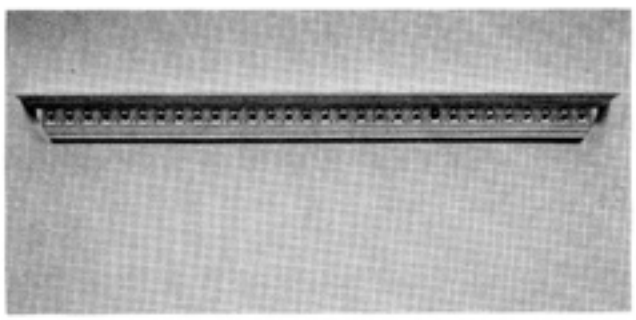
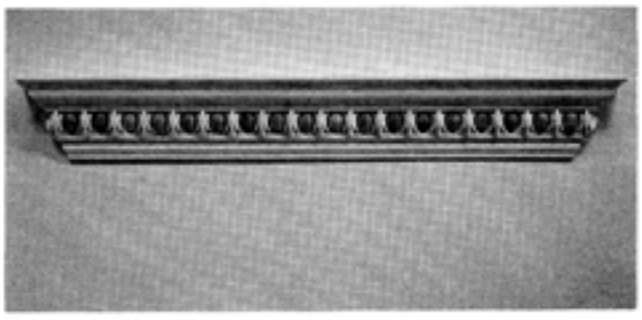
SPRING HURLBUT

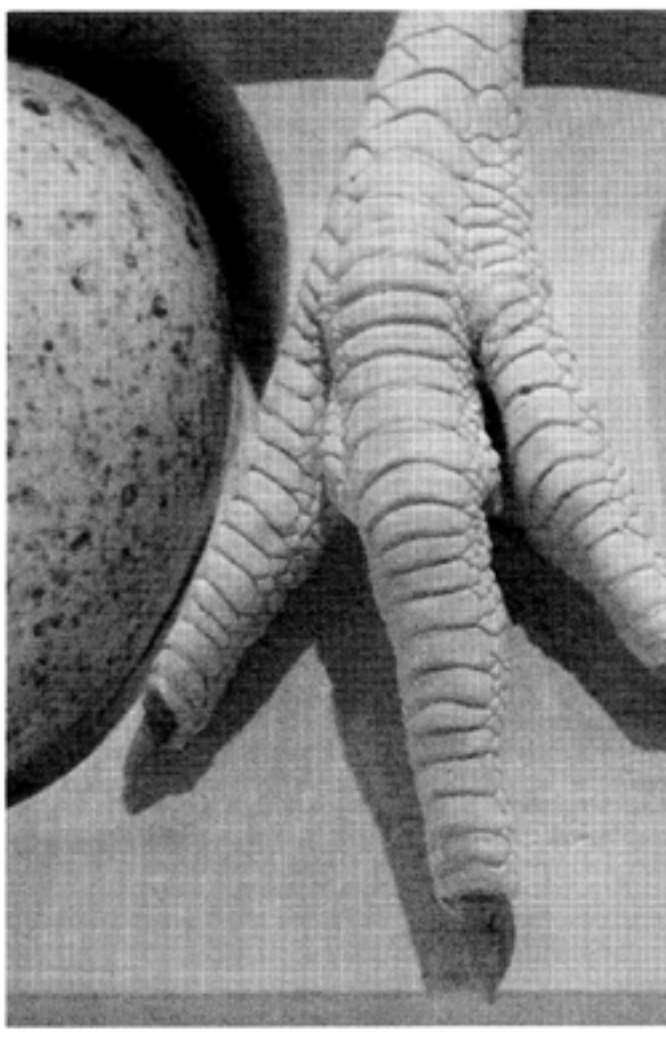
Ritual Ornament / Elemental Dream

Jerry McGrath





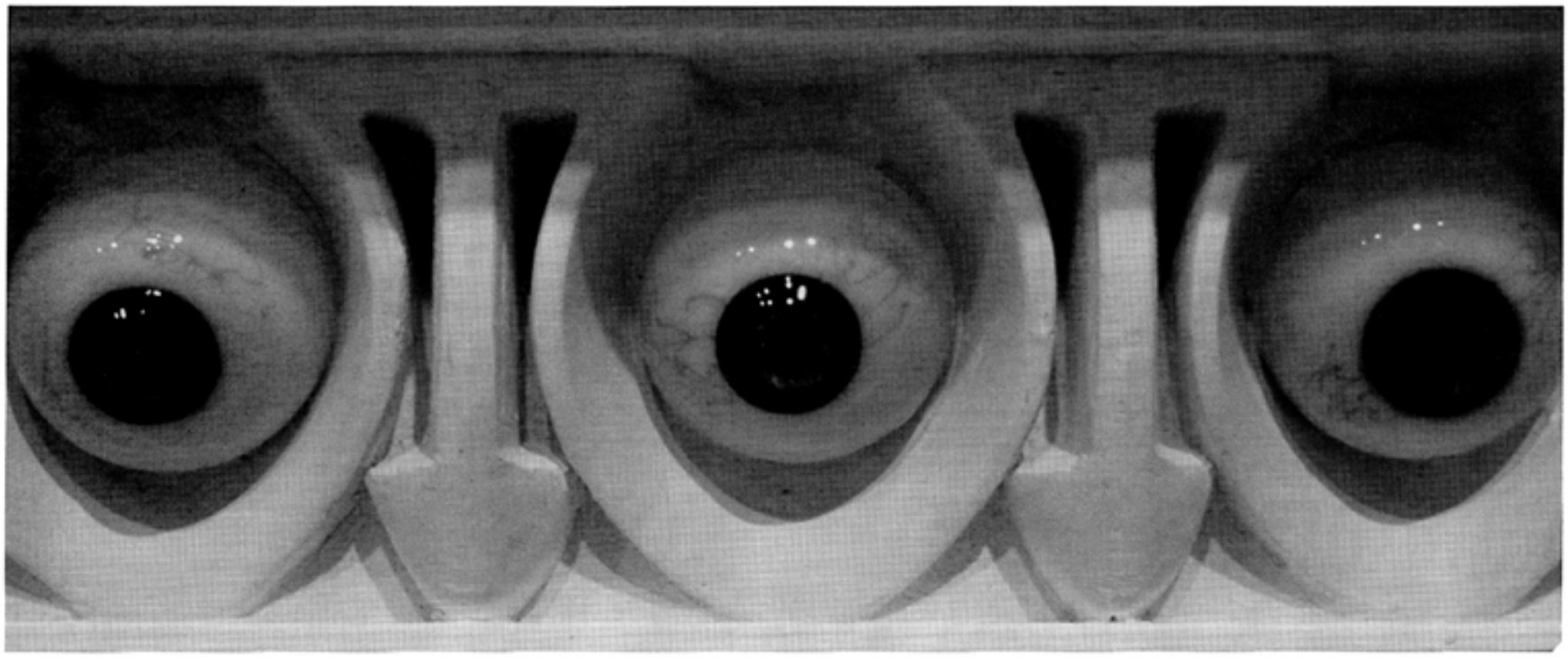
LEFT: **EYE AND DART ENTABLATURE**, 1991, GLASS EYES, PLASTER, 179 X 15 CM.
RIGHT: **OVO AND CLAW ENTABLATURE**, 1990, CHICKEN CLAWS, TURKEY EGGS, PLASTER; 152 X 30 CM (ONE SECTION OF DIPTYCH);
PHOTOS: ROBERT KEZIERE.

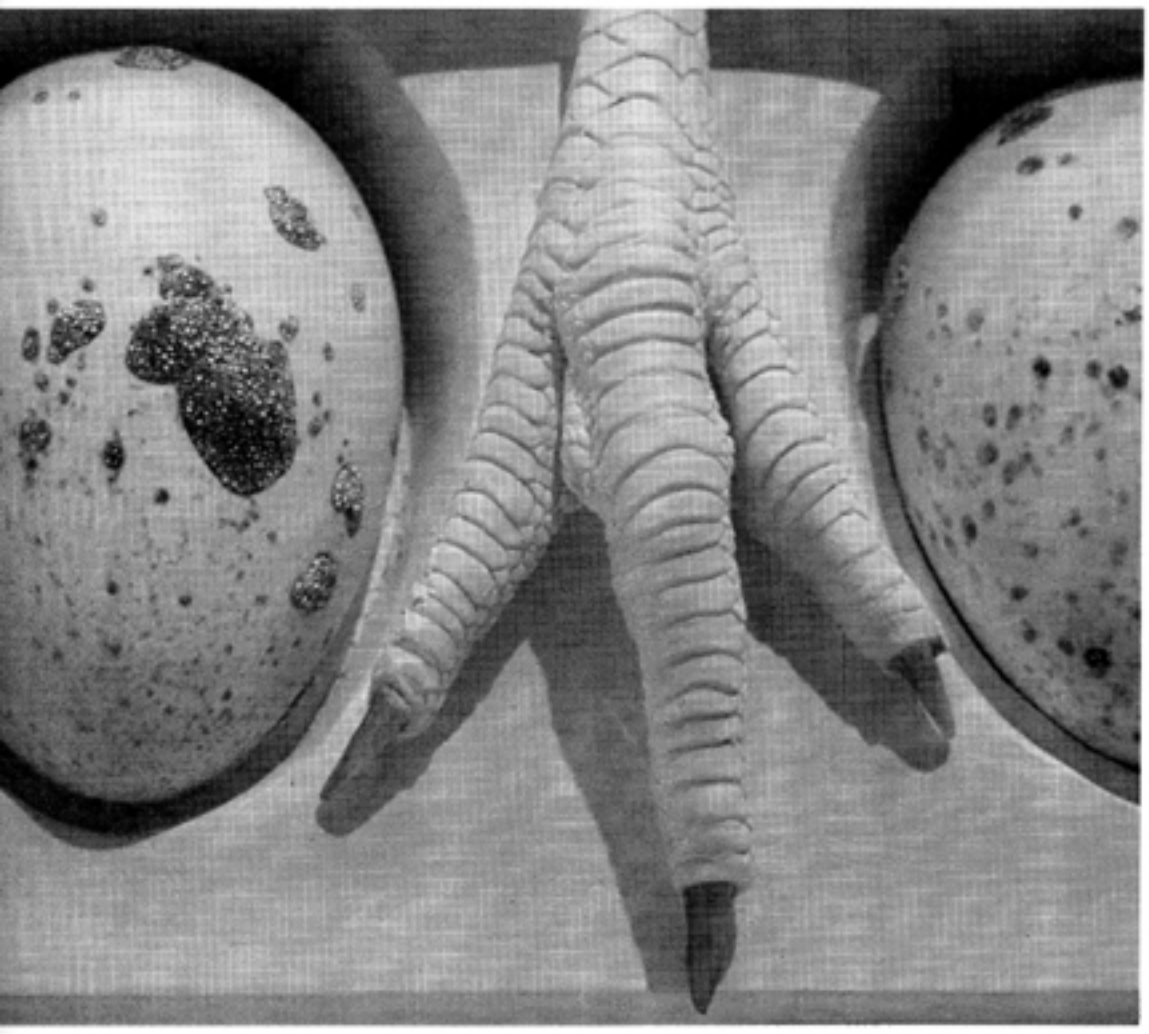


My first experience of the work of Spring Hurlbut derives from the mid-seventies. On an upstairs floor of the Duke Street library of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, she installed a moulded plaster element similar to one which encircled a light fixture in the ceiling. I came upon this quite by accident. I remember my surprise, not only at the suddenness of the discovery but also at the way it influenced my immediate sense of where I stood. Of course no light fixture blossomed out of the centre of this gesture but the incompleteness of illusion in no way indicated that anything was lacking. It provoked a return to a childhood reverie.

In that earlier circumstance, many times repeated, I lay with my back upon the floor and considered the details of the ceiling and its perimeters – the walls and their pictures hung upside down and somewhat closer to the "floor," the door casements (appearing to interrupt passage from one room to another) and the fresh, liberating lack of furniture up there. Such an inversion fed my imagination by recasting many familiar elements in a new relation to each other. It ran against the grain of the habitual, use-driven accommodations which govern relations with the interior spaces through which we pass in the course of our lives.

It is easy to forget the once-contingent aspect of things which come to occupy – for whatever period of time – a very settled place. The character of a building, for instance, often bears a decisive, conclusive air, one that is resistant to an interrogation which might go further than the shuffling of its extrane-





TOP: EYE AND DART ENTABLATURE, DETAIL. LEFT: OVO AND CLAW ENTABLATURE, DETAIL. PHOTOS: ROBERT KEZIERE.

ous contents. Over time, this character grows into the status of a durable given, an apparently known set of features, like those of a friend – the friend whose appearance is familiar in a vague, unstudied way which allows for recognition but does not support the confident recall of particular features. The functional conditioning of a space, a conditioning which applies to both the space and its occupants, doesn't encourage us to discover what may lie latent within it. What are these latencies? Any answer will remain incomplete; however, one could say that they can be coaxed out through reverie and dialectical play where the terms include inside and out, nature and culture, public and private, history and myth. Hurlbut's sculptures and installations animate these terms, revitalizing and bringing into view occluded or forgotten dimensions of the familiar, the shopworn, the conventionally received.

The plaster works created in the mid-eighties took a lyrical turn. For instance, *Three Columns in Situ* (at YYZ in 1986) seemed spun out in the way they draped and enfolded the gallery pillars which supported them. They suggested ribbed bolts of fabric rolled out and intertwined – or some slow accretion encountered in nature, such as the voluted growth of a nautilus shell. Within the regular cubic character of the gallery space, Hurlbut's elaborations around three standing columns rekindled an acute temporal sense of the process of their creation, of doing as a residue of being. The gallery pillars entered the drama as somewhat mysterious condensers of form, locations where spirit achieves palpable, tangible extension.

In 1987 I saw her *Three Tree Columns*, installed among a spacious stand of trees in Sault Ste. Marie. Rising about fourteen feet high, they were actual poplars, truncated and trimmed, relatively even in thickness along their extent, and fitted top and bottom with spun-steel capitals and bases. They seemed a rustic approximation of an element of antiquity, a jaunty citation in which the shafts preserved their bark and knots. They implied an element of country-cousin culture. The capitals gave the impression of mortarboards only partially successful in bestowing a hybridized, denatured character upon their recipients. But these works also do well against a somewhat different, more sober perspective, the natural provenance of architectural forms within the vocabulary bequeathed by ancient Greece. It was the rediscovery of this heritage in Renaissance practice that gave Hurlbut her idea for this work. It was on the *Column of Loggia* by Bramante in the courtyard of Milan's Basilica of San Ambrogio that she discovered the marble had been carved with knots to resemble a tree. There the abstract ideal is turned around towards, as it were, a "revisitation of origins." The tree with its canopy

of leaves supports the sky. A column is first of all a tree. Before the regular fluting of the quarry there was the irregular eruption of knots and branches.

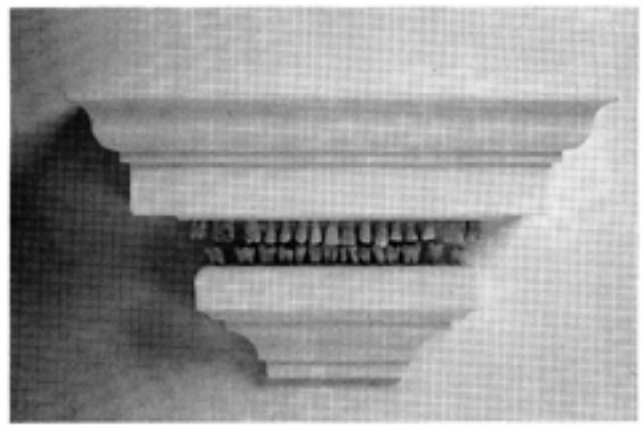
These originary intuitions developed, from the late-eighties onwards, into a whole new vocabulary. During this period she created a brilliant and arresting series of entablatures and related works which fall under the general title *Sacrificial Ornament*. Moulded in plaster from silicon casts, the entablatures are customized in scale to accommodate objects incorporated as repeated elements within a frieze. These elements include quail, duck and turkey eggs, glass eyes, animal femur bones, cow and horse teeth, chicken feet and castings of cow tongues. They are startling works which often display a sanguinary sense of humour. In *The Sacred Dentils* (1990), a section of entablature assumes the character of a rictus displaying two rows of yellow teeth. Here is another measure of antiquity at some distance from our stereotypical notions of a logos-loving, æstheticized polity; this one bears a Darwinian cast. *Dentil Entablature* (1989) is even more dramatic, showing a single row of teeth running an expanse nearly six feet long.

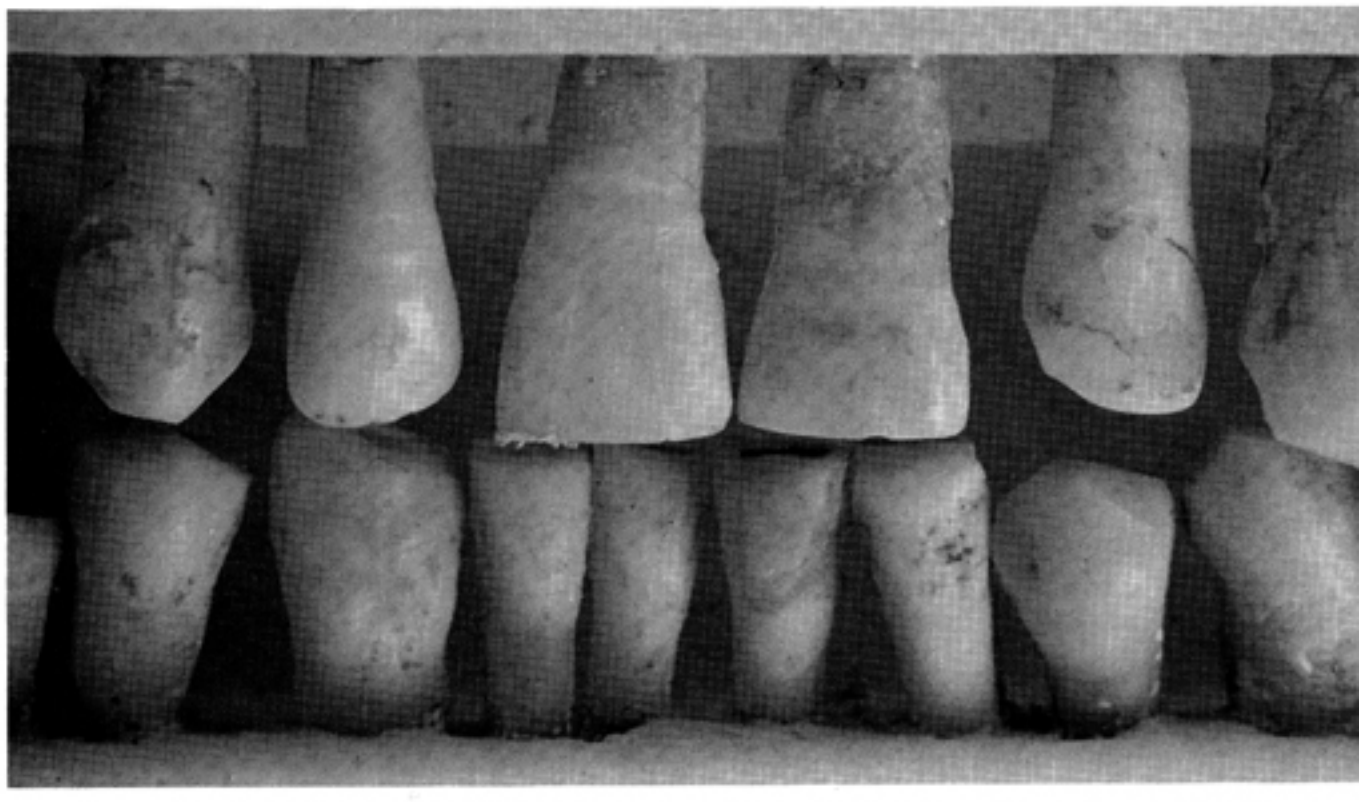
These works have been made concurrently with an exchange of ideas with George Hersey, a professor of art history at Yale. Hersey, in the essay "Ornament and Sacrifice," presents in abbreviated form his thesis that ornamental aspects of Greek architecture were derived from ritual. It was believed that whatever was offered in sacrifice – animals or shellfish or eggs even – received the divinity in whose name it was offered. What was to be done then, Hersey asks, with the inedible parts that nevertheless partook of the divinity? One solution was to hang them in trees: "In fact the first temples were groves of such trees. Thus, in ancient Greece, did sacred groves blossom with the strange fruit of bones, teeth, vertebræ, horns, skulls, and garlands."[1] Hersey goes on to say that it is commonly held that Greek temples evolved from those groves. His enlargement upon that idea is that the sacrificial remains became memorialized in the decorative aspects – the ornamental mouldings – which we know from classical architecture. Hersey draws upon etymology to support his claim. For instance, "the three upright elements of the triglyph are called *femurines*, thigh-bones." And the stylized drops called *guttæ* beneath the femurines may be seen as drippings from the bones. In one particularly resonant passage he explains their significance:

> Guttæ are important. Such fluids were thought to contain things like the soul, the life-force, strength, sexual ability, and other god-given powers that could be absorbed by, or removed from, the body. Thus in Greek *aion* means both spinal marrow and destiny, perhaps with the idea that your fate is bound up with the marrow of your bones.

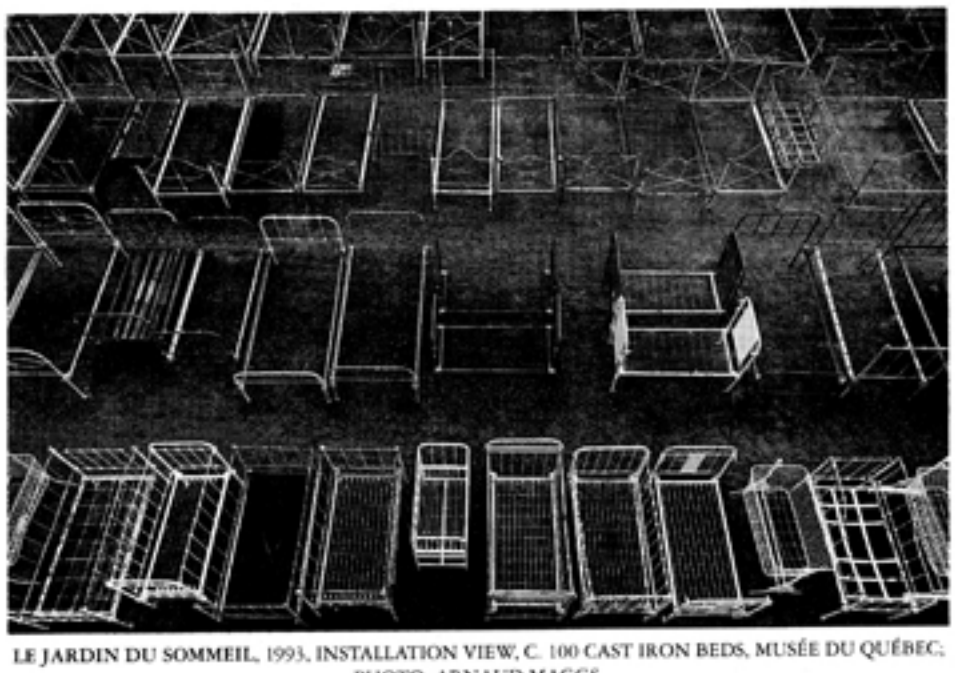
Hersey's theory is by no means free of contention. There is an opposing view that the decorative aspects of architecture derived from structural features that appealed to the eye. Dentils, the small rectangular blocks under the bed-moulding of the cornice, are claimed to originate from the exposed ends of lintels in post-and-lintel construction. Of course, such an idea has little use for the argumentative strength of etymology which tells us that "dentil" derives from the Latin word for "tooth." Our modern orientation towards the functional and the secular predisposes us to accept a view that such design elements arose out of an insulated discipline wherein freedom and constraints were often different measures of the same thing. Why, after all, should body parts be the basis for the evolution of decorative elements in classical Greek architecture? Hersey replies: "To the ancients the limbs and organs of the body were felt to be seats of different aspects of the personality. Heads, eyes, tongues, ears, fingers, thighs, and the like were sacred to the soul, to the temper, to one's human worth and *virtù*." From this it is not hard to understand why they should take on such powerful signifying functions. We should not be too surprised that such a view may seem like an overly bloody provenance for decoration: after all, "decorative" was often considered pejorative within the nearly cultic thinking of the severe arts that painting, sculpture and architecture became at the high point of modernism. These practices developed protected vocabularies and self-reflexive messianic leanings – all managed, of course, within their rhetorics of progress and proper spheres of conduct and action. To claim such atavistic roots within a paradigm of occidental cultural history, as Hurlbut does so dramatically, is to acknowledge the sublimated ritual aspect of what had become so divested and self-propelled. That decoration should offer access to a hidden dimension is ironic indeed. For what is decoration, after all, but the practice of "furnish[ing] with adornments"?[2]

Features of mythology are recalled in this "decorative work." In *Dentil Entablature* can be detected the story of Cadmus, who sowed the earth with a row of dragon's teeth and thus produced a crop of men. And not just a crop of men but armed men; Cadmus, thinking he has harvested a whole new legion of enemies, is issued this caution: "Meddle not with our civil war."[3] Their first impulse is to wage war among themselves. Here a theatrical element of architecture is used as an emblem for violent human history. *Eye and Dart Entablature* (1991), with its row of glass eyes, recalls Argus, who held Io, a river goddess, in captivity. His one hundred eyes were most efficiently put out by Mercury who, with a single stroke, severed his head. (The goddess Juno, so it goes, ornamented the tail of her peacock with his eyes!)





TOP: THE SACRED DENTILS, 1990, TEETH, PLASTER, 30 X 20 CM (ONE SECTION OF DIPTYCH); PHOTO: ROBERT KEZIERE
BOTTOM: THE SACRED DENTILS, DETAIL



LE JARDIN DU SOMMEIL, 1993, INSTALLATION VIEW, C. 100 CAST IRON BEDS, MUSÉE DU QUÉBEC; PHOTO: ARNAUD MAGGS.

Eyes, teeth and claws also allude to the sometimes pernicious aspects of institutionalized powers, of their less-than-salutary inclinations to monitor, coerce and persuade within a fiction of consensus. Public architecture has often been ideologically dedicated to such a role. (Perhaps the most extreme instance of that was Hitler's plan for his home town of Linz, a vast, over-scaled enterprise that would have been an apotheosis of kitsch archive and fetishized memorial.) Consider this salient observation by Hersey: "Book III of Vitruvius' *De architectura*, the only classical treatise that has survived from classical times, is almost entirely devoted to the rules for arranging and ornamenting temples." Hersey claims that this prescriptive intensity is the "rule-based atmosphere of taboo," following from the ancient ambivalence about sacrifice as both holy and forbidden.

These works radiate an air of mystery and animism. The entablatures, grafted and inlaid with tokens of the creature world, return to us an immediate sense of the flesh and carapace of the ideal, of the sensible realm that gives expression to the transcendent. The very strangeness of the castings from cow tongues (*Tongue and Dart Entablature, Lesbian Cymation*, 1990) brings us back to the terms of our own contract with life, the visceral furnace where life is forged and maintained. The injunction to look inwards (Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living) does not often bring us around to this intemperate region. In these works it is evoked with an apparently supervening sense of decorum and order, free of any rhetorical excess. But you can sense the fated and the contingent all the better for its seemingly august bearing. In these works dread is cousin to marvel. The splotchy markings on quail eggs suggest the surfaces of tiny, brittle worlds. A row of chicken feet points downwards, as if to absurdly denote some gesture muted and absorbed through repetition. Within a row of glass eyes tiny vein-like patterns stand revealed, an illusionist's trick that draws self-consciousness right out through the optic pathways to one's own blinkered orbs. Embellishments such as acanthi or scrolls are replaced with castings of cow tongues in *The Linqual Brackets* series: these are given a slug-like articulation which nevertheless suggests the musculature of speech. The substitution is infused with pathos and humour; we "naturally" think of utterance and expression outside of such a narrow, reductivist frame, as something greater than a biological curiosity capable of producing sounds. What is striking, too, is the vanished richness (however odious to our sensibilities) of a form of cosmic appeal which demanded the sacrifice of animals. How alien it seems, this application to divine forces through channels running with blood: and how persistent the legacy of managing the intractable, corporeal residues of these negotiations! Once – in childhood – the wallpaper blossomed with fantasies and fears. These works give us new reasons to consider what lay latent within it.

They also draw out of the stones of our long secular tradition a drama that seems from our perspective the feverish infancy of a culture. That they seem dreamlike is entirely in keeping with such a sense of origins. Nietzsche has written that "as man now reasons in dreams, so humanity also reasoned for many thousands of years when awake . . . . This atavistic element in man's nature still manifests itself in our dreams . . . . Dreams carry us back to remote conditions of human culture and give us a ready means of understanding them better."[4] In the light of these remarks, the residues of the sacred groves evoked in Hurlbut's work can be considered the residues of dreams – waking dreams but, nevertheless, dreams.

This state of reverie – wakeful dreaming – is induced in *Le Jardin du Sommeil* (1993). It consists of two-hundred old, cast-iron beds (including cribs) arranged formally in tight rows with narrow walking spaces. Suggested by the image of a child's crib partly sunk into the ground to serve as a perimeter fence for a grave, this work draws upon the most poignant form of compression: it is recalled in the ready phrase "from cradle to grave." Hospitals, dormitories, prisons – all such public, institutional frameworks may be expected to rise out of this work as a rich, associational bouquet. Private moments are figured here as well, the cyclical experiences of birth, love, passion and death. The installation puts a very public face to these events as well, not to diminish their inherently private character but to emphasize how they are inescapably human, cardinal moments of a shared, collective experience. Even while setting up physical constraints in the form of a network of passages, *Le Jardin du Sommeil* is intended to open up space for the dreamer. The non-directed pathways of reflection, reverie and remembrance may be the only avenues to freedom but they can lead all the way back to the tremulous hopes and fears of those sacred groves, to that affective disorder from which arose those first appeals for solace and protection.

NOTES

1. George Hersey, "Ornament and Sacrifice," *Sacrificial Ornament*, Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, n.d., n.p., and following quotes.
2. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 7th ed.
3. Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, trans. Zimmern and Cohn, London, 1909, pp. 24-27 (cited in C. G. Jung, "Symbols of Transformation," *The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*, Violet Staub de Laszlo, ed., New York: The Modern Library, 1959).

Jerry McGrath is a writer of criticism and short stories living in Toronto.

Un des aspects marquants du travail de Spring Hurlbut réside, selon l'auteur, en sa capacité de déclencher un état de rêverie aussi bien qu'un jeu dialectique. Dans ses entablatures, frises, chapiteaux et installations, l'artiste révèle certaines dimensions oubliées, mais toujours présentes, dans les formes courantes. Au delà d'une simple documentation de l'évolution esthétique de l'ornementation, l'investigation de Hurlbut sur l'origine des formes architecturales met en relief les moments forts de notre expérience collective de l'intimité.