

The Outlaw

Liz Magor continues to expand the boundaries of contemporary sculpture

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Clad in a leather jacket and motorcycle boots, Liz Magor reclines on a rustic sofa in one corner of her East Vancouver studio. It could be the view through the window of one of her backwoods-cabin installations—the sort of *mise en scène* for which she is known. On a table in the space she shares with the artist Damian Moppett—the vinyl records and turntable next to the sofa are his—are what appear to be the results of a hunting expedition. However, as with most of Magor's work, what you see is not what you get. Viewed more closely, these items reveal themselves to be a cast of a bird and a cast of a raccoon, created through a mould-making technique that she's adapted to her own needs.

The discrepancy between perception and reality, things never being quite what they seem, the constant sense of “What the hell is going on here exactly?”—these are all hallmarks of Magor's work. Over her 35-year career she has become one of Canada's most significant artists; this year she received the Audain Prize, British Columbia's most prestigious visual-arts award. Last year the award went to Jeff Wall, but unlike Wall—the most prominent figure in what is sometimes referred to as the Vancouver School of photoconceptualism—Magor is something of an outlaw on the art scene. As influential as she has been for a whole generation, both through her sculptural practice and as an associate professor at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, she has never been aligned with any particular movement. “I was always trying to find the truth according to Liz,” she says. “I was in Liz's school.”

The animal casts are reminiscent of the doe and buck that appeared in her recent exhibition “The Mouth and other storage facilities,” which was shown in Burnaby and Seattle and will appear in modified form this summer in Saskatoon and this fall in Toronto. The exhibition is about appetites, for looking and for consuming, and the white deer heads, seductively arranged like a retail display, compete for the viewer's attention with a sculpture of trays stacked with post-party debris: wrappers, cigarette butts, liquor bottles. Curled into the stack is a tiny mouse—the dark heart of inner hungers, perhaps, now sated and asleep? Or maybe the impulse that makes us have one too many drinks at a social gathering and inadvertently insult the host on the way out. “This work is about the coexistence of two drives or two realities,” says Magor, when I ask for her interpretation. “A kind of stacking of one part of your life that is not quite manageable on top of another part that you manage quite well. And I assume that every single person is trying to keep the balance between control and lack of control, rational and irrational. You are living with complexity.”

Here I have forced Magor to do something she generally avoids: explain exactly what she means. To supply the narrative line, even as I try to come up with my own, determining the threads that tie together her practice and her existence as an artist who has created what Philip Monk, director of the Art Gallery of York University, calls “a signal contribution to Canadian sculpture, an important body of work that will have lasting resonance.” Giving meaning to a series of events is a writer's task, but it is not necessarily the artist's, nor does life generally fit into a neatly packaged version of itself. There is always something spilling out, something that doesn't make sense. And questioning preconceived notions, even turning them upside down, has been Magor's life work.

Born during her parents' journey west from Montreal to Vancouver (during a one-year stop in Winnipeg), she grew up the only girl among five children. (Four Boys and a Girl was the title of an early Magor work consisting of five figures machinemoulded from organic material.) Her father, who trained as a journalist, worked in public relations for the Canadian Pacific Railway, "writing the copy that opened up the West," and she supposed she might be a writer too, but in the end may have taken more from her paternal grandfather, Robert James Magor. A financier of the kind memorialized in the novels of Robertson Davies, he was the coowner of the Magor Car Company, building train cars in the first half of the 20th century. If Magor makes objects that question our assumptions about reality, he created objects that formed the basis of the modern industrial reality we tend to think we live in.

From 1966 to 1968, she attended the University of British Columbia, where she took a general arts degree and learned about art from painters: "I don't remember understanding anything they talked about," she says. The following year she enrolled at Parsons School of Design in New York as a student of something more tangible: industrial design. She could easily have remained her grandfather's granddaughter—she wanted to be an inventor, to make the world over in her own image, and even proposed an inflatable summer community that could be deflated in the off-season—but it was not to be. It was a time of radical change, of drug-assisted experimentation with perception; the ideas of Buckminster Fuller and sustainability were discussed in class, and Magor was part of a student group that organized one of the first Earth Days, inviting Isaac Asimov and Stewart Brand, creator of the Whole Earth Catalog, to participate. Like many in her generation, she was in the process of rejecting the status quo. Unlike most, she would never recant.

It wasn't until she attended a series of screenings at the Museum of Modern Art and saw Michael Snow's classic avant-garde film *Wavelength* that her aspirations crystallized. "I opened up," she says, "and art walked in." Defiantly "anti-urban," and a self-described chauvinistic Canadian, she left New York, finished her studies at the Vancouver School of Art and spent the 1970s "trying to figure out what I was doing." To support herself she worked for the National Film Board as an animation assistant and at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, where as an usherette she was paid to watch Tom Stoppard plays. While living in Vancouver, she and her then-husband built a one-room cabin in Refuge Cove, an off-the-grid commune on a remote island in Desolation Sound; it was an experience that would resonate thematically through her future work. "I was trying to make meaning all the time until about 1980," she recalls. "Then I realized that meaning is a weirdo, meaning is elusive, it doesn't reside in the image, the object or the material. At that point I said, 'I won't try to make any meaning, I'll make something about itself.' I had to reduce it to make it something almost dumb. Like a brick wall."

Production, a 1980 sculpture made of bricks created from newspapers that had been pulped and moulded and stacked, was a turning point for her practice. It was as if the words and ideas the newspapers contained—supposedly our basis for making sense of an increasingly complex world—were instead shown to be walling us off from reality itself, implying that we never really know what is going on.

Production was followed by another pivotal work, *Dorothy—A Resemblance*, which was part of a series that cemented her reputation in the early 1980s. The series was based on an acquaintance of Magor's who explained the events in her life through fluctuations in her (nearly constant) body weight—98 pounds—and whose life Magor explained by way of lead sculptures of everyday objects: wedges of cheese or pie, light bulbs, pears, candles, books.

The Dorothy series coincided with Magor's move to Toronto and her rapid emergence as an art-world contender. Between the early 1980s and 1988, while being represented by the formidable Ydessa Hendeles—a prominent art dealer who later became an even more influential collector—she was chosen to exhibit at the Biennale of Sydney, the Venice Biennale and Documenta 8, in Germany. It was a meteoric rise for someone who had never sought the spotlight and who in fact harboured more than a little ambivalence about the mercurial nature of art stardom—indeed, two years later, the journey would hit its own brick wall.

Returning once again to the idea that things are not quite what they seem, in 1989 Magor printed some photographs she had taken in the late 1960s of her own countercultural community and exhibited them as a series called *Field Work*. These are iconic-looking images of long-haired youth wearing bandanas and feathers and moccasins, cooking over campfires or canoeing, living the romanticized version of wilderness life that characterized the back-to-the-land movement. The series was captioned with the titles of photographs from a project by Edward S. Curtis, who documented Native American cultures at the turn of the last century. To make his subjects camera-ready, Curtis had them remove their wristwatches, put on wigs and generally conform to his own ideas about their culture.

What might have been a useful examination of 1960s-era appropriation (and idealization, even idolization) of First Nations values—referring to how Magor's generation attempted to reject the effects of technology and corporate capitalism by mimicking other cultures—instead became a flashpoint of heated debate. In the politically correct climate of the early 1990s, Magor found herself under attack, the object of criticism for supposedly taking part in what she was attempting to critique—the appropriation of Native culture—while her critique of Edward Curtis was either lost or misunderstood. It was an irony to be portrayed as a symbol of white privilege while barely scraping by—“I was in all these shows and barely making a nickel”—and to discover that her critics “were as righteous as we were in the 1960s.”

She left Toronto and almost stopped making art, but in the end *Field Work* served as her entry point into an extended exploration of historical re-enactors. Magor studied groups who were recreating experiences from clashes ranging from the American Civil War to the First World War. These images of fugitives from reality evolved into installations and sculptures of wilderness hiding places inspired by real-life fugitives at large—the most notable works of this group were *Hollow* and *Burrow*. The fugitives' escapist impulse Magor seems willing to grant only in ways that are inherently impossible, as she has never quite allowed it of herself.

When it comes to what sort of advice she gives the students she mentors, who must forge a path as unpredictable as her own and can surely only hope for as much success, she is both practical and encouraging—cautioning them against a champagne lifestyle, reminding them that support can still be found—and intent on returning their gaze to the ultimate source of inspiration: the honing of their own unique vision. “You just have to be careful to stay focused on the right things,” she states.

Her life and her art have always been physical. The studio work is arduous and she has the scarred hands and wrenched shoulders to prove it—as she puts it, “I am always crashing into the hard world.” In her studio, she stands and stretches, appearing taller than she is, lean and weedy and tomboyish, but maybe that's just my perception. And though it's not yet spring, in through the studio window comes the sun, laying down tracks along the wood-plank floor.