



Liliana Porter

Man with **Axe** and **Other Stories**

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

February 5–May 9, 2021

Argentina-born artist Liliana Porter (b. 1941) recontextualizes the ordinary things of the world to create small cracks in our foundations of meaning, memory, and history. Following an ethics of reuse, Porter's medium is the everyday object that carries some trace of the past—nostalgia-inducing toys, family curios, and odd souvenirs found in flea markets and yard sales. Juxtaposing these artifacts in marvelous vignettes and semiotic double entendres, Porter sparks a wry appreciation for life's underlying contradictions.

Nowhere is this more resonant than in the namesake artwork of this exhibition, *Man with Axe and Other Stories*, on loan from the Pérez Art Museum in Miami (cover and fig. 1). A bird's-eye view of civilization being reduced to rubble, it is an epic sprawl of smashed objects and toy figures arranged in winding procession across a large platform: a flat landscape as allegory for the open field of history. At the

terminal point of the trail of destruction is a tiny plastic man who appears to be walking backward across the platform, methodically using an axe to destroy the objects in sequence, from small chunks of matter near him to full-sized pottery, clocks, and other figurines in the middle distance, and then large elements, including a ruined piano. We are reminded that one lone character (or a virus, or a dangerous ideology) can thoroughly lay waste to the continuum of past and present that comprises the concept of civilization. The figure calls to mind philosopher Walter Benjamin's parable of an angel of history whose "face is turned towards the past" as a witness to the cumulative destructiveness of progress—a storm that "drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky high."¹ But in Porter's narrative, the figure is not an angel as a sorrowful witness, but an undersized and overreaching bringer of anarchy.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The installation should read as scary and apocalyptic, but Porter does not wish to cause undue anxiety or limit us to a pessimistic view of the human dilemma. Instead, she embraces multiple responses. "To one person it can seem fun, to another tragic, to another pretty, another a horror. And I think they're all true."² For those of a certain age, the replica of the car in which President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, a firing squad of toy soldiers, and the broken porcelain head of Chairman Mao might arouse chilling memories of a history saturated with violence and crushed ideals. But, elsewhere, little plastic figurines try to bring things back to order, repair broken clocks and smashed pottery, and sweep up messes. These actions may be hopeless attempts to hold back an inevitable collapse, but they are also expressions of the Sisyphean impulse to never stop struggling against obstacles: the core business of humanity.³ Rich with melancholy and humor and despair



Figure 3



Figure 4

Porter says about *Man with Axe* that “even though it is destruction, it’s not sinister. . . . It’s like a luminous destruction, we could say. I like that contradiction.”

The embrace of paradox continues throughout the exhibition, where other sculptures, installations,

and hope, the installation shows the man with the axe as a sociopathic embodiment of time itself, forever frozen in a single moment, forever unfolding in a pattern of violence and renewal.

Always fascinated with paradox,

and videos similarly mix oppositional metaphors: history is perpetually on the move and in a state of ruination, labor is essential but always being undone, and the associations between objects and language are as endlessly plastic as the repertoire of toys and knickknacks in Porter’s studio (figs. 2–4). The exhibition raises philosophical (that is, unanswerable) questions: What is time as a measure of existence? What role does memory play in shaping the world? What is our purpose in life? A philosopher might furrow their brow at the impossibility of finding answers. But they might also respond with a smile, reassured that the cosmic parade of dissolution and remaking will always give them material to work with.

Mark Scala
Chief curator

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” (1940), translated by Dennis Redmond, 2001. Available at folk.uib.no/hliis/TBLR-B/Benjamin-History.pdf

2. Quotes from the artist are from an interview with Inoa Batista, Frist Art Museum intern, July 16, 2020.

3. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to the never-ending task of pushing a boulder up a mountain until it nearly reached the top, only for it to roll back down again.

Illustrations

Cover

Man with Axe and Other Stories, 2017. Figurines, objects, and wooden base, dimensions variable. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Jorge M. Pérez, 2017.013. © Liliana Porter. Photo: Rhinebeck Studio

Fig. 1

Man with Axe and Other Stories (detail), 2017. Figurines, objects, and wooden base, dimensions variable. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Jorge M. Pérez, 2017.013. © Liliana Porter. Photo: Rhinebeck Studio

Fig. 2

To Do It: Red Sand III, 2020. Sand and figurine on wooden base, 36 x 40 x 40 in. (approx.). Courtesy of the artist. © Liliana Porter. Photo: Rhinebeck Studio

Fig. 3

Untitled at Sea with Gardener (detail), 2016. Acrylic and assemblage on canvas, 36 x 80 x 3 1/2 in. Collection of David Packard and M. Bernadette Castor. © Liliana Porter. Photo: Rhinebeck Studio

Fig. 4

To Fix It: Silver Alarm Clock, 2020. Broken table clock and figurine, 6 1/2 x 5 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist. © Liliana Porter. Photo: Rhinebeck Studio

Organized by the Frist Art Museum

This exhibition is supported in part by



The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by



Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203

FristArtMuseum.org

#TheFrist #FristLilianaPorter