

ART REVIEW

The things they carried, in a striking show at Harvard

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, February 14, 2019, 12:57 p.m.



Liz Magor turned items from thrift stores into "Blowout." COURTESY OF CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

CAMBRIDGE — A dapple of sunlight brings an uncanny sheen to the works of Liz Magor, now installed in the crook of a concrete bench at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. A cluster of semi-transparent mylar boxes packed together like a low-slung cityscape, the piece would be remarkable enough without Mother Nature lending a hand; the forlorn-looking cast-offs that populate its innards — a sad and ragged-looking stuffed elephant clutching a striped sock;

bundles of string; a grungy polka-dot blanket; a crumple of green crinoline — make sure of that.

But with the sun hanging low, the scene shifts from the mildly absurd to the outright macabre. In one box, a toy lion sprawls on its side, the light lending a milky glow that makes its chamber appear cryogenic, like a science-fiction hero preparing for a long period of suspended animation. Help me, he seems to be saying. Dried rat carcasses arrayed here and there don't help. "Pet Co.," she calls it, maybe a riff on all her tiny captives trapped in their cages, yearning to be loved. But there's no such redemption to be found here. They've already arrived at the end.



Detail of Liz Magor's "Pet Co." COURTESY OF CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

There's always been something gleefully abject in Magor's work, black humor served up with bone-dry restraint. With the boxes, which the artist made by hand, she may be quoting Minimalism — right-angled forms snapped together to fall in line with its Brutalist concrete surroundings (the show, called "Blowout," was commissioned by the Carpenter, and made for this very space) — but really, it's just the bait to set the hook. She's not interested in purity, aesthetic or otherwise. The

ready, it's just the bait to set the hook. She's not interested in purity, aesthetic or otherwise. The highly sullied, more like, is the raw material of her work — the abandoned, the accumulated, the ballast of each and every one of our lives.

Magor, now 70, is a national treasure back home in Canada, the winner of every significant career-achievement accolade the country has to offer. Career surveys and retrospectives are several — the last, “Habitude,” at the Montreal Musee d’Art Contemporain in 2016, took in a three-decade span (versions of it traveled to France, Germany, and Switzerland).

She remains largely unknown on this side of the border, though, which makes the Carpenter show all the more notable. Instead of picking and choosing from the artist’s greatest hits, director Daniel Byers commissioned all-new work and gave her carte blanche (the show includes three pieces from 2017, for context).

To make it, Magor traveled a familiar circuit of thrift stores in the vast exurbs surrounding her Vancouver home. Everything here was less found than furtively searched for, collected and catalogued for its imagined significance to someone at some time. What does it mean to carry so much weight, only to slough it off to make room for more? That’s a question that should haunt every one of our consumption-mad lives. If that were all there was to Magor’s work, it would be a bit one-note. It’s not, and neither is she.

It’s a Magor M.O. to adopt abandoned things and revive them, in her way, with a gesture of tender loving care. The only older pieces here, from 2017, give a clue to those long-standing priorities: tatty blankets riven with moth holes and cigarette burns, which Magor has sutured with thread or cauterized with resin. Nearby, a tidy array of boxes, each fitted with clear tops, contain buffed-up old shoes. She calls it “Shoe World,” from 2018, and the duality of the presentation — retail display, or funereal viewing? on sale, or embalmed? — scratches wryly at our consumer-driven world’s obsession with the new and detachment about the old.

What Magor means to preserve is less the object than the feeling it once carried: Someone, somewhere, once cared about these things enough to buy them, wear them, make them part of their daily lives. Inside their transparent cases, they read as artifacts of past, unknowable lives.



“Blowout” is at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts through March 24. COURTESY OF CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

There’s an easy reference to the readymade, Marcel Duchamp’s absurdist practice of taking unremarkable objects — a bicycle wheel, a bottle drying rack, most famously, a urinal — and arbitrarily assigning them the status of art. Magor, while dry, is not quite so tongue in cheek. In her work, she does these unloved things a strange and sincere honor, building art around them — protective vessels to carry them along a new phase of their journey after the care that once attended them has dispersed, reassigned to something new.

Sometimes, Magor envisions that future herself: A pair of purses here are actual cast rubber replicas that the artist has created to look like rumpled old leather with disarming precision. They seep glittering ectoplasm, suggesting a next life more fantastic than anything past — a great beyond of abandoned things where magic presides.

Mostly, though, Magor's work is about hanging on, remaining present in an indifferent world. Three gangly works are more expressive than most: Tethered to the concrete ceiling by a tangle of wire and thread, three cast-silicone creatures, one red, one brown, one ochre, hold a drape of fabric and garment as it tumbles down to the floor. The feeling I got was of an offering: Come back, they seem to implore. We're still here. And always will be.

LIZ MAGOR: BLOWOUT

At Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 24 Quincy St., Cambridge, through March 24. 617-496-5387, carpenter.center

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