

In her reconfigurations of ideas and found materials,
Betty Goodwin transforms life into art

On May fifteenth of this year, Betty Goodwin had ample reason to rejoice. Her show of recent work at La Ferme du Buisson, the prestigious showcase for contemporary art in Noisiel, a suburb of Paris, was closing that very day and the reviews in the French press had been ecstatic. *Beaux Arts* magazine, for instance, hailed her as a major discovery, comparing her impact to that of Louise Bourgeois.

But Goodwin was in no mood to celebrate. She was spending the day, as she does most every day, in her Montreal studio. She had not read the reviews; as a matter of fact, she never reads anything written about her. Friends, though, had read the French notices and they have reported, she says, that “they’re O.K.” So much for that.

What she was really interested in that day — besides coping dutifully with an interviewer’s questions — were the reports of horrifying massacres coming in from Rwanda, and the two mixed-media works she was “struggling with.” For Goodwin, the connection between these events — carnage in Africa and works in progress — is by no means just a coincidence. “There are eruptions everywhere,” she says. “Everything is fragmenting.

Not that it does any good — Goya had no illusions about that — but art allows me to accept it. It’s my way of coping with the world.”

The works in progress in the studio involved making tricky juxtapositions of real objects with drawings done in her characteristically wispy style of figuration on large, loosely hung sheets of translucent paper. In one, part of the Metal Room series, a huge, cast-bronze pendulum hangs beside a drawing that is still in flux. At the moment, it is a floating human figure, but since Goodwin “draws” as much with erasers as with pencils and oilsticks, the figure might yet turn into something else: a bone perhaps, echoing the pendulum’s shape, or maybe two figures merging with each other like a spirit entering — or leaving — a body. Who knows? Goodwin does not yet, but she will; she’ll recognize it, she says, “when the image finally emerges.”

That may not be for a long time. It might happen only in the last few minutes before the work has to go to the framer’s or maybe even later than that: she has been known to draw on the glass when an exhibition is being hung. In the studio, Goodwin is an indefatigable worrier who “burrows” — her favourite

The Studio

text by Georges Bogardi | photography by Geoffrey James

expression — into the material till the result is right: not exactly beautiful perhaps, not in the conventional sense, but somehow undeniably truthful.

In the other work in front of her, from her *Nerves of Steel* series, the figure is not floating but appears, rather, to be pushing itself into the picture space, which at the moment is no more than a vaguely pinkish, purplish haze. Goodwin's recent manner has had a somewhat blanched, ethereal quality, so the amount of colour comes as a surprise. In fact, she explains, she usually starts with lots of reds and blues which are gradually erased as the work progresses. For now, the real problem is how to integrate the lead strips that spew from the figure's mouth. Should they hang below the drawing's edge, should they hang in front of the legs or appear to pass between them, through the crotch? And the legs: there are four sketched in right now, so is there a second body pushing the first, or should they all belong to one figure so that it — never he or she but a generic it — will look like it's pedalling for dear life? Or should some of the legs go? The number of decisions to be made is infinite. The fact that these works in progress pursue themes that have already been beautifully resolved in the French show does not ease Goodwin's disquiet. "I want to carry them further," she says. "I work in a spiral, starting on the outside and burrowing toward a...what? It's not conscious. What will come out, I don't know."

Goodwin's spirals, in fact, arch far and wide, crossing others, performing elaborate twists in time. Goodwin first became known, almost twenty years ago, for the *Tarpaulin* series — the large canvases that had begun their lives as coverings for trucks. Like the altered photographs she has often worked with since, these objects came to the studio already bearing a past of their own, biographies recounted in wrinkles and seams, blotches and faded areas, rusting grommets and hand-repaired tears. "They retain their own history," Goodwin said at the time, "to which I add my own history." Three years ago, prompted by the death of her friend Marcel Lemyre, she made another tarpaulin, *Passage for a Tall Thin Man*. It is one of the original twelve she had bought from a trucking supplier back in the 1970s, and the first to have a title other than a number. It hangs in her studio with the one still unused tarpaulin nearby, rolled up the way it came. That one, she says, "will be the last."

Is Betty Goodwin an expressionist? She can't say. She does not like to talk theory. She has given many interviews but these have a tone of dutiful professionalism about them; they are mostly about method, not self-revelation. Influences — Artaud, Beckett, Kafka — are mentioned in a brisk way, but not eulogized





or analyzed. There is an admirable matter-of-factness to Goodwin's attitude; she has never pretended to be an intellectual. "I think I have strange antennae," she has said. "I'm living in this world right at the moment. I don't know whether it's more available or whether it's me, but I can't pass a newsstand without getting an impact of some disaster." A realist then? Her words about living here and now, right at the moment, seem to argue for that, echoing Daumier's famous dictum, which became a rallying call to nineteenth-century Realists: "Il faut être de son temps."

Of course, it is not quite as simple as that. "Realism," Linda Nochlin writes in her magisterial book on the subject, "must appear in the Present Tense." Degas or Warhol celebrated the pleasures of daily existence with no thoughts of any metaphorical beyond. Daumier or Golub excoriate the follies of society, and their work has the immediacy of a newspaper's Op Ed page. Whatever their temperament, however jaundiced their reading of the human condition might be, realists feel at home in the world. They are rooted enough to presume that comment and criticism are inherently useful, that they might make a difference.

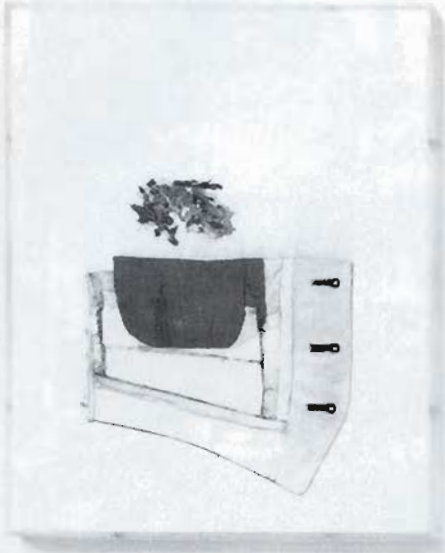
It is precisely this sense of rootedness that Goodwin's work refuses. The artist lives in this world, "right at the moment," but once this world — *this* world — has been filtered through her sensibility, it comes to seem like some alien land. The Steel Notes and Marker series of the late 1980s are like signposts planted across hostile terrain. Their titles, printed in red, warn of danger and disaster: "AN EPIDEMIC IS RAGING", "DEADLY OVERCROWDING", "BESTIALLY CONTRIVED WALLS", "KOMME KOMME KOMME." We are guided through a toxic zone by signs that read as if they were fractured translations of some Germanic message from the past. Many of these fragmented phrases do, in fact, come from Holocaust literature, from the books by Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel that Goodwin reads avidly.

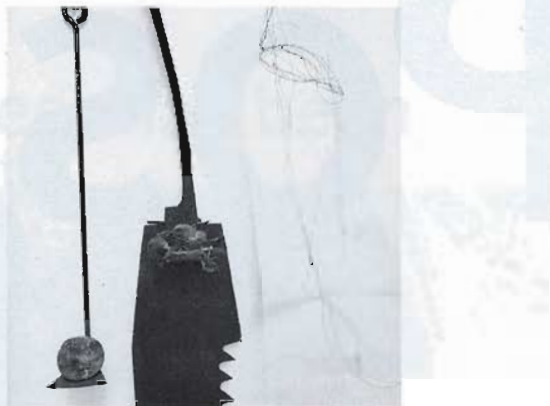
"Overnight the universe has lost its center and now in the morning it has any number of centers. Now any point in the universe may be taken as a center. Because, suddenly there's plenty of room." These are the words of Bertolt Brecht, chosen by Goodwin to serve as an epigraph to the catalogue of her 1987 touring retrospective. They depict what her own most compelling works do: a vast, lonely space through which beings move from point to point, with no guidelines or fixed destination. Bodies couple with each other — or are they breaking apart? In her recent Nerves series, the figures sprout tendrils that connect with the jumbled roots below them. Are they sinking into the earth or trying to break free? Her swimmers thrash and flail in the "water" which is just a wash of colour in the midst of the paper's infinite whiteness. There is no shore for them to reach, but they make the effort nevertheless.

This universe fraught with freedom, decision, responsibility, finitude, alienation and death is, of course, the existentialist's space. It is empty space but charged with options, and hence with guilt, a space Goodwin has depicted under many guises. One of the most memorable among them is









a curious work done in 1976 that she has only exhibited once, at Concordia University in Montreal in 1986. It has remained in Goodwin's studio ever since. *Pacing Fore "Sam"* is an enormous drawing, some three feet high and over thirty feet long, a graphite rubbing of the floor of the artist's old studio on Saint-Laurent Street. In a strip running along the rubbing's lower edge, Goodwin copied out a chunk — maybe three pages — of "Sam" Beckett's *Molloy*. Part of the text reads: "Now I am willing to believe, indeed I firmly believe, that other solutions to this problem might have been found, and indeed may still be found, no less sound, but much more elegant, than the one I shall now describe, if I can."

No critic's analysis of her work could capture as well as this the elusive obstinacy of Goodwin's style, that sense of nervous inadequacy coupled with the unremitting will to refine, redefine, propose one more variation on a theme. Media and styles are mixed in a promiscuous fever. Abstraction and figuration are forced on each other and then further complicated by written phrases. Photography is commingled with drawing, drawing with sculpture, sculpture with found objects. In this desperate game of hunting for meaning, boundaries are frantically crossed in every work. All points must be touched on, because one of them may yet turn out to be the centre.

In rare instances, such as the rubbing of the studio floor in *Pacing*, the artist comes to a rest. This is the most elemental work Goodwin has done. With a technique of ancient simplicity — for once, it's *one* technique — she dispenses with style altogether, and maybe with "art" as well. In an atavistic activity, she demarcates her territory, working literally where she lives. We are left to contemplate the sheer, physical effort that has gone into producing this vast field of shimmering graphite. For once, there is a transference of responsibility: it is we, the viewers, who are asked to accept that all this effort has been expended for our delectation. This is also one of the rare works of which Goodwin has made only one version.

Otherwise, her revisions are endless. "I am going back now to my old notebooks," she says. New spirals will soon intersect with old ones and who knows what hybrids will sprout? By definition, existentialist art can never be brought to closure. ■