

TORONTO

Liz Magor

SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY



Liz Magor's recent exhibition of sculpture was one of her best to date, combining—with the formal refinement we have come to expect from her—a nuanced mixture of references to domesticity and wildlife, still life, religious art, and Minimalism.

A pair of sculptures, *Bedside* and *Dresser* (all works 2007) installed on the ground floor of the gallery, address the tensions that exist between private and public contexts for the display of artworks and other objects. Each work features a cast of a deer's head, occupying a shelving unit attached to the wall with large triangular brackets so that it projects forward toward the viewer. Each is illuminated by a high-end halogen lighting fixture that looks to have been taken straight from an architect's drafting table.

This installation allowed the two works to waver between the traditions of domestic decor and the institutional and professional associations of more contrived or physically complex methods of display. While alluding to a lodge full of hunting trophies, the unlucky specimens are cut too high on the neck and look too young and too diminutive to serve the demands of machismo.

Stag and doe are both rendered in white, with irresistibly illusionistic details that extend to an unevenness of the cartilage in their ears and the presence of little bumps at the bases of the stag's antlers. This eerie verisimilitude is made yet more strange by the morbid surprise of real hairs creeping out from the sculptural material (a polymerized gypsum). The abrupt realization that one is looking at casts of the dead is tempered by art-historical associations with the painterly tradition of the study of animal corpses. A studio context is further signaled by the artful spattering of wine stains and paint drips on the shelves. But the unnatural blankness of the heads—and the absence of other connections to still-life convention—served to broaden and diversify their semiotic resonance. Their coldly lit white surfaces brought to mind marble statues of the decapitated John the Baptist. This feature also contributed to the anthropomorphizing of the forms and further evoked Christian iconography: Before being cast, woven material was inserted into the animals' necks, and this protruded in a way that recalls the seductive folds of drapery that adorn canonical *Pietà* statues.

Subtle reference to the Crucifixion continued in the upstairs gallery with a third work, *Hallway*, featuring the death mask of a pygmy owl whose claws had been pressed together and wrapped around a piece of electrical wire. Like the deer, it had a mostly monochrome surface, with isolated pink and purple details perhaps signifying blood. However, as with *Bedside* and *Dresser*, the spiritual resonance of the work is complicated by its juxtaposition with a domestic appliance—another expensive-looking lighting fixture—and the anonymous industrial surfaces of the shelf, cast in polymerized gypsum, on which the creature lies. Here, as elsewhere in the show, Magor demonstrated a masterful ability to produce formally austere works that still pack a powerful emotional wallop.

—Dan Adler