magor installations as *Four Boys and a Girl and Production*. They were produced, but not programmed, to have their own history. ... Through this history of decay, they assumed their own identity beyond the artist. But this history was taken as a metaphor for something else, however, as it became a poignant reflection on the human condition.

In *Habitude*, a dramatic shift away from pieces that decay, that are materially subject to a natural aging process, occurs in *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed* (1982). This two-part sculpture shares an exhibition room with *Production* and another primarily wood-and-paper installation, *Sowing Weeds in Lanes and Ditches* (1976). *The Most She Weighed* is, by contrast, made of shiny aluminum plates and heavy lead castings. The piece refers to an elderly woman, but as an object, it resists aging. This shift in approach toward a likeness that won't decay is so dramatic, so pronounced, it's as if *The Most She Weighed* appears not to belong to the same body of work as the other pieces in the room.

In fact, Magor curtailed the aging process in 1982, after which there seems to be a more direct attention to preserve and dignify or rescue what was aging and about to be lost. Her series of blankets, including *Maple Leaf* (2011) are, materially, about as far as one can get from the lead of *The Most She Weighed* and yet they, too, resist decay. Their flaws have been fixed or beautified, damaged blankets that were once separate have been combined, becoming a single blanket that outlives the bodies they once sheltered and protected.

Magor's use of new techniques in the later 1990s deepened her exploration of prior themes. She adapts advanced casting processes developed for the film industry – techniques that recreate unique textured and worn surfaces, such as the walls of buildings, that need to be transferred from outside locations to the more controlled environs of the film studio. Three of these sculptures, *Hollow* (1998-1999), *Burrow* (1999), and *Wrap* (2003) – two of which involve cast segments of the same large, hollowed-out tree trunk – are temporary abodes. *Hollow* is lined with thin foam insulation used in building construction upon which an empty sleeping bag lies loose as if left behind by its occupant, bedding not ordered after waking. The interior spaces of the other two trees are stuffed by material that substitutes for what was once there, or invokes the interior stuff of that temporary dwelling known as the human body. In *Burrow*, it's the sleeping bag itself that fills the empty space; inside *Wrap*, pink flame retardant insulation is compressed, slightly fluffy at the edges that overshot the log, like dense stuffing emerging from an old winter jacket. All of this non-cast material is made from extremely artificial substances resistant to age; the casts themselves use polymerised gypsum, also more resistant to decay than the wood they are imprinted with. Yet the casts take on the body, or at least the surface and form of the tree they have displaced. Perhaps the early work is still fraught, still paying for its mortal materiality in its aging – in intimations of its eventual disappearance – while the cast, fallen trees will endure. In doing so, however, they forfeit likeness to some degree, forfeit something like the living spirit of the actual.

After playing with materials more inert, Magor returns to the physical imprint and pigmentation of decay, age, and wear – to its appearance, if not its actuality – in the small cast sculptures of 2000-08. These objects are cast and pigmented to mimic tarnished pewter or silver trays, things that show the pull of time, are redolent of the inexorable movement toward the scrap heap or incinerator. They are stacked together with things that aren't usually considered deserving of representation: cigarette butts, pieces of half-eaten toast, the corpse of a small animal.

The tension or play between the cast objects and the actual ones in Magor's small pieces involves a complex relationship between history and memory. One of the elements in the small sculpture *Still Alive* (2016) is a very used, actual deerskin jacket, such as what might have been worn by the late 1960s, a hippy-era "back-to-the-landers" item in her photo series *Field Work* (1989). The jacket retains its own history, its marks and scars, and its strange, embroidered, leather-fringed materiality forfeits nothing.

Both the actual objects and the cast ones are capable of provoking memory in the viewer. This usually happens fast, before one has examined them and clocked what they are: that they're either casts or held by casts. The polymerized gypsum glove in *Speckled Veil* (2015), for example, tenderly cradles a dead bird as if offering it to an eternally dignified, beautified – perhaps memorial – moment. Especially lifelike with its cream-colored skin, the stitches in the seams lovingly rendered, the glove is like the gloves of our mother, or a fashionable aunt, perhaps. Here, material wear seems to belong both to memory and history. The cast remembers the glove that it has displaced – destroyed in the casting process – and subtle color from a fashion moment prior to our own has been added. What we encounter, then, is both actual and a fiction: a real bird and a sculpture. The gold foil-wrapped chocolates that I would buy in the hospital gift shop and bring to my grandmother as she waited to die, are offered by the work *Tray (Bird/Heart)* (2008). Real chocolates are accompanied by various imperfect fictions: on silver platters, a ceramic heart-shaped tray holds eight pieces of chocolate, and beside the tray, the crumpled skeleton of a tiny bird rests on a discarded paper candy trivet. Although the candies, cigarettes, and bottles of alcohol that one finds in Magor's works may invoke taste, they cannot be tried. We are strictly in the realm of visual memory here, and none of the weathered or decayed elements have any trace of scent. There seems always an element in Magor's small sculptures that eventually prohibits anything other than the present moment.

The display unit that holds the small cast works appeared to position itself somewhere between the furniture of museum display and the shelving of high-end retail. The shelving unit had a more massive physical presence than the works it held, leaving many of them both too available and too out of reach, restricting the power these pieces have possessed in the smaller confines of a commercial gallery and in the 2008-09 touring exhibition, *The Mouth and Other Storage Facilities*. In that exhibition, the objects were arranged on tables composed very much like the works they held – tables with "real" legs and cast table-tops with "flaws" in evidence like scars, and dusted, in places, with pigment suggestive of paint, wine, or blood. Given the importance of the support in Magor's small pieces – as well as the status of the marginal object in her entire oeuvre – it's safe to say that these kind of display bases are crucial even if they stand unnamed on the edge of recognition as a work.

For the sculptures in Magor's oeuvre that don't sit directly on the gallery floor, the problem of their support seems solved in her most recent small cast pieces such as *Pink Shimmer* and *Ladies Soft Glove (Russet)* (both 2015). Not only is this powerful work, genuinely tender in its treatment of mortality, and deeply beautiful, but the sculptural base, often an old cardboard box, is fully realized as a cast object. Much of Magor's recent cast cardboard is dusty grey or closer to green than the expected brown, or is a pearlescent shade that takes her sculptures playfully away from outward likeness.

This solution – that the sculptural base has become a full participant in the work it supports – unfortunately did not reduce the problem that Magor's pieces were lost in the huge rooms of the MACM. No matter how much time was concentrated in the selection of these works, it was too often diffused by the scale of their spaces. Walking into the semi-industrial, semi-domestic rooms of Susan Hobbs Gallery, for example – rooms scaled more to the human body – it's as if the air is sucked out of those rooms, as if everything had been cast from the same inert material as the sculptures themselves, leaving only the necessity of engagement. In the installation in Montreal, the inattention to scale – to the modulation of the spaces around each piece – tells us that the atmosphere of time and the silence of space surrounding Magor's work needs to be palpable, to exert a little invisible somatic pressure. The emptiness needs shaping, a holding presence, an infusion of time rather than a vapidness of space.

Two of Magor's major installations pointed the way to what needed to be registered in the entire exhibition: *Production* with its wall enclosing a corner of the gallery, and *Messenger* (1996-2002), where Magor provided the entire room – a cabin outfitted with a cot, enough food to last a year, a cast white dog, hand grenades and other eccentricities – and which could be viewed only through its windows in a darkened gallery. Essentially, the piece was a room within a room. *Habitude* shows us that, more often than not, it's the spacial register of the rooms in a house (or perhaps a studio) that should be kept in mind when displaying Magor.

Magor's works don't put on a show: they present a situation that waits, but not for you. *Production* is suspended until another brick is pressed; *Sowing Weeds in Lanes and Ditches* stands by for a character who might appear as if out of an Alice Munro short story; *Hollow* and *Messenger* persist, attendant upon the return of their missing occupants. Unlike the objects used in film production, Magor's materials do not participate in the suspension of disbelief. They keep in view a certain existential distance.