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CANADIANART

Spring Hurlbut: Deadfall Dialogues

Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto Mar 25 to Apr 24 2010

by Bill Clarke

Left: **Spring Hurlbut**, ***Double Trouble (positive)*** 2010, Right: **Spring Hurlbut**, ***Double Trouble (negative)*** 2010. Courtesy **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

For the past several years**, Spring Hurlbut**'s work has examined themes of life and death using motifs of stillness and motion. Her photography, installations, videos and sculptures, which use taxidermied animals, human remains and, most recently, ventriloquists' dummies, confront us with our own mortality. **Hurlbut**'s current exhibition, ***Shut Up***, at **Georgia Scherman Projects** is likely to make audiences feel a bit uncomfortable. But, as visual arts writer Bill Clarke found out, **Hurlbut** doesn't intend to creep us out; in fact, she is disappointed when viewers have that reaction. Rather, she says, she wants us to contemplate the human condition. **Hurlbut** and Clarke talked at the opening of ***Shut Up*** and then corresponded by email for the following interview.

Bill Clarke: How does your earlier work, which was rooted in architectural history, relate to what you've been making the last few years?

Spring Hurlbut: Mannerism was the guiding light in my architectural work. I'm fascinated by the subtle dismantling of classical Renaissance architectural conventions as evidenced in Giulio Romano's striking Palazzo del Te. His famous "falling triglyphs" strike at the heart of nature, artifice and the partial dissolution

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of prior conventions. Mannerist vocabulary continues, in part, to affect my practice beyond architectural boundaries.

For example, the *Sacrificial Ornament* series, which I began in 1989, is a set of architectural mouldings based on classical Greek architecture. They refer to how entablatures and columns represent, in a highly stylized manner, the reconstituted body of the sacrificial victim, both human and animal.

Then, in 1999, I was invited by the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum to design a new set of ornamental mouldings. Instead, I convinced the curator to allow me to work with the ROM's collection directly.

I conducted extensive research in all the ROM's departments. The result was the 2001 installation *The Final Sleep*. I chose 400 items from the millions of objects in the museum. The birds and animals I selected came from the research collection. Each specimen had a classification tag tied to its bound feet; their skeletons had been removed and their cavities were filled with cotton batting. There was no attempt to make these specimens lifelike because they weren't intended for public display. There was also no hierarchy of value placed on the things in the show: 3,000-year-old cat mummies resided between dog skulls and embalming bottles from the 1940s.

Museum presentations of natural history in the Americas tend to rely on illusion, trying to animate the departed. The installation moved away from the idea of the museum as illusion of life towards the idea of the museum as a cultural mausoleum. My interpretation of the ROM collection was to exhibit a monochromatic museum within a museum that constituted a final resting place for specimens and artifacts that had achieved immortality in their conservation and classification. There was no chronology, hierarchy or illusion of life in *The Final Sleep*. All things were equal in repose.

Spring Hurlbut, ***Dizzy*** 2009–10 (installation view). Courtesy **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

BC: Was *The Final Sleep* intended as an institutional critique, a rumination on life and death, or both?

SH: The rumination on life and death is completely accurate. While the ROM acknowledges their specimens' scientific usefulness, their humble deaths go unrecognized. The ROM was grateful that *The Final Sleep* bridged that gap, and the public was enthralled by the rarely seen study collection. It is a dream of mine to make a permanent installation in a natural history museum.

BC: When did you first start working with human remains?

SH: I used a single human femur to create a mould when producing a set of polymer femurs to place in a triglyph frieze in 1980. More recently, during my tenure at the Manchester Museum, I created the installation *Beloved and*

Forsaken. I displayed a mummy from the museum's Egyptology department. The mummy had been unwrapped in the 1970s and its remains placed in several beige archival boxes with handwritten labels identifying the contents: "dust and sweepings" or "bandages." The last, large box had the word "brain" written boldly, while the word "penis" was scrawled in faintly, as if it were an afterthought. I kept the mummy's remains concealed within their storage containers. It was significant to exhibit this fractured body as it was in the Manchester collection, separated and compartmentalized, never to be whole again.

BC: The *Deuil I and II* series followed this, correct?

SH: Yes, soon after *Beloved and Forsaken* was completed in 2004, I decided to work with my father's remains. My father, James, passed away in 1999. His cremated body was divided and preserved in plastic bags from the funeral home, and I received one quarter of them.

At first, I shelved my dad's ashes, not knowing what to do with them. But eventually, in 2005, I sifted through the ashes and sweepings, not unlike an archaeologist would, and discovered distinct bone shards.

BC: These photographs are poignant, but also unsettling. Viewers are forced to confront that this is how we all end up.

SH: The initial stages of this work recognized that my father existed, but that he no longer does. In the sifting of my dad's ashes, I felt that I was in conversation with him. My father's passing took on a ritualized significance. Working with his last vestiges gave me some measure of solace.

Spring Hurlbut *Automatonophobia* 2010.
Courtesy **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

BC: You have also photographed other people's remains…

SH: Yes, since that time I've photographed, with the mother's permission, the ashes of her infant daughter, who survived less than three hours after her birth. The baby's fleeting existence makes one acutely aware of the tenuous relationship between the living and a life never lived. My assistant, Galen, was also killed in a bicycle accident. His parents allowed me to photograph his ashes. His mother participated by sifting through her son's ashes.

Other colleagues and friends requested that I photograph their beloved ones' remains as well. The *Deuil I and II* series represent a five-year period that was intensely private. People participated generously by giving me ashes of their immediate family members to photograph. I accommodated the family members as best I could. They took a leap of faith with me. To be entrusted with a person's remains is a humbling and immense honour.

BC: When I saw the *Deuil* photographs, specifically the ones in which the ashes have been photographed against black backgrounds, I thought the remains looked like small galaxies, floating in space. They feel transcendent. Did that occur to you at all?

SH: That was not my initial intention; although, yes, scientists claim life originated out of stardust. The metaphorical relationship with the deceased's ashes and the cosmos is undeniable. I'm so pleased you had this reaction to them, though.

BC: I had the same response to your 2008 film, *Airborne*, which shows the ashes of six individuals spiralling in the air and slowly disappearing.

SH: I can see how *Airborne* could remind one of galaxies transforming, exploding, constantly in flux. Each of the person's ashes is seen separately on screen, and the film loop repeats endlessly. In these deaths, there is still movement, a continuum.

Currently, I'm returning the ashes to the respective families. It is necessary, of course, but also somewhat painful, parting with my subjects.

Spring Hurlbut *Automatonophobia* 2010.
Courtesy **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

BC: Photographs of cremated human remains and now, in your most recent work, ventriloquist's dummies—on the surface, your work seems "creepy," but that's not all you want people to take away, obviously.

SH: I want people to think about the human condition. Death should be looked on as a natural and inevitable destiny. I object to the word "creepy" because it devalues our attempt to contemplate mortality.

BC: Turning to your current exhibition, ***Shut Up***, what led to your interest in using dummies?

SH: It started with an installation called *Little Willie* at the Drake Hotel in 2009. *Little Willie* consists of a small vintage ventriloquist dummy laid out on a metal doll's bed. The mouth is propped open, so the dummy looks like he is screaming, silently. Many people did double takes when passing through the lobby.

BC: Where did you find the dummies for the show?

SH: I found them in various places—antique stores and fairs across the country. I have been on the prowl constantly for over a year.

BC: What do the dummies mean to you?

SH: The ventriloquist dummies are historic artifacts of popular culture from the 1950s and are strongly associated with the ventriloquists of their day. These former vaudevillian performers wrote the scripts for these little boy-men dolls. The ventriloquists, who are usually male, had the dummy utter outlandish, provocative or rude comments. He would then chastise his young charge. Since the dummy is perceived as a child, and cannot be held responsible for his transgressions, he is deemed innocent and is forgiven. Then, the cycle of bad behaviour, reprimand and forgiveness is repeated throughout the skit.

BC: Tell us about the two sequential photographic series in the current show. The action of the puppet's head doing a complete 360-degree turn is unsettling because it is unnatural; it is such a "scary puppet" convention.

SH: In ***Automatonophobia*** and ***Ta-dah!***, the dummies are dislocated from their relationship to their masters. They are performing a simple physical action without dialogue. They also reference what may be one of the first full turns in the history of photography, which was executed as a sequential self-portrait by Félix Nadar in 1865. The puppets are portrayed as having an almost independent will. But they are far from maniacal; rather, they perform for us. They copy human movement, but surpass human limitations. This movement is also performed by nine identical dummies mounted on a wall in a row. In this installation, ***Dizzy***, all of their bodies face forward and only the heads turn. I agree these unsettling "scary puppet" movements go far beyond our wildest capabilities.

BC: The same week that ***Shut Up*** opened, the right-wing American political pundit Ann Coulter was touring Canada. Her presence led to debates in the media about the nature of free speech, and some people at the opening wondered if the puppets expressed something about the idea of censorship, or of voices controlled or silenced.

SH: No, the "silence" in this exhibition has nothing to do with Ann Coulter. Rather, ***Shut Up*** concerns the separation of the ventriloquist from the dummy. The conversation between the master and the puppet has ceased, so the conversation is now in the audiences' heads. I've found that viewers have prior assumptions about ventriloquism. Some suffer from automatonophobia, the fear of dummies. Others feel uneasy, while others laugh but, in the end, the relationship between "us" and "them" remains unresolved.

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