

Maybe Don't Go to Nordstrom for Love

Liz Magor I wanted to start with the word “modest” because I used it a lot yesterday. It came up when I was talking about deciding how many pairs of shoes to work with. We discussed the fact that I could have included two hundred pairs of shoes if I wanted to knock you out with craziness, but instead I stopped at thirty-two pairs, which is kind of an awkward number. It’s not a lot, but it’s not a few either. In fact, this number has no conceptual foundation. I collected the shoes slowly, over a number of months, and by the time I had about three dozen my curiosity for finding new types was exhausted.

Solveig Øvstebø How did this collecting process begin? What was it that drew you to the first pairs of shoes, the ones that sparked this longer search?

LM At the beginning I had only three pairs, which I found during my year in Berlin. First, there was a long, bizarre pair of women’s shoes with very pointed toes. Second, a pair of men’s loafers, also long, size 12 maybe, with the toes truncated right at the tip. They reminded me of a pig’s nose, which has kind of a flat snout. When I saw those pig-nose shoes I thought, if you were to wear these you might inadvertently be turning yourself into a caricature. The third was a pair of furry boots, which look like shoe-shaped plush animals. Many styles of shoes have a formal



Shoe World (detail), 2018

connection to hooves and hides. You wonder if, by putting them on, the wearers are trying to get their spirit animal to come back.

Dan Byers So these shoes really seem to sit at an intersection between your ongoing use of animal forms, and your interest in the psychology and trappings of self-presentation.

LM I brought those three pairs back to Canada with me, and then started snooping around to see how extensive this syndrome is—of shoes or boots that impart an animal identity to the wearer. As you mentioned, this interest follows many years of using animal forms in my work, including stuffed toy animals. I've used them as protagonists in various fraught scenarios, I guess not unlike the way a child uses dolls and stuffies in her imagined dramas. At a more

“real” level, I had encountered “furries” in the early 1990s when I was making the photographs of historical reenactors. Furries are role players who assume the identity of an animal and costume themselves accordingly. This isn’t an unusual thing for children to do, but it gets interesting as an adult activity. I was pretty fascinated by them, but concluded that the furry phenomenon was beyond my understanding, so I didn’t photograph them. In any case, I’ve been interested for a long time in what costumes do to your imagination, and following that, what your imagination does to your psychological process and behavior: how costumes enable a surrogate self, or enhanced self. With all this in mind, I cruised the shoe rack at Value Village once a week for six months. Each week I made my selections with a different eye, trying to collect for the variety of intentions that shoes have, their range of affect. Although the three Berlin pairs were quite exaggerated and extreme in their style, I gradually was able to see the persuasive power of plainer shoes, and so when I found myself picking up the simplest women’s sandal, I figured I was done. I had the full spectrum at thirty-two pairs.

SØ So, you mentioned this is kind of an awkward number, a modest number. I’m curious to go back to that idea of being modest. Is there something about this quality itself that feels crucial to this work? What does the word “modest” bring to mind for you?

LM In our conversation yesterday, I said, “Well, it’s a modest number,” as though modesty was the point. I certainly know what “modest” means; Canadians are famously modest, probably due to the Presbyterian tendencies of the early settlers. Modesty in this sense is high self-esteem posing as self-effacement. Canadian modesty comes from knowing we’ve got the goods, but feeling that it’s unseemly to flaunt it.

DB Does that have something to do with self-presentation, then? This idea of artifice, of using how you look to somehow manipulate expectations?

LM Yes, it does, in that your initial presentation informs the trajectory of your interaction with others. The modest

presentation requires that you keep your strengths to yourself and let them be revealed slowly. It's a stealth action, very effective. But it's not an apt description of how the shoes operate. If modesty is about tamping down, then I need a different word for the shoes. It's more like they're trying to be great—they are pushing up. But they don't quite make it. There's a lot of fake leather in this bunch. There are a lot of promises; you'll be dancing, hiking, seducing, posing, but the structure and composition of the shoe will barely get you there. They present themselves as more than they are. Maybe "aspirational" is a better term for the shoes. Plus, it's a perfect term for the legions of shoppers.

DB We're supposed to be in a constant state of aspiring. But you talked about the shoes as not quite "getting there."

LM We see that it's possible for people to be perfect—or, if not perfect, then just outstanding and awe-inspiring and original. We see that it's possible because we have many examples of fantastic people—lots of evidence. This is the primary narrative of retail culture. Although we know it can happen, we aren't all of us



Shoe World (detail), 2018

able to muster what it takes to break through to that place where our personal awesomeness is recognized. So, if you don't make it, does that mean you have failed, or semi-failed? We know what it looks like to succeed. But what does it look like to semi-fail? What are the aesthetics of falling short? The shoes show me what that looks like.

SØ Is this sense of aspiration—maybe it's the brash inverse of modesty—related particularly to the shoes and the work we've been discussing, or to your whole practice?

LM I'm not being modest when I'm working. I'm working really hard to represent the drive to be outstanding, the drive to be noticed. But at the same time, I want the shade of missing the mark to be cast over it all.

DB It's incredible to think that you're working to attain a form that is *trying* to be something—trying to attain a final result that is itself in a state of trying to attain.

LM It's a bit of a contortion: wanting to succeed at a representation of failure. I've just realized how weird that is. To get there, I think about how it feels to present yourself to others. What are you thinking about when you meet someone for the first time, when your appearance precedes any other information about you? At that point the potential to be overlooked is quite great. In that anxious moment, various manipulations are triggered, mostly involving material and visuals, but also a mental preparation to perform.

SØ Our self-descriptions seem like an active part of this, too—all the stories we tell about ourselves, and to ourselves. Our minds are always testing out these self-descriptions, and building them up, and then maybe using them as guides for how to be.

LM Yes, you develop a narrative. I don't think you do it consciously. I think it's a cultural tic. There are a number of available stories and you pick one, maybe something tailored to the situation, and then you operate from that. That's why everyone

appears the same in the end, because we're all picking up the same narratives.

DB Yet all of the objects in your sculptures are so specific in their aspiration; the way that they aesthetically express that aspiration is highly individual. You've chosen these things for their qualities of really *trying*.

LM "Highly individual" is almost an oxymoron. I agree that the objects are very specific, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that they're unique or individual. They're the forms that come from a common dream, a story shared by millions. I also agree that they are really trying, but they're trying to match a pre-existing narrative, not create a new one. On the one hand, these things are connected to really appealing stories; on the other, they are made quickly using crap materials. They are the ubiquitous posing as unique. So there's something holding them back at the same time that something is driving them forward. This is a conflict, but it's not due to modesty. The conflict has something to do with aspiration.

SØ The aspirational mindset inherently acknowledges that you're not there yet, so in that sense it's similar to modesty. It's in the same family, perhaps, but it isn't modesty exactly, because in each case you have a different understanding of yourself in relation to others.

LM And maybe there's no end to it, no completion to the drive for more and better. Maybe success never completely arrives. That's likely if it's about us with others. Other people are quite strange to us. We're in changing relationships, and not everyone shares what we know. So insecurity is guaranteed.

DB That idea of relationality—"us with others"—is such an important aspect of your work.

LM It's always there. Thinking back through my work, it has always been there. I think because I'm uncomfortable in social situations—I can't quite figure it all out.



SØ To go back to the shoes: You keep them in these boxes. They're not completely free. Maybe they're on their way out of the box, maybe somebody will take them out and use them someday, but maybe not. For now, they're confined there with their aspiration, neither able to escape it or live up to it.

DB You're framing them, allowing us to see their specific identities through the sculptural process of containment. It suggests that you can't really see them unless you contain them.

LM I didn't change the shoes at all; I put all my effort into the containers. First I made a decorative box for each pair, then I dropped that into a sturdier more plain box with a clear lid. Then

I went back and added embellishments to the package, ribbons and sparkly things, in an effort to boost the allure. That part of the process felt a bit like scrap-booking, or some craft thing. But I never let the embellishment exceed the quality of the pair I was working on, because I wanted to understand their aesthetic. They are great examples of the near miss, so I was learning from them.

DB You're creating a space for the kind of intersection, or meeting, of these different aesthetic qualities, so they can be seen, isolated from the rest of the world.

LM That brings to mind our conversation yesterday, when I was saying that the studio is an important place for me. It's a very physical situation, but it's where I entertain metaphysical questions. Not concepts, more like inquiries. The questions come in sequence; I make a move and then I'm faced with a decision. I work it out, make another move, and meet another question. So a work grows and develops like that without an initial preparation for the whole. I guess that's why the large piece with shoes is a surprise to all of us.

SØ You're also in control in the studio. But getting back to the embellishments, I was just looking at the different add-ons you've given to some of the shoes. Like the feet from the mannequins, and the shoehorns on the sandals (which makes no sense, since they're totally out of place on sandals.) How do these various shoe-related objects come in?

LM I think just by copying the process of attention-seeking. You want to be seen, you want to be known, so you use material amendments that stimulate the situation and add complexity to the message. And these amendments aren't always practical. I could swap some of those add-ons around, and I do swap them around for a long time, until suddenly two things just want to be together. Either I'm tired, or they want to be there.

DB Is it something like the logic of the accessory? To bump something up a little bit, or change the tone?

LM That's right. There's pleasure in that. There's an unexpected beauty when your hat and your gloves start to sing together. If you didn't buy them as a set and they come from two different places, it's really exciting when they illuminate one another. I wanted that small thrill when I chose the paper or the decoration for each box. So, this isn't a cynical project. This is really a very loving project. If I dial down my expectation, I can connect with the charm of these unremarkable things. I started with the exaggerated, comical styles, but then I gradually started to see deeper into the soul of shoes. All of them are informed by some greater aspect of their imagination, and how they appear in the real is a fraction of the story that formed them. Like the little plastic ballet slippers: they are imagining a real ballet slipper, and all the cultural inflection that goes with that. All the shoes are doing that, in a way. See the little boys' shoes, the really plain brown ones? You get the image of a solid man living in Connecticut, on a nice estate, walking his golden retrievers. But then they flip to something much less than that. They're small, made for a little boy, and not even real leather—it's wannabe leather. The puffed-up idea and the deflated idea coexist, in equal measure. Empty and full all at once.

SØ There's the aspirational again—the "wannabe" leather. It's a shoe that aspires to be like the more expensive, high-quality brands, but it misses the mark.

LM Yeah, it's the Zara effect.

DB Each one of these things contains an individual narrative, coming together from different places. It's kind of like that logic of the outfit you mentioned, when disparate things sing together. How do the narratives play out?

LM I think narrative generates the production of each object, even before I get my hands on it, by providing the specification, or the model, for its realization. With a few exceptions—including the rubber boots that were made for a postal worker, which are kind of strange—most of these forms have been determined by fashion.

Fashion is a huge narrative production machine. In design, it's useful to have a "type" or a character to aim for, so I think the story comes first and the form follows. Some of these shoes are second-hand, but I'm totally not interested in the story of the person who wore them. I had to buy them used because at any given moment fashion is very uniform, so if I were looking for new ones I wouldn't be able to cruise the range I get at a big secondhand store. But I chose mostly never-worn shoes. I wasn't looking for patina, or wear or character. I was looking for the story that came before all that.

SØ Different kinds of stories start to co-exist within a pair of shoes. Fashion has its underlying narratives, certain stories that are projected through design, but when it comes to the shoes as physical objects, they relate to other kinds of human stories, both personal and political. For anyone, there are so many stories and memories that are connected to where you walk. For me, there is a lot of that when I look at the shoes in your work. Here, for example, you work with white shoes that have been heavily used, and I naturally wonder, used by whom and where? But then other pairs are completely new, so the memory aspect is not as obvious in those instances.

LM But, see, the new shoes have memories, too. They're just not memories of a real experience. They're memories of an imaginary culture. Nostalgia and sentimentality are usually associated with the past, but obviously it's possible to project forward with sentimentality as well. Because I'm interested in how our histories repeat, I'm often working with old things or used things and I have to work hard to not mire the thing in nostalgia.

SØ What do you do with that nostalgia?

LM I have to cut it. I have to counter it with things that are from the past but not nostalgic. Not all histories persist, and the meaning of a lot of stuff is not carried forward. Most of the stuff in our lives, at any given moment, is from the past, but only a fraction of it has sentimental or nostalgic energy. So I look for those non-sentimental, below-the-radar things.

DB I often wonder about our allergic reaction to nostalgia, to false memory that you project onto a past that never really existed. But there's also sentimentality, which is different than nostalgia, albeit related. There's an embarrassment that goes along with sentimentality. You talked about cutting nostalgia as if you don't want to feel—or provoke the feeling of—something poignant or sentimental.

LM No, I absolutely *do* want to feel sentiment and poignancy, but what I do with those ideas is make distinctions, and then proceed very carefully. Sentiment is different than sentimentality. Sentiment is feeling, and sentimentality is the repetition of feeling; repeated and repeated until it empties out. I want to have sentiment, but I don't want to drain it. So I have to make things a bit strange, make them familiar but also not. The purses operate that way. They appear familiar, but the hardness of the casting material and the pour of rubber coming out of their zippered places defies what you know. It's not consistent with previous experience. They are a bit to the left of themselves, and you can't comfortably say "that's a purse." Until you are comfortable with a thing, repetition is forestalled.

SØ In one of the earlier conversations we had, I remember you talking about found objects and found stories, and how the objects in your work are not something that you, personally, have a history with. You said that if they are not related to us personally, they become sort of empty. Here it is. I'll read from my notes: You said, "I'm interested in how the found form presents itself as full and empty at the same time. Full because of the relentless production of meaning and empty because of the persistent avoidance of feeling." That brought a lot of questions to mind: Is meaning produced when we encounter found forms because we project our own relationship with the context they come from onto the objects themselves? What is the feeling that is avoided in this same encounter? Does feeling come back into the picture when we get away from those projected meanings? You brought up a related quandary when you said, "If I love this thing because it was my grandmother's, the thing *itself* is lost and unloved." This is a matter of knowing things by experience, not just by reference.

DB I love this idea that somehow the thing is only neglected, debased, when its identity is solely defined by its connection to *you*, rather than its own material history, or its uses in relation to the rest of the world.

LM That's my position. I want to find the terms that allow me to know the thing, and then make sculpture from that understanding. That will never happen if I run everything through myself, or if everything is about my experience. If you say, "I love this vase because it was my grandmother's," what you're really saying is, "I love myself, and I love that I love my grandmother. I love myself for loving my grandmother." And so this thing, the vase, which was aiding you, is sidelined, shafted. I've just suddenly understood: that's what happened to all these shoes. At one point they were so willing to project somebody's persona, but their owners have moved on and they've been emptied out. They're ready now to be known for themselves and not because of their connection to the wearer. To do that, I have to slow down and consider them. The boxes and the platform they're on provide the stage for that consideration.

SØ I think a similar thing could be said about the stuffed animals in some of your other works. We've started by discussing the shoes, which is your most recent project, but I'm curious to know what's happening here with the stuffies. In their case, too, there's sort of a moment of getting to know these friendly found objects on new terms, giving them a stage that's disconnected from their past. But they've been altered, too.

LM Well, I'm not sure exactly what's happening here with the stuffed animals.

DB Initially you wrote very beautifully about agents and helpers and weakness and power.

SØ And you redid their bodies with that in mind, repositioning their arms so that they could actually hold what they are holding.

LM Right. I gave the stuffies a purpose, and I changed their faces and their figures to attend to that purpose. For example, in my recent exhibition at Andrew Kreps Gallery, in New York, there were three boxes, each with a stuffed critter holding a garment. Two of them were holding big knitted sweaters—vintage sweaters, “Mary Maxim” style, the kind with pictures knitted into them, like a moose or a totem pole, some flying ducks and so on. These were big in the 1950s and stayed current in the rural parts of Canada for decades. I usually associate them with children’s fashion, but in a secondhand store I found two large, men’s-size sweaters with patches on them that indicated they were connected to the oil industry. One patch says “Pembina Pipeline,” and the other “Oilmen’s Bonspiel.” The extraction of oil from the tar sands is a huge story in Canada, and many, many people have migrated to Alberta to work in the “oil patch.” It was very lucrative and people were proud to be part of it. So these blown-up kids’ sweaters with images of nature on them, crossed with oil industry insignia, are pretty remarkable in my view. But what actually makes them useful to me is the fact that the changing attitude toward fossil fuels has made this particular convergence of money, pride, and place obsolete. That story is ending. People are moving on. I had

Oilmen’s Bonspiel (detail), 2017. Textile, wool, polymerized gypsum, 39 ¼ x 23 x 9 ¼ in.



almost forgotten about us being a resource-proud nation until I came across those two sweaters. There they were, hanging on a rack, still dreaming the dream. I acknowledged their loyalty by refitting stuffies to grasp the hem of each sweater, halting their fall to the floor.

SØ And they're trying to communicate.

LM That's right. Material talks. It's like there's a conveyor belt that's going along, taking us with it. It carries everything; not just our dreams and plans, but our stuff—clothing, cars, various amusements. All the intense entanglements that we've concocted, based on urgent and pertinent concerns, have a material component. And then, when the moment passes, everything goes with it. We forget what we cared about. We throw everything out. When I go to secondhand stores, what I see is the persistence of the material which lasts much longer than the ideas that spawned them. Maybe we've moved on, but our discarded things hang on to the dream like true believers. They're still alive and active, and kind of more purely themselves at that point.

SØ I think that is exactly what brings your work to another level of commenting on what's around us. The poetic aspect is one thing; we consider these parts, we look at the material, we look at the formal qualities. But then you have the oil sands, these political questions, issues, superstructures. You talked about that in the first email that you sent me and Dan. At that point you hadn't started with the shoes, but you had started with the "agents," as you described them. You mentioned how the agents were moving around in the world, how active they were.

LM Stuffies are supposed to be passive, our little love slaves, covered in tears and snot. They never go out. They just lie there. But if I employ them in a different way, they become active. That's why I call them agents. So the question is, what should their activity be, or be about? It feels as though our personal and political concerns are always new, specific to this moment, but if you look past the topical, it's clear that our responses are very ancient and

predictable. Forms might change but certain behaviors stay the same. I look at the forms our interests take, in things like clothing or toys, and read backwards to what persistent feelings they express or influence.

DB Emotions may be sort of abstract in that they're generalized, but in the way that you deploy the materials and the characters, they become incredibly visceral. These agents are making offerings and reminding us of things, but then they are both strung up and helping us.

LM I want these rubber figures to be falling, and then to be caught—luckily, in the nick of time. Their feet are tangled in a mess of twine that falls down from the ceiling. At the same time, their arms are wrapped around a garment bag, stopping its fall to the floor, and out of the bottom of the garment bag there's a length of fabric slipping out. It's like a chain of falling, or a chain of saving, that extends from the ceiling to the floor.

DB Can you say more about how you went from recombining aspects of actual objects to then casting them? What is that impulse? Why are these figures rubber?

LM I was wondering, can stuffed toys still operate as sympathetic agents if they are more problematic? If they're a little scarier, a little uglier, a little less familiar? The rubber replaces the pleasurable tactility of the plush with something less approachable.

DB Because now they're not immediately recognizable as stuffies. You've distanced them from that original form. Is that what casting does for you—create that distance?

LM Yes, the distance that comes from keeping the form but changing the material is useful to me, and not just with the stuffies. I do this again with the purses and in earlier work like the leather jackets and gloves. It helps me establish an indeterminacy, an instability, and I hope with that they remain immanent, becoming, not finished.



Pet Co. (detail), 2018

Casting isn't the only way to achieve this. In the pieces that were shown at Andrew Kreps, the stuffies are roughly collaged. A patch with the eyes from a lamb are slapped over the eyes of a dog, or a pig's face is glued onto a bear's face, a dog's snout on a rabbit's face. On one of them, you can see there are still four ears. I was trying to cut the cuteness by asking, "if I rip a face off one guy and glue it on another, is he still sweet?"

SØ The sweetness is nonetheless there, though. There's a little bit left.

DB In that show, there was this range of moves, from violent, clumsy, quick acts to incredibly careful processes that take a lot of time. The quickness of those face changes versus these

meticulously cast, pigment-filled structures—how do those contrasts function? For you, is there a sense of these different speeds and procedures commingling?

LM I would say that all the means I use are in service of making an object lively and complex, unstuck from its original association. So whether it takes a long time or not doesn't matter as long as I'm getting a full range of notes.

SØ There's also an uncanny story that comes in here. With the shoes there's some unpleasantness, but you can shift very quickly into something different, seeing their humor and beauty. But with the stuffies, or the agents, as we call them now, there is a real element of uncanniness. It's disturbing. It's also in how you talk about them: you "rip a face off." Do you feel that there is some violence imbedded in them or in the process by which they are made? The fact that they have different eyes than the ones they came with, for example?

LM Maybe violence is too strong a word. Switching parts might be in aid of my interest in representing emotions that aren't simplified or connected to a conventional narrative. When it comes to emotional content, I want to have it in there, but I don't want to smooth it out. Unpleasant feelings and contradiction come with every package, even love. So it's tempting to say, "You know what, I'm going to go for the less emotional package—with less love, even—because there will be less anguish." Maybe that's why there has been so little depicted emotion in art since the Second World War. I think the denigration of the figurative and the emotional in art is really kind of appalling. I understand that it's hard to avoid the pitfalls—I mean, who wants to be maudlin? But I still think it's unfortunate. I'm trying to get a full range of emotion using the vocabulary that I've developed, including these quasi-narratives with surrogates doing things that I can respond to.

DB Hearing you describe the deeply invasive actions done to these stuffies, they are only "violence" if you think you're actually cutting a tongue, or eyeballs, out of a dog. Of course you're not;

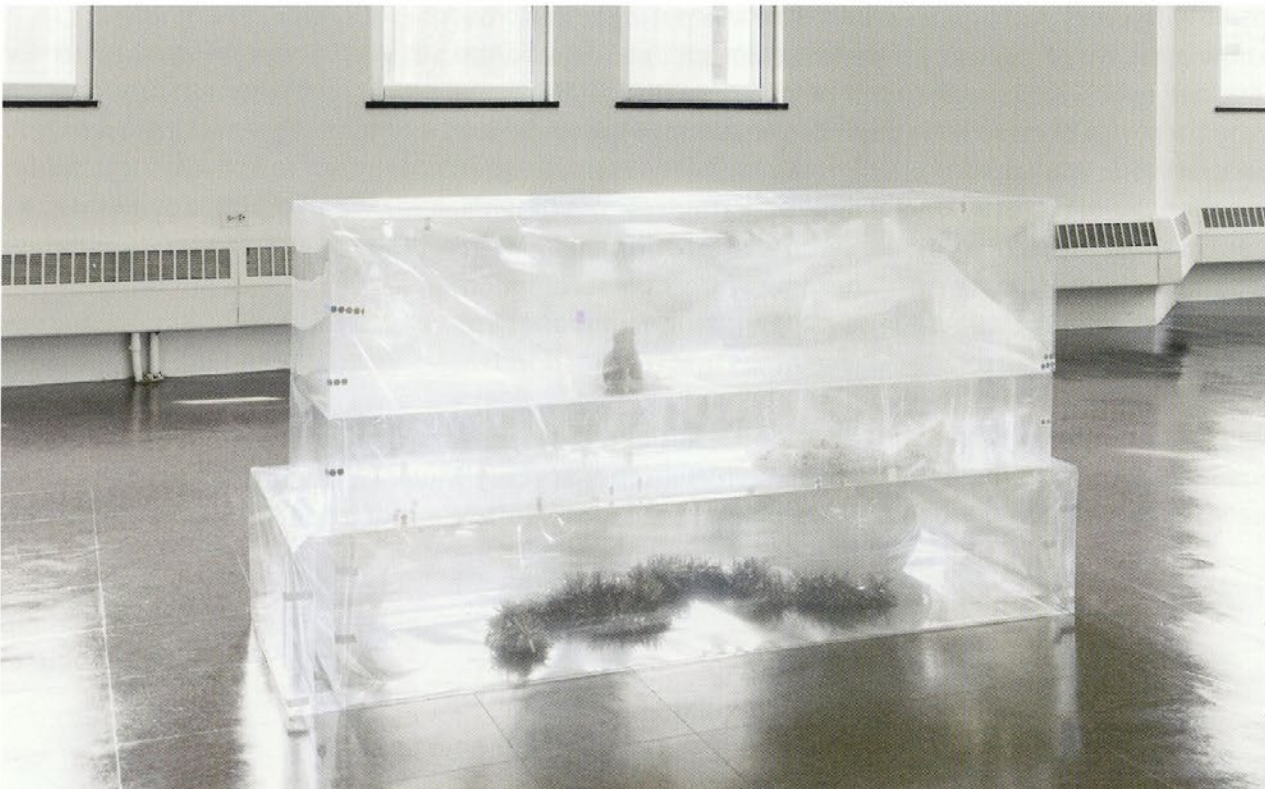
they are stylized representations, toys. But we still allow them to occupy this kind of tender, affectionate place for us.

SØ But it's also the language of ripping a face off, which just in speaking is a kind of violence itself.

LM I don't ever think of them as animals. But I am, actually, uncomfortable cutting up a thing, or taking apart an object. I don't cut with impunity, because here is an intact thing that I'm making un-intact. I suspect there are consequences to that. It's an exercise to consider this.

DB Let's talk about another one of your materials: When you first discovered the capacity of this transparent Mylar, you made something strong out of something weak. This flexible, rolled material which, when you use many layers, combine it into multiples of itself, becomes stiff and opaque. That journey from soft and transparent to hard and opaque feels important in this narrative, somehow.

LM It's a sculpture problem. Sculptors have to think about gravity. It's something you think about all the time; how to bring things



Seasonal, 2018

up from the floor. There are many conventional ways to do it, but most of them you don't want to embrace. That's why sculptors love Brancusi so much. In his work there is a lot of stacking, which introduces questions of hierarchy. All the parts are swapping qualities with each other, aiding and abetting each other. The idea of relationships between parts is a formal approach that I never forget. So, I'm always looking for ways to hold things up, or keep them from dropping down, but not with a neutral nothing-thing. The clear boxes are plinths, actually, but inside out. Instead of putting objects on top of a box, I put them on the bottom and then stack the boxes, raising the object up in this inverted way.

SØ I like the idea of the different parts of a sculpture aiding and abetting each other. Within each work there is the vital question of how each part exists for the other parts. This might be where the idea of "holding" becomes incredibly important. The shoes are held in these boxes. The agents are being held when they're falling, but then they're also holding something else.

LM Physically, the works with the rubber figures are like a concatenation of events with one thing holding another which is holding another which is holding another, etc. Even though the critters are stretching and trying to stop it, their burden still slips to the floor. The oval boxes are also stopping a fall in the way they hoist the flung-down fur jackets up a notch, or a step up from the floor. It's not much, but at least it's a gesture toward care and protection. In one of the oval boxes there's a badly damaged jacket. The sleeve is ripped through to the lining. Also in that box, there's a small stuffie figure attending to this big rip. In the other oval box, there's a figure holding the "wrist" of a discarded fur jacket. Together, they are in the position of a caring person comforting another person in distress.

DB Here, that care and protection is overlaid onto the language of display and commerce, to some extent.

LM Display and commerce as care and protection? They're trying to con you. In retail they use the language of care, sure, giving the impression of caring for you. I'm not going to say that's wrong.

I'm just going to say to myself, maybe don't go to Nordstrom for love. It's interesting when that artifice is down. One of the influences for *Pet Co.* comes from a retail store in Vancouver called Army and Navy, in the Downtown Eastside. Consistent with the dire economic state of the neighborhood, this store spends hardly any money on its window display. They use whatever's at hand, so the mannequins are missing parts, the paper flowers are bashed up, there are various insect bits lying around. It's quite anti-alluring. If you're interested in decorative drive, this is one end of the spectrum.

SØ And, of course, dreams of horror surface in the show also, among all the care and holding. There's this sort of little *bzzzt*, a little shock, that comes through.

LM *Pet Co.* comes from this kind of thinking—the shock that happens when the allure is switched off. It consists of many clear, polyester boxes of varying size, which I use as containers for the residue of dozens of mangled stuffies—castoff skins and puffs of stuffing—plus all the debris left behind from what could be imagined as a warm, real life. This left-behind stuff is collected on the bottom and in the corners of the boxes. The Mylar is very thin and clear. It doesn't have much structural integrity as a sheet but I can make fairly large, sturdy volumes by folding it. So you see many layers of Mylar and a multitude of folds, with some life-dust on the bottom. In a way, the bulk of the sculpture is boxed air.

DB This work proposes so many sculpture questions that open out into larger questions about life. For instance, you've spoken about your trials with gravity, that as a sculptor, you are constantly trying to figure out how to get things off the floor (or why to leave them there). And while you've made work before that encases objects in semi-clear containers, those containers have always been more traditionally "sculptural"—made out of rubber and telegraphing a kind of weight and certainty. Why this relatively flimsy Mylar? Why this weak material, with things just barely lifted off the floor?

LM In considering what one part of a sculpture is doing with another part, I need every aspect of the form to be eloquent. I



need each thing to be doing a lot of work, from the physical work to the metaphysical, because it's the only way that I can make a sculpture that's complex but not complicated. I want the artwork to have scope, but still be succinct. I started to think that the action of care and protection comes at a cost. I thought about the risk involved in leaving a safe place to help someone, or something, who is in an unsafe place. There's the possibility that the rescue will fail and both participants will succumb to the danger. It's easy to imagine this scenario and describe it in narrative terms. But I want a minimum of narrative, just enough to trigger some thoughts in that direction, and after that I want the materials and objects to take over and actually "be" in the situation I've imagined with, perhaps, an uncertain outcome. I want the sculpture to "be" something, not be "about" something. So the qualities of Mylar

bring me this possibility. As a very thin material it appears to have no structural integrity, it's floppy, and its clearness also reduces its presence. It seems weak and unpromising. But with some adjustment, mainly in the form of folding, a surprising strength emerges and it can be made into volumes. Not only that, but all the moves are visible, all the folds can be seen and known. And because it's lightweight, these volumes can be stacked, holding even more space. But even though they perform better than expected, the boxes are barely stable, some of them collapse with the lightest touch and the whole collection seems vulnerable and provisional. Into this precarious situation I introduce the contents, the bits and pieces that are housed in the boxes. By this time, I hope I've handed over control to the materials and the work is doing the work.

SØ The exhibition presents a series of containments, from the Mylar boxes, the garment bags, and the bespoke shoe boxes, to, rather quizzically and profoundly, the packed BILLY shelves and LACK table boxes from IKEA, which act as pedestals for your cast purse sculptures. How did the IKEA boxes enter the scene?



Pet Co. (detail), 2018

LM If furniture can be viewed as a collection of perches or plinths, serving to present our bodies and belongings and keep them off the floor, then IKEA is actually a display supply store. In some parts of the store—I think they call it “Home Organization” or something—they are just selling containers that will hold other containers that hold even smaller containers. As you approach the cashiers, you pass all the racks of flatpacks, all these containers and plinths—bookshelves, tables, sofas, etc.—that lie dormant, waiting to be inflated. This has something in common with my own activity in the studio, so I thought I could tap into the IKEA system as being one end of the spectrum of display, while supposing my work is at the other end. I also like that these “plinths” can be returned to the store after the exhibition so that I’m not paying for storage.

SØ I have to ask about the rats. How did you come to the rats that float around the installation and create a kind of morbid punctuation? How do they play against the other contents? Are the rats agents, too?

LM I like that you describe the rat skins as “floating.” Again, this illusion is thanks to the Mylar, which offers a subtle, almost invisible support, so if I place a skin in a box on top of a stack it’s kind of super-imposed over the contents of the boxes below—kind of a 3D collage. The skins were given to me by another artist who ended up not using them in a work. He gave me a baggie with about thirty skins in it and this went into a plastic bin with all the other stuff that I bring to the studio for consideration. I gather this kind of stuff constantly, even though less than ten percent of it ever makes it into a work. I need the range and choice at hand so that I can entertain all kinds of convergences. I picked the white fur coats first, re-identifying them as “pelts” ripped off the backs of the wearers. They ended up in the oval boxes. Then I cut “pelts” out of stuffies, an action that extended to harvesting all their parts—tails, ears, eyes, paws, etc. Other things came forward as “pelts” or body parts—stockings, sweaters, tissue paper, candy wrappers, swaths of fabric. It’s odd that I recognized the actual pelts, from the rats, only near the end. Are they agents? I’m not sure. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

SØ You titled the show *BLOWOUT*. Would you talk a little about that?

LM *BLOWOUT*... My garden is open, and the deer are everywhere and they eat everything. But they don't eat peonies and lavender, so I have those. Peonies will hold their great big ball of petals for a few weeks, and then all of a sudden, it just goes "blop," and it all drops down. I happened to be standing there one day when a peony suddenly just dropped all this stuff, its whole head. It was intense drama from an unexpected source. I thought of the trajectory of a flowering plant. You know; nothing, something, a huge something (the flower), and then nothing again. And so "blowout" is a word for that last moment in the cycle, when there's no point in saving anything and you let go. The promise in that means, okay, no more hanging on, I'll blow it all, like, I'll put all my stuff on the street.

DB Or a relief that at least the thing is over. Even if it was a bad thing, you're on the other side of it.

LM Of course, for the peony, it wasn't a bad thing.

SØ Because it's just the course of their life.

LM It's just a stage in the life. Though it's not the one that we love peonies for; we want the bloom to last forever. The blowing out is a release from the frozen moment, it's a purging, a kind of loss of control. Also, with regard to the title, I liked the tie to retail. I think it's obvious that my interest in retail is very strong. Its action is the middle man, trying to take something from both ends. The reason I like the studio is that I'm a producer and consumer in the same place, I can bypass the middle. Likewise, with a "blowout" sale, it's almost like the retailers are saying, "Oh, we'll reconnect the consumer to the factory. Forget my markup. This is a blowout. I'm not even going to try selling it to you, I'm just throwing it out. My store is empty."