

IT IS

Recent Acquisitions of New Canadian Art

WHAT

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Spring Hurlbut

Born in Toronto, 1952.
Lives and works in Toronto.

Airborne 2008
Digital video, 19:40 mins.
Purchased 2010

The theme of mortality has been a more or less overt presence in the work of Spring Hurlbut for nearly three decades. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Hurlbut created sculptures and installations through a combination of plaster and organic matter – especially bones – that examined the relationship between sacrifice and ritual within the classical origins of Western architecture.

In 2005 Hurlbut initiated a project using her father's cremated remains, which had been in her possession in the years following his death. What emerged from this study was *Deuil* (mourning), a powerful series of photographs consisting of documentation of her father's ashes and those of others.

Airborne relates directly to *Deuil* and Hurlbut's use of cremation ashes as the basis for metaphysically resonant works of art. The video is arranged into five segments, each initiated by a person's name presented across the screen in bold white text. On a table is a container of the deceased's ashes. The content of each chapter begins with Hurlbut's entering the right side of the frame wearing a dust mask and safety goggles before carefully releasing the lid on the container and exiting. The genesis for the making of the video occurred when Hurlbut was asked by a friend whether she would consider documenting her mother's ashes, in the same way the artist had previously done with her own father's in *Deuil*. Hurlbut was said to be "struck by the way [the] cremated remains rose from their container like mist or smoke as she carefully lifted the lid."¹ The ensuing sequences in *Airborne* pit the meandering of ashen remains against the solemnity of a monochromatic jet black background.

Airborne is filmed in slightly slow motion, which emphasizes both the delicacy of the artist's touch as well as the mesmerizing effects of the ashen mist that rises out of each of the urn boxes. It is difficult not to be absorbed by the poetry of movement provided through the simple process of releasing ashes out into the open. As Hurlbut has observed, "The ashes are in no way manipulated. I simply put the black box down on the table; I open the lid of the box to release

the ashes into the room. Exposure to the existing currents of air lifted and dispersed the finest particles. The conditions in the studio where the video was done were constant. Death here is not finite. As everything in the cosmos is ad infinitum, death itself embraces this continuum."² Over the course of *Airborne*, the last remaining evidence of the lives of the six individuals³ does a final dance, or, more appropriately perhaps for Hurlbut and the loved ones of those depicted, provides the opportunity for a last goodbye.

Jonathan Shaughnessy

1 Press release for the inaugural exhibition of *Airborne*, Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto, November 2008.

2 Spring Hurlbut, email correspondence with the author, 25 November 2009.

3 One of the video's five segments depicts two persons.

