

# Reality, Art and Life: the work of Liz Magor

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Liz Magor, installation view of *Shoe World* (detail; 2018), as shown in *BLOWOUT* at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2019. © Liz Magor Photo: Useful Art Services

The gentle curl of plinth at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts this past winter was tidy almost to a fault: All along its curving surface were neat little boxes with clear plastic lids containing an array of personal objects — a pair of high heels, slippers, sandals. Life, under glass. On its edge sat a mostly-finished mug of coffee — left, maybe, by an absent-minded installer? How long has it been here? Isn't somebody going to take it away?

The answer, simply, is no: Vancouver sculptor Liz Magor put it there, puncturing the bubble between gallery and outside world, art and life, in her typically wry fashion. When it comes to questioning art's role in the world, few artists have a touch both so light and so deft. Magor

creates sealed systems of strange mystery and then deliberately cracks them open to let reality come flooding through. *Blowout*, the exhibition co-commissioned by the Carpenter Center and Chicago's The Renaissance Society, where it is currently on view, is no exception. A collision of the mundane and surreal, the show leaves you swimming in a sense of the uncanny.



Liz Magor, *The Rules*, 2012. Driftwood, and paint, 185.5 x 457 x 74 cm installed National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Liz Magor  
Photo: NGC

Some might expect Magor, now 70 and the winner of almost every major prize Canada has to offer, to be looking more back than forward. The National Gallery of Canada holds a representative group of her work, ranging from 1979 to 2012 (her installation sculpture *The Rules* is currently on view), and the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal hosted a 30-year career retrospective in 2016 that travelled internationally to Switzerland, France and Germany. So it is a lovely surprise to find a broad-ranging exhibition in the US that is almost entirely new work.

As one of Canada's best-loved and most influential artists, Magor's canonic status at home has rarely resulted in breakthroughs south of the border and this is only the artist's second solo exhibition in the US. Daniel Byers, the Carpenter's director, had seen the Montreal retrospective and it moved him, together with Solveig Øvstebø of the Renaissance Society, to make a bold offer: a new commission and carte blanche. The result is a cluster of work that feels familiar while poking at new territory in a long and fully-formed career. Still, *Blowout* has one looking



back, at the residue of revelry run amok in Magor's *Stack* series, carrying a bizarre array of cast-offs – broken mickey bottles, Chiclets, paper cupcake liners, a chunk of wall, an enormous, withered rat carcass.



Liz Magor, *Stack (Racoon)*, 2009. Polymerized gypsum, pigments, wood, cardboard, ash, and paint, 144.5 x 50.8 x 38.1 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Liz Magor Photo: NGC

As with all her best work, Magor casts the specimens of an aftermath in a sort of amber and leaves the backstory to us. Her latest works feel less like revelry, more funereal, in fact, a tidy postscript to a life no longer being lived. What happens when one dies will forever be subject to

some kind of debate or another – ashes to ashes and all that – but what one leaves behind in this material realm is far less ambiguous a subject. Look at any landfill, and you'll see what I mean. *Blowout* may not have a specifically eulogistic function in mind, but it works as one all the same. In the installation work *Pet Co.* an array of blocky semi-transparent mylar boxes are bunched together like a scale-model cityscape. Their occupants, though, have no way out: Scraps of fabric – I noticed teal synthetic tuile and a strip of leopard print – are encased as though in solid blocks of resin; forlorn stuffed animals squat inside with a tragically absurd, preternatural stillness (one little walrus, chin angled hopefully upward, seemed to all but say "Help me").



Liz Magor, installation view of *Pet Co.* (detail; 201) at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2019. © Liz Magor Photo: Useful Art Services

Magor's work has never been without a sense of humour, or at least of the absurd – like her majestic hollowed-out tree trunks fitted with manky sleeping bags. For me, that has always been the gateway to a deeper consideration of both ideas and materials. Magor's "captives" are, ironically, cast-offs, culled from the Salvation Armies and Value Villages near her Lower Mainland studio in British Columbia. It is a sly reversal: They are the unwanted, whom the sculptor has chosen to preserve in antiseptic, airless purity, transferring their inherent

worthlessness into something beyond conventional value: Art. At the same time, there's something doting, almost loving, in Magor's careful preservation of the careworn and abandoned. We've seen it before, in the beautifully tatty blankets she marks with gestures of maternal care – holes fused with colored resin, rips in the fabric sutured back together with a gentle, colourful flair.

The idea of the domestic – women's work, elevated to something almost spiritual – is never far from the surface in Magor's work, and so she draws attention not just to her cast of cast-offs, but the typical short shrift given to women's contributions in society's ongoing evolution. I look at one of those blankets and I am reminded of what I already know: That amid all the drama, women have always been the ones holding it together. Magor's work makes us look, and look again, and with a little luck, really see.

***BLOWOUT* is on view at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, to June 23, 2019. Liz Magor's *The Rules* is on view in B103 at the National Gallery of Canada, for details of her other works see the online collection. Share this article and subscribe to our newsletters to stay up-to-date on the latest articles, Gallery exhibitions, news and events, and to learn more about art in Canada.**

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## About the Author

Murray Whyte is an award-winning journalist at the Boston Globe. Previously, he was the art critic at the *Toronto Star* and has published articles in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* (UK), *The Times* of London, *The New York Observer*, *Esquire* magazine and *Details* magazine, among others.