EXHIBITION REVIEW

between two pieces of clear glass and inserted into wooden planks of various sizes. The planks were presented leaning against the wall, reminiscent of how wood is found in a lumberyard, and allowing light to project the images onto the wall. The piece not only calls attention to how lumber is created, how burnt forests rebound, and to the endless cycle of life, death, and re-birth, but also addresses issues of memory and photographic representation, asking whether a photograph can encapsulate an environmental experience.

Although the work in this evocative exhibition was primarily photo-based, Khalsa also included a thought-provoking sculpture. *Pray for Rain (Prayer Wheel)* (2015) is a nuanced piece that celebrates many issues central to her practice. The work, a representation of our world and its dependence on water, is comprised of a blue, blown-glass sphere that caps a half-empty/half-full clear glass cylinder containing water in which float twenty-eight small glass bottles, each inscribed with a word loosely associated with water. The cylinder is etched with the word for water in Morse code—a distress signal for the planet. The entire object slowly spins in a clockwise direction, linking the self-spinning object to the Tibetan Buddhist practice in which a prayer (in this instance for rain) is silently recited with each rotation. A distant spotlight shines through the water in the spinning glass cylinder, creating a flickering light on the wall behind it. Like a reflection on ocean waves, the sculpture reifies the ephemeral nature of water in Southern California.

It was difficult not to equate the riveting movement of the waters’ reflection with the evocative shadows cast by the light passing through the transparencies of *Trees and Seedlings*. No matter what their medium, Khalsa’s works resonate on multiple levels. Undoubtedly, the creation of aesthetically pleasing objects is important—however, her pursuit goes beyond formal investigations. The work is a confluence of personal and social concerns that continue to combat the ever-changing, never predictable, yet essential issues pertaining to water and life in the landscape of the American West.

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Pages created between 1976 and 1981, which combine found images to recreate visually the forgotten branches of the family tree. It is in these prints that the artist introduced her innovative experimentation with platinum-palladium printing on tracing vellum, their surface texture inviting the tactile response central to the encounter with Hands (1976–83). Here, family relationships are traced through the anatomy of touch: solidly entrenched through the similar-yet-different geography of the hands of Son (Ronald) and Father (Vernon), from 1976, yet as fleeting as the gossamer delicacy of skin and fabric in My Grandmother’s Hand, with stocking (1978), whose torn surface is beginning to fray. And capturing the most intimate of family ties, Snyder MacNeil’s portraits of husband Ronald from 1975 to 1981 keep his eyes in tight focus, life size and at eye level, producing an experience of one-to-one viewing that is highly charged.

Yet in some of the most conceptually interesting works on view, the intimacy created by their painterly tonal range and soft and luminous vellum surfaces is applied in less familiar settings—onto colleagues’ faces in The Eight Tenured Members of the Art Department, Wellesley College (by rank) from 1980, whose names are replaced by their anticipated year of retirement, identity reduced to an illegible code; to the Twenty-One Artists of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (1983), whose grid-like installation is accompanied by a printout of MIT’s letter announcing the budget cuts that would result in each subject’s redundancy; and to her students in Class Portrait, Graduate Students in Photography, Rhode Island School of Design (1979–80), in which each sitter’s image is placed above a copy of their identity card, complete with its own mugshot. In emphasizing the human reality of each individual that transcends the limits of their institutionally proscribed identity, the intense encounter staged in Snyder MacNeil’s portraiture goes beyond the personal to remind us of the photograph’s innate and irresolvable tension—between the intimate and the objective, between sentimental trace and bureaucratic document in the institutional archive. Let’s see some more.

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Spring Hurlbut: Airborne
RYERSON IMAGE CENTRE
TORONTO
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Death, that necessarily twinned companion to life, Sigmund Freud concluded, is the most compelling of all human drives: Death brings stasis to the constant agitation of life.1 In death, we can finally relax. Considered within contemporary Western culture, still pumped from postwar United States commercialization of youth culture, the notion seems absurd. Perceived as an incomprehensible violation of our autonomy, death is resisted and denied. We traffic in super foods and preserve our bodies for future awakening, when science finally solves nature’s fatal flaw.

Spring Hurlbut engages in no such fantasies. Instead, her explorations in sculpture, installation, photography, and video over the past three decades acknowledge the necessary demise of our ephemeral and fragile bodies. But, unlike Freud’s fatigued psychical bodies, those Hurlbut represents don’t settle into static sleep. Their vitality continues as visual, spiritual, or aesthetic presence.

Hurlbut’s work sits within the tradition of representing death through art. Through history, we’ve preserved bodies, either literally or figuratively: ancient death masks indexed ancient Roman faces as did, though with greater remove, nineteenth-century post-mortem daguerrotypists; mumified ancient Egyptians found their way, as “Mummy Brown” pigment, into oil paintings from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. It is intriguing to consider the semiotic and political implications if, for example, looted Egyptian corpses were reconstituted as drowning slaves painted into J.M.W. Turner’s The Slave Ship (1840).2

Hurlbut has deployed both approaches, using both real bodies and their rhetorical representations: Her earlier Sacrificial Ornament sculpture series (1989–97), modeled after classical Roman architecture, incorporated real horse teeth and cast relics of human femurs to stand as architectural dentils and triglyphs;