

Liz Magor

by Nicholas Brown

Liz Magor's recent sculptures are a danger to themselves. Abandoned trays replete with lifelike leavings from yesterday's parties, they frequently risk damage from real glasses and plates carelessly discarded next to them at gallery receptions. Her facsimiles of edibles and their containers, as well as other materials like clothing items, tree stumps and driftwood can be so convincing as to pass unnoticed by viewers used to the presence of ready-mades in the gallery. This is the sort of work that's inadvertently thrown away by maintenance staff. Magor's process of casting sculptures in polymerized gypsum (an industrial material capable of greater synthetic detail than plaster due to its hardness when formed) from real objects simultaneously asserts these reference objects while displacing them with their uncanny copy.

And yet the uncanny experience here is related to the act of looking, of discovering that we can be deceived by the material's ability to masquerade as the real. One must look closely to notice that things aren't as they seem: a waxen ashtray, curiously drained of hue, contains a lumpy and resolutely unacceptable fake mouse, though it sits atop an utterly compelling metallic tray (each object composed of the same material). Elsewhere, viewers discover real cigarette butts—a recurring theme for Magor, who insists on smoking her own as both research and method—littered amongst fakes. In cases where the fake is so convincing as to fool the most scrutinizing eye, the work's meaning is uncovered by reading the lists of materials posted on the wall or hand-out. Thus, Magor's works oscillate between an affirmation and a frustration of our senses. Even as we apprehend the material facts of the things before us, we are nonetheless confronted with the enigma of their existence in the first place. The compelling matter-of-factness of the object is so strong in many cases that it causes us to ignore the issue of their referentiality. Cast from originals (which we have no direct access to), Magor's objects take on a surrogate role that threatens to collapse the distinction between sculpture and reference.

It is this status as sculpture that makes them uniquely suspect. Unlike tromp-l'oeil painting, which employs established techniques to convince the viewer that they are looking through a window into a fully formed environment, here each object is a material fact, asserting its identity by what it is made of. It is not merely a question of illusionistic technique, but of the exact copy—the one-to-one. Philip Monk, linking the artist's sculpture to her earlier photographic output, has observed, "Magor's mould-cast relationship is the crux of her work," going on to offer, "the sculpture seals the surface in a deceptive act."¹ This artificial surface, accompanied as it frequently is with unaltered artifacts from the real world, cannot help but raise niggling questions of authenticity that nudge us towards considerations of what came first.

It is at this point that my observation that Magor faithfully replicates her source objects might not be sitting well with some viewers. One might question the verity of the surrealistic, indeed phantasmagoric qualities of works like *Stack of Trays* (2008), in which seven trays pile high, their uneven stack revealing an apparently sleeping rat nestled amongst the comestibles, liquor bottles and cigarette packs. There is nothing straightforward about this relationship, neither in the odd juxtaposition of things and bodies, nor in our awareness that they are rearranged facsimiles of objects taken out of the world and into the artist's studio. Unlike many other artists who traffic in copies, Magor insists on performing the moulding and casting process herself. From her perspective, this is chiefly a matter of process (she formulates this as a question of developing "an ability to find things that would otherwise be hidden"²), but it also affects how we relate what we see to human processes. What may appear to our trained eyes as a readymade is in fact collected, manipulated, and repeatedly contacted all over for impressions that result in its mould. The artist herself acknowledges the nature of this departure from the notion of the readymade, stating, "a readymade has not gone



through a material transformation... it is a language game, not influenced by looking."³ Thus, Magor's sculpture is equally about the transformative qualities of replication of an object into an entirely different material, and about the scopic possibilities of its display in a gallery.

In a body of work that indirectly indexes the body—sculptures manually traced from source objects, themselves harvested from the artist's surrounds—it should be noted that no actual human forms are found in Magor's sculptural output (rodents are another story, but it might be said that they function as detritus objects alongside the cigarette butts and gum wrappers). Unlike many of her peers in the field of sculptural simulacra, such as Ron Mueck and Evan Penny, Magor's work refrains from the spectacle of human cloning and the whole creepy "uncanny valley" phenomenon. Yet, somehow her work feels all the more uncanny for its object-centeredness. Away from the grotesque qualities of simulated flesh and sinew, Magor's work simultaneously narrows and widens the gap of human identification. Rather than confronting people with their own image cleverly duplicated, Magor sets up distorted mise-en-scenes that offer a greater power of estrangement by avoiding the directness of the body simulated.

Compared with the deathmask preservation of the above artists, the weight of mortality similarly hangs in Magor's trays and tablecloths. As though plucking the flowers and rotting fruit out of the vanitas paintings of 17th century Dutch masters, Magor presents us with our own fleeting desires and the exhaustion of the after-party lull. Walking amongst these ossified pieces, we are subtly confronted as we take our own leisure. Thus is the indeterminacy of an object that simultaneously fools one viewer into resting his drink on its table (that is, its base), while prompting another to reconsider their appetite for excess.

¹ P. Monk "Playing Dead: Between Photography and Sculpture" in *Liz Magor exhibition catalogue*, Power Plant and Vancouver Art Gallery 2002

² *Liz Magor*, interview by Jen Hutton in *WHAT IT REALLY IS exhibition catalogue*, Red Bull 381 Projects, 29.

³ 28.