

Sculptor evokes museums of yore

GALLERY GOING
GARY MICHAEL DAULT

For the mounting of Mannequin, opening today at Toronto's **Sable-Castelli Gallery**, sculptor **Spring Hurlbut** has subtly imbued the normally blazing white space at the back of the gallery with the shadowy softness and meditative hush we associate with the museum.

And not the blockbuster, crowd-pleasing, bread-and-circuses museum of today, either. Hurlbut's museological leanings take her, rather, backward toward the late 19th-century museum — that dusty, dignified locus of inspectable mysteries, the museum as *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of wonders), that rapidly vanishing world of the teaching museum, where specimens were ordered, classified, and offered up as reminders of the way everything eventually goes into the dark. Modern institutions try very hard to deny that museum displays are about death. They are probably wrong to do so.

Hurlbut's Mannequin is both an extension and a compression of her beautiful, ambitious exhibition last summer at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. A "museum within a museum," as she referred to it, *The Final Sleep/Le Dernier Sommeil* was an installation of 450 specimens and artifacts from the museum's collection — dead rabbits, dead pigeons, dog skulls, mummified cats, and dead shoes (borrowed from the Bata Shoe Museum), all resting peacefully in row after row of vitrines. This vast array of poignant objects was organized without labelling or commentary or curatorial guidance of any sort.

Mannequin takes up about 100th of the space *The Final Sleep* required, and it is no less powerful for that. Central to the exhibition, which provides lush, reminder photographs of the ROM show, is the mannequin figure itself.

The radiantly beautiful, antique, doll-like creature the size of a real-life little girl is presented in two handsome antique vitrines — the figure's lovely head in one and her linen-wrapped body in another — as if she were some diminutive saint, split into pieces and distributed between churches as a diluted relic. She was found in a Paris flea market (she dates from 1917), where Hurlbut discovers a lot of the material she uses into her work.

The mannequin's cheeks are flushed with pink, the modeller's contriving of the child's robust health. Her eyes are glassy and somehow sentient. There's only one flaw: Her nose has been chewed off by rats. *Sic transit gloria*.

This is the sort of exhibition that, in lesser hands, might come off as arch, precious, sentimental. But Hurlbut knows exceedingly well what she is about as an artist, and how to contrive and control the effects she wants.

Are we to see her deconstructed, disassociated child-mannequin as sacrificial, venerable, moving, frightening, tragic? Yes, probably all of those. And might we not see her as a sort of focusing of the museological act? Is she not the very emblem of the way, as Wordsworth once put it, we murder to dissect?



Spring Hurlbut's Mannequin.

On the gallery wall are the fruits of a collaboration between Hurlbut and Mike Robinson, who teaches historical photographic processes at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic University: three tiny daguerreotypes (silver-coated copper plate exposed and then developed using — gasp! — mercury fumes) of Hurlbut's mannequin.

Here, the poor creature has been eerily reassembled, with head and body together again in the same frame. How else ought the poor creature to materialize, given her own age and the venerable age of the daguerreotype? Surely they were made for one another! And if you can't finally be whole in history, where can you be whole?

*Prices on request. Until Feb. 2, 33
Hazelton Ave., Toronto;
416-961-0011*