

Liliana Porter: *Man with Axe and Other Stories*

Argentina-born artist Liliana Porter (b. 1941) recontextualizes the ordinary things of the world to create small cracks in our perception of meaning, memory, and history. Her 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 creates fables for our times—at once humorous and terrifying, banal and exotic.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is *Man with Axe and Other Stories*, which shows a small man in a suit at the terminus of a trail of objects that he appears to have smashed with an axe while walking backward across a plateau. The devastated landscape, full of splintered furniture, shattered clocks and vases, and toppled figurines, is a stage on which this anarchist has acted out his destructive impulses. The tableau illustrates that, like time itself, a tiny thing—a germ, an idea, or a lone person—can bring down a kingdom or a world. Always fascinated with paradox, 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.”

This enigmatic perspective continues throughout the exhibition, where other sculptures and a video 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 endlessly and joyfully elastic. With this exhibition, Porter asks the big questions: What is time in relation to experience? What role does memory play in shaping the world? What is our purpose in life?



Man with Axe and Other Stories, 2017

Figurines, objects, and wooden base

Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Jorge M. Pérez, 2017.013



Untitled at Sea with Gardener, 2016

Acrylic and assemblage on canvas

Collection of David Packard and M. Bernadette Castor

Porter’s strategy of disruptive recontextualization is seen in the spatial relationship between the tiny figure and the ship. We do not know whether the ship is on the surface of the water and the gardener is on the ocean floor, or if they exist in separate realities, like symbols in a dream. Either way, the scene invites a poetic reading rather than a literal one. Following Porter’s ongoing interest in the necessity of work, even when it may seem meaningless, the gardener embodies the human impulse to turn from the random forces of destruction and bring a comforting semblance of order to a small corner of the world.



To Fix It: Silver Alarm Clock, 2020

Broken table clock and figurine

Courtesy of the artist

To Fix It: Man with Blue Overall, 2020

Broken table clock and figurine

Courtesy of the artist

In these two works, Porter juxtaposes broken clocks with small figurines. The radical difference in scale makes the clocks appear to be monumental symbols for a convulsive collapse of time. The men seem intent on repairing the clocks, desiring to restore the relationship between history, the present, and the future. Porter notes that the “situation is sad and funny simultaneously. There is always the presentation of a big challenge and at the same time a hopeful inclination to believe that it is possible to solve the problem and heal the wounds.”



Matinee, 2009

Digital video

Courtesy of the artist

Matinee is a sequence of brief scenarios in which unexpected meanings arise from the juxtaposition or alteration of everyday objects that trigger cultural memories or personal nostalgia. Each vignette is accompanied by music composed and performed by Uruguayan musician Sylvia Meyer. However banal the individual curios, toys, and songs may be, new associations arise when they are combined, creating simultaneously poetic and humorous narratives that are reflected in the whimsical titles. Like all of Porter’s work, *Matinee* affirms that artists and non-artists alike can find meaning, joy, and inspiration in things that may seem unremarkable by themselves, but when creatively combined can become a new lens for viewing the world.

Running time: 20 minutes, 45 seconds



To Do It: Red Sand III, 2020

Sand and figurine on wooden base

Courtesy of the artist

In this work, the female figurine appears to be tirelessly sweeping an enormous amount of red sand arranged in a labyrinthine spiral: she is a small human with a big task. Yet the action

is ambiguous—is she creating or destroying the spiral? Either way, we realize—although she might not—that the results are impermanent; the pattern can disappear with a sneeze or a breeze. In discussing the symbolism of laborers in her work, the artist has said, “What to me is moving is that they really are into their task, having faith that they are going to really accomplish it, and from the outside, we say, ‘but this is an impossible thing.’”

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