

Adding History: The Art of Betty Goodwin

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Adding History: The Art of Betty Goodwin

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Betty Goodwin,
In Berlin, a Triptych:
The Beginning of the
Fourth Part, 1982.
MMFA. Photo:
courtesy of the artist.

Betty Goodwin's work is anchored in the figurative and the representational, yet the subjects retain some aspect of the enigmatic and elusive. The mystery of her work resides in her ability to liberate conventions from their traditional confines. This is worked out metaphorically on two levels. The first, is the artist's direct, immediate and personal concerns. The second, contextualizes the artist's personal interests within a reflection of some kind of global or communal concern. Both are manifested in the artist's technique and choice of subject matter, and have been present throughout her entire career of art making. Goodwin acknowledged this herself when she said in a 1995 interview, "I like it when a work operates on different levels."¹

Betty Goodwin's ability to subvert and expand upon the traditional artistic practice of representational drawing led to her receiving the first Harold Town Prize for Drawing (November 1998). Coinciding with this award were openings of exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and at the Sable-Castelli Gallery, her Toronto dealer. The major exhibition at the AGO celebrated the artist's 1996 donation to the Gallery of more than 150 of her works. Culled from this donation, *The Art of Betty Goodwin*, gave viewers the opportunity to trace the various crossover elements in 71 drawings, prints and sculptures representing the scope of Goodwin's career. Indeed, this exhibition allowed viewers to discover for themselves the many and varied levels of Goodwin's work.

The most "literally" figurative and representational of Goodwin's work occurred early in her career. Paintings and prints from this period recall the social realist and surrealist traditions. For example, *Worrybird* (1963), an etching on paper,

initially reminds the viewer of Chagall. However, Chagall's whimsical world of floating fiddlers, smiling cows and kissing lovers is rendered in resonant blues, warm pinks, and rich yellows. It is bathed in nostalgia and represents the longing for simpler times and for ways of life which no longer exist. In *Worrybird*, a dark and menacing crow or raven perches atop a person's head. The background is indeterminate, consisting of scratches, smudges, ghost images and dark holes. It recalls the words of Sylvia Path, who wrote in the poem, *Edge* (1963): "Her blacks crackle and drag." The mood created is one of paranoia, fear, and anxiety. The main figure is breaking apart, dissolving into the cacophony of gritty black scratches which surround him/her. Symbolically, it represents how social ills and personal demons can overwhelm and even incapacitate the individual.

A slightly later work, an untitled drawing from 1964, depicts the floating figures which have since become Goodwin's trademark. Three genderless,

schematically drawn figures float upon the surface of the paper. And while there is a certain grace to the composition of the drawing, the figures intentionally lack beauty. There is nothing to guide the viewer as to what the figures are about. Are they emerging from blackness? Is this work referencing death or life? In trying to read the images, the viewer becomes like the figures—a little lost, drifting, trying to make sense of uncomfortable surroundings. As such, one can read much—or little—into the significance of the images.

The lack of specificity in Goodwin's figures allowed her to employ them for a myriad purposes over the next three decades. Yet, regardless (or in spite) of how abstract her work became, the figurative reference remained. Goodwin's deliberate obfuscation of the abstract figure is integral to the work and her faceless figures became the viewers' everyman. Goodwin explored metaphoric abstraction even further, when she began using clothing to represent the body. This, too, became one of the subjective mainstays of her art making as she uses the images of gloves and vests in a multitude of ways.

Vest No. 1 (1969) is a soft ground etching. The etching is monochromatic—which is no surprise, for Goodwin says: "I really think mostly in black and white... I think of [colour] as an element that's needed. I'll realize that something is missing—sometimes it's colour, sometimes it's something else..."² This particular vest is rendered in such a way that it appears diaphanous. It is suspended in a non-setting, floating starkly in space. The vest is worn and creased. The artist has managed, through her technique, to translate the fabric of the vest, the very *materiality* of the object, into the art object. As such, the vest retains its three-dimensionality while being reproduced in a two-dimensional form. It also stands as a personal record of the individual who wore it. It is a particular, singular object, although imbued with a greater significance through its anonymity via representation. Certain elements of the composition were already present in the object; the artist had to work with them and to integrate her work around them. These elements were the creases, the worn areas of the garment. Goodwin respects their integrity and builds her composition around them. That mix of the deliberate with the simply causal contributes significantly to the simple elegance found in most of Goodwin's work.

Goodwin's father was involved with the garment trade, and the artist acknowledges an autobiographical reference in her vest works, albeit one unconsciously started. Yet while the vest references her

father and his life's work, it also stands for workers generally, and thus retains its grounding in social realist thematic concerns. Goodwin feels that it is impossible for her to not deal with the implications of our global society in her work. In fact, she believes that it is imperative to her role as an artist, that she act as witness to what is going on in the world. These concerns permeate her work, and the mood created by the artist is a dark one. Thus the vest becomes an artifact. A tangible record of the daily existence of one individual, it remains nonetheless a representation of the invisible labours of many. In so doing, Goodwin is able to give both dignity to the endeavours of a solitary labourer and a face to the nameless masses.

The vest manifested itself in Goodwin's work in a number of scenarios. So totemic did it become that the artist thrice buried vests encased in Plexiglas in the earth, to rid herself of her "obsession" with them. Yet they continued to appear. The act of "burying" became a part of Goodwin's oeuvre as well.

In *Parcel/Vest*, a work from 1972, the vest is folded back upon itself a number of times until it becomes a rectangular package. Resembling brown wrapping paper smeared with black ink, this package is tightly bound. Metaphorically, it shows how people become constrained by their work, their identity tied to what they do in the act of "creating". Who we are as people is tied inexorably with what we do. For better or worse, society is permeated with conventions and stereotypes about people: the lawyer, the housewife, the factory worker, et al... We then impose our collective expectations on these roles, and are surprised when people do not live up to them, or when they do. In her choice of title, and in display, Goodwin also comments on societal perceptions of individuals, i.e., what would a vest signify about the individual who wears it?

Technically, with its use of folds and layering, this work looks forward to her tarpaulin series. Metaphorically, the vest represents a person's skin; her tarpaulins did the same. Goodwin began her tarpaulin series in the mid-1970s. She observed that many trucks were covered with a canvas tarpaulin (rather than the hardcover that is common today.) She saw congruencies between the covering over the truck and its contents and the skin covering people and *their* contents. Goodwin folded, gessoed, stitched, painted and otherwise altered these tarpaulins. Thus, regardless of their abstract or (at first glance) non-objective aspect, these works, too, are firmly linked to the human body, and to Goodwin's continued use and exploration of the body in her art.

Significantly, these pieces of canvas were old, having been used prior to Goodwin's transforming them into art pieces. Like the vests, they had their own histories and physical appearance, which were incorporated and added to by the artist. The strips of canvas have gone through one lifetime, and now, as art objects, they have a second existence. History has been added to.

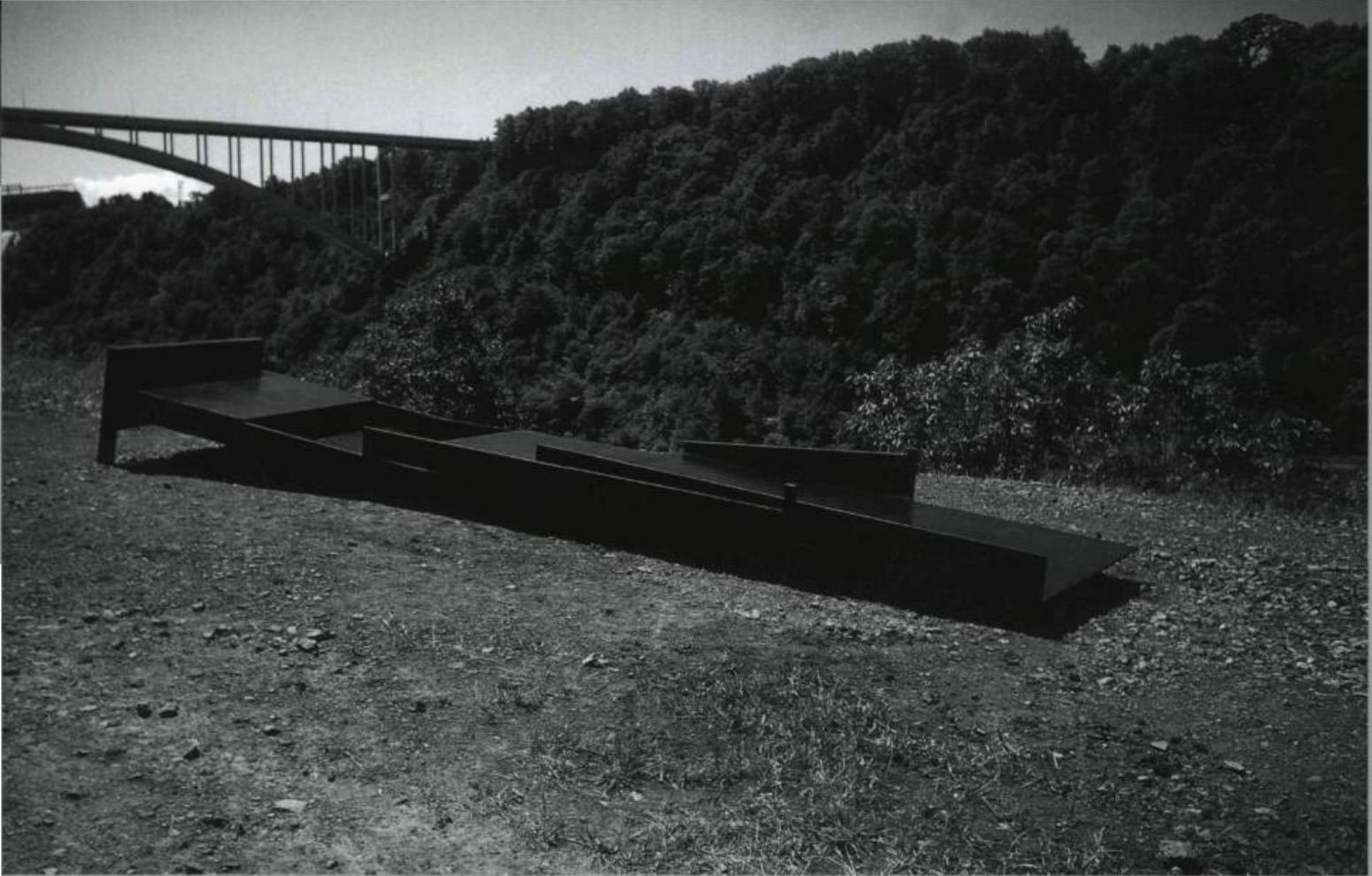
This addition to history that we see in Goodwin's work, this reclamation of objects and their transformation into something else, echoes the very cycle of life itself. *Untitled Nerves No. 1* (1993) depicts an ambiguous, possibly shrouded figure lying on the ground. Roots, carved and scratched out of the coloured surface of the painting, act as ties and as passageways between the figure and the earth. It is a heavy, silent, immutable work. Goodwin doesn't glorify or sentimentalize her subject. It is presented to the viewer as a fact, incontrovertible, and unchangeable: life, death, return to earth, rebirth, and the cycle begins again. There is a harmony between Goodwin's philosophy and her chosen avocation.

As is evident in her tarpaulin and vest series, Goodwin also blurs the lines between artistic practices such as painting and sculpture. Vest "paintings", with their repeated layers of paint, for example, take on the look of bas-reliefs, while the repeated foldings and bindings of the tarpaulins retain the impact of the artist's hand in their constructs. Yet, conversely, her formal sculptures have a literal linearity that is not evident in her drawings and paintings.

Goodwin's "pure" sculptures reflect the artist's ongoing concern with line as the primary element in her artistic constructions. *Steel Room with Two Chutes* (1994)

Betty Goodwin, *Passage in a Red Field*, 1980.
Photo: courtesy of the artist.





Betty Goodwin, *River Piece*, 1978. Welded mild steel. Artpark, Lewiston, N.Y. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

is sparsely elegant, with its delicate sense of line and design. Goodwin's compulsion towards integrating artistic elements is shown in her making the stand for the sculptural object an element of the whole work rather than merely a supporting adjunct. Constructed of steel, oil, wax and metal, *Steel Room*... consists of a small metal box standing on delicate metal legs, approximately four feet tall. There are windows in the room which offer the viewer an obstructed view of the interior space. Two chutes descend from the box, seemingly going nowhere and serving no practical purpose. Their inclusion however, is visually important to the success of the piece. They engage the viewer and keep the sculpture from seeming cold and severe.

The sculptures are also potently laced with metaphoric references. For example, an earlier sculpture titled *River Piece* (1978) was a site-specific work created for the Artpark in Lewiston, New York, which overlooks the Niagara River. We can see from related drawings that Goodwin was initially working with a literal bed image. Yet the finished piece is much more poetic and evocative. Linear in form, the completed sculpture consists of layers of metal which overlap one another. The sculpture gives the illusion that it could almost be compressed and folded up into itself. However it is monumental in scale and structure. A "headboard" seems to contain the compartment from which the sectional pieces emerge. Like a river, they gracefully, sinuously and subtly curve out-

wards, rather than emerging in a straight line in apparent contradiction to the materials and the individual components. Further, the fragmentary construction of the sculpture mimics the gravel and rocks which are part of the landscape in which it is situated. The bed evokes not only a sense of a natural river, but ties in with Goodwin's overall concerns regarding the symbiotic and cyclical relationship between life and death, waking and dreaming, swimming and drowning.

Other sculptures by Goodwin seem to be drawings which have been translated into another form. Works such as *In Berlin, a Triptych: The Beginning of the Fourth Part* (1982) present the viewer with wedges and cylinders arranged into an enigmatic patterning. Yet one wonders for what purpose—for surely, as the artist has told us in her title, the construction is superfluous. A triptych needs no fourth part. Likewise, the sculpture, with its elaborate construction defies the viewer to discern its intent.

Goodwin's installations, while not sculptures proper, are particularly strong. *The Mentana Street Project* (1979) deals with space, movement and line. She has liberated her concerns from sculptural and two-dimensional confines and translated her interests into something which the viewer can literally enter. In constructing her corridor, Goodwin again challenges the viewer's sense of perception and order. One must reject one's expectations and preconceptions in order to experience the sensation of the rearranged order.

Similar installations, such as the *Clark Street Project* and *Passage in a Red Field*, now exist only in photographs, but have been an important influence on a younger generation of artists. They also exemplify how the artist transcends the restrictions of the medium, in turn allowing her to liberate the subject matter.

Goodwin could be described as a serial iconographer. When she finds an image or metaphor that speaks to her she stays true to it, wringing every possible nuance she can from it. She constructs her art with a delicate finesse which belies her sureness of depiction, whether producing sculpture, painting or installations. And constantly permeating her work is a concern with the individual, and his or her place amid the greater world. She explores issues which concern all—birth, death, existence and meaning. Thus, no matter how elusive the subject of her work, the viewer is able to glean some measure of recognition and relevance. Refusing to give in to pat answers or maudlin excesses, Goodwin's economy of presentation reinforces the strong content of her art. *The Art of Betty Goodwin* was held at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto). It was co-curated by Jessica Bradley (Curator, Contemporary Art, AGO) and Matthew Teitelbaum (Director, AGO). ■

Notes:

1. *A Blood Stream of Images: An Interview with Betty Goodwin* (Border Crossings, Fall 1995), p. 44.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 50.