

THE FINAL SLEEP
LE DERNIER SOMMEIL

Spring Hurlbut

Elizabeth McLuhan

Institute of Contemporary Culture

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FINAL SLEEP

In *The Final Sleep*, artist Spring Hurlbut has chosen and arranged artifacts and specimens in order to create a monochromatic “museum within a museum.” The artist’s installation, like the museum itself, constitutes a “final resting place” for specimens and artifacts that have achieved an immortality of sorts in their conservation and classification as part of a museum’s collection. In *The Final Sleep*, however, there is no chronology, no illusion of life. All things are equal in repose.

The artist has charted the terrain of death and sleep in earlier work such as *La Somnolence* and *Le Jardin de Sommeil*. But in *The Final Sleep*, Hurlbut has achieved a balance between the corporeal and the incorporeal; between the tangible presence of once-living creatures and the ghostly netherworld to which they have been consigned.

The artist has transformed the Roloff Beny Gallery into a mausoleum (“a large and stately place of burial,” *Oxford English Dictionary*) providing a lying-in-state for a wide range of artifacts and specimens. Induction into museum collections can be said to constitute a permanent disjunction equivalent to the mummification of Egyptian hawks and cats. From the tomb guardian at the entrance to the rows of fish, birds, mammals and cultural artifacts, the installation is carefully laid out—a city of the dead. There is a performative dimension to the procession of visitors walking slowly up and down rows of imposing walnut cases.

The metaphor of the museum as mausoleum is not new but the artistry and rigour of the installation reinforces the

singularity of vision. The monochromatic unity of the artifacts and specimens enhances the incorporeal effect. The artist has also provided a meditation on museums—a demonstration of the power of specimens and artifacts to speak with mute eloquence to the attentive visitor.

There is a poignancy to the birds and mammals, once living, now preserved as skeletons or study skins, legs bound and tagged. These labels, some brown with age, constitute an archive of their tenure as museum specimens. There is a pained but signal solemnity to their poses in repose. Eyes removed and eyeholes stuffed with cotton—blind witness to their own transformation.

The artist has used serial images before. In *The Final Sleep*, one case might feature a row of snowy owls or another a line of dog skulls. A sense of symmetry dominates the installation: within each case and in the overall alignment of the cases.

In one case there is a headless skeleton of a grey gibbon leaning toward a lone marmoset skull in the adjacent case. Frozen in an unrequited yearning for completion—such moments may lead the visitor to metaphysical musing.

The Final Sleep offers viewers an opportunity to reflect upon these cultural artifacts and natural specimens: to consider their natural and unnatural states. Between sleep and repose lies memory. Here, a battered baby shoe is transformed into a memorial to inarticulate human loss—an artifact of human memory. There, an ancient incantation bowl, once guardian of an ancient unborn fetus, now rests.

In another case, feathered shoes and feathered nests are testament to the cultural constructs of diverse species. A shoe is winged, mythic—light and fleeting and erotic. Nests, monuments to nurture and nature, constructed with such lightness, are vulnerable to the slightest breath or gust of wind. The boundaries between human and natural worlds are permeable and illusory.

Museum of nature is an oxymoron. Nature, here, is really the idea of nature—a cultural construct—and, like the nests, encased in taxonomic references.

The Final Sleep subverts the idea of a single grand narrative. The objects are presented without any didactic explanatory panels. The exhibit questions the traditional construct of authority and expertise as the only legitimate approach to understanding the world around us. The names of every specimen and artifact can be found in their respective cases or on handouts beside the cases. But label copy is deliberately minimal. The inclusion of these names functions instead as a way of paying respect to the individuality of each of the specimens—a memorial to those lying in state and once alive.

In *The Final Sleep*, the Victorian-style wooden cases create the expectation of a traditional exhibition. The dark wood and black velvet interiors provide a dramatic visual context for the objects. But the arrangement of the objects is contemporary: a solitary hermaphrodite bird, with attendant magnifying glass for the visitor to read the label; a row of five Snowy Owls, lying on their backs; dozens of bird skulls of

descending size lying flat in a tall case. In many cases, much of the interior space is left unused. This creates an overall effect of transparency in an installation that can be described as a forest of cases.

Paradoxically, while challenging traditional museum approaches, *The Final Sleep* reaffirms the power/presence of objects to speak for themselves. *The Final Sleep* is, ultimately, about the desire for transcendence. Without the pretence or illusion of life, the objects are allowed to address the living directly about their own spiritual anxiety and scientific unknowing.

Elizabeth McLuhan, Head of Exhibits

Institute of Contemporary Culture, Royal Ontario Museum