

VISUAL ARTS

The familiar transformed into the mysterious



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Liz Magor at Susan Hobbs Gallery
 Until May 28, 137 Tecumseth St., Toronto; www.susanhobbs.com

An Te Liu at MKG127
 Until May 21, 127 Ossington Ave., Toronto; www.mkg127.com

The re-purposing of familiar, everyday objects into high-concept art commodities is at least a century-old practice. (Many would argue that crafters, who turn scraps of all sorts into decorative art, have been doing it forever – but that’s another column.) Two new shows, one at Susan Hobbs Gallery and the other at MKG127, breathe gentle puffs (quite literally at MKG127) of new life into the practice by re-working objects so familiar, so tame and easily overlooked, they are almost abject.

Liz Magor’s sculptures at Susan Hobbs Gallery look, at first, like leftovers from the backroom of a dry cleaner – which, in a way, is exactly what they are. Magor has taken a series of found, often much-abused (and perhaps once much-loved) woollen blankets, cleaned them up and hung them along one wall of the gallery, complete with giant dry-cleaner hooks and paper or plastic dry-cleaning covers. So far, so what?, you may well ask. Take a closer look.

Magor, a master at re-contextualizing the banal, has gently intervened, inserting her presence on each blanket and thus marking them as unique objects. Holes have been covered or ringed with gobs of gypsum; stains have been re-stained, coloured over with fabric dyes; loose tags have been put back on, but backwards, or re-applied with diaper pins and tears have been repaired with scribbles of coloured thread.

Blankets that existed only in fragments have been sewn together, made into composite blankets that resemble mid-century abstract paintings. Another has had its once satiny hem removed and replaced by a (very convincing) plaster version cast from the original. In the gallery’s upstairs space, an enormous

dark-blue blanket (so dark I thought it was black) hangs horizontally across the wall, with all its many holes covered in silver gypsum – looking, nicely, like a twinkling night sky.

Magor sets the blankets’ connotations of comfort and reassurance against the actual, distressed surfaces of the blankets, and thus the surfaces subsequently suggest disruption and incompleteness. And she does it all so quietly, it’s creepy. As a lifelong insomniac, I read the blankets as a metaphor for troubled sleep – everything necessary to permit a comforting nap is still present in the blankets (softness, density, soothing colours), but the small imperfections nag at the viewer, much the same way small noises or prickly worries pester light sleepers. And don’t get me started on my fear of bedbugs.

Over at MKG127, An Te Liu’s *Blast*, a room-sized sculpture made from dozens of partially gutted, whitewashed small appliances – everything from a Dustbuster, a soap dispenser, a toaster oven, an ice crusher and a clock radio to a collection of still-working fans – chugs, whirls and hypnotizes the over-oxygenated viewer.

Starting with a small tail of tangled appliances near the gallery floor, the sculpture spirals upward, an inverted whirlpool. As it grows wider, the array encircles a long, downward-pointed black pendant spotlight, recreating the effect of dropping a lit flashlight down a tiled well.

When fully activated, with the light bouncing upward off the floor and onto the bellies of Liu’s disemboved machines, and with all fans spinning, *Blast* is a white-noise dervish that effectively neutralizes the entire gallery; making conversation, even ex- and inhalation, difficult, or at least more than involuntary. You feel that you are being both drawn into a vortex and shoved away, pushed to the wall.

Deliciously disorienting but, counterintuitively, given the scrappy materials, made with abundant, tidy care, *Blast* is both meditative and bombastic, blustery and still.

Liu, who recently sold a similar huge sculpture (one that was on view last summer at Toronto’s Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art) to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, is the new crown prince of the gleaners.