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Spring Hurlbut's Sacred Dentils (detail): pondering the ways in which civilization obscures our roots.

ART REVIEW / Human teeth and chicken's feet figure in the latest works from Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut, who has turned a kind of X-ray vision on standard classical ornaments to reveal what they were before they were gussied up

Architecture in the flesh

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FITTED out with Spring Hurlbut's exhibit *Sacrificial Ornament*, Oakville's Centennial Gallery immediately calms and steadies the visitor hurrying inside from this midsummer's wet Ontario weather.

For that first moment within, the Toronto artist's powder-dry white and bone-brown temple decoration and other architectural adornments, sparsely arrayed and starkly lit, seem to have transformed the spacious Centennial into that most serene of places, a museum of Greek and Roman antiquities. We glance around and see everywhere the ancient, reassuring signs of order and stability, realized by Hurlbut in plaster and natural materials: the long, graceful horizontal lines of entablature, the rhythms of parallels and perpendiculars, the disciplined visual counterpoise of upright pillar and flat-topped capital.

Then we settle down for a closer look, and get a surprise. The row of short, staccato peg-like ornaments called dentils,

which regularly adorn classical entablature (the wide horizontal feature which sits atop the columns) turn out to be *dentals* — human teeth in one of Hurlbut's pieces, cow's teeth in another.

Similarly, the familiar egg-and-dart pattern, found repeated on the entablature of classical or classical-style buildings everywhere from Athens to Akron, here turns out to be a row of real turkey eggs, instead of the usual vague egg-shaped bulges. The pincers that hold the egg shapes in this popular decorative mode are, in Hurlbut's rendition, real chicken feet, claws and scales and all. It is as though the simplified, stylized forms we are used to seeing on "classical" courthouses, municipal buildings, grand mansions and such were suddenly stripped of all that stylization and returned to what they were in the (Greek) beginning: animal bones and teeth left over from sacrifices, rows of eggs ready to be offered to the divinity, and so on.

Or, to put the matter in another way, it's as though Hurlbut has made the standard classical architectural elements remember where they came from, and what they were, before they got smoothed out

and made respectable. It appears that the artist also wishes her viewers to see themselves in her work — to see, and ponder the ways in which the long course of civilization obscures our deepest roots, needs, desires, fears.

The modern personality, as Hurlbut might say, is like the modern "classical" building: a smooth, well-organized, secular edifice that has forgotten the sacred flame that once flickered before the god who dwelt within, and forgotten the basis of this modern self in the body, which is (like the Greek temple of old) an architecture of blood and suffering, bone and teeth and fat and flesh.

Hurlbut's objects are beautifully made, and her point is eloquently and economically stated, by simply turning a kind of X-ray vision on familiar classical ornaments and revealing what they were before they were gussied up.

Or, to be more precise, what George Hersey, an art historian at Yale University, believes them to have been.

Hersey's 1988 book *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* is the source text of Hurlbut's show. In this book, and again in the essay he has contributed to the show's

catalogue, we find the argument that I've outlined about the development, and the amnesia, of classical architecture. I must admit that, when I read Hersey's work upon its publication, I found it an enchanting fancy, eccentric, and engaging as a kind of scholarly fiction of a high intellectual order. I left it, and leave it, to historians of Greek architecture to judge the merits of his case.

Clearly, Hurlbut has decided not to wait until the jury comes in. She has taken Hersey's thesis very seriously, and very much to heart, embodying it in visual objects that call us to rethink in a fresh way our bodies, these fleshly shrines of the spirit.

Organized by Joan Stebbins, director and curator of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, *Sacrificial Ornament* continues until Aug. 30 at Centennial Gallery, 1306 Lakeshore Rd. E., Oakville. The show, whose appearance in Oakville is being sponsored by Marr Corp., will then travel to the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Windsor and the Musée du Québec, Québec City.