



Oriri ex cinere

Spring Hurlbut

c/o Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

In *Oriri ex cinere* (rising from the ashes), artist Spring Hurlbut recounts the inspiration and process behind the photographic and video work she has created using cremated human and animal ashes. Hurlbut's lines, quadrilaterals and circles of ash have an integrity of form that keeps them whole and intact, and another force that dissipates their structure, suggestive of the dissolution that ultimately affects all living forms. Her video, *Airborne*, shows ashes of named individuals emerging from black boxes and riding the air currents in a dance involving the movements of the living and the vestiges of the dead. Hurlbut draws attention to the reality of death that is generally cloistered in our society. Through her activation of human and animal ashes, she gives the dead a chance to engage once again with life.

ENCOUNTER

At once she showed us an image of the ashes of her friend –
a strongly-lit swirl against black, like a galaxy of stars
and so tactile that I stroked the image with my fingers.

She said that to arrange and photograph the ashes
was to take the dead's life forward, and presented a picture
of her own father inside the crematorium chamber,

his skull intact, the bones still laid down in human shape.
We saw, too, her reassembly of a museum's collection
of white, albino and transparent objects in tall vitrines:

a taxidermied swan, rabbits, fish and a pair of Victorian
silk button boots alongside two fur and diamond shoes
of her own. She used the word 'lucette'. Then we sat

at a long table where she explained the idea of *punctum*:
coming to a photograph with emotion first, under the radar
of learning or expectation — which did or did not prepare us

for a photo-work commissioned by the parents of an infant
who had died: the baby's ashes in a clear packet placed
above an old set of weighing scales, back-lit, and below,

pieces of bone in descending order of size, left to right,
measured against a brass ruler. Volume and length.
I thought of the John Berger story where a young man

falls into a furnace and disappears; his lover imagines him
forever in particles of the factory's dust — but here,
the beloved's remains were declared, illuminated, swept

into a ridge or scar. Afterwards, in grey light, we touched
the iron structure of a bassinet, remnant of an exhibition
of one hundred and forty antique rocking cradles displayed
in formal rows. Transformation through repetition, she said.

Kay Syrad

First published in her book *Inland*, Cinnamon Press (2018)

NOTE BY SPRING HURLBUT

I met Kay Syrad several years ago in Courbières, France. At the time I discussed my work with Kay, I was exploring the possibility of publicly exhibiting a photograph of my father's ashes in the crematorium chamber. However, upon further reflection and preferring a less literal approach, I chose to keep the image in my own personal archive and not to exhibit this work.

Deuil 2005–2008

After my father, James Hurlbut, died I received a portion of his funerary ashes from my mother. In 2005 I began working with his ashes. My



Figure 1: Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil: Scarlett 1* (infant), 2005, 24.5 × 45 inches.



Figure 2: Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil: Scarlett 2* (infant), 2005, 24.5 × 30.25 inches.



Figure 3: Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil: James 5* (artist's father), 2008, 28.625 × 28.625 inches.

father's remains marked the beginning of the photographic series *Deuil* (to mourn). I decided to sift through the cremated remains, not unlike an archaeologist, discovering distinctive bone shards in the ashes. Interacting with my father posthumously felt like I was in a conversation with him. My father's death had taken on a ritualized significance. Working with his last vestiges has given me some measure of solace. The death of my father compelled me to further investigate my notions of mortality. My work with human ashes resulted in other people's requests to photograph their beloved family members, both humans and animals (Figures 3–6).

In her poem, *Encounter*, stanzas six and seven, Kay Syrad discusses the ashes of an infant who had died. This refers to two other works in the *Deuil* series (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 4: Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil, Mary 3* (artist), 2006, 28.625 × 28.625 inches.

The ashes are highly unpredictable, fugitive and almost impossible to work with. It seems remarkable to me that the fine, cremated dust is all that remains of an existence. This is an ontological discourse that speaks to the shared experience of our inevitable demise.

After Malevich: The Moment of Dissolution 2014–2018

In 2014–2015, I created a photographic series titled *After Malevich: The Moment of Dissolution*, based on Kazimir Malevich's paintings and drawings from 1917–27 (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/kazimir-malevich-1561/five-ways-look-malevichs-black-square>). In my series a plane in dissolution gradually fades into a black background. I worked directly with



Figure 5: Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil: Peewee 3* (canine), 2007, 28.625 × 28.625 inches.

funerary ashes to form a composition similar to Malevich's, then with a decisive action I displaced this geometry. The once contained particles dissipated into the blackness. The resulting composition suggests the dissolution of life (Figures 7–9).

A Fine Line 2016

In 2016 I studied the grid drawings of Agnes Martin (1963–1985) (<https://www.moma.org/artists/3787>). Her grids were the catalyst for my next photographic project, *A Fine Line*. I delineated graphs made from the finest dust of cremated ashes of deceased individuals. With mathematical precision, I placed each horizontal line equidistantly one above the other. There is a perceptible tension set up by the proximity of these lines to one

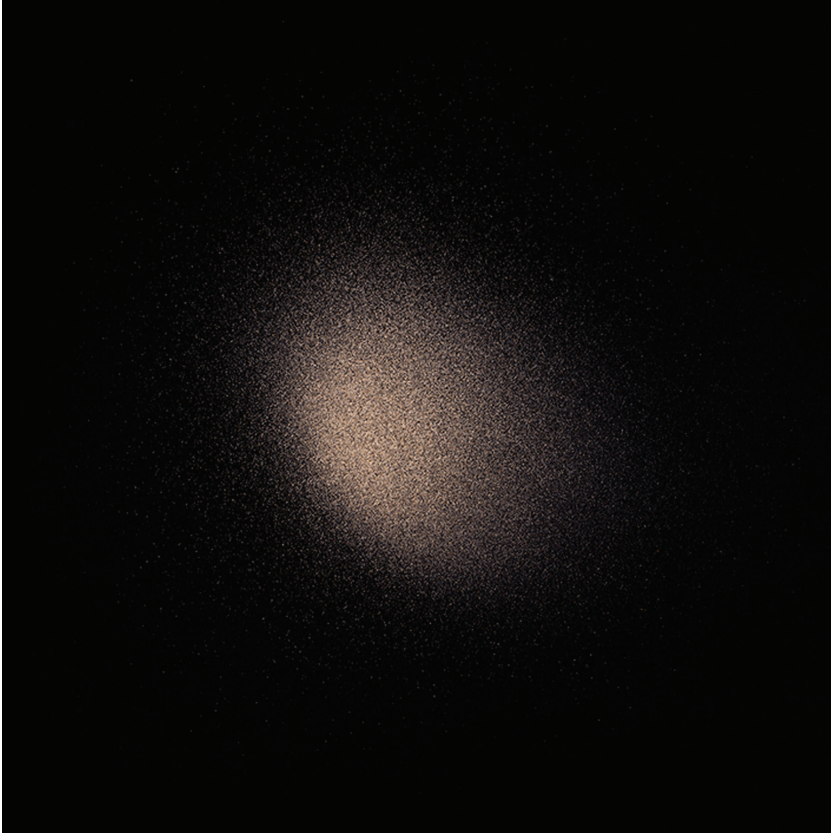


Figure 6: Spring Hurlbut, *Deuil: Peewee 5* (canine), 2007, 28.625 × 28.625 inches.

another. I chose a selection of lines and intentionally disrupted them, causing the lines to dissolve into intermittent spillages of ash outside of their linear boundaries. The lines appear to oscillate as they move in and out of the dispersing particles. The effect is reminiscent of a musical score, a tremor of evanescence. Essentially, this series of photographs is about measuring chaos (Figures 10 and 11).

Dyadic Circles 2019

Rebecca Duclos has written that

the Dyadic Circles series has in its penumbra the figure of Swedish artist and spiritualist, Hilma af Klint, whose 1920 painting ‘No. 1 Starting Picture’

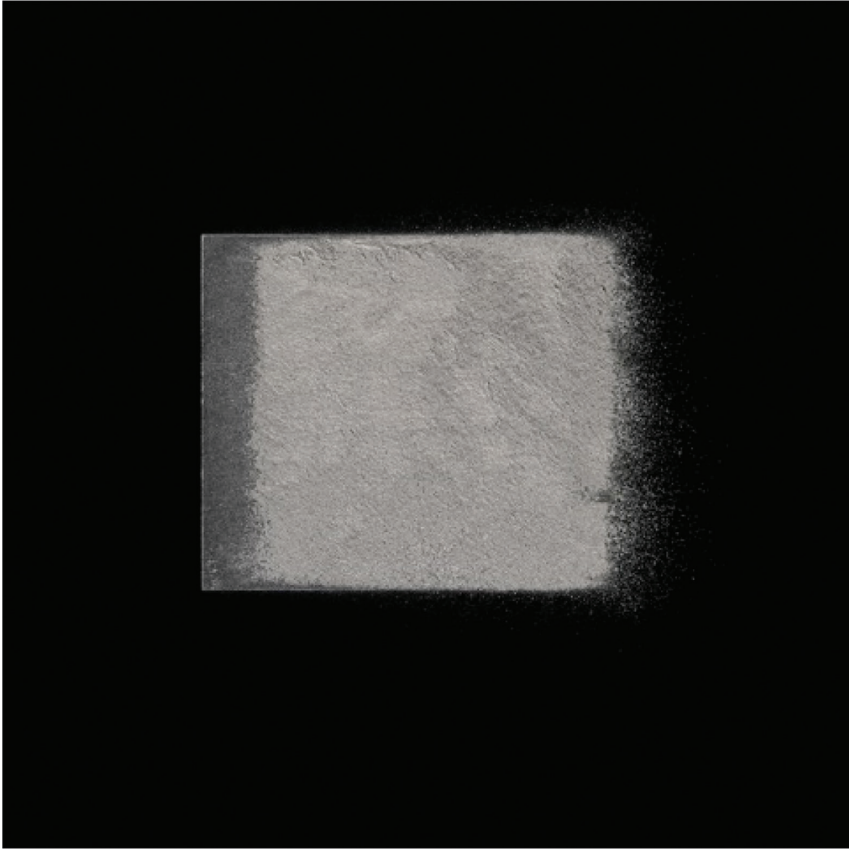


Figure 7: Spring Hurlbut, *After Malevich: The Moment of Dissolution, Nutmeg 1* (pony), 2014, 25.5 × 25.5 inches.

resonated deeply with Hurlbut. Both women's work—separated by exactly one century—is a testament to the conversations that art making is uniquely positioned to pursue, and to evoke. As artists, Klint and Hurlbut shuttle tenuously between the material and immaterial worlds of the living and the non-living as a generative place to produce ideas (<https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/series-ii-1920-by-hilma-af-klint>).¹

I was captivated by this painting and the idea that the circle—which normally represents infinity or unity—was divided into two parts, one half white and the other black, suggesting a duality within a whole.

The *Dyadic Circles* photographic series are made up of the funerary ash of predominantly domestic animals (<http://www.georgiascherman.com/>



Figure 8: Spring Hurlbut, *After Malevich: The Moment of Dissolution, Nutmeg 2* (pony), 2014, 25.5 × 25.5 inches.

viewing-rooms). Each circle is divided into two parts. One half consists of pale cremated ash and the other half contains dark ash. In some cases the two-part composition is from a single individual and in other instances it depicts two subjects. It is the first time in my practice that I am introducing two individuals and two shades of ashes in a single composition (Figure 12).

Since 2013 the subject matter of my photographic work has taken the form of simple geometric lines or shapes, often referencing similar configurations within art history. My own performative action disturbs this perfect geometry, giving life to the image. Through my work I have learned that sacred substances can be used in secular artwork. I collaborate with

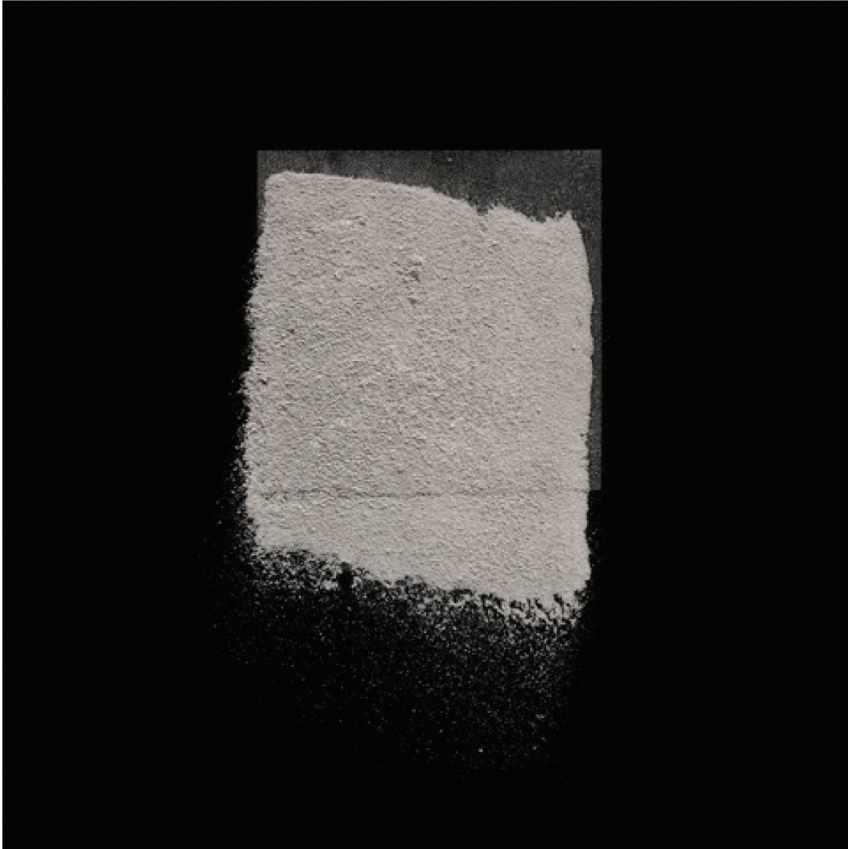


Figure 9: Spring Hurlbut, *After Malevich: The Moment of Dissolution, Irregular Quadrangle, Arnaud I* (artist's late husband), 2018, 25.5 × 25.5 inches.

my posthumous subjects by interacting with the ashes in order to give form and expression to loss.

Airborne 2008

My friend, Margaret Priest, asked me to work with the funerary ashes of her mother, Trudy. While opening the lid of her urn I was captivated by the slow and deliberate movement of her ascending ashes. Rather than using her ashes as a subject for a still photograph, I realized that I could capture her swirling particles in a video.

The resulting video, *Airborne*, is a 19-minute projection in which I open identical black boxes containing the funerary ashes of six different



Figure 10: Spring Hurlbut, *A Fine Line: Arnaud 2* (artist's late husband), 2016, 27.375 × 27.375 inches.

individuals: Trudy, Grania and Robert, Harvard, James (my father) and Mary (<https://ryersonimagecentre.ca/exhibition/spring-hurlbut-air-borne/>). Each person is identified by their first name at the beginning of their segment of the video. After opening each box, I move out of the frame and the fine ashes ascend like rising mist in front of a black background (Video 1).

The conditions of each box's opening are the same: the existing air currents, the exact same urns, and the same procedure for removing the lids. Within these controlled conditions and repeated actions, it might be assumed that the particles of ash would rise up in a predictable manner. However, when you observe the video, you can see that this is definitely not the case. Each posthumous subject had a very singular trajectory,



Figure 11: Spring Hurlbut, *A Fine Line: Arnaud 3* (artist's late husband), 2016, 27.375 × 27.375 inches.

some rising out of the box and then cascading back, others climbing invisible air currents before dissipating into darkness. How they ascended, in which direction and for what length of time was always unpredictable. In spite of their status as deceased, each individual defied this definition in their temporal performance in front of the camera.

My film crew and I were often astounded by the configurations manifested by each individual, as if they were having a momentary resurrection. We often felt in a state of grace as we watched the unique behavior of each individual's ashes. These performances are enhanced in the video by the slow motion used to capture each subject. In *Airborne*, the finality of death is circumvented as these posthumous subjects transcend the barrier between life and death.

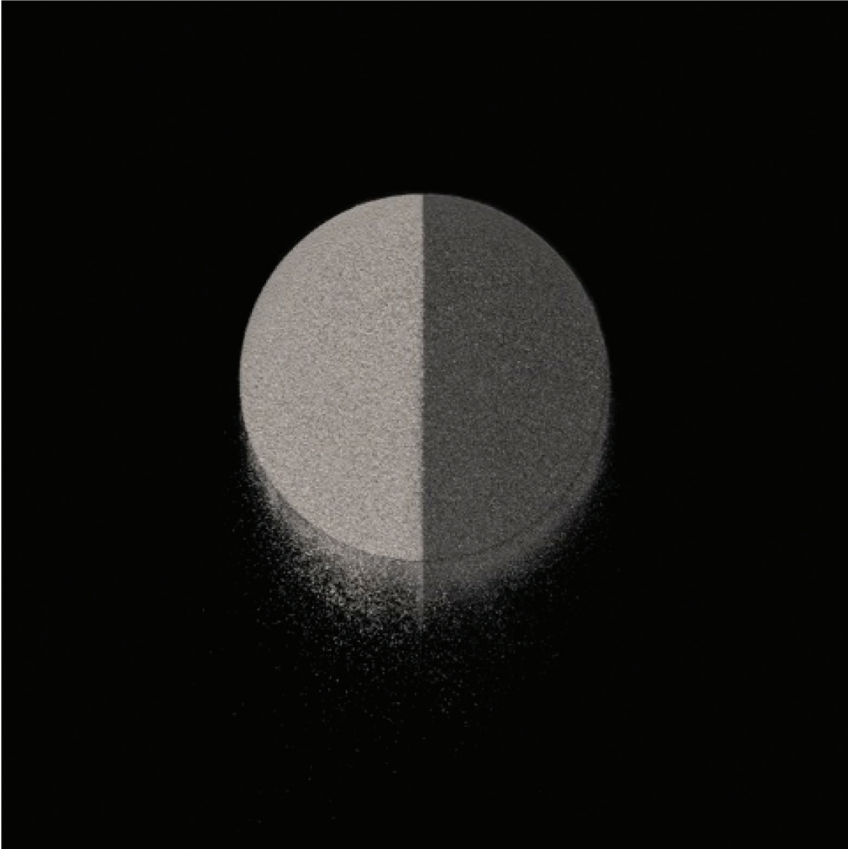


Figure 12: Spring Hurlbut, *Dyadic Circles: Nutmeg 2* (pony), 2019, 24 × 24 inches.

Russel Lord, curator of photography at New Orleans Museum of Art, said of Airborne: ‘In combining the personal with the profound, Hurlbut’s work creates a piece in which endings are re-staged as beginnings and the reductive finality of death is animated into a vibrant, and often very elegant, afterlife’.²

A RECOLLECTION BY MARGARET PRIEST

On the occasion I visited Spring Hurlbut’s studio and saw her photographs of her father’s ashes they had not yet been exhibited. I had been familiar with her previous explorations of death; however, I was taken aback by this unflinchingly personal—and seemingly taboo—approach.



Video 1: Spring Hurlbut, *Airborne*, 2008.

The images stayed with me. Some years later, a few weeks before her 100th birthday, my mother Trudy Priest died. It was not a death to be mourned. It was a long life to be celebrated and a death to be admired. She had chosen to depart this life, before reaching the great milestone, by her own efforts and on her own terms.

Trudy's ashes were to be placed in a small grave beside my father's, but before doing so I decided to speak to Spring. I didn't know how she 'found' her subjects, but I suspected it wasn't a simple task. Furthermore, by this time, I had another connection to Spring—my daughter Georgia Scherman, Trudy's granddaughter, had become Spring Hurlbut's gallerist.

The ashes were offered to Spring because I greatly admired her work. I expected nothing in return save the satisfaction of being of assistance to a fellow artist. What a surprise it was to find myself and my family the recipients of an unanticipated and immeasurable gift. Spring gave us back the vibrant, fearless adventurer that was Trudy unloosed from the constraints of her harsh working class existence in twentieth century England.

For the most part, I knew my mother to be a painfully practical and conservative woman, but on occasion she exhibited a surprisingly unconventional spirit. When I watched *Airborne*, Spring's moving evocation of Trudy, I saw my mother's true energy emerge from the container, free from all constraint, free to fly, open to adventure and to new frontiers. I

saw the wild child in the Australian outback, the winter swimmer in the bitter North Sea, the 75-year-old immigrant setting out for yet another new continent, the octogenarian roller coaster rider—and the brave and determined woman who dared depart this life by her own doing rather than reach an ultimately meaningless 100th milestone.

My husband, my son, my daughters, daughter-in-law and granddaughters were equally overwhelmed by Spring's evocation of the life that touched them and that through our family's precious copy of *Airborne* will continue to live and swirl around us and our future generations to come.

Margaret Priest

July, 2019

AFTERWORD

My role is to bear witness to the loss of others through photographing and filming the ashes that have been entrusted to me. Living individuals or family members and friends of the deceased have given me permission to work with their ashes.

I would like to thank Kay Syrad for allowing me to reproduce her poem, *Encounter*, from her book, *Inland*. I appreciate her reflections on my work and her attention to the details of our conversation. Her poem came to me as a complete surprise; an unexpected gift from an extraordinary encounter.

I would also like to thank artist, Margaret Priest, for her heartfelt response to my video *Airborne*. Her thoughtful writing confirms my conviction that through my photographic and video work I have been able to give the dead a temporal resurrection.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Clare Brant and Jane Wildgoose for screening my *Airborne* video at the Life Writing and Death day conference in 2018 and independent curator, Rebecca Duclos and curator, Russell Lord for their valuable support. Additionally, thanks to Rebecca Duclos and Russell Lord, both of whom have written so eloquently on my work.

Thanks finally to my gallerist, Georgia Scherman of Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto, Canada.

All images courtesy of Spring Hurlbut and Georgia Scherman Projects.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Spring Hurlbut is a visual artist based in Toronto, Canada. She has been involved with questions of mortality and reverence, transcending the barrier between the living and the dead. Hurlbut has work in the collections of Département de la Seine-Saint-Denis, France, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the National Gallery of Canada, and was awarded the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2018. She has exhibited widely, including at PS1, Long Island City, the Morgan Library, New York, the New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and C/O Berlin in Germany.

NOTES

- 1 Rebecca Duclos. 'Spring Hurlbut: Dyadic Circles.' *Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto*, <http://www.georgiascherman.com/2020-sh-view-room>. Date accessed: 3 May 2020.
- 2 Russell Lord. '10 Years Gone.' *New Orleans Museum of Art*, 27 May 2015, <https://noma.org/ten-years-gone-brings-together-six-artists-whose-work-engages-with-the-broad-themes-of-time-memory-loss-and-transformation/>. Date accessed: 3 May 2020.