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
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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. 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 daguerreotypes; mummified 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;
EXHIBITION REVIEW

her installation Le Jardin du sommeil (1998) displayed a vast collection of antique metal cribs that referred metonymically to their absent occupants, whose lives may have ended prematurely from faulty hygiene in birthing and feeding. More recently, Hurlbut’s photographs offer compositions of cremated human and animal remains.

The first piece in the subsequent, ongoing, and morphing series, Deuil (Mourning), begun in 2005, developed in relation to her own father’s cremated remains. Her photographs of the larger bone shards picked from his ashes and arranged along the edge of a ruler signal an objective ethnological and museological approach to the past. This is one way that we manage what life leaves behind: our archives and artifacts accumulate in the thick pile of history. Shifting from this analytic approach, Hurlbut engages realms disregarded by science: love, poetics, loss, beauty, imagination, and metaphysics.

In these large, square, color photographs, the ashes from an individual or animal (as she photographs our dear doggy dust as well) lie scattered in a loose circle inside the frame. Dramatically lit against a deep black background, their mixed textures and warm tones appear as elegant starry constellations in a night sky.

The first of the Deuil series, titled James #1 (2005), was made with her father’s ashes; since then, Hurlbut continues to receive inquiries from those wanting their loved ones memorialized in the same way. Again, we’re invited to consider the relative semiotic and fetish values of ashes and photographs of them in relation to memorial functions: the ashes are the real stuff of the loved one, but are usually kept out of sight; the photographs are mediated representations of that being. Can these visually aestheticized representations offer greater comfort to the bereaved than gray powder inside boxes?

Building from these photographic series is the video piece shown at the Ryerson Image Centre (RIC). Projected on a screen inside a dark curtained enclosure inside one of the RIC galleries is the nineteen-minute Airborne (2008). If the discrete and measured bone shards of the first series were expanded through beauty and feeling in the second, then this third exploration, Airborne, invites the dead back to movement and philosophy.

The five sections within this looped color video are introduced with names presented in austere white letters against black: Trudy, Harvard, Mary, James, and the couple Robert & Grania, who reunite on screen as smoky gray tendrils. Within the otherwise deep black space, a strong warm light radiates diagonally from the upper right corner, its illumination creating a sliver of light on a box sitting at bottom center. Wearing a ventilator as protection against these hazardous artists’ materials, Hurlbut labors in her work of memorial. Approaching the box from the right, she opens its lid and, backing discreetly out of the frame, allows the dead to speak. The finest of entombed powder emerges slowly in ascending swirls and spirals and, for roughly five minutes for each of these posthumous portraits, the smoke-like plumes curl through the deep black surrounds. The once-sequestered bodies appear, in their dance of death, as cosmic and microcosmic particles of intense life, floating as constellations through infinity. Like genies escaping their bottles to make magic, these buried beings, in their elegance and beauty, make magical spaces for the contemplation of existential mysteries.

Artists trade in the metaphysics of immortality: their material productions and their names live longer than individual bodies. It may be, according to Freud’s rumination, that we crave the quiet of death, but until we get there, we like to imagine mortality.

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NOTES