



## Ann Thomas on Spring Hurlbut

Spring Hurlbut has an affinity for tackling difficult subject matter with insight, elegance, and a characteristic balance of emotion and reason. The large inkjets prints (roughly 24 by 30 inches) in the series “Deuil” (Mourning) from 2005 to 2007 are made with a process that creates a surface seductively rich and subtle in tonality and color. Cremated human remains are their subject, but ultimately the images are about so much more than the banal evidence of death.

Hurlbut’s work over the past two decades has often alluded to human mortality through the creation and installation of objects, from the “Sacrificial Ornament” series to the installation *La Somnolence*. “Deuil” is her first body of artwork that is entirely photographic. I was introduced to the series when leafing through the May 2007 issue of *Prefix Photo*. Moved by the courageous treatment of the subject matter and knowing the artist’s extraordinary gift with material presentation, I knew immediately that I had to see the prints and possibly represent them in the collection. When I did, I was not disappointed, and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, now has four.

**Above:** Spring Hurlbut, *Galen #4*, from the series “Deuil,” ultra-chrome digital print (28 1/4 x 32 1/4 in.), 2006. Images courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects and the artist

In the “Deuil” series, Hurlbut has taken two distinct approaches. For one—taken of the remains of Scarlett Wright, a subject whose death occurred within hours of her birth—she used scientific measurement. Scarlett’s mother entrusted Hurlbut with her daughter’s ashes, and Hurlbut appears to try to explain the incomprehensible brevity of this life by applying the fundamental tools of order to the instinctual cry: *why?* She weighed the small quantity of infant ashes that barely fill a tenth of the standard-issue mortuary bag on an antique scale and photographed them. Then she measured the precious, almost talismanic shards of bone extracted from the ashes against a ruler and photographed them. These unconventional portraits pit the strength of science against the force of universal randomness and personal loss.

But if the shortness of Scarlett’s life remains inexplicable to Hurlbut and therefore comprehensible only by scientific measurement, Hurlbut honors two other subjects—Galen (who was 29) and Mary (who was 52)—by acknowledging their eventual and inevitable return to cosmic matter. In these works, which constitute the second of her approaches, she sprinkled the subject’s ashes onto black paper and photographed them. Although the “why” question remains implicit, Galen and Mary open up the more resigned interrogation: *where?* Mary, who found spiritual nourishment in Buddhism, radiates into the darkness, while Galen’s “open and ever-expanding spirit” is a luminous comet speeding into the cosmos.

Apart from their power as images and superbly conceived prints, the works that constitute “Deuil” add a new dimension to the genre of photographic *memento mori*.

**Right:**  
Spring Hurlbut,  
Scarlett #2, from the  
series “Deuil,”  
ultra-chrome digital print  
(24 3/8 x 30 in.), 2005.

Throughout the history of art, death has found its symbolic representation in the depiction of the Dance of Death, the melancholic contemplation of the hourglass, the presence of a bearded Father Time, or the advance of the faceless figure of the Grim Reaper brandishing his scythe. With the advent of photography and its ability to capture the often grotesque evidence of death, the taboos associated with its visual representation became more entrenched. Conventions were created for the making of photographic *memento mori*: both dead children and dead adults were presented as if sleeping, with the more rare depictions of the deceased in open caskets. These images ensured that we remained bound to the concept of death as the absence of life as we have known it. Hurlbut’s “Deuil” series serves as a Vanitas but also proposes a more universal consideration of the portrait in death, one that underscores what it is that we ultimately all share.

Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Ann Thomas is the author of the books *Beauty of Another Order: Photography in Science* (1997) and *Lisette Model* (1990). She curated the exhibition and wrote the text for the accompanying catalog for *No Man’s Land: The Photographs of Lynne Cohen* (2001) and, more recently, *Modernist Photographs* from the National Gallery of Canada (2007). She has contributed essays to many publications devoted to twentieth-century and contemporary international photography.

