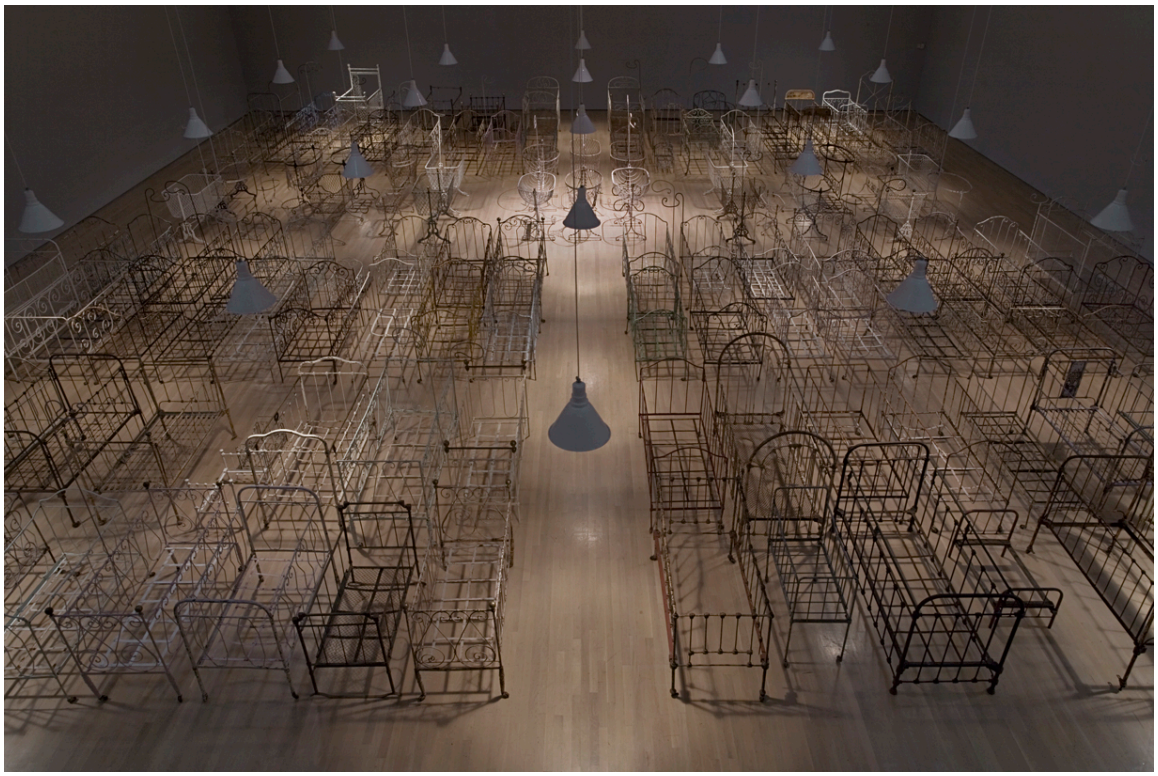
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Tracing the lines from cradle to grave

By Sarah Milroy. Jun. 19, 2009



The simple poetics of Spring Hurlbut's Le Jardin du sommeil (1998) offer a kind of solace, with a tone more whimsical than tragic. Photo credit Richard-Max Tremblay

This summer's retrospective exhibition of large-scale colour photographs by Montreal-born artist Robert Polidori is the big-hype event at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal this season. But the retrospective show of work by the late Montreal artist Betty Goodwin, drawn from the museum's outstanding permanent collection, has unexpectedly stolen the puck, with an assist from Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut. All three exhibitions deal with themes of loss and remembering. But while Goodwin and Hurlbut bring a sense of delicacy and gravitas to the task of representation, Polidori's pictures are all naked revelation, delivering a kind of voyeuristic frisson and queasy-making aftertaste.

Polidori's work has long been the subject of both aesthetic and ethical debate in the art world. His big prints are, by and large, devoted to themes of destruction and detritus: bombed-out buildings in Beirut, abandoned radioactive classrooms in Chernobyl and Pripyat (their paint peeling, their window sills sprouting grasses),

and, most controversially, the destroyed houses of New Orleans's Ninth Ward, which he shot in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Artists have often engaged themselves with themes of human suffering - Goya is the prime example - but not without delivering a certain amount of editorial spin. (Goya affixed caustic captions to his depictions of war.) Where Polidori gets into difficult territory is in his rapturous aestheticization of his subjects. He abandons himself to beauty. These are not pictures that make you think; rather, one can find oneself looking through his lens at the flayed wallpaper of an abandoned New Orleans house and thinking: That colour would look great in my dining room. As viewers, we become mired in his conflict. (Polidori has photographed Versailles as well, and some of these are his best work, subtle inquiries into the site's restoration and the strategic simulation of history.) His pictures of Havana's destitute, rubble-strewn streets look similarly enticing, exotic, desirable - unless you want to think about the realities of living on $10 a week.

All photographers who take on the social realm must negotiate this problem: How much beauty is in good taste, given the content? And it cannot be denied that Polidori makes us bear witness to social realities that the mainstream news media barely pauses over. One discerning friend of mine from New Orleans, for example, felt some respect for Polidori's stubborn insistence on documenting these subjects on a scale that cannot be denied, forcing entry for this imagery into the privileged strata of society that needs to be sensitized to the crisis the most. And had these images been created solely for the pages of magazines, where reportage would anchor them in a political discourse, the impact might be different. But selling them for $20,000 a pop (the going rate) feels exploitative. It's hard to get comfortable with that.

It's hard to be comfortable with Goodwin's work, but for different reasons. Looking at her art inevitably provokes a harrowing, but often cathartic, introspection. Her landmark soft ground etchings of vests, from the early seventies, carry the weight of historical memory. The imagery arises from the garment trade in Montreal, of which she was a part. But the vest prints also memorialize her father: a tailor and garment maker who died unexpectedly when Goodwin was a child. The vest, in her hands, becomes a symbol of the physical shell of the body, from which the soul can suddenly and irrevocably slip free.

The exhibition contains, as well, several of her massive tarpaulin works from the mid-seventies: found movers' tarps that she subtly customized with paint and other artistic media to enhance their scars and weathered places. A handsome minimalist sculpture in steel from 1977, *River Bed* , stands as testimony to her ability to distill form and achieve a freight of meaning; two elongated steel steps, linked together in a descending configuration, suggest a river moving downstream, but also a bed, a coffin, a passageway.

Several of Goodwin's best mixed-media paintings of swimmers reveal the extent of her painter's gift - veils of diaphanous colour and fragile line, erupting here and there into volcanic excoriation - but also her subtle, oblique way of exploring difficult themes that could be hackneyed if handled bluntly. (The paintings are accompanied by three luminous and soulful works on paper on the same theme.) This series was provoked by the death of her son, but they speak eloquently of the way in which human beings can buoy each other up, weigh each other down, or leave each other to sink, struggling in the flood of life. Several slightly later works evoke torture and states of extreme privation, as Goodwin worries at man's capacity for unconscionable acts of brutality.

The selection ends with a sculpture titled *Particles of a Scream* (1999), a startling physical description of despair that Goodwin made near the end of her working life. A black square on the wall serves as a backdrop to a tall, spine-like form sprouting a tangle of wires and shattered glass vials (light bulbs?). On the floor, their jagged remains, and added bits of broken mirror, pile up as testimony to what was. The mood of disappointment and deep loneliness is palpable, but Goodwin tells her truths in a whisper; we lean in to hear her.

Currently at the museum, Hurlbut is exhibiting her haunting installation *Le Jardin du Sommeil* , a solemn but quirky assembly of antique children's beds and cradles, installed in funereal rows. This graveyard of lost childhood feels somewhat quaint, even Edward Goreyish, after the Goodwin show, but its concise poetics have charm. Hurlbut sets up a condition - a simple assembly of objects - and leaves us to complete the work with the archive of our own recollections: of our childhoods, of our offspring's astonishing trajectory from cradle to adulthood and beyond, of those we love who have vanished in time. Like Goodwin, she offers a kind of solace, but her tone is more whimsical than tragic.

Human life, in her imagining, seems a series of jumps, halts and pirouettes along the narrow diving board of time before the inevitable leap into the dark. Like Goodwin's, her art makes for good company along the way.

The Robert Polidori and Spring Hurlbut shows run at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal to Sept. 7. The Betty Goodwin runs until Oct. 4.