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# THE ART OF LIZ MAGOR

Facing page: Liz Magor, *Stack (Racoon)*, 2009, polymerized gypsum, ash, wood, 58 x 68 x 68 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

1. *Corner Mouse (left hand)*, 2009, polymerized gypsum, wood, caulking, 79 x 28 x 23.5 cm. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

2. *Corner Mouse (left hand)* (detail), 2009, polymerized gypsum, wood, caulking, 79 x 28 x 23.5 cm. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

by E C Woodley

*To use language at all is to use an instrument that was forged by others. The purely personal cannot be uttered in language at all.*

— Gabriel Josipovichi, *Writing and the Body*, Princeton University Press, 1982.

*Objectivity is left when something is finished.*

— Siri Hustvedt, "Ghosts at the Table," *Yonder*, Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

There is a line written by Northrope Frye about Flaubert, how he turns "all simple life into an enormously intricate still life, like the golden touch of Midas." Liz Magor also freezes and transmutes "simple" life, and her tableau can be just as intricately precise or as abjectly complex as an image in Flaubert. Her accumulations of foodstuffs, clothing, deceased animals and other objects are uncannily odourless and irrevocably silent. They are capable of stopping your breath, if only for a moment, in mortal dread or fascination. The airlessness and the motionlessness of time in the gallery rooms these things inhabit must be negotiated without much recourse to language. Fluidity of speech is held like Midas's water and wine.

Unlike the occasionally lavish, gold-tasselled banquets Flaubert transcribed (when *Sentimental Education* was published in 1869, the critic Edmond Scherer dismissed the novel as “a collection of photographs”), Magor has a fondness in her still life for the quotidian amalgam of pewter (which is primarily tin) or silver-plated lotus-shaped or round trays. In their modesty and intimations of worldly dignity, these domestic objects transmit a certain pathos, especially when they are tarnished. The effects of the daily atmosphere seem to have adversely affected these decorative plates, as gravity affects mortal skin and bones.

Magor's objects may be “real”—a mickey of scotch or a stick of gum (the labels removed but identifiable as Johnnie Walker and Wrigley's), a box of Toblerone chocolate—or, like many of the plates and cigarette butts, and the animal corpses and leather or tweed jackets, they may be remade as polarized gypsum casts that hold every surface detail of the originals and are painted or coloured to more or less match them. For the viewer, there is more to this position than to simply sort out the “real” from the “fake,” although that is part of the tentative questioning one becomes involved in. How much “reality,” how much pre-fixed meaning is resident in any object? Objects are made by us, and in this sense they contain us, are made of us; it isn't only media, as McLuhan famously observed, that are “the extension of man.” The few pieces of Chiclet gum sitting in the shadows of one of Magor's stacked-plate still-life sculptures are the height of artifice, whether Magor has manufactured them or not. A strange, chemically engineered habit, not quite a food but a moulded thing that seems to speak of Magor's methods and concerns. An insignificance that is capable of invoking cultural and individual memory. In Canada, a stick of gum is more likely to act as an agent of memory than any Proustian madeleine.

Alone in 2009, in the narrow, domestically resonant space of the upstairs gallery at Susan Hobbs in Toronto was a work called *Corner Mouse* (left hand). A simple, darkly varnished wooden corner cabinet about three quarters of a metre high, something from the 1950s or '60s that you might find at a Salvation Army store. On one of its shelves was an ashtray of similar vintage in which a mouse was lying dead. The cabinet was made of real wood and glue, but the ashtray and corpse were cast and coloured by Magor, each one made with great attention to the detailed life of the thing produced. All together, a dead ringer for “real,” like a quotidian scene in a little-used country cottage at the change of season.

But, then, thinking more clearly, I found that the intense sense of the real these objects communicate was somewhat unmade by the scalloped pattern of opaquely cream-coloured glue that the ashtray was half sitting on. What is this dollop of glue doing here? Why would anyone glue an ashtray to a corner cabinet and do it so badly, so obviously? This flourish of process, of showing-as-made, asserts the scene as fiction, as artwork. But the bodily, gluey substance of this bold but seemingly clumsy reveal complicates Magor's act. Glue was once manufactured from the bones of dead animals, and it still retains that bodily character. The mouse, once in living possession of its skeleton, is capable of becoming the substance that visibly strengthens the cabinet's joints. *Corner Mouse* (left hand) is unmade as reality by the very substance that appears to make it up. What seems inanimate becomes animate in the mind of the viewer, before being scattered and backing away into some more complex state. Magor works with the innate complexity of substance, the thin borderline between the artificial and the “natural,” and the mind's wavering and naïve perception of these states.

The genius of objects is that they speak of the precise boundaries of human knowledge, and also of the imprecision of our perception of them. “In solitude, objects are the company we keep,” writes Siri Hustvedt. In Magor's work, objects keep their own company. This includes living creatures, which in



1. *Leather Ashtray on Table*, 2009, polymerized gypsum, cigarettes, wood, 57 x 121 x 63.5 cm. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

2. & 3. *Leather Ashtray on Table* (detail), 2009, polymerized gypsum, cigarettes, wood, 57 x 121 x 63.5 cm. Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.



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death have become objects. A corpse, like an object of mass production, seems to oppose uniqueness, or at least complicates the notion, demonstrates the replaceable-ness of any individual in the great mass of living things. Magor's works resist language, but like props in a theatre, they seem to belong in proximity to words. One can imagine that, in their solitude, they themselves are strange and literal embodiments of a descriptive quality in language.

In *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), Svetlana Alpers commented on the relationship between language and image in early 17th-century Dutch painting, including still life. "The vanguard of language studies at the time had led away from names redolent with meaning to the things themselves and to what [Sir Francis] Bacon variously referred to as 'the creator's own signature and marks' or 'footprints' or 'stamps' on them. God creates by imprinting himself (as in the imprinting of a coin or a seal) in things rather than by writing texts." Alpers notes that in the 17th century and again in the 19th many of the most advanced artists in Europe adopted a highly descriptive mode. "The stilled or arrested quality (of this work) is a symptom of a certain tension between the narrative assumptions of the art and an attentiveness to descriptive presence. There seems to be an inverse proportion between attentive description and action: attention to the surface of the world described is achieved at the expense of representation of narrative action." In opposition to primarily Italian, allegorical or symbolic works, "northern images do not disguise meaning or hide it beneath the surface but rather show that meaning by its very nature is lodged in what the eye can take in—however deceptive that may be."

In this sense, something of Magor's sculptural still life is recognizable as "northern art." She shares with Dutch art a concern with "the problem of the relationship between art(ifice) and nature." Considering the writings of one of the leading 17th-century Dutch cultural figures, Constantijn Huygens, Alpers concludes that when looking at the ornate and often lavish still life of Willem Kalf, "we have to consider if, more often than scholars have been willing to admit, deception here engages not a moral but an epistemological view: the recognition that there is no escape from representation."

In Magor's work at Susan Hobbs, which dated primarily from 2009, the question of the strategy and nature of representation was asked in an exacting way, however difficult it was to answer. In a series of installations of work from 2007 and 2008 that began its life at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle with the title *The Mouth and other storage facilities* (the mouth here, among other things, suggestive of a cavity diverted



1. *Tray (bird/heart)* (detail), 2008, polymerized gypsum, 17.75" diameter x 2". Edition of two. Photograph: Site Art Services. Courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, BC.

2. *Tray (bird/heart)*, 2008, polymerized gypsum, 17.75" diameter x 2". Edition of two. Photograph: Site Art Services. Courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, BC.

3. *Tweed (toblerone)*, 2008, polymerized gypsum, 16 x 16 x 5.25". Edition of two. Photograph: Site Art Services. Courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, BC.

4. *Raccoon*, 2008, polymerized gypsum, 31.5 x 23.5 x 4.5". Edition of two. Photograph: Site Art Services. Courtesy Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, BC.

from producing language), Magor's Dutch-like "trust in the attentive eye" of the viewer played out in a different way. In this work, it was more often obviously clear that many of the cast objects were just that. One reason for this was the almost mythic, non-naturalistic or semi-naturalistic pigmentation of some of them, especially the animals. Here, at one station of the journey you made along a tableau of goods strung out across overlapping Ikea-like tables was *Raccoon*. Shiny blue wrappers of Krinos Ouzo candies glittered almost blindingly unstable under extremely bright lighting and were scattered across a cast and tarnished pewter plate on which was arranged a white raccoon curled into the fetal position. Held up by "real" legs, the table tops were cast, "flaws" in evidence like scars and, in places, dusted with pigment that suggested paint, wine or blood. In some works, the paint of a cast cigarette butt or paper candy wrapper had overshot the limits of its moulding and bled clumsily onto a decorative plate. At first viewing, you perceive these objects as "real," and then quite quickly the gap between this perception and what is actually present opens up and you are plunged into an abyss. In this instant of recognition, when "what-I-think-it-is" becomes "what-it-really-is," also comes recognition of one's own flawed and easily lead perceptual apparatus. This is irreversible knowledge. Once you have seen the thing for what it is, you cannot return to the previous state of simple belief. The meaning, whatever it might have been, seems to drain out of the objects on display.



Perhaps paradoxically, there is a correspondence between the wordlessness one is left with when attempting to negotiate the optical and the existential conditions of Magor's work and wordlessness as a strange condition of the allegorical German *Trauerspiel*, the Baroque "Sorrowplay." Beyond both the mimetic attitude with which the allegorist approached nature as a form of transience and decay and his attraction to an abject world of objects and things, there is, in the 17th-century drama as described by Walter Benjamin, a tension staged between the spoken and the written word. The sound of fragmented passages of spoken dialogue oppose the meaning communicated when read on the page (as the *Trauerspiel*

often were). "The spoken word is only afflicted by meaning," Benjamin wrote in 1928, "as if by an inescapable disease; it breaks off in the process of the middle of resounding, and the damming up of the feeling which was ready to pour forth provokes mourning." (John Osbourne, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Verso, 1998) Mourning is a silent, inexpressible condition nearer in proximity to death than everyday experience. It brings living beings closer to inhabiting an object state. ■

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