

**Spring Hurlbut**  
***Institute of Contemporary Culture***  
***at the Royal Ontario Museum,***  
***Toronto***  
 by Karen Roulstone

On entering *The Final Sleep/Le Dernier Sommeil*, an installation by artist Spring Hurlbut, our sense of life is suspended and we are left in a kind of wavering stasis. For here, in a dimly lit room, are Victorian display cases containing animal study skins, precisely laid-out skeletal forms and human domestic artifacts. Luminous, with an eerie monochromatic beauty, the forms are laid out to appear as though in a state of repose. While the glass cases suggest past museological display practices, gone is the didacticism normally associated with such presentations. No single case takes precedence over another; we are left to be the architects of our own interpretation and are reminded that all things are equal in repose.

By accessing and displaying museum artifacts and specimens normally confined to research, Hurlbut has set up what the exhibition's curator Elizabeth McLuhan calls an "artist's museum within a museum." Based loosely on evolutionary history the installation moves from ichthyology through to human culture. It is framed at the entrance by a Tang Dynasty tomb guardian and at the exit by a Scottish 19th-century wedding veil and a Korean mourning hat. Woven throughout the installation is a sense of the complex interrelationship between human and animal culture. Peculiar juxtapositions confront the viewer. In one case an arctic hare lies side by side with an Inuit skull-and-pin game fashioned from an arctic-hare skull; in another a pair of feather shoes from 1962 rests beside delicate feather-lined tree-swallow

nests. Hauntingly, a taxidermied arctic hare gazes towards the eviscerated study skin of another hare lying in the case before it. Here are emotive forms that force us to question our concept of what is past and how we ritualize life and death, both human and animal.

*The Final Sleep* maintains strong philosophical and visual connections to Hurlbut's earlier installations. In *La Somnolence* (1995) we also saw a repetition of forms. The placement of numerous cast-iron Victorian children's beds evoked a feeling of death and mourning. In *The Final Sleep* the multiple Victorian display cases create a sense of uniformity but are a false ballast. It is in Hurlbut's methodology that our sense of containment is ruptured. A headless gibbon is set up in a case directly behind a solitary marmoset skull, suggesting a possible marriage of parts; worn baby boots are placed opposite a French porcelain funeral wreath, gesturing towards a premature loss. The narratives are infinite and variable but all gesture towards an unravelling of our notions of what constitutes public museological display.

At a time when museums strive to recreate the real by using new technologies and more sophisticated visual displays, *The Final Sleep* presents us with a reality that is stripped bare. We are left vulnerable to a stark yet beautiful reflection of our own engagement with mortality.

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**Spring Hurlbut / Detail of *The Final Sleep /Le Dernier Sommeil*, 2001, installation, photo by Volker Seding, ROM collection**

