

**Join the New Social Environment** — our daily conversation with artists, filmmakers, writers, and poets. [Join us.](#)»

« [JUNE 2019 Issue](#)



[Donate](#)

**ArtSeen**

## **Liz Magor: *Blowout***

*JUNE 2019*

*By Jared Quinton*



Liz Magor, *Pet Co. (detail)*, 2018. © The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Photo: Useful Art Services.

**On View**

**The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago**

April 27 – June 23, 2019

A disquieting energy pulses with low-grade intensity throughout Liz Magor's exhibition *Blowout*, co-organized by the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard and on view at the University of Chicago's Renaissance Society. In the vaulted gallery, the artist has orchestrated a nuanced choreography of banal materials and cast-off human possessions, whose horizontal sprawl is punctuated by assemblages that hang from the walls and raking ceilings. Within and between the material groupings, convergences arise to suggest narratives, only to pull them back the moment you attempt to understand them.

As such, writing about Magor's work can feel like doing epistemic violence to it.



Installation view: *Liz Magor: BLOWOUT*, 2019. © The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Photo: Useful Art Services.

The centerpiece of this exhibition is a strange, tumbling floor installation called *Pet Co.* (2018). Using what the exhibition's co-curator Dan Byers describes as a "sculptural process of containment," Magor has enclosed a collection of precisely culled materials and objects in translucent boxes. Various stacked and strewn about, the modular forms are made of a flimsy mylar that gains a degree of structural stability when it's doubled and folded back on itself. In these precarious, see-through coffins, Magor has placed stuffed animals (whole and dismembered), gauzy textiles and synthetics, rat skins, and used clothes. Though chaotic-looking at a glance, the delicate configurations reveal themselves to be deftly considered. Moments emerge in which a stuffed animal seems to hold its own disgorged stuffing; another hides itself and a stash of fluffy body parts in a bed of taffeta.

Allegedly inspired by the haphazard window display of an army/navy surplus store in Magor's home city of Vancouver, *Pet Co.* does a lot with its humble materials, at once elevating and cherishing them and thematizing their uselessness, the precarity of their meaning. The plush toy animals are rich with nostalgia; so are the chintzy fabrics, though of a different sort. Magor stages a subtly affective confrontation between her viewers and the materialities of intimacy, wear, and repeated touch—relating both to the objects' original use and the artist's tender repurposing—while also estranging us from these items, sealing them off and denying us full comprehension. Empty candy wrappers dot the installation, offering tiny temporal and material ruptures.

Despite her chosen medium, Magor's practice feels opposed to some central tenets of the found-object tradition. Rather than casting viewers' attention outward to the spaces and systems that her delicately orchestrated objects occupy and circulate in, Magor is more interested in the stories that get embedded in specific items; the aspirational ideas that they embody and the attachments we form to them. Dedicated as she is to material convergences and the meanings they can produce, one might even consider her a formalist.

"Material talks," Magor says in a printed conversation with Byers of Harvard and the Renaissance Society's Solveig Øvstebø. "It's like there's a conveyor belt that's going along, taking us with it. It carries everything; not just our dreams and plans, but our stuff; clothing, cars, various amusements. All the intense entanglements that we've concocted, based on urgent and pertinent concerns, have a material component. And then, when the moment passes, everything goes with it. We forget what we cared about. We throw everything out."

The works thus transcend Magor's preference for thinking of them on an intimate human scale, making us consider what happens to things after their human attachments have been severed, or if intended attachments were never made in the first place. A second major installation in the exhibition, *Shoe World* (2018), consists of 32 pairs of second-hand shoes, which Magor has painstakingly rehomed in handmade boxes of matboard and polyester and displayed on a fabric-covered platform. The shoes physically index the bygone presence of past owners—as well as their aspirational self-presentations, as Magor describes—but they also cannot help but invoke wasteful economies, and how the individual impulses Magor is interested in get commodified, repackaged, and sold back to us.

The artist carefully selected these objects from a massive collection she maintains in her studio, apparently only ten percent of which ever gets displayed. Her reverence for them flirts with an animistic or object-oriented impulse. Magor describes her "stuffies" as agents that interact with one another, capable of feeling the weight of her positioning and suffering the violence of her disfigurements. Though perhaps dialectically opposed to her exacting formalist impulse, this de-hierarchized approach to her materials offers a freshly ethical materialist approach—an approach that doesn't transcend the specifics of her objects and references so much as leverage that specificity toward something deceptively, furtively profound.

The title of the exhibition, *Blowout*, refers to the precarious, bursting beauty of a peony flower the moment its petals all drop at once. It almost reads as a joke on the artist's part. Despite the manifold, rich associations we might make from individual objects, there is nothing particularly beautiful, overt, external, or even viscerally appealing about the works in the exhibition. Two sculptures from the "Valet" series (2018) push things to alienating extremes, wherein stacks of still-boxed IKEA furniture form giant pedestals for small gypsum sculptures cast in the shape of oozing handbags. But in this estranging quality lies the magical mechanics of Magor's work, in which materials compel us toward narratives that disintegrate just as we start to grasp them.

## **Contributor**

### **Jared Quinton**

**Jared Quinton** is a curator and writer.