

The Unreal Familiarity of Liz Magor's Stuffed Animals

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Liz Magor, *Pet Co.* (detail), 2018, polyester film, textiles, paper, stuffed toys, rat skins, mixed media, 112 × 518 × 396 cm. Courtesy the artist and JW Anderson Ltd, London

Magor's dry absurdity highlights the measures we take to enjoy and endure the gaping nothingness of our everyday reality

While visiting this tightly selected survey of Liz Magor's recent work, I gawked like a stoned teenager at a scrap of iridescent foil. It sat inside a box made from wobbly, colourless translucent plastic, one of many that comprise the Canadian artist's installation *Pet Co* (2018). Each box contains materials and creature comforts selected to make sense-memories squall: stuffed animals, alternately brown and fluorescent; chocolate wrappers; and things made to protect other things, like pastel-hued packing paper. The plastic cartons might resemble Christmas presents under the tree of a very comfy family, were they not transparent and filled

more air than gift. Their mood is weirdly unreal familiarity.

Since the mid-aughts, Magor – whose art practice dates back to the 1970s – has used sculpture to entertain decadence, while remaining firmly grounded in a more conflicted position. Bottles of booze, chocolates, white dinner rolls and cigarettes have been major motifs. In *Leather Palm* (2019) – one of ten sculptures in this show, dispersed across two rooms and one large window space – a facsimile glove sits upon a wood-veneer table, a half-smoked cigarette impossibly teetering from its lower cuff, with ash settling in the sunken palm. Magor's sculptural technique largely entails setting various shades of realness against one another: while the cigarette is the genuine article, the glove was cast from polymerised gypsum; in mimicking wood, the table is both real and a slightly embarrassing fraud. This scale of various authenticities engages the mind in a stocktaking of reality, which feels good – like how meditation slows the mind while also waking it up.



Leather Palm, 2019 Polymerized gypsum, cigarette, metal, 36.5 x 28.5 cm. Photo: Anna Lukala. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

In *Delivery (Sienna)* (2018), a monkey cast in rubber dangles from masses of tangled string, clutching a Harry Rosen suit bag. It's as if the swanky bag had plummeted from a cliff, the primate sent in to rescue it. That work's playfulness is counterpointed, nearby, by quietly gutting vignettes: *Coiffed* (2020) is a low stage tidily laid out with domestic items: handpainted jewellery boxes, folded sheets, a small lion made from dull blue rubber whose dirtiness suggests many years spent in a garage. The lion's white hair evinces old age, its hollow grey-ringed eye sockets suggest death. Presumably this commodity was once inflated with life by its child companion. Now it shares the grim fate of its human creators. Sadness is not new to Magor's sculptures. What's new, as opposed to their earlier downcast earth tones, are their bright and sometimes Day-Glo colours, which curiously sharpen the work's mortal connotations – while departing a greyish world might be a relief, the thought of being ripped from dazzling polychrome existence is almost unbearable.



Coiffed, 2020, painted plywood, fabric skirting, silicone rubber, artificial hair, acrylic throw, woollen blankets, silver fabric, linen, jewellery boxes, costume jewellery, packaging materials, 69 x 335 x 244 cm. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

To the extent that Magor's past work has been funny, its humour has tended towards dry absurdity, highlighting the measures we take to enjoy and endure lives bracketed by gaping nothingness. In previous works, cigarettes were hoarded within cast piles of polymerised gypsum clothing, and orange cheesy snacks under piled rocks. During the last decade her humour has become more puckish. *Oilmen's Bonspiel* (2017) is a small chimera, its face and giant pouting eyes borrowed from a stuffed animal the colour of strawberry marshmallows, its body pieced together from an old sock puppet and knitted sweater. This is, in the best sense a child's way of playing god.

In making the emotion-brain complex jump and spark, this creature's glinting plastic eyes share an effect with cigarettes, and the aforementioned foil. Magor's work has a way of pushing its viewer to consider that this manipulation of our emotional receptors might count for something important, despite the less-than-ideal implications of the commodities in question – cigarettes being harbingers of death, twinkly plastics a toxic symptom of rapacious consumerism. The question of what this important thing might be is rightly left unanswered. This work is accordingly less akin to a guide for healthy living than to a pair of booster cables, energising the unconscious libidinal dilemmas of all industrialised, capitalised, materialised, consumerised, endlessly compromised people.

**The Rise and The Fall at *Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea*,
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