

Liz Magor /

INTERVIEW & IMAGES

Liz Magor has developed a well integrated body of work that arises out of her profound respect for the structures of animals. In her first pieces she covered 'found' skulls with stitched leather masks, and set animal teeth multiples in styrofoam cushions. Recently she has created fictitious animals out of real and cast parts, sometimes presenting them as rugs.

In this interview and the two following, the interviewers, identified by initials, are Ann Rosenberg and Steve Harris.

AR How did you find the Vancouver School of Art as a place to work?

LM I didn't go to school very much, I just signed up and did my work at home. I didn't meet anyone there or make any friends until the graduating exhibition (1971). When I was there, the school was in a morbid state, the halls were empty, the rooms were empty.

AR Did any of the teachers suggest in what style you should work?

LM Nobody laid any trips on me about what I should do and how I should do it. I was registered in Design because I had that kind of background from New York, and, anyway, by the time you are in fourth year they figure you are already gone. I used the school for technical advice — resin, fibreglass — no one passed any kind of judgments, the training was all technical.

AR Why were you trained in design?

LM Don, my husband, was the one who talked me into art school in the first place. I thought artists had to draw. In fact I thought all artists did at school was drawing. I liked to make things, yet the sort of sculpture I knew about didn't fit with my sense of practicality. I have horrible doses of practicality that led me to believe, then, that anything that I would want to invent or do should have a reason, like a chair. So I was trained in Industrial Design in New York, but at school I made things that couldn't do anything.

But in New York, I began to see what was going on. I saw that Claes Oldenburg was making things that weren't marble, wood and bronze. There are so many galleries there, I learned so much. I overdosed myself, got myself into a guy's train of thought — there were great retrospectives of people like de Kooning and Barnett Newman.

AR Well, now that you feel free to do as you please, as an artist, you seem to have a great interest in animals, real and imaginary. Are you really fond of animals? Do you like animals more than people?

LM It is not because I like animals, it is not because I hate people, but a cross between those ideas. I think that man has come to think that he is God of the Earth, you know the old idea that man is made in the image of God. I am reacting to that, it is not that I think that we are better or that animals are better, but rather it is a reaction to the idea that no one blinks an eye when we make a rug out of a polar bear. I wonder why anyone should be uptight if we made a rug out of a movie star? Let's take the finest specimens of mankind and do the same thing with them that we do with the finest specimens of animals. There are plenty of us around, lots of us to spare.

I am also reacting to the idea that we take people like Beethoven (or any example of mankind at its greatest) and say this is what mankind is. But people like him are exceptions to the rule, just freaks. Most of us are just ordinary, base, animals — not that talented — hunters and farmers. And if we are animals, and we are so biologically, then we must be the worst animals. Our intellect has buggered everything up.

I think it is narrow-minded to say that animals have no intellect. I heard this great seagull story. The seagulls, whose population has increased so much over the last few years, are hungry, they fly around the black tower and around the Vancouver Block where the National Film Board Offices are, voracious. This friend of mine, who works at the Vancouver Block had a six inch ruler to prop up her window and, one day,

a seagull came and took it. She saw the seagull fly away with it so she propped up the window with a box. About a half an hour later she heard the ruler fall into the window. The bird had brought it back. Now that's not instinct, that's thinking.

AR So, when you figured out that art today was anything you wanted to make, you were happy?

LM Yes, and I realized that how long it takes to make it, or how long it lasts doesn't matter anymore.

AR But you do care about technique.

LM Yes, but I know the things I make will not last as long as marble or bronze, but I think of making them carefully enough that they will last a lifetime.

I don't worry about making my things to last forever, because it is another audacious thought that this earth, this planet will go on for ever. Sometimes I have this feeling that we only have twenty or thirty years left, in that case I would be wasting my time to make things super-permanent. I also think I may be wasting my time sitting in my studio making these things in the first place.

I would rather be out in nature looking at the birds, discovering things on this planet that are not going to be here much longer. When I think of that I think that maybe conceptual artists have the right idea, because they are not taking up all their time making objects . . .

AR What do you think you would like to do next?

LM I like the idea of natural multiples, like when you are looking at a flock of birds, they are all so like, all so perfect, it is as if they all popped out of the same mold. I would like to make things like that (Gathie Falk's apples are a similar idea). For example I would like to make some identical kits with the pieces set in a vacuumform mold; kits of bird bones, chickens. In fact I bought a dozen chickens and took the meat off, put them outside to let the bugs finish, but the rats got them and the idea fell through.

But I think that I will do the same thing with the nests I have collected. Every robin makes a nest with exactly the same dimensions, it is always 4 inches across the top and 4½ inches deep, the materials might vary a little bit according to where they build it, but the dimensions will be the same. All the birds behave this way, you can tell a thrush's nest from a hummingbird's, they are natural multiples. They must have some mold-making device in their head, I guess.

So I have taken a robin's nest apart and you get a pile of big twigs, a pile of small twigs, a pile of fine grass, a few hairs, and I would put these into a vacuumform package and suggest by this that people, if they think they are so fucking smart, should make their own bird's nests. I mean the birds just know how to do it, and they keep on doing it, nobody tells them how.

EXHIBITIONS

Stand Back You Fools. Burnaby Art Gallery, 1973.

Multiples. Burnaby Art Gallery, 1973.

Pacific Vibrations. Vancouver Art Gallery, 1973.

Librations. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1973.

IMAGES

Amputata Tyrannus (Male & Female), 1974, mixed media, lifesize.

Draco-ornata, 1974- , mixed media, lifesize.

Nonnus Atavus (detail), 1974, mixed media, lifesize.

Nonnus Atavus (front view).

Photography: Timmun Alariaq







