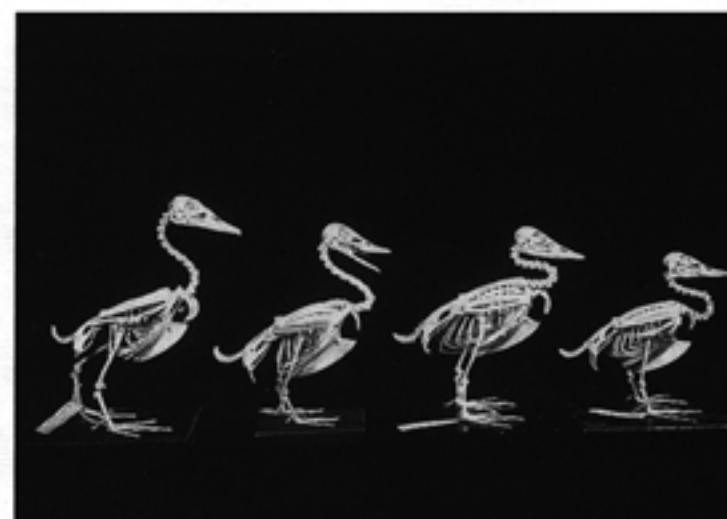


transformed this room of the museum into a mausoleum.

I find myself faced with two, magnificent, dead white swans laid to rest in a display case, the first of rows of antiquated vitrines that bathe in the light of lampshades suspended from the ceiling in a black-walled space. The rectilinear patterns of the processions of cabinets are repeated by the lines of specimens displayed on soft, black cloth lining the cases. Among these are five snowy owls, several white hares, a row of bird skulls and another of mammal skulls, ascending in size. There are beavers and mice and mummies of cats and hawks. Most appear to be sleeping. The highly ceremonial presentation of the polished wooden cabinets that glow in the hushed gallery invokes an immediate association with death, or, more specifically, with a funeral parlour in which the deceased is displayed in an open casket.

But far from a cynical comment on the deadening effect of the museum on the objects it displays, *The Final Sleep/Le Dernier Sommeil* is a moving, contemplative installation that challenges the entrenched view of nature as something that exists outside us. Walking along the rows of cases toward the back of the room, I notice an almost imperceptible change from natural specimens to cultural artefacts. A row of white leather lace-up boots and another of yellowed baby shoes take on animal qualities, as if they had been alive once, just like the hares and the geese. Similarly, a conical bra from the '50s and a 19th-century corset, both yellowed with age, appear like preserved



skins, as if they had always been part of the human anatomy.

Hurlbut spent almost two years selecting from the ROM's research collections hundreds of artefacts, natural specimens and art objects not usually on display. She also added objects from other public and private collections. Things appear to be chosen for their relation to death, and for their whiteness: bleached bones, white fabric and leather, white swans and albino peacocks. The monochromatic ceremonial displays of animal specimens and cultural artefacts alike have an equalizing effect. The Victorian-style cases that have become obsolete in the hands-on, spectacularized exhibits upstairs create a sense of reverence, of respect not usually associated with the dissection and preservation of specimens. A feeling of kinship is evoked between humble creatures in their "final sleep" and ourselves. Hurlbut notes, "There is no chronology, no hierarchy. All things are equal in repose."

The initial emotional impact derived from the room's ceremonious aesthetics gradually makes way for curiosity about the intellectual and historical meaning of this collection. Human intervention into natural processes of life and death are reflected in some of the cultural



artefacts. Nineteenth-century baby bottles, with tubes that proved lethal because they could not be properly disinfected, are shown beside the original bottles and packaging for jars of embalming and preservation fluids. One case of objects invited death; the other preserved the illusion of life.

Amid all the creatures laid to rest, a single Arctic hare sits up, reminding us that the traditional aim of a natural history museum such as the ROM is to create an illusion of life. In the "bat cave," for instance, children squeal with excitement as they grope through the dark corridor and glimpse clusters of bats overhead. A sudden roar of a plane from hidden loudspeakers is followed by a rush of bat wings. Of course, the colony of bats pinned against the ceiling doesn't move, but a sense of "being there" takes hold nonetheless.

*The Final Sleep* pierces such illusions and presents the reality of death in a stylized, ritualized manner that invites contemplation rather than fear and horror. Hurlbut frames and classifies the widely disparate objects in a methodical, quasi-scientific presentation. But the aesthetic, highly stylized exposition of artefacts and specimens unblocks dimensions that are lost in scientific research when each

"thing" is framed separately, lit and probed by eyes and hands to yield observable truths.

In her earlier work of the '80s and '90s, Hurlbut brought a visceral reality to classical architectural ornaments by creating, for instance, egg-and-dart-patterned entablatures from real chicken feet and turkey eggs, suggesting that cultural order and conventions sublimate the messiness of animal and human existence. In the ROM installation, modern science is similarly revealed as an abstraction but, interestingly, cultural ritual and ornamental patterning are introduced to contaminate the scientific study of nature. In addition, Hurlbut adds things from her personal collection, a translucent purse and sandals as well as the '50s bra, thus upsetting the border between the private and the public, and casting herself, the subject, in with the objects.

This entanglement of subject and object does not preclude a curiosity into the intellectual and historical aspects of the objects. Indeed, facts such as names, species, ages can be read in folders hanging on walls adjacent to the cabinets. But here they provide a knowledge that is incidental.

If, in the end, "all things are equal in repose," what happens before the final sleep needs reconsideration. Hurlbut's rapprochement between the false dichotomies of animals and people, art and science, beauty and knowledge, the public and the private, learning and feeling, has as much to say about life as about death. ■

*The Final Sleep/Le Dernier Sommeil: An Installation by Spring Hurlbut showed at the Royal Ontario Museum*

(Institute of Contemporary Culture), from April 28 to August 12, 2001.

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## VISUAL ART

## VISUAL ART

### Spring Hurlbut White Exploits

by Petra Halkes

How many years ago, I wonder, was the *Tomb Guardian* separated from his tomb? The glazed earthenware statue from the Tang dynasty stares at me with vacant eyes as I furtively pass him to enter a basement gallery in the Royal Ontario Museum. Once inside, I realize the figure has resumed his ancient guarding duty here; Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut appears to have

*The Final Sleep, An installation by Spring Hurlbut, 2001, Royal Ontario Museum.*

facing page: *The Final Sleep, An installation by Spring Hurlbut, 2001, Royal Ontario Museum.*