

# Waking up to eerie presences, and absences, around us

**ART REVIEW** / *Two installations from Spring Hurlbut at Harbourfront — La Somnolence and Lingual Consoles — reveal architecture as an extension of ourselves*

BY KATE TAYLOR  
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ENTER the big western gallery at Harbourfront Centre's Power Plant these days and you will witness a spectacular sight. In a work called *La Somnolence*, Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut has filled this large space with turn-of-the-century children's bed frames, row after row of them. The installation of more than 150 metal frames starts out with cradles and moves forward through cribs to actual beds.

The cribs are empty, the room dimly lit and the effect eerie. As you walk along each row, your voice stilled and your pace slowed by the geometry of Hurlbut's layout, the experience soon starts to recall a trip through a graveyard and the absence of the children becomes poignant.

In the clerestory next door, curator Louise Dompierre has installed an example from an ongoing body of Hurlbut's work, the *Ololyge* series. In *Lingual Consoles*, a series of white plaster architectural consoles (the brackets used to support cornices), she playfully replaces the central decorative S-shape with a cow's tongue. Some of the plaster

tongues sit demurely in place, passing almost unnoticed by a quick glance, others twist upward as though trying to lick the top of the console.

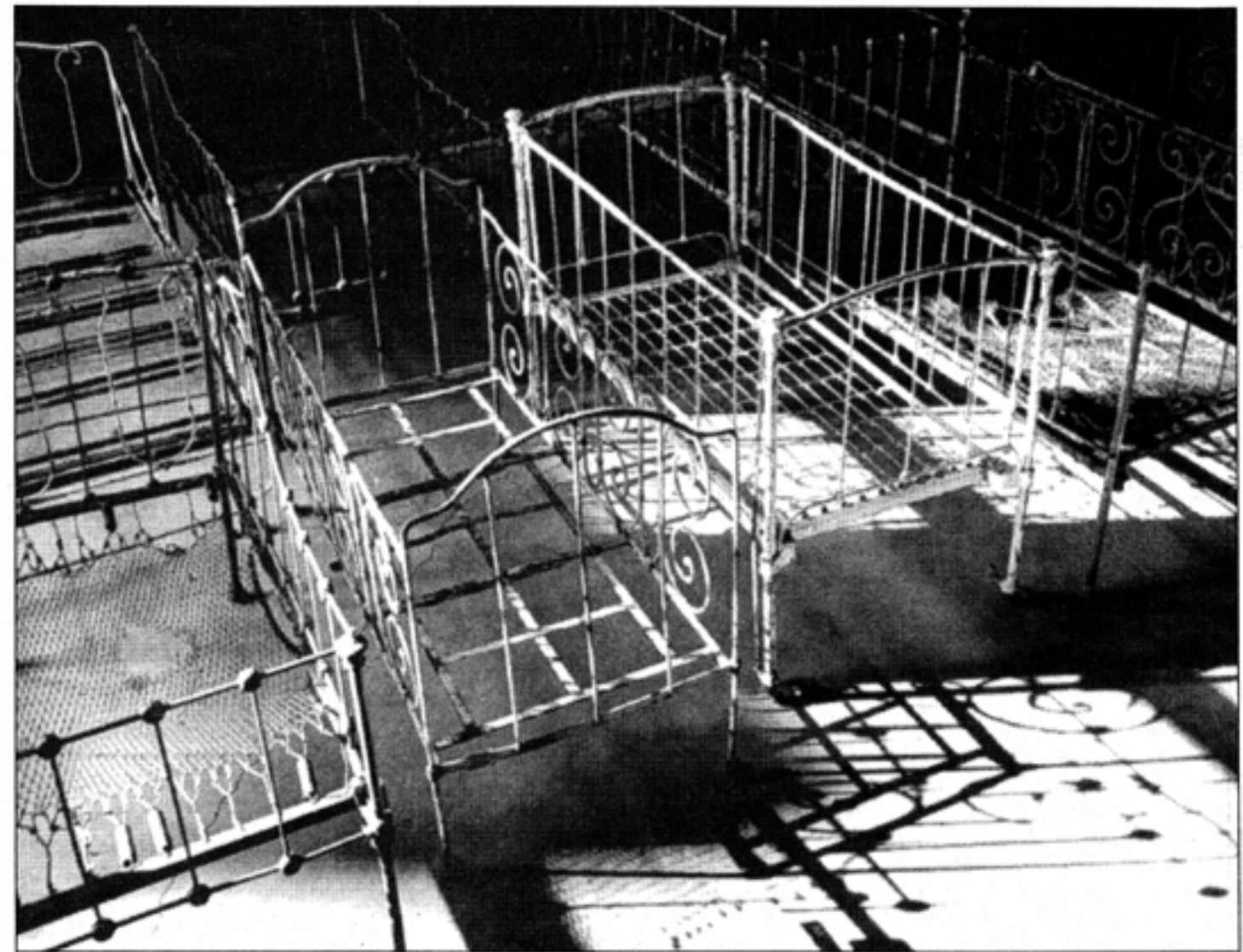
The *Ololyge* series has also included dentils (the row of small blocks beneath some cornices) shaped like human teeth, and columns that were tree trunks. It is based on an academic theory that the forms of classical architecture evolved from stylized representations of natural, animal and human parts. I have often found this work pedantic, its literal illustration of architectural theory a dry thing, but placed next to *La Somnolence*, Hurlbut's project displays its larger, more humane dimensions. The beds, which draw attention to an absence, and the consoles, which hint at a presence, reveal architecture as an extension of ourselves.

The second artist featured by the Power Plant in its current crop of shows is Robert Youds. The Victoria painter is a smart, if sometimes smart-alecky, postmodern critic of modernist painting. This show is a mini-retrospective of work from 1985 to 1994, curated by Greg Belerby and organized by Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art

and Design. In these abstract paintings, Youds quotes modernist conventions questioningly. For example, if abstraction once aimed at flatness, Youds is always cleverly denying it. In the most recent work here, he stacks up as many as five layers of canvas, using a cutaway box to make a deep frame, and then cuts holes in each layer right back to the wall.

The catalogue for this show has yet to appear, but the Power Plant puts an intriguing quote from writer Willard Holmes in its press material. In questioning the place of a modernist painter in a postmodern world, Youds, he says, never adopts the ironic posture that is the hallmark of postmodernism. Are we to understand that Youds intends the small, brightly coloured plush pompons that decorate his recent work as a serious, formal gesture? Ironic or not, as Holmes also points out, Youds is always inventive and open: This show reveals his project as something intelligent and developing.

Both this display and that of Spring Hurlbut's work are convincing shows. What is dubious is the Power Plant's decision to slot them into the same spot on the exhibition schedule. Youds's work makes



Spring Hurlbut's *La Somnolence*: Rows of turn-of-the-century children's bed frames, in cast iron.

Hurlbut's evocative installation look sentimental; her work makes his art-about-art look abstruse.

It's up to Toronto artist Peter Bowyer to round out the program, which he does with grace and wit in an installation of industrially framed, cartoon-like images of people at work and play. Curator Gre-

gory Salzman compares Bowyer's work, these drawings and a set of full-scale, industrial-metal picnic tables with parasols, to that of Dickens for its humanist humour. With his modernist yet friendly aesthetic and his gentle look at people and technology, Bowyer has always reminded me of a 20th-cen-

tury master: the French comic filmmaker Jacques Tati.

*Spring Hurlbut, Robert Youds and Peter Bowyer are showing at the Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, until April 2.*