

Liz Magor's new MOCA exhibit is a provocative reflection of contemporary life



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DAN BRADICA/COURTESY THE ARTIST

Liz Magor's current exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto includes a recent sculpture featuring a stuffed baby giraffe lying on a work table; it's rather life-like and recognizable by its extended neck, but its patterned coat is a ghastly shade, a soft metallic grey. A white ceramic cup with the dregs of a coffee sits nearby as though the toy maker or the taxidermist has just stepped out. In a larger installation that takes over most of MOCA's second level, Magor pursues this unsettling aesthetic yet further, covering the floor with box after box containing minor litter and dead birds.

Meanwhile, downstairs, the late British sculptor Phyllida Barlow is represented by a series of rough, massive columns made in big round sections, stacked up to the ceiling or lying about on the floor. Both artists use an eccentric vocabulary to make bold intrusions into the visitor's physical space yet take very different approaches to sculpture: If Magor's work hints at a dark story, Barlow's considers its materials, drawn from the urban environment.

Magor, a veteran Canadian artist based in Vancouver, has long worked with domestic and commercial materials and found objects. In *The Separation*, her new installation at MOCA, she has laid out 41 boxes, each about the size of a small tabletop and made of stiff transparent mylar, the kind of container sometimes used for food storage or in which a dry cleaner might return a fancy dress. Each holds only a few items, civilization's scraps and leavings: empty takeout coffee cups, a few of the fluted foil papers used to hold a single chocolate and several plastic toys, miniature lions and a smiling walrus. Birds' skulls are perched on top of several boxes and fabric monkeys hang over this display, holding spotlights that they shine on it.

Magor's animals are particularly disturbing, simultaneously stuffed toys and dead things: The boxes include a bird sprayed the most unhealthy shade of metallic blue, as though the paint had killed it. The humans, meanwhile, have left the room.

There are many ways you can interpret this, but the images of a fabricated or modified nature, the leavings of consumerism and the human absence spoke to me of environmental calamity. Belatedly I wondered if the monkeys, despite their lights, are those who see, hear and speak no evil – an image of fatal insouciance.

The contrast with Barlow is sharp because Magor's work is narrative, it suggests that symbolism is at play, while Barlow's work deals mainly with its materials and their presence in our space. Her columns, built in sections using grey, lumpy concrete plastered on polystyrene bases with the odd scrap of coloured ribbon sticking out, are both amusing and slightly threatening: In the manner of the most effective abstract sculpture they ask we move around them, modifying our path to their shapes.

This work, called *untitled: eleven columns; standing, fallen, broken*, dates back to 2011 and has been reconfigured for different venues over the years. The British artist, who had found fame in later life after many years teaching art, was working on a new installation for MOCA when she died last March, at the age of 78. In the absence of whatever she would have created reacting to MOCA's industrial architecture, the museum has reconfigured *eleven columns* for its ground-floor lobby. Displayed in her native Britain in the years of the London riots and the Brexit debate, it could also be read as symbolic, a statement about fallen empires and a society making do with what's at hand.



Phyllida Barlow, *untitled: eleven columns; standing, fallen, broken*, 2011.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

But now it is mainly an interaction with the former Tower Automotive building, which itself has heavy interior columns of grey concrete; here, Barlow's work seems like a playful dialogue with that space. There's a similar humour in *squint* (2018), a pair of cannon balls, again roughly fashioned from both cement and foam, and dangling from a wooden arm. The arm is a solid and beautifully built thing but the balls themselves look too provisional, too much like something slapped together in craft class, to actually swing out and hit anything with force.

Using everyday materials and purposefully sloppy, Barlow's sculpture comments on its own transience. She did not live in an era where it seemed like a good idea to be erecting new monuments. Nor does Magor. Their meeting at MOCA makes for a particularly provocative reflection on the current moment.

Work by Liz Magor and Phyllida Barlow is showing at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto to Feb. 4.