

Home Again

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You've been running ragged circles in the forest, following some archaic directive telling you to retreat to nature. After the city went down, people were turning into packs of primates. No water, no electricity, no phone. The worst of it was, people were marking their territory with their shit, taking over as many apartments as they could, until each one was emptied of comestibles. This looting was made easier by so many people abandoning their homes when it hit. Leaving without so much as a can opener. Running in search of some agency that might help. Keyless, shoeless, thinking in a childish way that nothing would be more effective than to show up at the door of a fire station to announce their dire straits. Then not to find it, or not know where it was, or to find it empty, or gone. Gone, gone, gone.

You sight what looks like a constructed, variegated mound of rocks in the forest setting. There could be very good reasons to stay away from a pile of rocks. It might indicate someone's unwillingness to dig down six feet to bury a body; a repository of contaminated flesh and unknown rituals. A marker in an otherwise remote unpeopled wilderness. Stumble across it and you realize you are not alone, have not been alone for several hours. Or days. Or for as long as it has been since you began wandering around in circles, lost. But it could be a cache, hiding something you need, especially now. Perhaps this is an opportunity. How long will it take to move those rocks? You could move them aside and then move them back. But the

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rearrangement would give your presence away. You weigh the risk. *Animals presage earthquakes by several days. Cattle grow restless, birds fall silent, pets go missing. They sense the infant seismic stirrings that will mature into catastrophe. Collapse. Something is always slipping while our lives sit balanced on the edge. Put together a world that holds, the way it used to be. A cup is missing its saucer. Put this one with this. If that works, try a bolder move: this couch with these drapes, this body with that time. Now change your father, become your ancestor, find the family you lost, the purpose you missed.*¹

With a cursory glance at Liz Magor's *Stores*, one might assume the gallery was a work site, an excavation: a piece of drywall leans against a wall, someone's rucksack hangs from a nail to protect lunch from ground intruders. The largest element, a pile of rocks, flags the ruse. A closer look reveals fluorescent orange cheesies spilling out from underneath; larvæ-like, they seem to be multiplying under what is now clearly a hollow shell. A pile within a pile. Further inspection shows traces of the rocks' manufacture: casting burrs in the cracks between rocks—excess fluid that has escaped the imprint of the pigmented mould. An attempt to pick up an individual rock is frustrated; they are linked in constellations which form the total effect. Tapping the surface produces a muffled, hollow sound. It is a fake.

On one wall hangs a weathered rucksack, looking as if it might have been recently unearthed, and is perhaps slimy to the touch. It takes a beat to recognize the small margin of visual difference that allows you to realize it is made of rubber, a cast imitation. Relieved of its realness, it becomes more animate, as if it might start to breathe like an artificial lung. A hint of vaguely familiar orange powder has leaked out from a deteriorated seam; pieces of macaroni lie on the floor like dead maggots. Through a tear, one can see the unmistakable

packaging of Kraft Dinner. Three or four boxes, you decide: enough emergency sustenance for six to eight people at one sitting.

TAIPEI: A cat, dehydrated and barely breathing, was found trapped in a house 78 days after Taiwan's earthquake. The animal apparently kept itself alive by eating another cat, veterinarian Chen Taochieh said yesterday. The head, tail, bones and bits of fur from the second feline were found next to the survivor.²

Building materials lean against another wall: a fragment of pock-marked drywall, and a piece of plywood. They are waste, about to be pitched in the dumpster, a by-product of some inefficient domestic renovation. You might walk by them, but something in the way they are placed, makes them appear almost arranged. The crisp, delicate edges of the objects and their flat, uninflected reverse sides reveal that they too have been cast from a mould. Stashed behind them are several bags of carrots and potatoes, sweating veritable condensation. Grocery sized, this is an amateur cache, a stopgap measure with a short-term view. But cast in multiples, there may be thousands of these lean-tos strategically placed for migratory fugitives.

As children we made snow forts. Perfect, no clutter. Ingenious secret doorways, intricate intersecting frozen tunnels burrowing through the large mound of snow which had been pushed to the side of the road by the snow plow. Anybody driving by would never know we were in there. Hunkering down, we'd have our first secluded domestic conversations with our playmates. Removed from the domain of parental control, our murmurs mimicked the sounds we could hear through the bedroom door as our parents privately discussed the days events.

A white raincoat and a white woven purse hang on a white hook on another wall. There is some suggestion of fashion here, someone's attempt to match these pearlescent surfaces, conveying a tawdry

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daytime glamour of making do in a rainy climate. The cast bag is a ghost of the kind women carried in the 80s. Its most valuable element, a women's rectangular pocket book, bulges tumescently from within. There is nothing else in the bag, but further exploration would be frustrated by the bag's sealed lips. It is as deliberate as a rubber decoy.

In considering Liz Magor's exhibition, the professional viewer might at first conjure up analogies of survivalism in the art world: oppositional encampments, conflicted stakeholders, and the dialectic of disingenuous metaphor. On the other hand, the urban pedestrian coming in off the street might be reminded of an incident from the night before; about to disarm the alarm on his late model car, he notices a sleeping bag in the doorway of a light industrial building, along with some cardboard, a grocery cart jammed with things whose original value is lost, destined to be redirected to the ineffable demands of urban camping.

Whatever the cause, the instinct to pull into the shell is strong. Introversion seeks its form. The cabin waits. Given the urge, it's surprising that the country isn't dotted from coast to coast with these little forts. . . . For the rest of us, the Cabin in the Snow is best kept as an idea. A place where our true self resides knowing it has no real home in the world.³

In *Messenger* (pp.28, 31, 32), a work from 1996, Magor created a complex evocation of domestic retaliatory retreat. A cabin conjures nostalgic frontier images of pre-industrial settlement. Fitted up with a rag tag collection of military equipment, this environment articulates a self sufficient masculinity, fortified by the rigorous economy of function. The niceties of comfort and hospitality, which might imply a need for social engagement, have been banished.

I was almost forty, and was visiting my parents at their house in the winter. Every night my father ritually locked us all in: wooden bars placed in the sliding door channels, a little screw nested in the bolt lock under the

handle of the front door. If an intruder did smash the side window, they would still not be able to turn the knob; this was Dad's logic. During the night I heard a squalling sound, tortuous, rhythmic, and strangely human. Trying to get closer to the sound, I struggled unsuccessfully with the storm windows that were solidly snapped into place. I finally had to tell myself that it must only be foxes mating, not some sordid scenario of domestic violence across the field. But I realized that if the house were set on fire, we would never get out in time.

The need to control an environment is not unlike an artist's will to define their production of meaning. The creative process is hazardous, as one tries to find shelter while living in the muck. But this psychological terrain can be found in every household. To establish pattern and routine is reassuring. Mentally we organize our day, plan our wardrobe, rehearse the rhetoric of daily interactions. We create the identity that will facilitate our negotiation, incorporating the subtle social codes with which to fend off or establish contact.

In Magor's *Burrow* (1999; p. 60) and *Hollow* (1998–99; p. 59), the conditions of habitation are reduced to a hollow tree; their moulded exoskeletons force the soft body of a sleeping bag to adapt to their interior contours. There is comfort in these limited parameters, simplified to a world confined to sleep, the choice of deep retreat.

In *Stores*, there are no signs of shelter. The inhabitant has become a migrant, stability assured only by the secret knowledge of hidden sustenance. Food is the object of desire, and it exists in two extremes: vegetables as icons of good food coming out of the dirt, and their nemesis, junk food. The latter can be immediately consumed, quickly raising the sugar and salt levels for emergency repair. The former requires more equipment, patience, and planning. As if subscribing to the exhortations of a self-help book, the scavenger, within these binaries, is able to accommodate mood swings in their foraging strategy.

Complications can only exist as some ratio of the two options, making for some degree of freedom for the life of the mind.

Liz Magor's work is labour intensive, determined in its will to represent plausibility. One might imagine a lost career in special effects, although Magor's representation must withstand direct scrutiny, its illusionism not intended for the background of filmic approximation. The barely discernible shift of consciousness occurs with the realization that the camouflaging elements are not real, but are representations. With that, the hunting and foraging narrative fumbles. The work becomes self reflective, as we are caught in the details of its simulation. Moreover this simulation is not singular. The signs of production suggest that there may be multiple caches and calculated decoys, spread all over the map. We are not alone in our inner crisis of speculation and uncertainty, as we attempt to second guess the reason for the surface ruse. But as participants in this economy we are implicated. Caught out in the embattled terrain of our own dissembling, we are positioned for active thought. All bets are off, but we won't give this place up.

Notes

¹ Liz Magor, "White House Paint," *Real Fictions: Four Canadian Artists* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996) p. 55. ² *The Province* (Vancouver), 10 December, 1999, sec. A, p. 48. ³ Liz Magor, "Messenger," in *Liz Magor: Messenger* (Toronto: Toronto Sculpture Garden, 1996) n.p.