

Momus

These Are Not Ideas; These Are Things: A Conversation with Liz Magor

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Liz Magor claims her “space between the mould and the cast.” It’s a pronouncement reified by thirty years of installation and sculpture that reads tentatively, delicately, inscrutably, and sometimes misleadingly. In person, though, Magor is totally resolved. She communicates an uncanny clarity and determinacy, a dedicated idea of her practice, revealing nothing of the obfuscation or ambivalence that her work sometimes conveys. When she speaks, she imparts fully-realized meditations, as though threaded from a safe in her chest where she keeps them coolly spooled. Magor is slow and assured and wholly articulate. She insists on saying things simply. Indeed, on the occasion of her 2014 Iskowitz Prize exhibition at the AGO, *Surrender*, we walk through her spare show, peopled by the appearance of a sleeping Husky (*Siberian Husky*, 1990) and crowded with her famed *One Bedroom Apartment* (1996), and during this tour she establishes her markers of import by a list of exclusions. Among these are nostalgia (she has no use for it), home (it’s not a painful notion, just “work”), and conceptualism (“I’m totally against ideas. Ideas are a dime a dozen”). Magor is one of the most articulate and poetic thinkers I’ve had the pleasure of interviewing, though I’m not sure her cogency goes reflected in the words below, as so much of it flowed from inflection. I felt, let it be said, completely convinced that the indeterminacy of her work stems from me (from us?) than anything else.

Looking at *One Bedroom Apartment*, with its collection of boxes and wrapped furniture, I’m made to wonder about your relationship to the process of moving. For a lot of people it’s considered a traumatic event ...

I’m with you on that. [*Laughs*] So that’s the nerve I’m interested in [touching]: why would moving be so bad? Often you’re moving to a better place. Often the move is voluntary (it’s a tragedy if it’s not voluntary, let’s put it that way). Often you’re moving to another city, moving in with your boyfriend. However, in the process of going towards that goal, whatever we’ve chosen, we have to throw all our stuff in the air, and it’s painful. Because that stuff is supposed to be our pacifiers. So when they’re disrupted, it’s not that pleasant. Then the recognition that all that stuff you bought for pleasure – even the buying is pleasurable – it’s all just a great big lead boot. You get to the truth of it when you move. I don’t like getting to the truth of it. [*Laughs*]

I think about your work, especially this one, in its relationship to home, and the realization that you can’t get home again. James Agee articulates this in *A Death in the Family*, that you can try to get home again, that it’s good to try, but you’ll never get all the way home again. Unless you have a little child of your own ... he gets into a familial aspect of trying to turn the corner on your own pain by creating a home for someone else. What is home for you? Is it a painful idea?

No, just that it’s work all the time. You have to maintain the center, even though the center is moving. By the center I mean, you might call it home. [Agee’s] probably referring to the idea you form as a child. And then you’re kind of cast out of paradise — you have to pay your own rent, and it’s never the same again. But I don’t lament that; I’m used to that. It’s part of my human job to feel familiar in the world outside of my parents’ house. And for me, that’s a long time ago. I remember ... the thing I called normal? – I was never at a normal place again. Normal doesn’t really exist, except for children. So it’s not painful; it’s normal to be abnormal, normal to be disrupted all the time. This isn’t trauma.

I’m sort of interested in the below-the-radar traumas, which are more like irritants, small anxieties. Things are always breaking. You drop things on your clothes. There’s a general entropy and destruction going on in your life. It’s not like your roof is caving in, but there’s a lot of stuff that you

are responsible for, and it fails. A constant humiliation. The failure of it.

Let's talk a bit about media. There's a moment in [a frieze review](#) of your work where the author picked up on how a lot of artists would, if they were trying to articulate similar fallibilities and insecurities, do it through performance or the body or, anyway, less tangible media than what you're electing to use. How do you perceive this comment? How do you account for your choice of such solid media in communicating such instability?

I think my choice is consistent with the subject, in the sense that if my subject is the relationship I have, including my body and my mind, with the inanimate or the material, it is this soft, amorphous thing called *me* bumping up against this hard, intransigent, uncooperative thing called *hard material*. It's not me bumping into the movies, or TV, because they're mutable and manageable. These things are not. They don't listen, they don't cooperate. They were created to sit still, and be at my service. That sofa [*gestures across the room to One Bedroom Apartment*] is my servant. It's not my fantasy. So when I think of media that is more mobile, it's equivalent to the imagination; whereas that's equivalent to my body. Because my body is also not that responsive to my desires. I can't make it the shape I want. If it's sick I can't heal it, exactly. I like the intransigence of this.

So my processes are difficult. I'm not conceptual. I don't say, "oh I have this great idea." I say, "oh, I have this material with this characteristic. I'm going to explore the characteristic and see what's unseen so far in its behavior." I use the casting material a lot because it flows; it's liquid at one point. And it will flow into any shape I provide, and it will mime that shape. These are not ideas; these are things. I'm totally against ideas. Ideas are a dime a dozen. [*Laughs*]

You said in a talk at [FIAC](#) that you wanted to empower the idea of zero. There's a nice elusiveness to that. What did you mean?

If I create a longing for a state or a life I would like to have, or things I would like to touch or be with ... if I am engaged in that longing incessantly or thoroughly, I turn them into idols, idols for things I don't even have. And while I'm doing that I'm probably sitting in a chair that I do have. My bum is on it. [*Laughs*] So I think, "what if I flip it and idolize the things that I do have, and I look at them so hard that they become important?" Because I give them my full attention? So the extreme version of that would be to say nothing is everything; zero, dust is important. I can do that for a few moments [at a time]. I can't do it forever, I'm not a Buddhist. But for a moment. And as an artist I want to go for those things that have fallen down, and been discarded, and find in them the allure they had when they were first picked up.

The relevant term for your projected or perceived allocation of meaning in a used, even historic object, might be aura. Is that a term you think about?

Aura is – it comes directly from us. There is some phenomenology in the idea of aura, so there is some material reality in aura. So aura's pretty good. [*Laughs*] Yeah, I'm interested. But I also would go into the auratic space and –

Muck around? –

Yeah, muck around. I would go in and drill a hole in it and say, "what are you made of?" [*Laughs*] So I don't stay in that dream space. I want both. I want that dream to be about what is around me now, in every moment. That's why I don't really deal with pop culture. I'm not doing rifts on TV shows or music because it's already quite famous.

It doesn't need you.

Yeah, it doesn't need me. It's redundant, my efforts are wasted there.

You have some objects here that make me think of my mother, and her mother, though. They're already becoming signifiers.

Yeah, they're becoming signifiers. It's like when you're driving on the highway and those lights are coming toward you: they're like signifiers. And then it passes you and you see what kind of car it is and who's in there. Those things, I don't know if they're receding or advancing. They might be receding for someone your age because they're coming out of your grandmother's view and into yours. But to her, they might be going back. She probably doesn't want to see them again, while they're exotic for you.

That's an interesting way to invert the common narrative of nostalgia.

Yeah, everyone's in a different place when it comes to the trajectory of their intersection with the things in this room. So I don't have a meaning for them, exactly. I just want them to be here with some degree of charm that I know is latent in them. So I pull up the charm with a bit of sparkle. And then often people say [my work is like] I've cleaned up after a party. I didn't mean to do it that way, like the scene after a party. I don't have moral or narrative or fixed [meaning].

Right. The artist I associate with you, however adjacently, is Iris Häussler. And yet she's stringing a narrative through, or certainly laying the narrative crumbs for us, in a way you're really not.

Yeah, I just truncate it. I just say, "it's an excerpt, one frame out of a film." Maybe I can imagine a beginning and an end, but it would be different for everybody.

Do you have an instinct around that? A water's edge that you bring things to, narratively, but know not to go beyond?

I'll try. Like sometimes I let it go quite far along – like probably the dog there [*Siberian Husky*, 1990] is quite far along, narratively, because it's quite articulated. I call him a Siberian Husky, for instance. There's a lot of things where I play with sentiment and mortality. I get as close as I can to the brink of "suck," and then sometimes I fall in. But I'm not cynical, I'm not ironic; I don't want to be detached. I don't want to be afraid of attachment even though it's full of hazard and ... it's expensive. To get stuff to –

Oh you mean it's expensive literally! Not just in the sense of emotionally taxing ...

No! I mean literally. I mean you have to have a lot of privilege to be attached to things. Look at the migrants, they can't even carry a bag. If they want to keep going they have to drop, and drop, and drop.

***Being This* (2012) feels different – it's more directional, more citational.**

I was trying something. It came after the blankets. With the blankets I was trying to identify them through their affiliation, their label, and their material. So if they say, "all wool," you think to yourself, "okay, that's pretty good." And if they say, "made in Scotland," you go, "oh hey, *that's* pretty good!" So in the hugeness of the things that come floating towards us we have to do some quick sorting. And so even though we don't want to look at labels, we do; we do that probably for each other, too [label and sort each other]. So I started looking at labels. I go to Value Village, it's like my archive for the world. I started finding things that had labels of stores that were in Vancouver when I was fourteen – that was when I started my retail experience. I would start finding these and then keep the garment and the label; and I knew that all those stores had disappeared in Vancouver.

There's this constant change, something you don't realize until you find a record or a photograph that reminds me how momentous and constant the change is. I started making these as though they accepted that change. Each one of them is incoherent and has no center. Even though it's wanting to say, [as the work points to its own label with a gloved finger], "I'm something. I hope I'm something." [*Laughs*] So with all that turmoil – not just human but material turmoil, the churning of stuff is enormous.

I'm noticing the title of the exhibition, *Surrender*, on one of these labels. What's the

significance of this show's title?

Titles are hard; you can see they're fairly literal. I do them mostly just to identify things [for myself]. I don't want the titles to tell you how to view, though. But it does seem that all the works have some relationship to the inevitable, inexorable deal that you have to make with the material world, and that you can't boss it around. And that at some point it might be that our things give the narrative to our life, as opposed to us giving the narrative to theirs. The relationship might not be as unequal as we think it is. I surrender to that.