

# ARTFORUM

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the course of many a smoky, late night, and amendments over the lines as he tinkered with the names, breadths, and depths of forests, citadels, mountain ranges, and rivers. Its frayed leaves, full of exquisite chirography, are taped together. Tolkien's maps aren't guides to treasure—they *are* treasures.

His Elvish lexicons were drawn from his philological fascination with the souls of ancient tongues and legendary texts—including the thousand-year-old Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* and *The Kalevala* (1835), a Finnish odyssey. Yet he was doubtful of his artistic prowess, and rightly so—his drawings are merely weak reflections of his phenomenal words. The watery pencil marks of *Barad-dûr: The Fortress of Sauron*, ca. 1944, depict the titular edifice as a pleasant, gently rendered, Renaissance-style palace with Mount Doom faint in the distance—not as the “black, immeasurably strong,” and fearful tower that caused Frodo such utter despair. There are some delightful exceptions: *Halls of Manwë on the Mountains of the World Above Faërie*, 1928, shows the incandescent dwelling of the Valar king, Manwë Súlimo, atop a sublime peak that reaches into the heavens. The willowy curves of *Bilbo Comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves*, 1937, accentuate a lazy river's lulling bend. The lone figure, his back to the viewer—a melancholic device Tolkien frequently used to suggest the beginning or conclusion of a trepidatious journey—meanders downstream in his barrel, lending the entire scene a slow, rhythmic wistfulness.

Yet Tolkien excels as a graphic designer: Take the orphic symmetry of his grimoire-like binding for *The Hobbit* (1937), featuring onyx-colored dragon-and-mountain motifs upon a dusty-green ground, or the whispering, serpentine “fire writing,” the script that appeared on the One Ring when it was heated by flames.

This incredible trove, accumulated over more than a century, confirms that Tolkien's beautiful and byzantine legacy is secure—a gift of breathtaking imagination, darkling light, and spellbinding adventure.

—Darren Jones

## CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

### Liz Magor

CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

A gesture that recurs in Liz Magor's recent work is the needy and desperate embrace—the full-bodied attachment of a subject to an object of comfort. In her 2017–18 show at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York, the hybrid stuffed animals of *Oilmen's Bonspiel* (a kitty-faced monkey) and *Pembina* (a pig-headed teddy bear), both 2017, each hugged a heavy knit sweater around the waist. More recently, at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, a creature the size of a Beanie Baby grasped the tails of a soft coat in *Closet (fur)*, 2018, while silicone casts of larger plush beasties held onto garment bags in her “Delivery” series, 2018, which hung from the ceiling.

The clinginess felt precious, and it hovered, like the smell of nervous sweat, around the salvaged coats, shoes, textiles, and other items that make up Magor's work. Even the sculptures that were not cuddled—such as *Freestyle (Pink Grommet)* and *Toolshed (Wood Stain)*, both 2017, with their heavy wool textiles—suggested the potential for suffocation. I'd like to call them haunted, but that's not quite right. Perhaps the heavy alterations of the well-loved “stuffies” (as Magor likes to say) detracted from the subtler signs of care and purpose these things engender—the very qualities that attract the artist to her materials in the first place. Her dismembering and fusion create a parallel but underwhelming sense of loss. Magor's arrangements, which often read as altars, feel more constructed and less enigmatic than, say, Cathy Wilkes's clusters of broken dishes, dolls, and baby things. Take *Black*

*Purse*, 2018, a stack of boxed IKEA Lack tables that supports the titular object, which was cast in polymerized gypsum and was oozing some shimmering purple liquid from its zipper slit. This coagulated tongue intrigued, but the expanse of beige cardboard was too dry, stark, and new to carry out the full idea. What did it—to cite the furniture model—*lack*? The theme of resurrection was certainly somewhere in the galleries, between the rodent pelts (*Pet Co.*, 2018) and the new encasements for old soles (*Shoe World*, 2018), but I wanted to see the recycled belongings break out of that endless loop.



Liz Magor, *Closet (fur)* (detail), 2018, polyester film, paper, cardboard, fur coats, stuffed animal, 30 × 33¼ × 51¼".

Magor's strategy for going beyond mawkishness was to “make things a bit strange . . . a bit to the left of themselves.” The work did reward close looking with a few sensory surprises—the nearly imperceptible slippage between original and replica handbag in *Black Purse* was striking—but the tweaks often rerouted the objects into confusing detours. When the artist talks about “trying to kill air” in her sculptures, she's explaining how she identifies problematic areas in her molds of objects, and yet it did seem that, just before I entered the space, a suspended bubble had popped, leaving its soapy residue on some of the stacked Mylar boxes that contained many of Magor's things, indicating that the fun was over. Indeed, Magor clearly enjoys her processes and is deeply invested in the textures, weights, and characters of her found and fabricated goods. These objects embody the artist's definition of a gift as an offering between “two people who care about each other.” Magor cares about—and for—the materials of her work; she has pursued them and their attendant themes for years, testing different emotive channels. But some of the grit and rawness of her decade-old pieces, such as *Stack of Trays* and *Squirrel (cake)*, both 2008, seems lacking in the newer works, especially now that the objects are packaged in tidy boxes. Perhaps the clenched paws should loosen their grip.

—Mira Dayal

## RIDGEFIELD, CONNECTICUT

### N. Dash

ALDRICH CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

The comfort blanket, or “transitional object”—*transitional* because it typically accompanies an intermediate developmental phase—is most commonly associated with early childhood, but the adjustment period extends into adult life with striking frequency. A 2010 survey