Figuration On the Dark Side
Betty Goodwin
Galerie René Blouin, of Montreal, from September 27 to November 1, 1986

James D. Campbell
James D. CAMPBELL

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 — arguably her strongest to date — this “shadow-self” is given full play.

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.

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
tries to capture those aspects of the Shadow that cause
tonomous consciousness itself, plunging the subject into a
embodying pain in figuration with such terrifying
survive our humanness. In a world fraught with hazard,
spirit translucence of the field often reminds us of am-
versary and violence that has always been operative
 delegates more problematic the communication of suffering
flow or blood, the field a womb or coffin. So colour is not an end in itself but a means of proceeding
munity for Goodwin and one heavily gessoed
mediocre struggle, a Dark Carnival of the soul, and has singular impact as such. A portent of this was
inability to locate itself by
 guided by art, leaving a pattern of traces and marks in its wake –
and so always affects its context – as it negotiates its
suspended between pole and tropic.
hat is to be pointed out that the significance of
sung to the limbs of a tortured beast. Anthropo-
morphic 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. She reminds us of Jung’s assertion that, as Jung
said, emotion is not an activity of the individual but something that
happens to him.
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 subsume 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 flaccidity that has crept into
some of her figuration – paradoxically as she attempts to
better hone 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, vulner-
bility 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 terror-
ized 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
the 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 water it is 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 character-
stic eloquence and restraint that indicates the artist’s
concern that it only be used when and if it can mean-
ingfully add to or enhance the work. The reddish, wa-
tery translucence of the field often reminds us of am-
niotic fluid or blood, the field a womb or 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 new form that is
manifest by virtue of Goodwin’s clarity of intention,
and one might add that the image of the artist con-
ceiving of and consciously intending the work, seeking
a way of ingress 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 once 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 nowaday 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 ques-
tion 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.

(Photos Brian Merrett, Musée des Beaux-
Arts de Montréal)