

ETC



Hope, Abjection, Want: Betty Goodwin

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Number 8, Summer 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36435ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, J. D. (1989). Review of [Hope, Abjection, Want: Betty Goodwin]. *ETC*, (8), 64–65.

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Betty Goodwin, *Room*, 1988. Steel, pastel and wax on metal;
169 x 47,5 x 40,5 cm (left); 169 x 54 x 40,5 cm, (right).
Photo : Louis Lussier

Betty Goodwin, galerie René Blouin,
March 25 to April 22, 1989 —

"There is nothing like the abjection of self
to show that all abjection is in fact recognition
of the want on which any being, meaning,
language or desire is founded."

Julia Kristeva

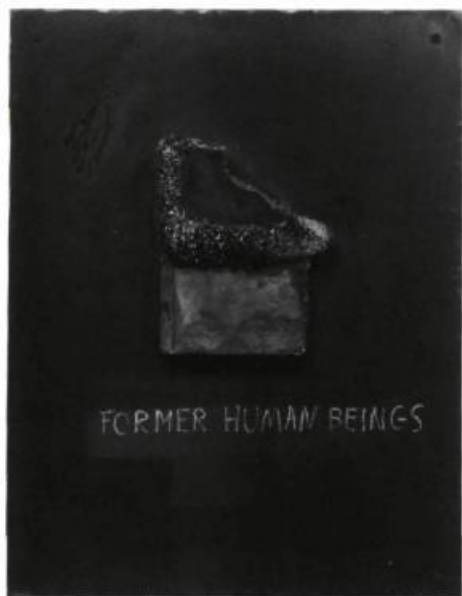
The tremulous bodies in Betty Goodwin's current drawings seem to occupy an oppressive space, pinioned between originary Desire and the abysses of their own displacement, in this night land where the flesh takes on a terrifying facticity, in its longing for an Other, in its pain or in its abjection, in its corporeal being, or in the litany of absences with which it all too often falls into step and disappears.

Swathed in the blackness of a shroud, laid down into a wash background redolent of blood and darkness, these seated figures seem cramped, their postures distorted in this claustrophobic space that seems like a vertical crawlspace or an upended coffin. The chairs on which they sit seem to hem them in, and become less

like furniture than extensions of their own flesh, undergoing some Kafka-esque metamorphosis; the legs and back of the chair become a sort of Cabalistic dead shell in which the living flesh is imprisoned yet omnipresent.

Goodwin's recent work exhibited here arguably brings to the highest pitch thus far this oeuvre's still-ongoing invocation of human flesh in all its specificity; flesh of self and flesh of Other; flesh as magnet for desire, desecration, dissolution and death. Flesh *qua* flesh. Her tenderness has never been as poignant; her compassion has never been so moving. The treatment of the tremulous private body, like a sign inscribed in its own abjection, is traced in its specific, vulnerable trajectory in time, a trajectory that runs the gamut from the anguish of transfiguration to the apogee of felt transcendence. It has never been so intense as now. Or as knowing. The body, once regressed, becomes a real transcendency.

The *Steel Notes* in this exhibition mark a real formal breakthrough for Goodwin. Small steel wall



Betty Goodwin, *Steel Notes (Former Human Beings)*, 1988-89.
Wax, pastel, ferrite and steel filings on metal; 52 x 40 cm.
Photo : Louis Lussier



Betty Goodwin, *Steel Notes (Komme Komme Komme)*, 1988-89.
Wax, pastel, ferrite, steel filings, steel on metal; 57 x 43 cm.
Photo : Louis Lussier

reliefs, they are no less adept at invoking the flesh and have an explicitly fetishistic aura; they remind us not only of the reliquary statues, the so-called *nkisi nkonde* (the *fétiches à clous*) of the Congolese secret societies — with their nails wired close to the magnets, the tortuous tracks of filings resembling splintered teeth or folds of flesh, magnets like the stuffed reliquary in which the magical, life-enhancing medicines are close-packed — but also of grave markers specific to a technological space. More importantly, the reliefs allude to forsaken bodies; oppressed by space and ejaculated beyond time. Tablets of weathered surrogate flesh, they tremble between the wall and a hard place, and demonstrate that the body is never a *tabula rasa* but an elaborate inside and an outside upon which are inscribed all the significations and torments of time.

The *Steel Notes* are literally energized by the magnets that attach to their mid-drifts like Siamese twins. Only the most violent displacement can pull them off, such is the strength of their magnetic charge, redolent of life-energy, the unnatural closeness a signpost of subjection and abjection, and erotic cohesion.

The *Steel Notes* seem a natural outgrowth of this corpus; they are not the radical departure they at first appear. The scratched lettering, as if gouged into the steel plate with the fingernails, reminds us of the scratches and fugue iconographic elements that appeared in the *Tombeau de René Crevel* proofs of 1979. Here is the physicalisation of the depth-structures in those works; here is steel plate transformed into flesh, the found patina becomes a cloak that weighs heavily on that flesh, the scratched marks inscribed on the abject body.

The *Markers* are twin plates affixed to tall stalks of iron, the haunting textuality confirming our suspicion that they are truly depth-markers of the unconscious, drawing us inexorably towards absence, but also life-buoys for the plumbing of depths that still remain, in modernity, unnameable. Yet they are a tribute to the living, rather than the living dead, for even as they invoke our several deaths and “the fever that is raging” in the blood, in the sensuous body, in the fire-storms of

modernity, they register a devout sense of hope, an implicit commitment to humanism that sounds a grace note amidst rumours of ruination and woe.

Goodwin has also executed a site-specific work in the smaller room of Blouin’s gallery. Starkly entitled *Room*, it is comprised of two steel houses or rooms on stilts. From the side of each “room” project pipes which are twisted and convoluted, or which reach straight to the floor. The pipes become the esophagi of the rooms, from which the sound of no larynx issues. Peering through the slotted door of the rooms we glimpse within the oppressive blackness the hole where the pipe begins, but no light escapes it. There is only silence where words are suggested; only darkness where no light is allowed to shine. The rooms seem to indicate a discourse on alterity; the relation of self and Other. Each room comes to resemble a being in its own right. Indeed, it occurs to us that the rooms share a curious dialogue for objects which seemed so muted.

So this work gives rise to a certain hopefulness rather than overtures of a totalizing closure. With the realization that these shadowy forms, these steel reliefs, these darkened rooms are really metaphors for our own status as carnal subjects, we grow aware that they like our own *doppelgangers* or doubles, summoned up from another place, another time, our own most private bodies invoked; they bear witness to our own wounds and our worst intrapsychic traumas; they become touchstones for our own embodiment.

The double of the observer is bound to one in empathic complicity, that shared common sense of the corporeal subjectivity in its very specificity, as such a fragile, death-bound thing, a *cogito* trembling on the brink of its own mortality. The dark night of the soul yields slowly to the dawning of new hope, these reliefs, structures and drawings all imbricated with the traces of a subject who triumphs over all adversity, who hopes against hope, and paradoxically finds transcendence — or, at the very least, the fruit of reconciliation and relief — after or through immense suffering.

James D. Campbell