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BY MAIA-MARI SUTNIK

Can I see another woe
And not be in sorrow too,
Can I see another grief
And not seek for kind relief.

– William Blake

In her first photographic work, *Deuil*,[1] accomplished Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut gives us a thoughtful meditation on death. By documenting cremated remains, and thereby revealing the fragile materiality of what remains of existence, Hurlbut connects us to an experience both individual and universal. One might imagine that such a project would require a rigorous detachment, but Hurlbut, deeply affected by the trust bestowed upon her by the families of the deceased, experienced empathetic grief and loss in the making of this work, which she describes as a privilege.[2] The work explores the inevitable mourning and sorrow occasioned by death, but goes further, to reveal the timeless incandescence of the luminous spirit.

Deuil comprises a series of photographs of the ashes of Spring Hurlbut's father, James, and of Scarlett Wright, an infant who died a few hours after birth. It also includes photographs of the ashes of Mary Pocock, a Toronto photographic artist whose unwavering spirit endured a protracted struggle with her own mortality,[3] and of Galen Kuellmer, an emerging photographer and former assistant to Hurlbut. Although photographing the ashes of Mary and Galen marked a significant shift in Hurlbut's methodology, as a whole, *Deuil* can be seen as a logical progression in the evolution of her artistic thinking and practice.

While, in the Western world, death and dying are not quite the taboo subjects they were once held to be, they are nevertheless not easily understood or accepted as a natural, ever-present part of life. Death is considered a rupture rather than a fundamental process of nature. Modern society, enamoured of the miracles of medical science, regards death as an unexpected interruption, something to be resisted. Those

Previous spread
Spring Hurlbut
"Mary No. 2"
from *Deuil*
2006
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GEORGIA SCHERMAN PROJECTS (TORONTO)

who experience loss are deliberately shielded from the physical evidence of death and then quickly consigned to the privacy of home and family. As Galen Kuellmer's mother, Jan MacKie, observed: "My encounter with our laws and accepted systems around how we are able to deal with someone's death (in particular how we are *not* allowed to follow our own instincts and process in dealing with the physical aspects) came close to driving me insane."[4] Moreover, once condolences have been expressed and eulogies given, the pressure to curtail grief, to "get on with life," can be intense. The social psyche offers little empathy or emotional recognition to those mourning loss.

Generally regarded as an uncomfortable, if not a grim subject, death is often avoided or is referred to euphemistically in social discourse. Other than the elaborate funerals and memorial ceremonies accorded to celebrities and political figures, grief is largely treated as a private, even socially difficult affair. Hurlbut wanted to rescue death from its status as either hidden or sensationalized. She wanted to restore to death its naturalness and to do so directly in a public context.

Throughout much of human history, representations of death have served as markers of the finality of loss. For many centuries, death was represented as a menacing skeleton, a symbol to fear. By the nineteenth century, death, which was embedded in daily life, always close, became visibly and prescriptively mourned. Bereavement was demonstrated by black clothing (especially for widows), veils, arm bands, stationery with black edges, and pendants containing a lock of hair of the deceased. Embroidered samplers of poetic sentiments and bell jars of cherished belongings of the deceased were popular memorial objects.

In 1839, following the *Gazette de France*'s announcement of Daguerre's solution to the problem of fixing an image, photographs came to play a prominent role in death and remembrance. Posthumously painted mourning portraits, in which an artist, using the corpse as a model, painted a lifelike image of the deceased (especially popular for children, who suffered the highest rate of mortality), were replaced by post-mortem photographs. These photographs provided a lasting, more convincing image of the deceased. Displayed in special cases and albums and easily shared among family members, they quickly became an important and pervasive part of nineteenth-century life.

In contemporary North America, such photographs of the dead are no longer considered in good taste. But images of the dying and the dead surround us. Despite efforts to control the public distribution of such images – for example, recent political moves to prohibit the media's publication of images of the coffins of soldiers killed overseas – depictions of violent death in the news media abound. Horrific images of gruesome deaths – from skeletal remains in mass graves to sensationalized crime scenes – are regularly splashed across front pages and television screens. Photography in the media seldom memorializes the dead respectfully, and images that affirm the naturalness of loss and grief are rare. Hurlbut's photographs of cremated remains recover and reclaim images of death from such politicization and sensationalism.

Hurlbut's creative vision has evolved through more than three decades of contemplating permanence and impermanence. In 1981, *The Wall* was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. This architectural work involved the installation of a wall, on the surface of which traces of human presence – scratches, marks and indentations – were visible. Literal absence was visually signified, and could be experienced, as a felt presence. In 1998, *Le Jardin de sommeil* was installed in a park in

Spring Hurlbut
“James No. 2” (top)
“James No. 1” (bottom)
from *Deuil*
2005
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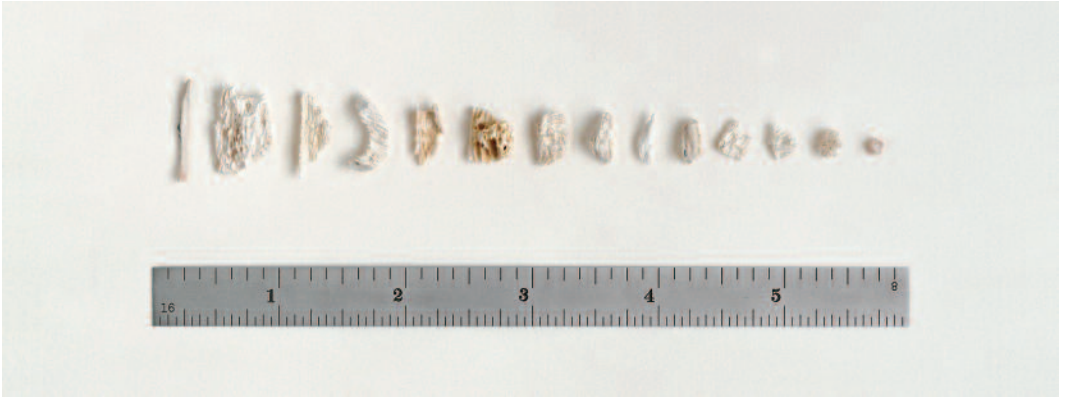

Spring Hurlbut
“Scarlett No. 2” (top)
“Scarlett No. 1” (bottom)
from *Deuil*
2005

the north of Paris. For this work, Hurlbut placed more than one hundred antique cribs throughout the garden in an explicit and visceral articulation of absence and loss.

In 2001, Hurlbut collaborated with the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto to produce *The Final Sleep/Le Dernier Sommeil*, a brilliant installation that explored questions about the nature of material significance and the immortality of objects conserved in a museum collection. Selecting from among millions of historical specimens, Hurlbut offered viewers a strikingly unusual vision of the natural world. By arranging a selection of white and albino birds and animals in precisely ordered positions of repose and placing them in carefully considered relation to evocatively personal objects – Egyptian cat mummies, children's boots, nursing bottles, a child's funeral wreath – she transformed the museum's research collection (not generally intended or used for public display) into a vibrant and provocative exhibition that reconceived the status and meaning of archived museum artifacts. The monochromatic installation of four hundred and fifty white specimens demonstrated not only an astonishingly radical approach to classification, but, more significantly, that new identities could be constructed through such rearrangement. In the context of the museum itself, this artfully arranged "final sleep" contravened standard museum practice and regenerated the collection, both physically and conceptually. Hurlbut's unusual methodology produced an unexpected freedom; liberated from its closed, scientific, archival status, this collection of objects acquired new life. Without an established classificatory hierarchy, a relation of equivalence between objects was created, in which the symmetry of the arrangements displayed an exquisitely poetic sensibility.

Hurlbut employed a similar strategy at the Manchester Museum of Natural History and Ethnology in England, where she selected hundreds of objects from a massive collection. Exhibited in 2004, the installation, titled *Beloved and Forsaken*, consisted of a free-standing, taxidermically prepared, white cow on a raised dais surrounded by twelve large, nineteenth-century display cabinets. Displayed in the cabinets was a wide range of objects, from glass jars containing specimens of *Phallus impudicus* (a phallic-shaped mushroom) to stacks of unopened boxes containing "mummy remains." Hurlbut's favourite artifacts were boxes labelled "sweepings and dust" and the wrappings of an Egyptian mummy.

A museum collection is primarily a conservationist's preserve in which an illusory likeness to life is favoured for public display. By means of her arrangements and startling juxtapositions, Hurlbut subverted conventional museological practice and configured new meanings and relationships. The Manchester installation, in its contemplation of the meaning of loss and of the relationship of loss to practices of preservation, foregrounded issues of mortality. Hurlbut's reanimation of the Manchester collection thus served, in the course of her subsequent meditations on her father's death, as the transitional work to a more personal and intimate examination of death and loss.

In 2005, nearly six years after her father's death – and several years after her mother gave her father's ashes to her – Hurlbut began to document cremated remains. When she first approached the task of photographing her father's ashes, she had no idea how to proceed. After several failed attempts, she decided to employ an analytical method usually applied to archaeological collections – measuring the size and weight of objects in relation to one another. Sifting through the ashes, she discovered small remnants of bone and began to arrange and then photograph the

Following spread
Spring Hurlbut
"Mary No. 5" (left, top)
"Mary No. 4" (left, bottom)
"Mary No. 1" (right)
from *Deuil*
2006
COURTESY THE ARTIST
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PROJECTS (TORONTO)

fragments according to size. Hurlbut has said that working with her father's ashes in this way was sad but calming – handling the ashes felt like being in conversation with her father – an instance, perhaps, of Blake's "kind relief."

Hurlbut sees her role in the creative process of this work as secondary; the subject is of primary importance. She regards herself as a "medium," as a facilitator of sorts, in the process of performing this visual transformation. But this conceptual distancing from such an intimate subject actually calls upon a deep inner vision.

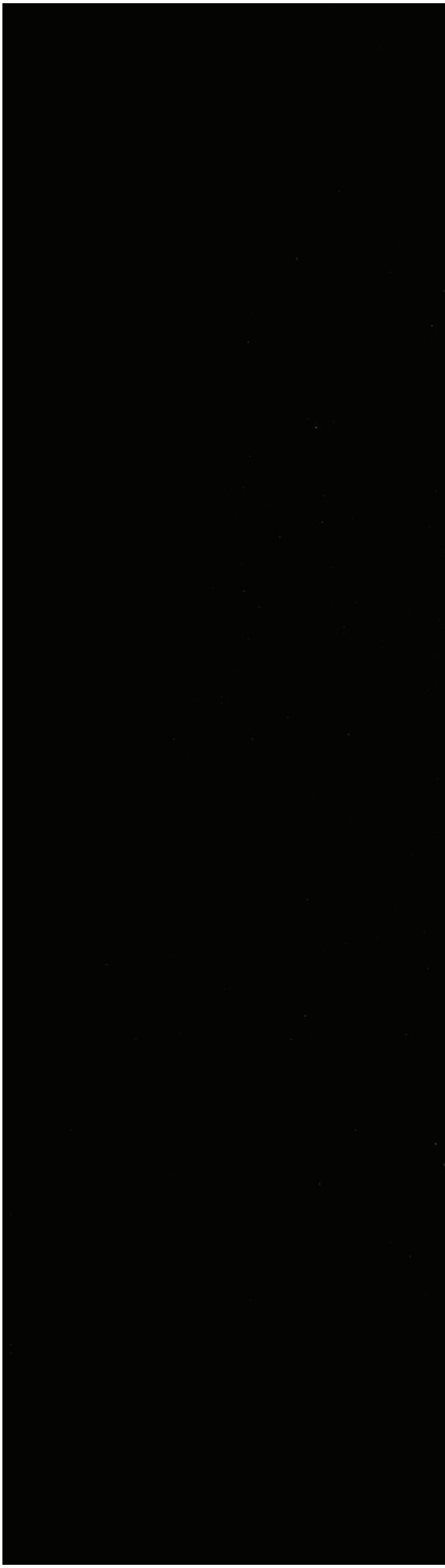
William Blake, the early-nineteenth-century artist and poet, believed that the visionary imagination contained no birth and no death, no beginning and no end; it constituted a perpetual journey through eternity. The artist thus engages in a spiritual activity, the essence of which consists of the delineation of a particular reality – a reality that is *revealed* to the visionary imagination. If the artist sought merely to reproduce or mimic the forms of the visible world, the senses could impede creativity. Consequently, the artist, according to Blake, must create his or her own visual symbolism in order to express a vision that owes little to ordinary visual experience.

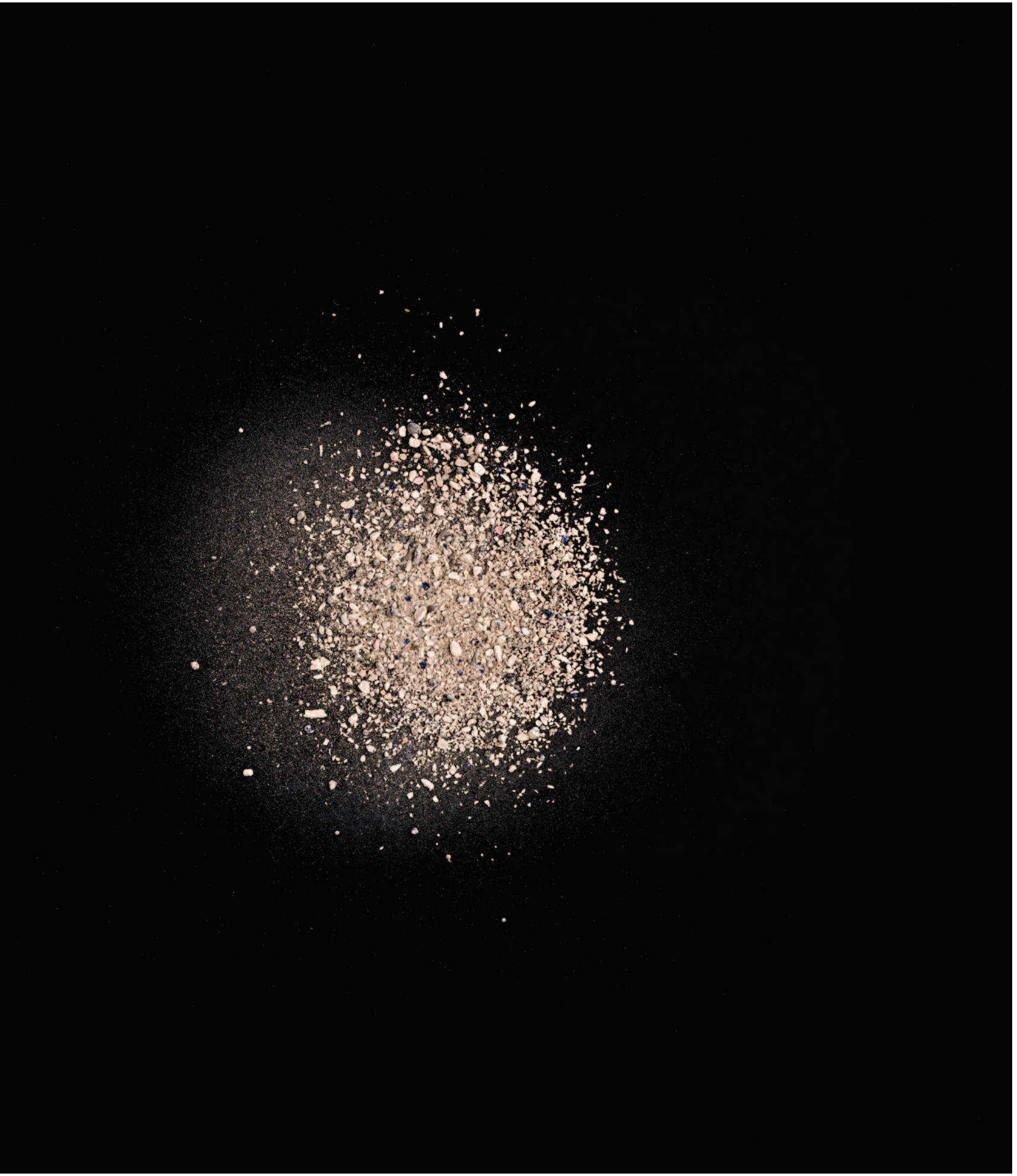
This is not to say that Hurlbut subscribes to Blake's philosophical mysticism, but it is clear that viewing *Deuil* is no ordinary visual encounter. *Deuil* forgoes the familiar symbols of death – figures in repose, skeletons, wreaths, gravestones and skulls – for new ways of looking at death. Perhaps Hurlbut conceived her work as spiritual activity and the work itself as a metaphor for life, for it is unquestionably a work of deep spiritual essence.

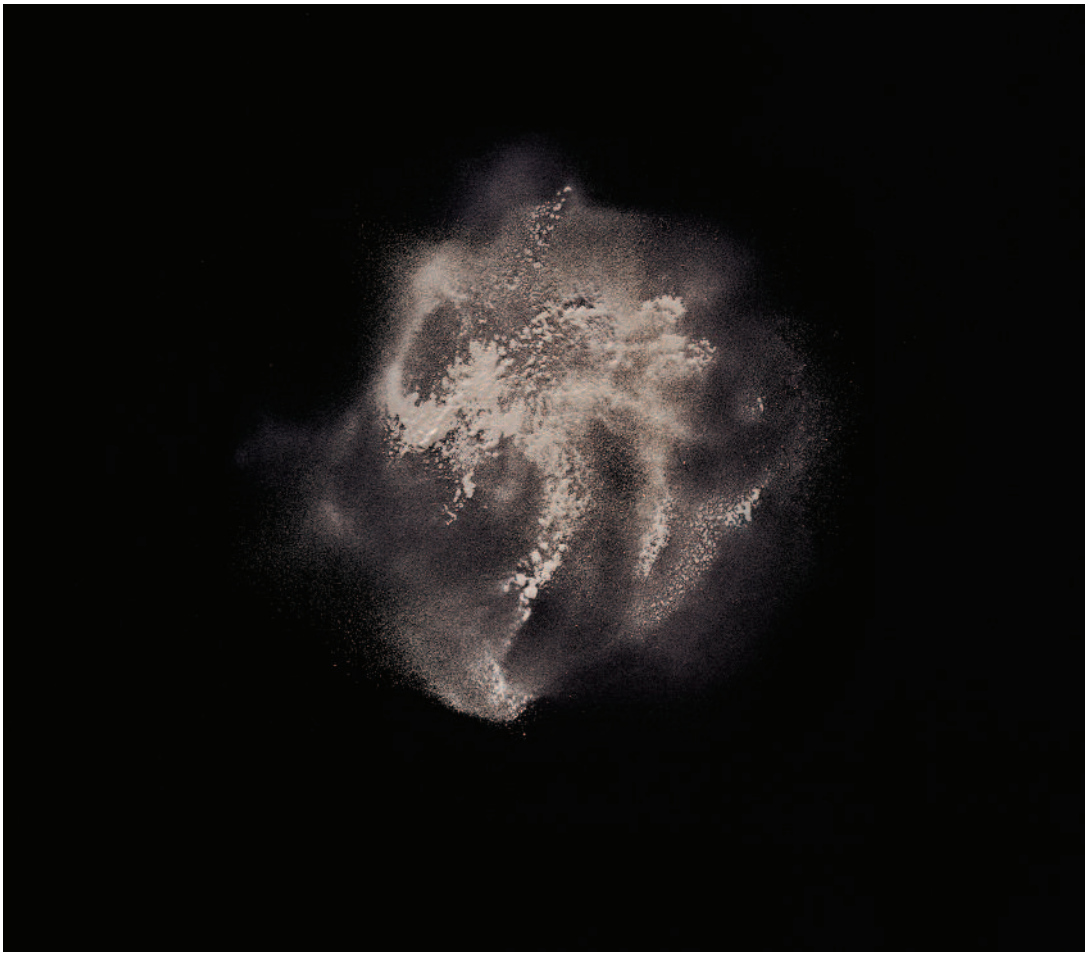
On the basis of her work with the ashes of her father, Hurlbut received permission to photograph the ashes of the infant Scarlett Wright, the ashes of Mary Pocock and those of Galen Kuellmer. Having established her methodology in her work with her father's ashes, she applied the same approach to Scarlett's ashes. The paper-thin shards were placed above a ruler in order of descending size and then photographed. Hurlbut's close observation and meticulous presentation of cremated remains speak to a process both intense and contemplative – a creative process intended to re-imagine, in a public context, the experience of death.

In working with the ashes of Galen Kuellmer and Mary Pocock, Hurlbut had to reconsider her approach because the bones had been pulverized. As a result, the ashes lacked weight and density and there were no articulated bone fragments. So Hurlbut decided to pour some of the ashes onto a large sheet of black paper, causing the finely ground ashes and dust to disperse. By patient and subtle manipulation of the materials, she facilitated the gradual formation of new compositions. Photographed in colour, the resulting images are astonishing revelations. The unique shapes and radiant luminosity suggest unfolding galaxies and exploding supernovas. Hurlbut's patient creative process gave birth to compelling new universes. Her intimate handling of the ashes and fragments produced a work of great tenderness and emotional depth.

It is likely that Blake (who died in 1827, a dozen years before Daguerre's invention) would have rejected photography because of its reliance on and foregrounding of appearances. But, believing that we see the world not *with* the eye, but *through* the eye, Blake identified the inner vision that resides in human perception and imagination as the key to artistic creation. It is possible, therefore, that Blake might acknowledge a phenomenological appreciation of Hurlbut's work; indeed, a subject as powerful as death, and work as original and evocative as *Deuil*, suggest a contemplative spirituality and visionary imagination.







Allowing the ashes to slowly take shape required great patience. Describing the process, Hurlbut notes that it sometimes took "up to a week before I found a single composition that had the delicacy and spontaneity I was searching for. Often the dust was so fine it would coat my hair and face. I wore a mask, but despite this I'm certain I inhaled the subjects I was photographing." This unavoidability of inhaling and being coated in ashes has long been recognized in cultures that widely practise cremation. Almost lighter than air, the dust and ash seem to float, settling on whatever surfaces they encounter. In Hurlbut's case, this unforeseen but unavoidable absorption of the dispersed dust physically literalizes her experience of herself as a "medium" in the creation of this work. It also symbolizes her emotional connection with her subjects. Her willingness to give herself over to her subjects, to act as an empathetic intermediary, was a profound act of faith. As the "medium," Hurlbut recovers her subjects from the finality of death and transforms them into images of new universes. *Deuil* thus becomes much more than a sorrowful lament.

If any aspect of death remains taboo, it is most likely the treatment and presentation of what physically remains after death. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hurlbut was assailed by some doubts in undertaking this project. As she worked with the ashes, she wondered if Mary would have approved. Certainly, the support and approval of the families of the deceased served to confirm and reassure her. But she also wondered whether the larger public would be receptive to images derived from ashes and bones. Would perceptions of death as an unpalatable subject interfere with public reception of the work? Would the images be interpreted as morbid, disrespectful or inappropriate? Would these fears and concerns themselves inhibit or obstruct the process of her work?

A viewing of the work immediately dispels such concerns. The large colour photographs, although documentary in a literal, rudimentary sense, are extraordinarily beautiful and profound. With images that plumb the depth of the uncharted – the allusive – she gives exquisite form to a conceptual exploration of mortality. The work is an invitation to share and reflect upon a deeply moving experience of finality and loss. More than this, *Deuil* reconceptualizes and transforms the finality of death into images of galactic creation and continuation. In this transformation, the bereaved may find some consolation. As Jan MacKie poignantly commented: "There is one image in particular that stands out for me – the ashes appear almost as a galaxy in a deep, rich, dense, black universe. It feels very much like Galen's open and ever-expanding spirit."[5] Moreover, by participating with Hurlbut in the process of sifting her son's ashes, she felt a spiritual connection with her son, a connection that had been severed by the regulations and conventions that prohibited her from having access to her son's physical remains at the time of his death.

Hurlbut's galaxies open up and illuminate the subject of death in a rare way. Making photographs that insist upon and embody the naturalness of death as part of life – that, in a sense, affirm the creative potentiality of death – is a bold and artistically complex undertaking, one that constructs new avenues of discourse and creates new associations with death and mortality.

Deuil is a project deeply rooted in a sustained artistic oeuvre and practice. It is also an extended collaboration with the families of those whose ashes she worked with and transformed. Underlying Hurlbut's indelible images of what remains after death is the larger concept of the image as inner vision, as an expressive living memory.

Previous spread
Spring Hurlbut
"Galen No. 1" (left)
"Galen No. 4" (right, top)
"Galen No. 3" (right, bottom)
from *Deuil*
2006
COURTESY THE ARTIST
AND GEORGIA SCHERMAN
PROJECTS (TORONTO)

« Deuil : une nouvelle œuvre de Spring Hurlbut »

Première série photographique de Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil* manifeste l'engagement profond de l'artiste envers un processus de documentation posthume. Se voyant comme un « médium » qui travaille avec des restes humains incinérés, Hurlbut sonde de nouvelles profondeurs dans la représentation de la mort. En donnant à la précarité matérielle de l'existence une interprétation visuelle, ses images pénétrantes servent de véhicule à une expérience, à la fois personnelle et universelle, de la perte. Dans cette œuvre, la finalité de la mort s'ouvre à une notion de voyage perpétuel dans le temps, dans un univers toujours en expansion.

Maia-Mari Sutnik analyse ici *Deuil* en termes de pratiques contemporaines et historiques autour de la mort, et à partir de l'histoire des représentations photographiques de la mort et du souvenir. L'œuvre est également examinée dans le contexte des enquêtes antérieures de l'artiste sur les collections muséologiques, dans lesquelles elle réanimait des objets archivés dans des installations esthétiquement exigeantes. Dans sa démarche, Hurlbut est passée d'une approche archivistique de la mort à une réclamation métaphorique de la mort comme moment potentiellement créatif au sein des processus continus de la nature.

Hurlbut's *Deuil* constitutes an innovative and provocative meditation on mortality, loss, grief, remembrance and memory. Hurlbut feels that her work, while it explores new depths and enters uncharted territory, nevertheless lies within the tradition of post-mortem photography. But this is only partly true. Actually, Hurlbut's visioning of what remains belongs to terrain not unlike Blake's notion of the perpetual journey in time. Hurlbut's achievement is the charting of new and significant territory there.

Notes

The exhibition *Deuil* was curated by Scott McLeod and presented at Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art from May 3 to June 9, 2007. The work of Spring Hurlbut appeared courtesy of the artist and Georgia Scherman Projects (Toronto). For their assistance with the presentation of the exhibition, Prefix gratefully acknowledges the Toronto Arts Council.

The epigraph is taken from William Blake, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) (London: Oxford University Press, 1977).

1 *Deuil* is French meaning mourning, sorrow, bereavement.

2 References to the views and statements of the artist are taken from discussions and correspondence between Spring Hurlbut and the author in May 2006 and February 2007.

3 Marcus Schubert (the husband of the late Mary Pocock) wrote to Hurlbut, September 25, 2006: "The project … seems like another way for Mary to continue making her presence felt. Through her spiritual practice [Mary was a Buddhist], much of the inner power she found allowed her to outlast her "expiry date" (as she called it) by eight years. She lived for the moment, in a world of impermanence – making the most of each passing day. Through your work, Mary's ashes, her words and spirit once again find expression."

4 Communication from Jan MacKie to Hurlbut, October 5, 2006.

5 Ibid.