Figuration On the Dark Side
Betty Goodwin
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James D. Campbell
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FIGURATION ON THE DARK SIDE:
BETTY GOODWIN

Betty Goodwin's recent exhibition cum installation marked an auspicious beginning for that gallery - and for the new Montreal gallery-going season.

Few of her peers have been so consistently adept at recognizing and visualizing the dark aspects of the human personality as present and real. In this show, Goodwin assumes in her work. That the "shadow" is a moral problem and one she has sought to pose in a highly dramatic but entirely unaffected fashion in her figuration has gone largely unnoticed.

It is a truism, perhaps, that consciousness of - much less attempting to depict - the dark side of the human personality requires considerable moral effort. Few critics have acknowledged the extreme moral stance Goodwin assumes in her work. That the "shadow" is a moral problem and one she has sought to pose in a highly dramatic but entirely unaffected fashion in her figuration has gone largely unnoticed.

The crux of the drawings on view here - and in some significant way their starting-point - is a preoccupation with the human body and its gestures. Ordinary poses take on a hieratic intensity that never becomes banal. The deeply-felt humanity of her images is always attested to - even when the lived-body

James D. Campbell is a writer and critic in Montreal. His most recent monograph was entitled John Heward; his book on David Rabinowitch will appear shortly.

2. En réalité, après les vague successives de l'expérimental, de l'underground, du cinéma "autre", etc., il faudrait plutôt parler aujourd'hui d'un cinéma différen...
takes on the limbs of a tortured beast. Anthropomorphic images are always rendered more achingly human through the depiction of some peculiarly human expression or gesture - usually one of pain.

This is not to say her moral stance is not also, one suspects, a psychotherapeutic measure for the artist herself: a deliberate attempt to achieve in her mark-making a kind of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering. Suffering is, of course the latent theme of the work. No contemporaneous artist is as gifted at embodying pain in figuration: with such terrifying facility - but always with an intimacy that leads the sensitive viewer into an empathic compact with the work.

Goodwin's visualization of the dark side of human nature has an ineluctably emotional cast and a somewhat obsessive quality that only heightens its dramatic ethos. She reminds us that, as Jung said, emotion is not an activity of the individual but something that happens to her.

This figuration is concerned with the lower levels of the personality, riven with and actuated by uncontrollable emotions and behaviour that is wholly primitivistic in nature. These figures, one suspects, are not only passive victims of their effects; but incapable of moral judgment or victimized by its absence in others.

I was always reminded of that amazing passage at the end of Proust's Remembrance of Things Past when I viewed these works, apropos 'the injuries that human bodies do to those who love them'. Goodwin tries to capture those aspects of the Shadow that cause such injury as they resist any moral control and subconscious consciousness itself, plunging the subject into a chaos of uncontrolled desire.

Intense pain, harrowingly conveyed as a fundamental truth of lived-experience, pervades Goodwin's figuration. Despite a curious facility that has crept into some of her figuration - paradoxically as she attempts to better some her representational skills - which renders more problematic the communication of suffering rather than intensifying it, two of the works in the group entitled How Long Does It Take Any One Voice to Reach Another (1985-86) are amongst the most compelling she has ever executed.

But it should be pointed out that the significance of this show in the history of the work lies in its blurring of the distinction between an exhibition of drawings proper and an installation.

In the main room, one wall is covered with nine overwhelmingly vertical aluminum panels - a new medium for Goodwin and one heavily gessoed - on which she renders a dramatic 'shadow-play', carrying to its highest pitch the theme of suffering and injury, vulnerability and violence that has always been operative in her work, and involving the viewer in its very enactment.

Black shadow shapes beseech helpless figures who desperately confront them and seek to cast them off. But, it is implied, they are Siamese twins, the terrorized figures the vessel of their shadow's manifestation. This is a demonic struggle, a Dark Carnival of the soul, and has singular impact as such. A portent of this was seen at the Aurora Borealis exhibition last year, but here it is realized on a larger scale and in more depth.

Single figure drawings occupy three of four sides of a central structural pillar in the gallery. They hearken back, as individual figures, to antecedent works. (One depicting a fragile figure in a foetal posture, is especially convincing.)

These frozen figures seem to be floating in some dreamlike space, a substance less like the water it at first seems than the externalized unconscious of their creator: oceanic, all-encompassing... a medium ideally suited to serve as a context for the rendering of a body... in time as well as this problematic space. But it is a medium that belies its appearance for it is one redolent of hazard.

Colour is used with what has become a characteristic eloquence and restraint that indicates the artist's concern that it only be used when and if it can meaningfully add to or enhance the work. The reddish, watery translucence of the field often reminds us of amniotic fluid or blood, the field a womb or a coffin. So colour is not an end in itself but a means of proceeding into the work and nurturing it towards its gestation. These works symbolize the birth of a neuma that is manifest by virtue of Goodwin's clarity of intention, and one might add that the image of the artist conceiving of and considering the work, seeking a way of ingressing through trauma into the essential structure of her own intentional life, is very apparent here, as the processual marks left on the field confirm.

The body seems so vulnerable amidst the violence and dynamism of the context in which it finds itself, leaving a pattern of traces and marks in its wake - and so always affects its context - as it negotiates its passage through it. This delineation of passage is more than a process of differentiation, but a very touchstone of our humanness. In a world fraught with hazard, weary of sense, the body strives to locate itself by virtue of its own idealized poses, frozen for an instant, suspended in time, as it were, between pole and tropic.

In the suspended poses of swimmers, lifeguards and divers, Goodwin disclosed for us - with considerable personal integrity - a unique and hypnotic vocabulary of images that at one bewitch us on an aesthetic level with a fine rendering of contour as drawing and also touch our emotive selves by virtue of their beguiling intimacy. In the drawings exhibited here, Goodwin moved beyond this stock repertory of compelling poses, adopting a more extreme moral stance and revealing a new vocabulary emphasizing the centrality of the Shadow. This demonstrates she is still in a continuing period of great creative ferment.

Few shows nowadays continue to haunt us after we have left the gallery. In Goodwin's case we are haunted by a question: From what caesura of the heart have these blood-stained wraiths seeped forth?

That an answer continues to elude us, that the question should be asked at all, proves just how utterly necessary Goodwin's work is.

1. Betty GOODWIN
   Do You Know How Long It Takes For Any One Voice to Reach Another, 1986.
   Montréal, Collection particulière.

2. Carbone, 1986
   Installation à la Galerie René Blouin.
   (Photos Brian Marrott, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal)