

# Nearer, my death, to thee

Evoking the aura of an apparition, artist Spring Hurlbut has created a resting place for an idiosyncratic flock of objects culled from the ROM's permanent collections, writes **SARAH MILROY**

For the past year, Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut has been thinking a lot about museums.

Invited by the Royal Ontario Museum's Institute of Contemporary Culture to create an exhibition for the Roloff Beny Gallery, she first imagined she would present a new variation of her well-known sculptural series titled *Sacrificial Ornament*. These works, which Hurlbut had been making for a decade, are plaster sculptures of classic architectural detailing that return the now much-stylized decorative motifs to their grisly origins.

The dentils of a classical entablature, for example, are replaced with cow's teeth, the ovals of an egg-and-dart moulding are reinterpreted with quail's eggs and plaster turkey claws, and the crown of a Corinthian column is festooned with ram's horns. These works take us back, she says, to the sacred groves of Ancient Greece where the remnants of sacrificed animals and humans were suspended in the trees to create a charged, ritualized space, the precursor to the temple.

When Hurlbut talks about this little-known aspect of antiquity, her fidgety fingers fly about excitedly, often stopping to tuck a strand of her pale-blond hair behind her ear, or adjust her glasses. This is just the sort of macabre and exotically sinister stuff that lights up her imagination. In a way that is essentially romantic in impulse, death is her muse.

Looked at this way, her ROM

project falls right in step with her past work. Lamenting the widespread practice of animating the remains of the past, as museums are now wont to do (at the ROM, the dinosaur bones are tricked up like Vegas show girls, with their coloured lights and plastic ferns), Hurlbut decided to take a break from making sculpture, and create instead a sacred grove of her own, a resting place for an idiosyncratic flock of objects from the ROM's wide-ranging holdings. Resplendent in Victorian vitrines that have been resuscitated from storage for this occasion, most of Hurlbut's finds are a luminous and ghostly white. Together, they emanate the eerie aroma of an apparition.

*The Final Sleep*, as she has titled her installation, brings together more than 400 objects, from stuffed birds and rabbits, dog skulls and an albino porcupine, to Egyptian cat mummies, the headless skeleton of a gibbon, some dead swans and a piece of 50-million-year-old fossilized dung. To these she has added some things of her own: a prized collection of embalming bottles (bearing brand names like Sphinx and Pyramid); a group of glass nursing bottles with rubber tubes from turn-of-the-century France, thought to be lethal in their ability to harbour bacteria; a bullet brassiere in white satin; and a child's wire grave decoration, complete with a porcelain dove. Natural history and material culture are blended in a presentation that ef-

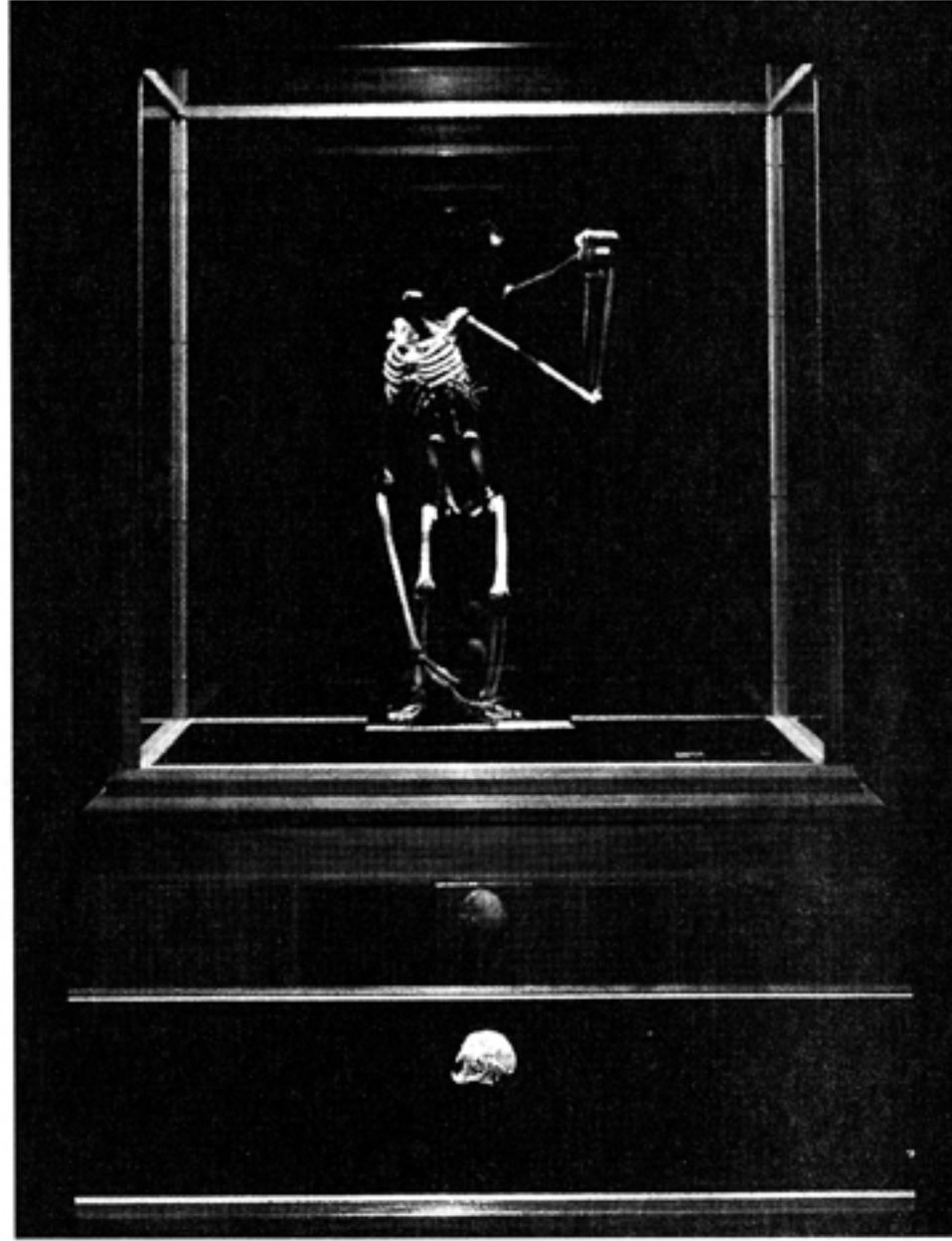
faces our traditional systems of categorization, placing art and science in courtly rivalry.

Quite deliberately, *The Final Sleep* provokes one to question current ideas about what museums must do to engage the public. "When it got around that I was working at the ROM," says Hurlbut, "I had all these people tell me how much they used to love it in the old days," when the objects were just left to lie in all their enigmatic silence. Inspiration struck when, following a hunch, she asked to see the ornithology collection.

"They have 160,000 stuffed birds in the study collection," she says, her slate-grey eyes wide in amazement. "There were rows and rows of albino birds, lying in state in their storage drawers, with their cotton-batting eyes," she remembers. "Study skins," as they are called, are not gussied up with glass eyes or arranged in life-like poses; instead, they are packed with cotton and left to lie in tight bundles, their claws bound with string.

Hurlbut was fascinated. "I am not interested in illusion," she says. "I mean, these things are deceased. It's all the more remarkable if there is less intervention."

When the penny dropped, she began a journey that took her through a throng of ROM departments from Egyptology, paleobiology and mammology to Far Eastern, West Asian and ichthyology. Along the way, she worked with the Institute of Contemporary



A headless grey-gibbon skeleton and long-tusked marmoset skull, part of Hurlbut's installation, *The Final Sleep*: contemplating the afterlife.

Culture's head of exhibits, Elizabeth McLuhan, swaying the minds of leery collections managers unaccustomed to the thought of their research materials being brought before the public eye. Objects were

pulled up from obscurity, and then arranged in a tour de force of editing and formal design that allows each object maximum impact and poignance.

Variety is the spice of this install-

ation. While a hermaphrodite evening grosbeak is given its own case emphasizing its singularity, the cabinet full of albino birds is congested with variety, including crows, ptarmigans, cuckoos, grouse, pheasants, canaries and sparrows in an endearing freak show of nature's marvels.

Asked about the installation's almost all-white colour scheme, Hurlbut suggests the analogy to black-and-white film, which has a way of focusing the viewer on structure and composition. But she also points out that, in direct opposition to European-based traditions, white is a colour of mourning and transcendence in many cultures. (The exhibition contains, for example, a white Korean mourning hat, which she has placed beside a Scottish wedding veil.)

While the reality of death is the unflinching subject of her installation, so too is the mystery of the afterlife. "I wanted to focus on the contemplation of death, rather than its more sensational aspect," she says, citing by way of contrast the more shocking work of Damien Hirst or Andres Serrano. "Death," she says, "is such a speculation. This, I hope, allows us to draw nearer."

The exhibition also signals a creative rebirth for Hurlbut, a reprieve from a body of work that, she says, was beginning to feel automatic. "I felt that I needed to have a different relationship with my work. I needed to *not* know where I was going with it." Talking of the recent past, she says, "There was this despair. You know your area very well, and you are known for it," but, she implies, the old magic was gone.

"Now, I am fascinated by my work again. I have many ideas for exhibitions in museums." She adds: "To me this is a primer. It is the beginning of something."

*The Final Sleep* is on display in Toronto at the ROM's Roloff Beny Gallery through Aug. 12.