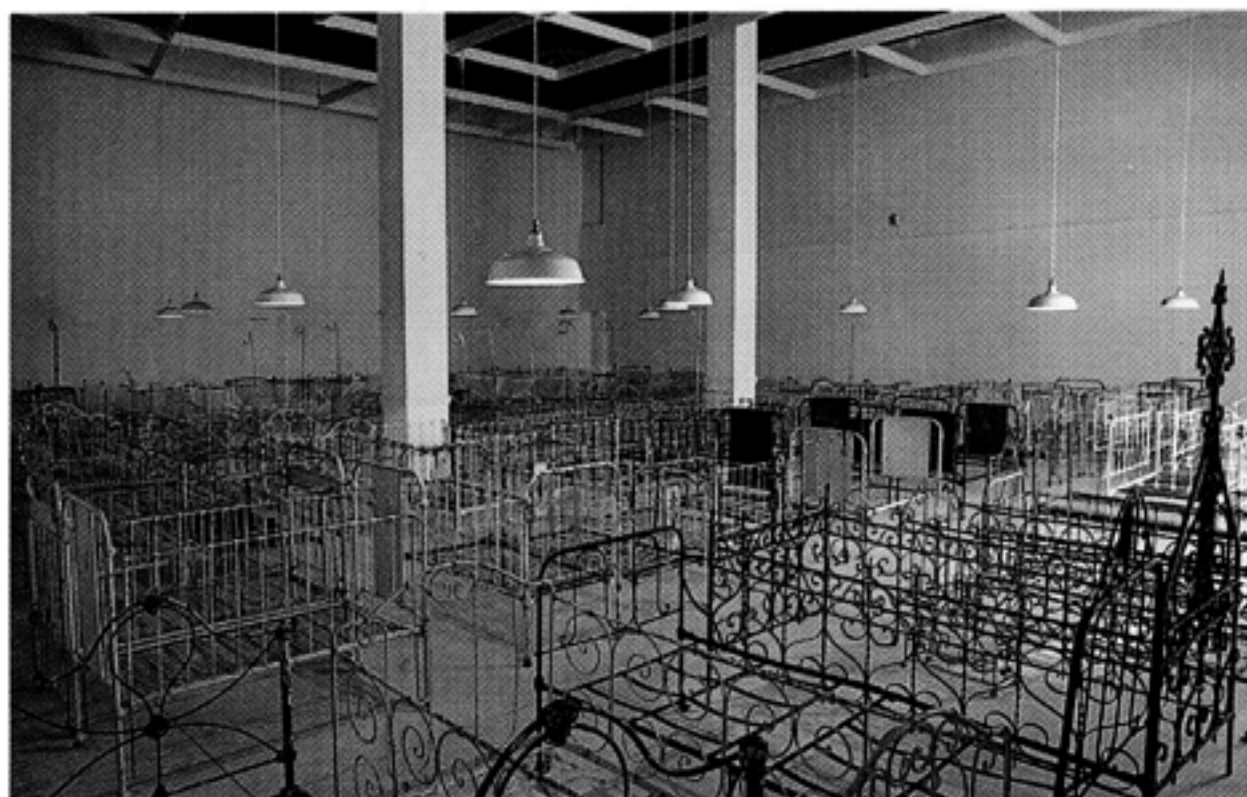


# Art in America

May 1995



Spring Hurlbut: Installation view of *La Somnolence*, 1995; at the Power Plant.

## TORONTO

### Spring Hurlbut at the Power Plant

In two installations, Spring Hurlbut employed elements of architecture and design to examine rituals of death and mourning. Both works were rescued from the brink of the horrific and maudlin by being possessed of a strong and beckoning life force that opened them up to multiple levels of meaning and interpretation.

*La Somnolence* was approached from a darkened corridor, at the end of which hung an intricately beaded white pillow form, a type of wreath used a century ago to mark a child's death. In the large, dimly lit main gallery, 200 turn-of-the-century wrought- and cast-iron children's beds, most of them white, were arranged in cemeterylike rows. Gathered over many months in rural Quebec and southern France, they were organized—cata-

logued—by size, type and design. The first rows began with cradles or bassinets, then came cribs, then child beds, and finally beds for larger, grown children, with dolls' beds interspersed among the others. Within each row, similar styles were grouped.

Although the beds are rusted and in varying states of decay, their graceful trceries and intricate finials seem to speak of care taken in manufacture as well as of parents' love for their offspring. These gorgeous relics of 19th-century mass production contrasted with the bland, white, industrial light fixtures from our era hung at intervals above, a contrast further dramatized by the ornate webs of shadows cast by the beds upon the concrete floor. A woman's voice singing a lullaby in Berber was intermittently heard; it was not a song of pain and loss but of sweetness, love and hope. Like the installation's title, which means "sleepiness," the lullaby displaces the theme of death, making the work appear a meditation on growth and time, on lives lived and on childhoods passed.

*The Lingual Console*, Hurlbut's second installation, was an extension of her "Sacrificial Ornament" series [see *A.i.A.*, Jan. '93], in which the sources for classical architectural motifs are found in pagan sacrifice rituals. In the new piece, two sets of 10 architectural brackets faced each other across a corridor. Each was white and featured plaster casts of cows' tongues, two vertically aligned per console. As opposed to the rigid, stylized appearance of the traditional acanthus leaves, each tongue was vitally, sensually alive: fully extended, it licked, curled and strained to one side or the other. While Hurlbut claims that the motifs are "based on lamentation, the ritual scream, the act of mourning," they were among the most erotic and therefore life-affirming objects I have encountered in recent memory. Against the innocence and purity of childhood sleep, this installation evoked ripe, mature indulgence in sensual pleasure. Life asserts itself once again in the presence of death.

—Roni Feinstein