

# COPING WITH THE ASHES: SPRING HURLBUT'S DEUIL AS DEATH REVIEWED

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(see images after text)

In our anthropocentric understanding of the world, death is considered a rupture rather than a fundamental process of nature. Death, because it is hardly accepted as a natural and ever-present part of life, is to be resisted. Mourning and loss occur mainly after the burial of a person; we are for the most part shielded from the physicality of death.

Unquestionably, death is an uncomfortable subject that belongs to the private realm. As to perception, the notion of death has been represented as a symbol of fear throughout history. In this sense, Spring Hurlbut's work is an unusual project, in that her documentation of cremated remains reclaims and restores the representation of death as a natural process of life. Moreover, the artist dares to take a very private "matter" in the literal sense of the word to create a photographic work of art of a person's cremated ashes and to place it in an exhibition for public display.

*James # 2* (2005) is one of the first photographs from Spring Hurlbut's *Deuil* (Bereavement) series, a project that she worked on for four years. The image documents the cremated ashes of her father. Scott McLeod, curator of the *Deuil* (2009) exhibition at Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa writes that the photograph emphasizes "the terrible insubstantiality of human remains after their purging by fire."<sup>1</sup> In her interview

with McLeod, Hurlbut explains: “this stage recognized that my father existed, but that he no longer does. In the sifting of my dad’s ashes, I felt that I was in conversation with him. My father’s passing took on a ritualized significance. Working with his vestiges gave me some measure of solace.”<sup>2</sup>

*James # 2* is not the first time Hurlbut explored the theme of the permanence and impermanence of her father’s death.<sup>3</sup> In each work of this series, Hurlbut invents different ways to represent a person’s death through ashes. For instance, earlier works in the *Deuil* series include an archaeological approach, where the artist discovers small remnants of bone by sifting through the ashes of her father, which she then rearranges according to size.<sup>4</sup> Then, in the second stage (i.e. *James #2*), she places the bag of remains on a scale, as though measuring the weight of death. The twin stages are the methodologies applied to the first two people’s post-mortem “portraits” of the series: the ashes of her father, James, and those of a little girl, Scarlett Wright. In the catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition, Maia-Mari Sutnik writes that the artist’s approach to the notion of death serves as “a metaphor for life which forgoes the familiar symbols of death, only to create new ways of looking at it.”<sup>5</sup> The third stage consists of a meticulous technique in arranging the ashes of photographer Mary Pockock and finally, the remains of her assistant Galen Kuellmer, a methodology resulting in the creation of unique and luminous shapes resembling stars in a galaxy.

The medium of photography is then another aspect to examine closely. In *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin reflects on the slow motion qualities of a photograph, driving the

onlooker to travel: “With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (236). In all three stages—although more poignantly in the third stage—the medium of photography enables the viewer to travel to new and unforeseen dimensions.

The cremated remains of a once living person are evidence of the person’s death, and inextricably, also a proof of life. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes talks about two terms which he feels are present in photography: *studium* and *punctum*. In Hurlbut’s case however, it is uncertain where the distinction of the two terms can be made. It is almost as though the act of photographing human remains resides in the space in-between. *Studium*, the obvious symbolic meaning of the photograph, is evident in the process whereby the viewer recognizes the presence of ashes, does not know the dead subject, and has no personal connection with it. The empathetic reading, the same emotion that enabled Hurlbut to work with the other remains, seems to provoke in contrast the *punctum*. When the viewer realizes the weight of the subject, the conceptual dimension beyond its visual quality, and the fact that there is necessarily a life for death to occur, only then does *punctum* occur.

The overall aesthetic quality of the image attracts the viewer’s eye, but instead of marshalling the onlooker, the process rather puts the audience in conversation with the fairly private notion of finitude. In Walter Benjamin’s words, this image constitutes the physical aura of death. Through photography, Hurlbut has captured the aura of death and

exposed it to the public eye. Yet, the picture frame has a distinctive role as well. Hurlbut's only condition of these works in the Library and Archives Canada collection is that "the frame is an integral part of the work."<sup>6</sup> Through the act of framing these photographs of cremated ashes, the artist encloses and thus preserves the notion of death within the frame. Hence, the viewer's eye is always directed toward the center of the frame, where punctum resides.

As Hurlbut creates a new image of death, she also generates an immortal image of the dead person. Hurlbut's work simultaneously embodies the ideas of life and death. The act of labeling the image means that the artist retains the name of the individual who is in these remains, almost as though personifying the ashes and attributing to them the physicality of a person's soul. It is as if the invisible soul has become the eternal materiality of a person's remains. The named photographs are both the evidence of the life that existed, as well as a new symbol of the soul.

In René Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" a calligraphic statement confirms the visual illusion of the illustrated pipe.<sup>7</sup> In Hurlbut's work, the medium of photography is the very element that creates the visual illusion. We observe the ashes, aware that the powdery matter consists of the remains of someone, yet we know that we are not actually looking at the physical substance but only an image of it. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag distinguishes between paintings and photographs saying: "images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all, a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), and interpretation of the real, it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real,

like a footprint or a death mask.”<sup>8</sup> But what happens when that trace of the real represents a physical remain of the living?

Spring Hurlbut argues that she is “the medium” in this work, “a facilitator of sorts.” Her emphasis is on her spiritual and meditative role in relation to the ashes. This explanation enables her to circumvent what could be readily viewed as an offensive handling of a person’s ashes to create these strange photographic works.<sup>9</sup> Instead of maintaining a respectful distance from this disturbing material, the artist engages with it, refusing to be repulsed by these ashes. In addition, the active involvement and support of the relatives who gave these ashes (to whom she has returned them) creates a positive mindset behind the intent of the work. Hurlbut’s death portraits are representations of the duality in life and death; the dynamics of what remains after the end of the living. The measuring and sifting technique represents the physicality of death and thus, constitutes a metaphor of the physical understanding of death as a natural course of life. On the other hand, the portrayal of luminous creations may be perceived as a way of representing the immeasurable universe; a metaphor for the inexplicable abstraction of loss and death. Thus, the portraits attempt to define the notion of death—both physically and spiritually—resulting in an experiment to determine its memorializing quality, as opposed to utter finitude.



James # 2. (part of Deuil I), 2005.

Spring Hurlbut. (1955-), Ontario

Ultra chrome print . 24 3/8 x 30 inches. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)

Library and Archives Canada. c. 3912845.



James # 1. (part of Deuil I), 2005.

Spring Hurlbut. (1955-), Ontario.

Ultra chrome print. 24 3/8 x 30 inches. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)

Library and Archives Canada. c. 3912839



Galen # 4. (part of Deuil I), 2006.

Spring Hurlbut. (1955-), Ontario.

Ultra chrome print . 24 3/8 x 30 inches. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)

Library and Archives Canada. c. 3912852

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Gerald Ferguson: Frottage Works 1994-2006,” and “Spring Hurlbut: Deuil,” Carleton University Art Gallery (6 Dec. 2010) <artengine.ca>.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Clarke, “Spring Hurlbut: Deadfall Dialogues,” *Canadian Art Magazine* (15 Apr. 2010) <canadianart.ca>.

<sup>3</sup> In 2001, she collaborated with the ROM in an exhibition called *The Final Sleep*, where she questioned the material significance and mortality of objects in the museum. In 2004, through the *Beloved and Foresaken* exhibition, taking place in the Manchester Museum of Natural History and Ethymology in England, her work consisted of contemplating the meaning of loss and the relationship of loss to practices of preservation. Maia-Mari Sutnik, “Deuil: New Work by Spring Hurlbut,” *Prefix Photo 15 Spectral Light* 8:1 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke.

<sup>5</sup> Sutnik.

<sup>6</sup> *James # 2*, (part of *Deuil I*), 2005, Spring Hurlbut. (1955-), Ontario, Ultra chrome print, 24 3/8 x 30 inches (7<sup>th</sup> ed.) Library and Archives Canada, c3912845 <collectionscanada.gc.ca>.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *This is not a pipe* (Orig.: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) Transl. and Ed. James Harkness (Los Angeles: University of California, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” and “The Image World,” *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Hurlbut is not the first artist to work with human remains either. In fact, the use of human remains as a representation has more largely been used for commemorative displays of mass-destruction and as a remembrance practice in the genocidal history context. Marie-Jeanne Musiol, “In the Shadow of the Forest (Auschwitz-Birkenau),” (1996) <musiol.ca>. She is an artist who uses photography to represent death (i.e. slaughtered Jews) by capturing ashes in forests of Auschwitz, Poland.

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