

Liz Magor tackles the meaning of things in MAC exhibition Habitude



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Liz Magor's *Being This*: One of 24 boxes, featuring paper, textiles, found objects. "I look for objects trying too hard," Magor says. "We use the material world as props or mask – to augment or disguise ourselves." **SITE PHOTOGRAPHY / COURTESY OF CATRIONA JEFFRIES, VANCOUVER**

Old wool blankets and discarded sweaters that were probably never quite right. A reconstruction of a furnished cabin that looks as if it is inhabited by someone anti-social or broke. Logs and trays. Boxes, bricks and birds. A couple of chairs.

There is a great deal to see in Habitude, Liz Magor's engrossing new exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MAC); the show is the largest to date of the work of the leading Canadian contemporary artist, and it offers much to think about.

Much of Magor's work focuses on material culture and consumerism — what things are and their role in society, the relationship between a gallery space and the outside world, and the relationship between making objects, found objects and discarded objects, explained Lesley Johnstone, MAC curator and head of exhibitions and education. "She brings us along in this discussion she is having with us of what they are, and of how what is made and what is found speak to each other."

Johnstone co-curated Habitude with Dan Adler, a professor at York University, and representatives of museums in Zurich and Hamburg, where the exhibition will open, in slightly different form, in 2017. The show, which includes work Magor created and produced between 1975 and 2016, features 75 pieces and focuses on sculptures and installations. It took two years to plan.

Large-scale installations like Production (1980), a wall of 2,500 bricks she fashioned by soaking newspapers in water and pressing them through a machine, coexist with pieces created on a more intimate scale, like the wall-based The Most She Weighed / The Least She Weighed (1982).

One of the exhibition's four rooms features four imposing works: three of large logs (1999) and one of a pile of rocks (2000). "I like thinking about weight and volume and physicality ... I want people to think of them as massive, as obstacles in their path, not objects," said Magor during a walk-through of the exhibition before it opened.

An early work, Sowing Weeds in Lanes and Ditches (1976), features seeds, grass, boxes, garden gloves, books, tools, clay pots and other implements on a wooden shelf. At the time, "I wasn't quite sure it was art ... maybe I hoped

art would change enough to accommodate me,” she said. Today the piece is in the collection of the Canada Council Art Bank.



Artist Liz Magor: “I am interested in making objects that live with other objects. I want my things to live in the world of things — even though I know they are in a different category.”
COURTESY LIZ MAGOR

Born in 1948 in Winnipeg, Magor has called the Vancouver area home for much of her life. She has represented Canada at the Venice Biennale and received the Governor General’s Award, the Audain Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts, and the Gershon Iskowitz Prize. Her work has been in international exhibitions, and she has influenced a new generation of Canadian sculptors, as Johnstone told a packed house while introducing a public lecture by the artist Monday night.

Magor works with a range of materials, including old clothes she finds at places like Value Village. A number of pieces in the show feature objects made of polymerized gypsum, a casting material, combined with other objects.



Liz Magor's Pearl Pet (2015), polymerized gypsum, polyethylene: "I am interested in how inanimate objects become the emotional deposit place" for people. *TONI HAFKENSCHIED / COURTESY OF SHLESINGER-WALBOHM FAMILY COLLECTION, TORONTO*

Habitude features no plinths: bases that often support sculpture. "I am interested in making objects that live with other objects," Magor said. "I want my things to live in the world of things — even though I know they are in a different category."

A 2011 series of works began with old blankets found in "a state of total disrepair ... vulnerable blankets." But old wool blankets have "a lot of persistence," and so she stitched usable pieces of blankets together to create king-sized blankets: a way of starting over.

She frequently makes use of ordinary objects — "Ordinary is my favourite place," she said when we spoke — and shifts them just a bit to make them less familiar. In one sculpture, for instance, a pile of towels conceals a stash of beer; in another, sweaters hide cigarettes. "I got interested in how low levels of anxiety are dealt with low-level addictions," she said at the lecture. "It's a conundrum: the double life of a smoker and drinker."

The wall-mounted installation Being This (2012) consists of 24 boxes (Of a total of 78 she made in the series) displaying found garments "that have

been meticulously snipped, stitched, and embellished.” Of the clothing she searches out, Magor said: “I look for objects trying too hard.” The people who bought the garments initially wanted to project a certain image to the world, she suggested. “We use the material world as props or mask — to augment or disguise ourselves,” she said.

Co-curator Adler observed in the exhibition’s catalogue of Magor’s work: “Unwanted and unvalued, everything from toys to tree trunks is cast and combined with other material so that it promotes speculation about a loss of retail allure or a shedding of the thin veneer of fashion.

“Her methods encourage me to slow down, wander about and listen to those neglected things, to understand their difference and their relationship to obsolescence — in ways that are analogous to the predicaments of people, or how they might struggle with desires, with compulsive and addictive behaviours and with the ideas of value, relevance and worth.”