

Remember when I was shoes?

There is something about the colors of Liz Magor's sculptures. The objects seem to be blushing. They seem to know that they're on view and are not entirely comfortable with it. They are a bit more modest than other objects. They know that they were made by hands that cared to make them. They know that they were found by hands that cared to find them. They know they have been matched up with their mates. Someone found their soul mate for them. Or someone found them their soul mates. They and their soul mates are in an off-kilter relationship, slightly, but also a perfect relationship, a harmony, slightly. Like in any relationship, between these objects there is a vibration, an accord and a discord, and this keeps the energy flowing. It keeps things interesting.

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There are no people in Liz Magor's work, and it's easy to understand why. She spends a lot of time in the studio with her materials. Who would want to spend that much time with other people? Or even representations of people? The emotions of people are out of control. The emotions of objects radiate, but they have boundaries. The emotions of a person are in relation to *you*. The emotions that radiate from an object are in relation to everything around the object, rather democratically. Objects are unlike people in this way. People pick specific people to have strong emotions for, and to

Shoe World (detail), 2018.



Sheila Heti, 'Remember when I was shoes?', *Liz Magor: BLOWOUT*, Carpenter Center for the Arts, The Renaissance Society, 2019

receive strong emotions from. Objects are not so exclusive. They will radiate with whatever objects are near.

Because Liz Magor is a person, she chooses the objects that will be near the other objects. Humans have to choose. We are compelled by our likes as much as by our dislikes, and what doesn't move us has no place in our world. We are drawn to beauty and to bitterness, to novelty and to the banal. The banal becomes less banal if we love it. It is a great human power to love something unloved, to show it to other people as though it were special; and the alchemy of our love, and just the act of showing it, makes it special. Who needs the physical representation of a person in this scene? Obviously a person put it there. Obviously a person is seeing it. What are we seeing, really? Liz Magor's seeing. And we are seeing our own seeing, too.

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The question of emotion comes up a great deal—in our lives, in conversations about how people buy things in order to feel things. When we buy something perfect and mass-produced that has not been touched in a creative way by human hands, we feel nothing. We don't even feel uneasy. The touch of human hands, and how the human transforms whatever she touches, makes us uneasy because people make us uneasy. Liz Magor's sculptures and assemblages have an uneasy feeling attached to them because we can feel the person there. We feel the person more because she seems to be hiding. If what looks like a yarn sweater is really not yarn but is only impersonating yarn, we know a person was there, and so we feel uneasy. A person only does things because she has some purpose or intention behind what she does, whether she knows what that purpose is or not. It is hard and exhausting to be acted on by another person. People who don't like art have had enough of being acted upon by people. Why would they choose that on their Sunday off? It is a reasonable position for a person to take.

One feels that the shoes in this exhibition are similarly exhausted. They have lived a life with other people, and even though they have been discarded, they still have to keep living. They are fated to live as art now. Once they belonged to somebody, which

was responsibility enough. Now they belong to the world of symbols. That is an even greater task. They have been given some magic to help them in this task, so they don't have to do it all on their own. The magic is in how they are altered, in the box Liz Magor has made for them, in a shoe horn added, in whatever she knew they would need in order to continue the life of a shoe that has been discarded and then rehabilitated into a different world—the world of art.

One doesn't feel the feelings of the shoe (that's not what I'm describing) but the feelings that Liz Magor feels for the shoe. Something about this shoe made it the chosen one. It didn't ask to be chosen. Liz Magor chose it, based on her own intuitions, knowledge, experience, and feelings, her memories and associations, her sense of beauty and her eye for beauty in decline. These orphan shoes seem to me like none of them were up for the task at first, but they make a good show of it. Objects work for us, not unwillingly, like obedient pets, because it's their job. These shoes were manufactured by humans and for humans. Their work is not done yet.

We don't know anything more about the shoes because we don't know anything more about Liz Magor. She could have picked these shoes because she liked them, or because she disliked them, or because they gave her a charge, or because they gave her no charge at all. These shoes do not tell an autobiographical story.



She is using the shoes. The shoes are standing in for the entire world of objects that can be arranged. An artist arranges objects, in part, to settle their interior life temporarily, to achieve a kind of nullness. The interior becomes more null as the arrangement becomes more perfect because the artist externalizes their interior, thus ridding them of it and coming closer to peace and calm. It is the most peaceful and calm thing not to have one's interior, to have it be outside of oneself, where it can be looked at, manipulated, molded, reproduced, painted, and put in some kind of harmony with the things of the world, as opposed to when feelings are inside your body and the things of the world are divided from these feelings by the barrier of self and skin.

Inside of Liz Magor and inside of myself are shoes, cigarettes, whiskey bottles, blankets, clothes brought home from the dry cleaner's store, animals, boxes, leather jackets, Cheetos, chocolates, tree trunks, dead mice, trays.

Once these things have come out, they are not inside you anymore. The work of the artist has made what existed inside her into a ghost. If an artist lived five hundred years, a thousand years, at the end of her life there would be nothing left inside to externalize, and that would be a perfect, utterly detached existence. She could walk through her exhibits and remember the past. This past would be her past, and the past of history. Remember when civilization had mice in it? Remember when it had shoes? And what is the difference between civilization and one of its citizens? Remember when I was a mouse? Remember when I was shoes?

Yes, someone says, touching the objects, touching the now-dead me. *And you were very beautiful then.*

Thank you, sir. I tried.

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Liz Magor has said, "When I'm out in the world looking at things, I look past the people and see their accoutrements, their buildings, their accessories and implements. When I see a movie or a play, I'm clocking the sets, the costumes, the props. There is a population of things that exists in concert with the population of people, and the choreography between the two is so synchronized that it's difficult to determine who or what is directing the action."

I have never looked at the world of things. I have only looked at the world of people. Perhaps that is the difference between a sculptor and a fiction writer. I have never clocked *sets, costumes, props*. I have never considered the *population of things* or the choreography between things and people, except to feel, *This room needs to be tidied up.*

Liz Magor's sculptures seem to me to have feelings about being in the world of people, and they make me feel pity for the world of things. Her shoes, boxes, sweaters, birds seem to be sinking down into themselves, down into the world, as though there is a heaviness to being an object in this teeming world of people

Shoe World (detail), 2018.



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who, like me, often don't notice they're there—don't clock their actual synchronicity with our lives. The world of things can be quite unloved. How is this possible in a world such as ours when we spend so much money to acquire things, and pay so much attention to what we want to acquire, and when our things are our main means of showing off? Because the things-in-themselves are neglected in favor of what we ask them to mean for us.

When Liz Magor takes someone's discarded shoes, we understand that they already lost whatever meaning they once had in the world of their original owner. That is why the shoes were thrown out. Because they became nothing.

We can look at them as independent beings now. They lost their job, which gave them their identity, like anyone who has over-identified with their role and then had their role snatched away.

Now they stand before us, as themselves. As objects shorn out of the relationship that gave them their most obvious meaning.

In this way, they are humble, but they also have dignity.

One sees them and feels a bit sad. We are also shorn of our meaning, of the most important relationships that were supposed to give us our identity and our purpose on this earth—the relationship of us to the cosmos, of us to nature, of us to each other, of us to our souls, and to God. What do we have left, when all this has gone and left us abandoned at the used-shoe depot? That is how it feels to be a human now: like we are shoes donated to a Salvation Army. We make do the best we can.

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The Salvation Army saves the souls of these discarded objects by putting them on offer to Liz Magor, so they can be turned into art, which is their salvation. They get to exist as the essence of a shoe, without having to do the drudge-like work of a shoe. They are dead; their souls have risen and now they exist in the symbolic realm, just like the dead do. The dead exist in our imaginations as

symbolic figures: *mother, father*. The dead shoe exists there, too. We walk into the gallery as into a mausoleum. All art is religious art. Even when nothing saves us.

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"In this culture we have a lot of access to subjectivity. I don't need more people," Liz Magor once said. "What I need is an understanding of the meeting or interface of subjectivity with the material world. I know that my mind charges the world with significance. I don't know if that's innate, the product of some function in the brain, or whether it's learned, but I'm aware of the incessant operation of meaning-making I'm engaged in, the constant apprehension and interpretation of everything I see or encounter. It's exhausting really, and strangely unsatisfying. The drive to name and understand and rationalize actually results in the opposite of meaning.... I need to find the equivalent of the mind in the things that are around me so that I can rest, leave my mind in things, let go of ideas, and take a break."

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She has done this for the shoes: they are at rest, they have been granted a break. They are not rationalized by being walked around in. They are not useful. They are not doing their originally intended job. They are like a mind at rest. If the shoes are Liz Magor's mind, and the shoes are at rest—off the job, as it were—then so is the mind, divorced from the way it was intended to act. If the shoes are in an alternate reality where they don't have to be shoes, maybe in this same reality the mind doesn't have to be a mind (always figuring things out) and the soul doesn't have to be a soul (always aspiring to something greater).

There is nothing to figure out when looking at these shoes, in the museum. Here is a place where your mind can rest. Your mind doesn't have to think about Consumerism, Capitalism, Feminism, or Art. It can do what a discarded shoe does: nothing. It can let go of its originally intended job. Your mind need not name what it



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is seeing, or understand, or rationalize. It need not charge these shoes with significance or charge their arrangement with meaning. If it is possible for a shoe to step away from a foot, then it is possible for a mind to step away from meaning.

A shoe cannot step away from a foot, but a person can remove the shoe from the foot and put it in a gallery. Can a person remove from their mind all meaning? There will always be the feet of the visitors, standing near the shoes, and there will always be the minds of visitors, hovering near with meanings.

There is no better world, here on earth. There is nothing greater. Shoes belong to feet, and minds belong to meaning.

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Liz Magor wrote, "My question to a writer is simply, what means are used to empty a narrative of its ostensible subject in order to let it fill with its latent subject?"

The ostensible subject is always the *I* of the creator. The latent subject is always the *you* of the viewer. The writer and the artist empty the narrative (or the object) of the *I* of its creator by continual and endless manipulation, so that what ends up on display is something that is more a product of the creator's aesthetic sense, not of their personal history. An artist's aesthetic sense lives inside her body like something separate from herself. Some people call this *a vision*. It may be the transcendent part of ourselves—the impersonal part that apprehends on a very deep level the actual architecture, physics, mathematics, symbolism, and beauty of the universe. Some aspect or angle of this is what the artist is trying to externalize. If what is actually put forth on display has the same dimensions, relationships, and rules as a forest or as the stars in the sky, then the latent *you* can find itself in it—can see itself looking back.

No artist ever gets there completely, but this is what we aspire to. This is what Liz Magor aspires to when she takes the shoes and boxes, alters them, and puts them in the room; her intention is to have all these things assembled in such a way that, in essence, they give you the feeling of looking up at the sky at night, or of gazing out at the waves of the sea, or looking down at the

forest floor. In all these experiences, there is space for the latent *you* to emerge. Which is not the *you* of your personality. It is the *you* denuded of your roles, of your tasks, your responsibilities, your title, and your name. This is the *you* the artist hopes to draw forth. This is the same *I* she aspires to be working from. And when the nasty, bothersome, uninteresting, and claustrophobic *I* of roles and responsibilities steps forth, the working has to temporarily stop.

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“What means are used to empty a narrative of its ostensible subject?” Liz Magor asks the writer. For Liz Magor, the means involves changing the medium of the object as our eyes expect it to be: yarn is now steel. She also displaces locale and function.

What about the writer, who is ostensibly writing about her mother, but the latent subject is something else: say the idea of *mother* in the mind of reader, or the reader’s own mother, or her own self?

The process is the same: the more the material of language is manipulated from its source—the original expression on the page—the more the narrative is emptied of its ostensible subject, *I*. The subject becomes *itself*—the language, the sentences, the flow, the music, the harmony and unity of the whole, of the paragraphs and the words.

The artist does this too, as when Liz Magor once said, “I try in the studio to perform the inquiry in a different way each time, coming at the same question from a different angle. What if there’s more color, more beauty? What if there’s more system and rigor? What if there’s a narrative drive? What if there’s more feeling? How does the scale work? Where does the thing rest or sit?”

The writer asks, “What if there’s more rhythm? What if there’s less? What if there’s more sense? What if there’s less? What if there’s more story? What if there’s less? What if there’s more character? What if there’s less?”

The ideal we share is the same: *as much color, beauty, system, rigor, narrative drive, feeling, scale and rhythm, sense and story and character as there is in the great, impersonal universe which we, as humans, encounter.*

This is why making art never gets old. The task is a deeply impossible one. It is an ideal one. It tugs on all our ideals—that we could be impersonal enough to impersonate the truly beautiful, absolutely complex, rich with meaning and meaningless universe.

A shoe has no less rights to be representative of the Totality than the stars in the sky themselves do. And the studio where one tinkers, or the document on the computer, can be a laboratory as bursting with possibilities (and only one right, possible outcome) as the laboratory of the human soul. The heaviness of Liz Magor's sculptures, the way they seem to sink in on themselves, is because of their absolute humility. The great saints say the first step towards God is humility. These shoes are taking their first step towards God. They are blushing. They blush to be seen doing this, and they blush at their grand aspiration. They blush in their nakedness; the naked ambition of matter to be more—to be the site of everything and the ideal, while existing as the particular and the degraded. Any prayer could begin, *I am a discarded shoe, who was found by an artist, and put here. I pray to be much more than a shoe, and I pray to be much less than a shoe, and I pray to be not more or less than a shoe. Help me, God, for I find it impossible to be all of these, or any of these, or neither.*

I could say a prayer for her shoes: *May you be more than a shoe, and less than a shoe, and only a shoe.* I could pray for the feet of the visitors: *May your feet be cushioned in a pair of shoes you will see no cause to discard.* This is a prayer to God, *Don't discard me.*