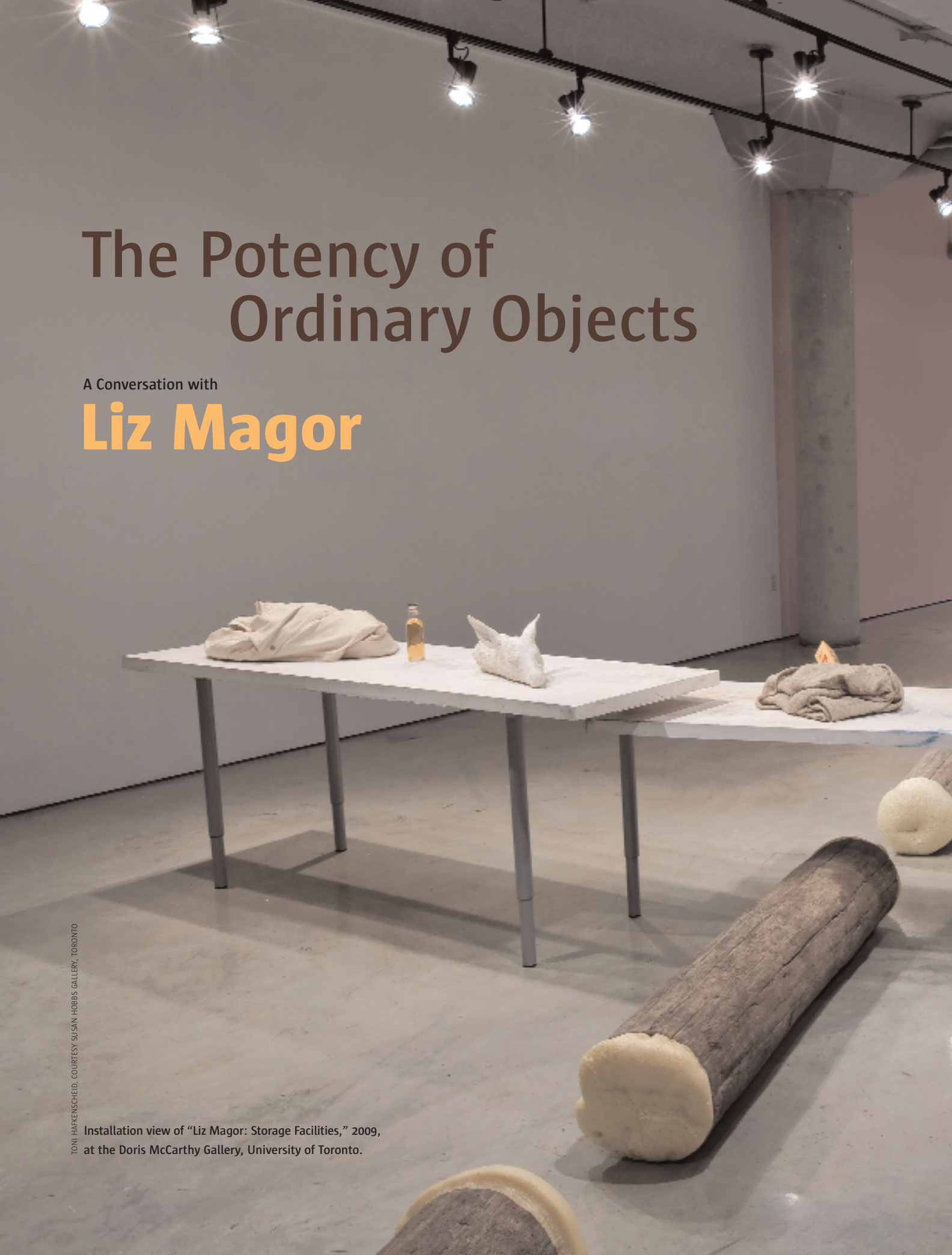
The Potency of Ordinary Objects

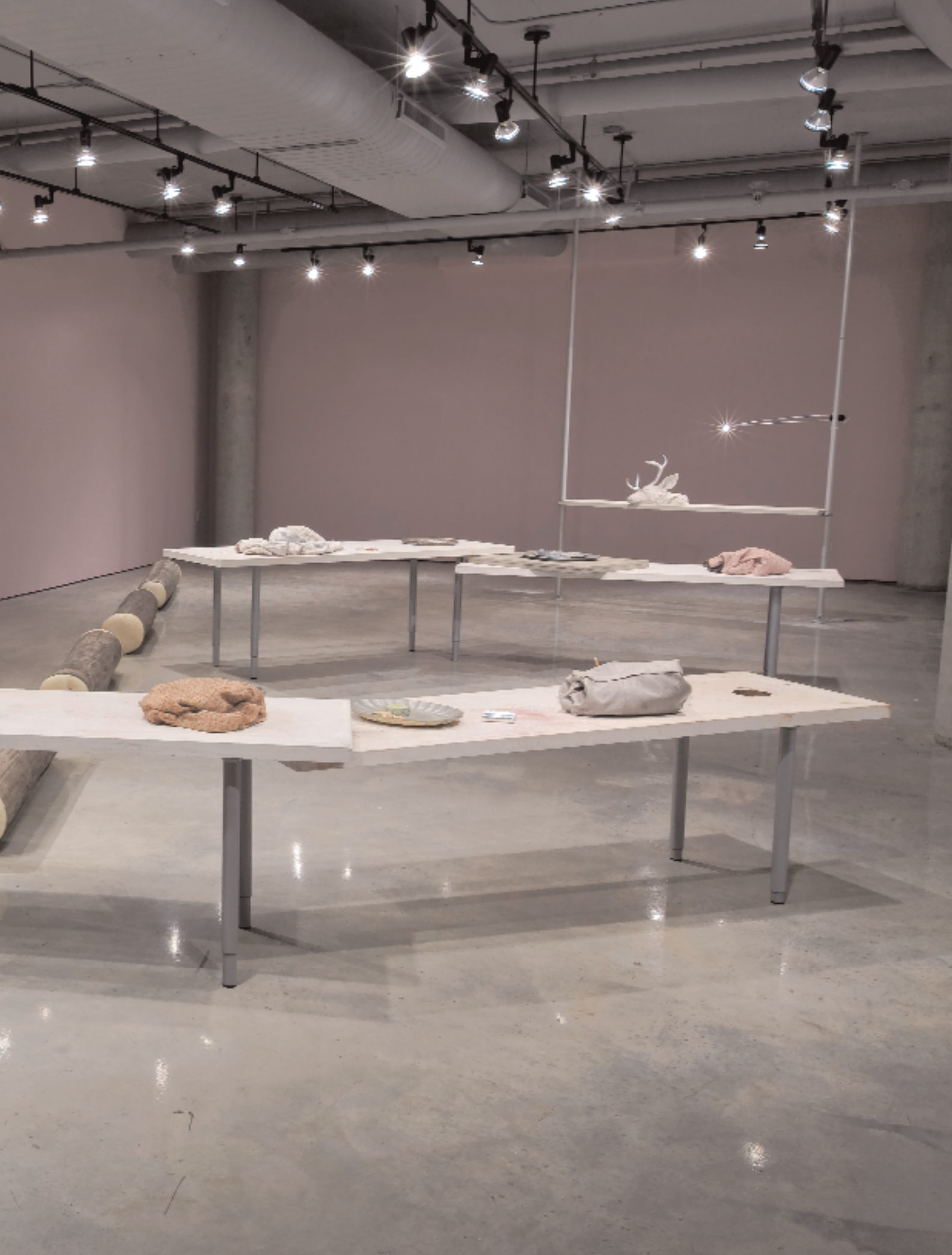
A Conversation with

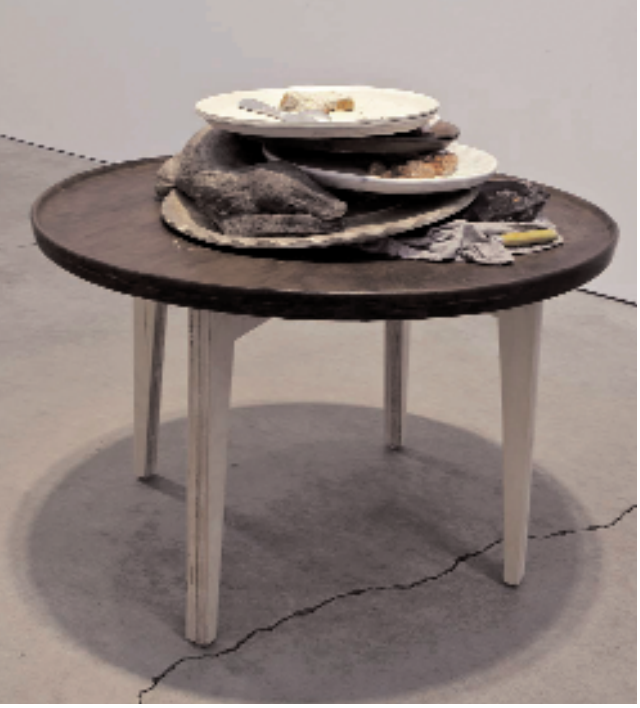
Liz Magor

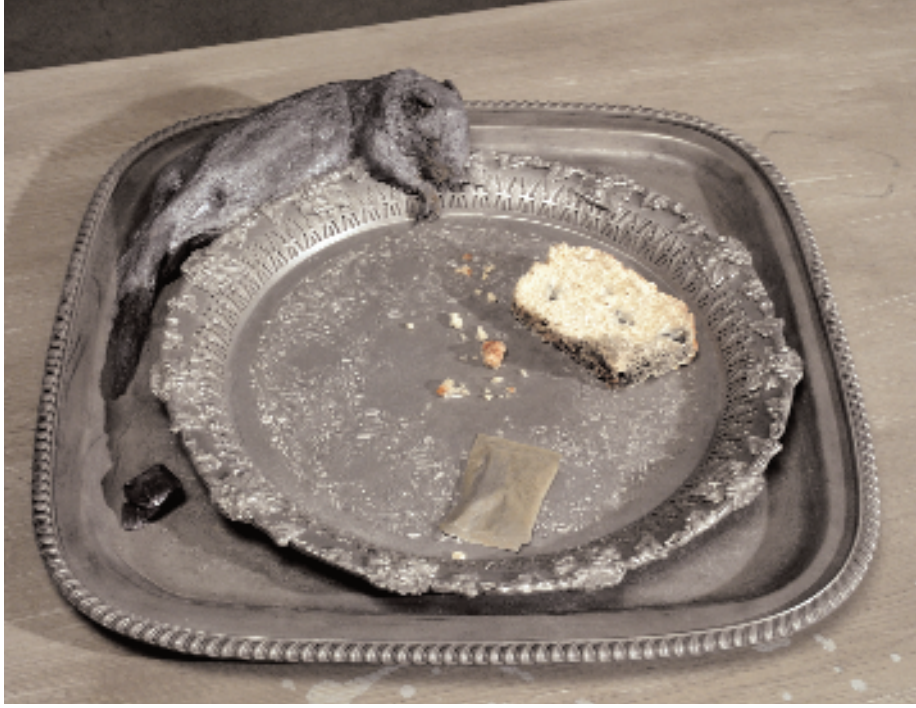


TONI HAFKENSCHEID, COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY, TORONTO

Installation view of "Liz Magor: Storage Facilities," 2009, at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto.







Left: *Stack (Racoon)*, 2009. Polymerized gypsum, ash, and wood, 58 x 68 x 68 cm. Right: *Squirrel (cake)*, 2008. Pigmented, polymerized gypsum, 7 x 61 x 48 cm.

BY RACHEL ROSENFIELD LAFO

Vancouver-based Liz Magor uses found materials, often from the domestic sphere, as a springboard for investigating the social and emotional life of objects. In mining their history, use, and relationship to the body, she molds, casts, and alters them to explore issues of authenticity, replication, consumption, waste, value, and status. Magor continues this debate between the real and the simulated in her public artworks. She has exhibited at Documenta and in the Sydney and Venice Biennales, and has had solo exhibitions across Canada. Her recent solo show, "The Mouth and other storage facilities," premiered at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle and traveled to the Simon Fraser University Gallery in Burnaby, British Columbia. In 2009, she received the Audain Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts. This month, Magor is exhibiting new work at Vancouver's Catriona Jeffries Gallery (November 15–December 22).

Rachel Rosenfield Lafo: *Many artists today have cross-disciplinary practices, working across media boundaries. You've worked in sculpture, installation, public art, and photography. Do you consider yourself a sculptor?*

Liz Magor: Yes, absolutely. Though I work in different mediums, I approach everything from an object-hood point of view. I like the indistinct boundary between the art object and ordinary objects, things that aren't intended to be art. With painting and photography, the boundary is more obvious, so the role of the viewer follows conventional trajectories, concerned with visual or intellectual processes. With sculpture, there's an address to the body that triggers a general consideration of the physical world.

RRL: *Much of your work has been about house, home, and shelter, creating facsimiles and reproductions of cabins, apartments, shacks, places of refuge, discarded food and drink, clothing, and everyday objects. These objects are fraught with the aftermath of human use and intervention, yet you never depict the occupants of these places. Is that because you want the viewer to become the potential subject?*

LM: The point is that these places don't have occupants. They are empty and abandoned.

RRL: *You're interested in opposing tendencies—authentic and artificial, real and fabricated, safety and fear, comfort and discomfort, toughness and vulnerability. Why is it important to investigate both sides of every possibility?*

LM: In the process of entertaining contradiction, new insights emerge, insights that were obscured by the tension of opposing ideas. The other process that will shake things out is a manipulation of narrative. Narrative enables a belief. If an account flows without interruption, it's easy for a premise to become an assumption, like a truth. If the story is confusing or inconclusive, you can't relax into the obvious sequence of events.

RRL: *Is that why you mix real found objects with the fabricated?*

LM: Yes, it helps me explore the range of possible confusions. If a cigarette is smoked and butted out, and you've got the real butt in your hand, it's pretty disgusting, it's garbage. But if I make a mold of that cigarette butt and cast it, then it's different. It's sculpture, and it makes a demand on your attention. Same image, different status. Many of the cast objects in the "Mouth and other storage facilities" are taken from dead or finished things that mark the end of one

LEFT: TONI HAFKENSCHEID, COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY, TORONTO / RIGHT: SCOTT MASSEY

Leather Ashtray on Table, 2009. Polymerized gypsum, cigarettes, and wood, 57 x 121 x 63.5 cm.

identity and the beginning of another. For a cigarette, it's the end of its allure and the beginning of its garbage life. For a dead animal, it's the end of quickness and the beginning of rotting.

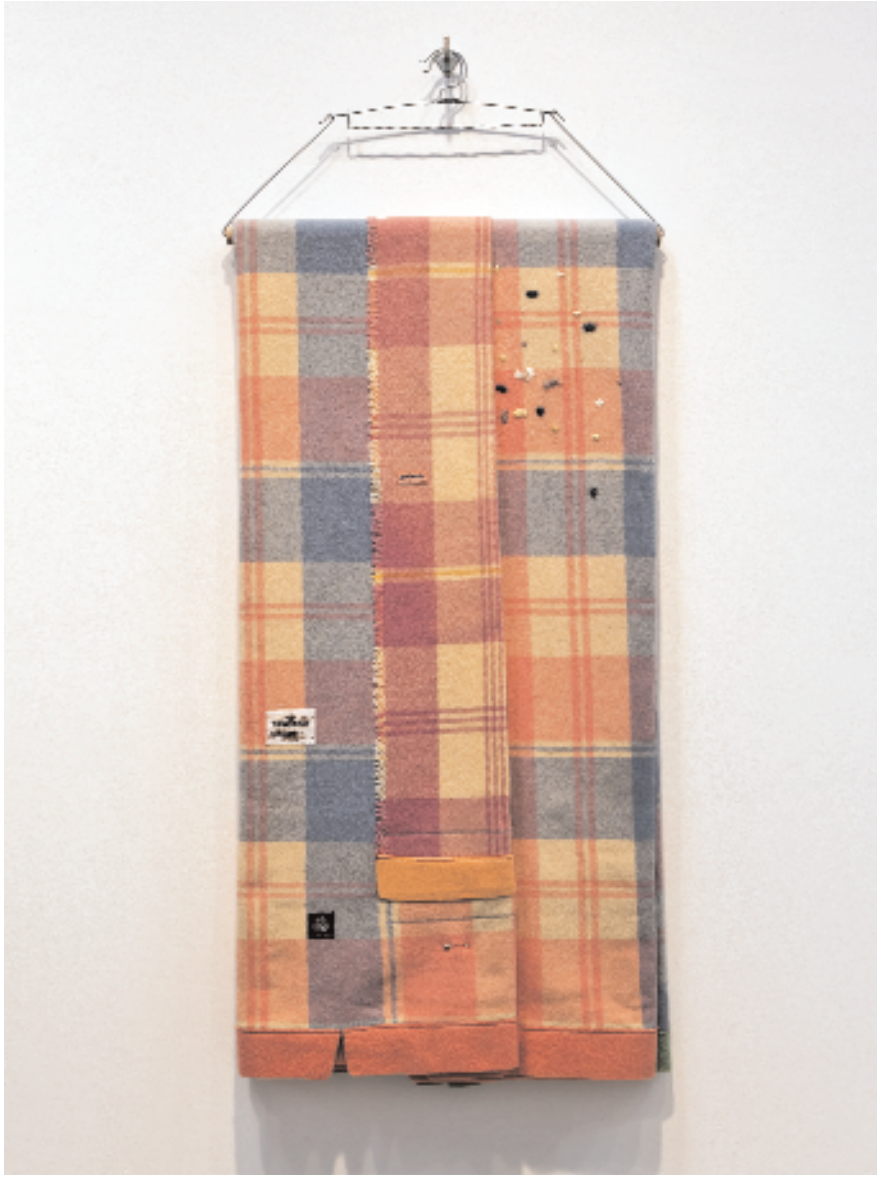
In a work like *Stack of Trays* (2008), I take things from disparate categories and erase their differences. Cigarettes, candy, little dead animals, leftover food—they're all thrown onto the trays and turned into one thing through the process of casting. They assume the same identity or status by being presented as a thing to look at. They go down to nothing and then come up again as a design.

I think of the trays as servant objects, usually overlooked in favor of what they are carrying. I like things that have complicated lives, like trays, ashtrays, empty glasses, and discarded wrappers. They are spent, exhausted, or discarded; somehow they have lost their status or maybe that status was never secure. They start out with a veneer of glamour, but it's thin and gets worn away by hard use. When it's over, it's hard to remember that they once had allure.

Ashtrays are especially amazing. They're really just garbage bins for dead cigarettes, but we make them beautiful, in silver and crystal, and then we grind dirt into them. In *Leather (ashtray)* (2008), the cast leather jacket is used as an ashtray. In this case, the cigarette is real, but it's been smoked already, so it's dead. Is an object like the leather jacket more valuable because it has gone through the long, difficult process of casting? Or is it more extraordinary because it's such a unique ashtray? Or is the sculpture the big deal? I respond to leather jackets as luxurious, sensuous garments, so at some point, I might think of the original jacket as more wonderful than the cast jacket, or the cast jacket working as an ashtray, or the cast jacket/ashtray regarded as art.

RRL: *Can you talk about your recent studio work using found and altered blankets?*

LM: Last spring, I wanted to start from scratch with something that I didn't know



Eatonia, 2011. Wool, fabric, metal, and thread, 145 x 62 x 6 cm.

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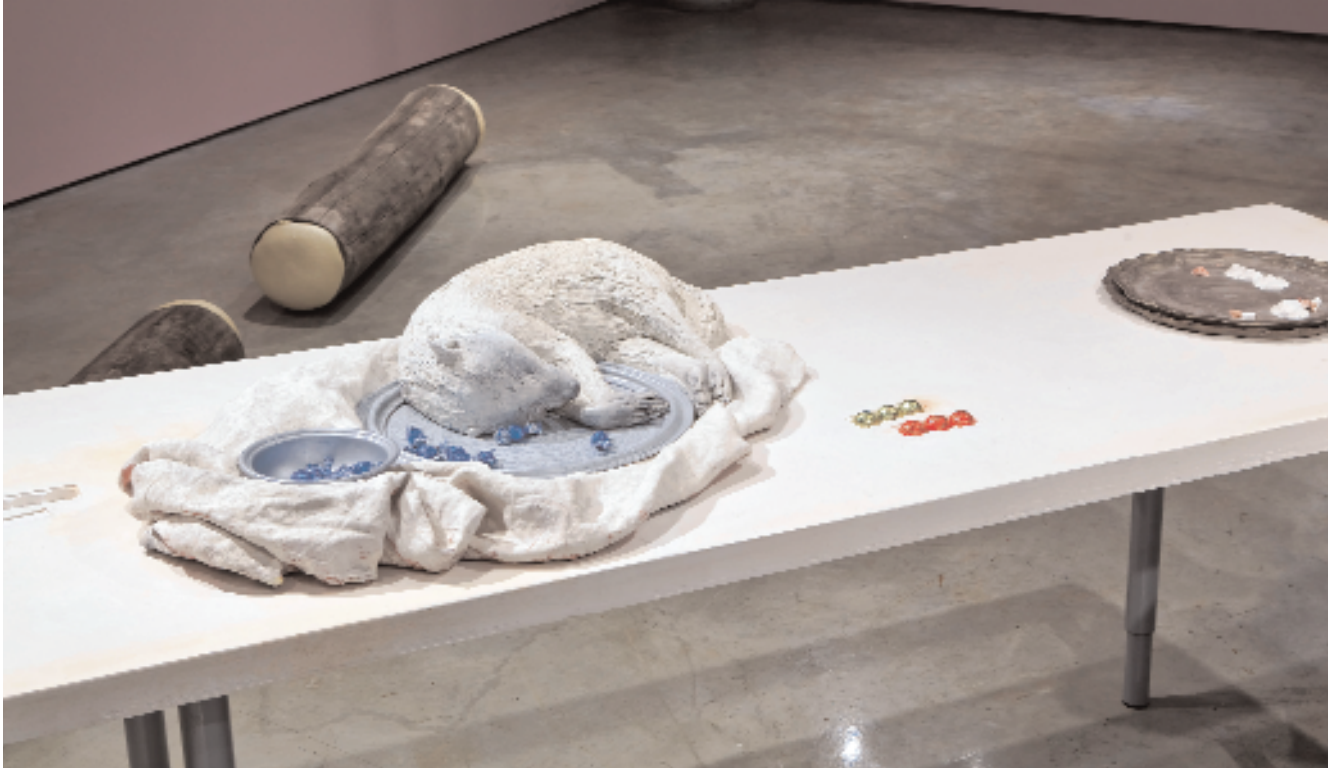


Installation view with *Racoon*, 2008; *Tray (stacked lotus)*, 2007; and *Molly's Reach* (detail), 2005.

TONI HAFKENSCHEID, COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY, TORONTO

how to do. I wanted to give mold-making and casting a break, so I started to buy wool blankets at thrift stores. Not the collectible ones, but the dirtiest and most moth-eaten. I valued the ones that had some evidence of repair. The repairs were like little notes, reminders of the early life of the blanket when it was still needed.

Most of the blankets that I found were quite small, and that may be one reason why they were thrown out. Contemporary beds are much bigger. My first thought was: Can the blankets stay alive if they get bigger, if their holes are repaired, if they get cleaner, if they try a little harder? What kind of debris is left in a blanket? Dog hair, cat hair, human hair—what if I think of these as decorative? I cut little flakes of silver ribbon and threw them on the blankets and sewed them where they fell. I valorized all the negatives, like skin flakes and holes. If there was a stain, I stained it more. I put all the labels backwards, erasing the marketing, the shops. I accentuated moth holes. I made the blankets bigger by adding pieces in a very unstrategic way.

RRL: *In your recent exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto, you showed the blankets on hangers, some still in dry-cleaning bags. How did you decide on this method of presentation?*

LM: With sculpture, there's always the problem of how to show things. Do you put them on plinths? I'll never do that, never. Do you put them on the floor? Those two choices, the floor and the plinth, are so worn out that it forces me to look for other ways. I didn't have any ideas, so I worked on the blankets as though they would never have a presentation, as though they would just come to a home and find a place like any other household object. Until I could figure it out, I made them as blankets to be used on a bed.

RRL: *When you first made them, did you think that you would display them on beds?*

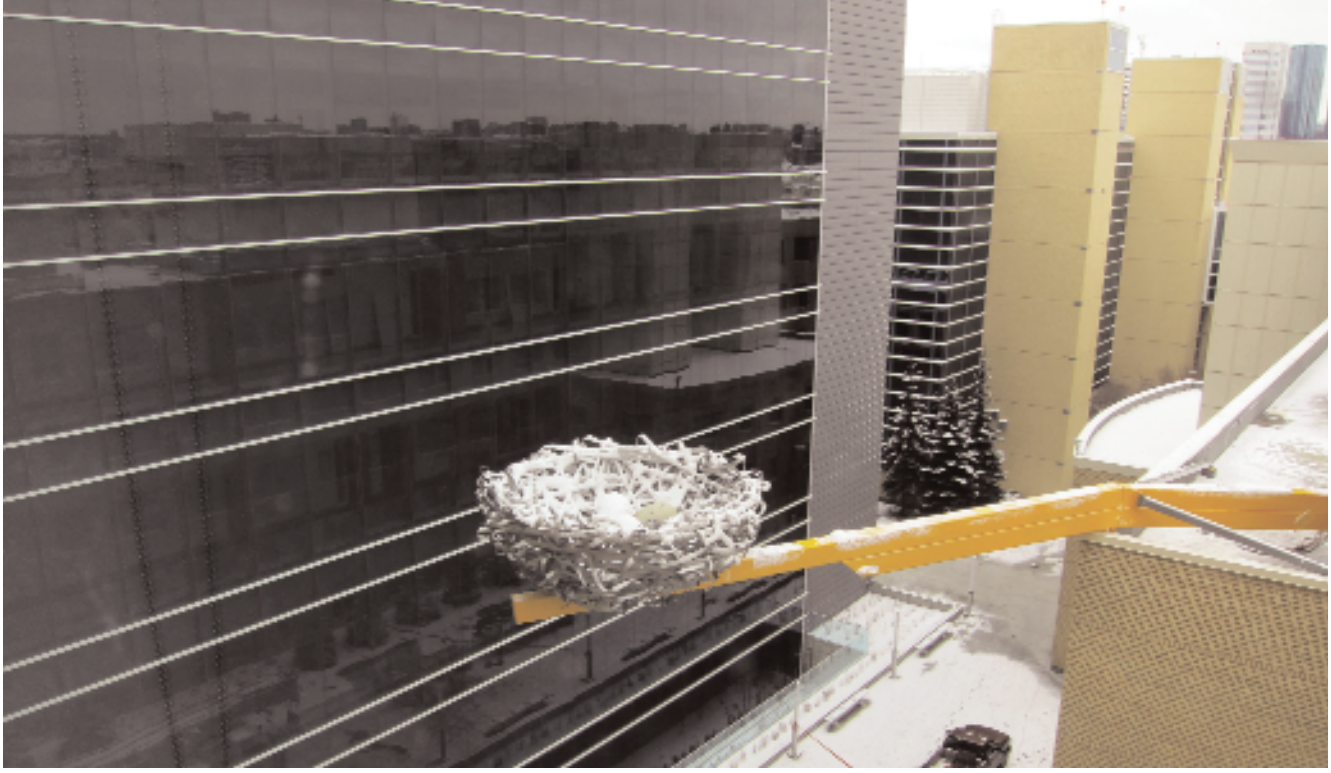
LM: I didn't know. It didn't make sense to say I will "display" them on a bed. I had to back up, before the bed. As I worked on them, I was running them back and forth to the dry-cleaners. The cleaners were concerned that they might "ruin" them, that the dye would run or more holes would appear. So, when I picked them up, I would scrutinize them, look them over inch by inch. Looking, with concern and interest, is what we do with art—and voila, the bags became markers of that special condition.

RRL: *In addition to earlier public works in Vancouver, including* The Game *(1995) and* LightShed *(2004), you've completed two new commissions since 2009.* Soft Spot*, a collaboration with Toronto artist Wendy Coburn, is installed at the Lois Hole Hospital for Women in Edmonton, Alberta.* Marks *was created for the new Surrey City Centre Library in British Columbia. How does your approach to public art differ from your studio practice?*

LM: Public work is permanently installed; it will be there much longer than work in a gallery, which might be out for a few weeks, put away for some years, and then brought out again in a different context. With public art, I have to do more thinking about the consequences or the outcome before I start. I do the opposite in the studio, where I'm adamant about not starting with a concept. I have thoughts and ideas, but I don't have a controlling impetus for the work. I'm much more material and process-oriented. In the studio, I'm following my nose or using my intuition. I try to see what's happening right now, not be planning ahead. It's slow and ruminative. There are failures, but I bear those losses, and I'm not accountable to anyone. With public work, there's a team—the architect, the fabricator, the public. I want to respond to the team, I need to hear what they're saying. I like the energy and power of collaboration, but I love the self-reliance and risk of studio work more.

RRL: Soft Spot *is a giant nest made from stainless steel ribbon, installed high up on a projecting I-beam. Inside the nest are three speckled eggs. How did you and Wendy arrive at this concept?*

LM: Initially, Wendy's image of the nest with eggs was difficult for me. I tend not to work metaphorically, and I don't like to work with references or to approach things as symbols. I want to reduce the number of intellectual steps that you have to take before



Liz Magor and Wendy Coburn, *Soft Spot*, 2010. Stainless steel ribbon and painted steel beam, nest: 12 ft. diameter; beam: 40 ft. long.

you're in the artwork. I'm trying to say that I prefer the phenomenological to the referential. I want the first and most abiding encounter with art to be through the body. I don't want to talk about meaning. If I were to elaborate a huge meaning package at the beginning, it would preempt what the viewer is willing or able to do.

With *Soft Spot*, Wendy and I gradually built up the formal and physical aspects of the work to the extent that the experience of looking rivaled or eclipsed the literal notion of the nest and egg.

***Marks*, 2011. Silicone rubber, 4 elements, 22 x 60 in. diameter each.**

COURTESY THE ARTIST

It's way above the road. You have to crane your neck to see this tangle of steel so precariously perched out there. There are no branches or twigs or birds or feathers. Maybe it's not even a nest. It's only from the upper floors inside the building that you can look down and see the eggs. Anyone seeing the work from above is probably at the business end of the hospital, as patients or medical staff. Given the inherent stress of their situation, we thought that the surprise of these beautiful eggs was a deserved reward.

RRL: *In* Marks*, sculptural forms function as seats inside the library. Did that develop from conversations with the architect, Bing Thom?*

LM: Yes, Bing talked about how libraries have evolved from being strict research and reading rooms. Today, library design encourages people to relax and feel contemplative in a public space. Since the 1970s, many of my pieces have dealt with the subject of beds, for sleeping and hiding out, partly because I think that relaxing the body is necessary for thinking, but also because I'm interested in worry and anxiety and consider sleeping to be a form of escape. So, I thought of making something that you could lie on in the library, maybe sink into something soft and spongy.

Eventually, I determined that this sinking would happen before the forms came to the library, as a record of relaxed bodies. I made the patterns in the studio using extremely soft, wet clay. Then we all lay down on them so that the fabric of our clothing, our buttons, zippers, hands, cups, pens, and books left impressions in the clay. The forms are 60 inches in diameter and cast in matte black silicone. They are dense-looking, mysterious, and mute. The public doesn't know what they are. They don't consider them art because they don't look like anything, but they can't be furniture because they're too ugly. People walk up to them and do their own work; they poke them, kick them, and bounce up and down on them. Eventually they accept that they're good for sitting or lying down, or they leave them and choose a regular seat. In any case, they get busy with them because I'm not telling them anything.

Rachel Rosenfield Lafo is a writer and curator based in Vancouver.