

Betty Goodwin's Practice of Art



Galerie René Blouin

Betty Goodwin, long considered one of Canada's more original and forceful contemporary artists, just keeps getting better. Rather than relying on an easy, complacent route and repeating work that has won her lavish praise in the past, Goodwin suddenly plunges into startlingly new directions. This kind of relentless risk-taking is a sure sign of a great — not just good — artist.

Goodwin is taken aback at the very notion of a temptation to rest on past laurels and carry

Figure and chair (1988). For Goodwin, "drawing is the most unalienated medium."

on with familiar work. Such an idea is utterly foreign to her thinking, for her art is all about stretching further and reaching deeper into the darker aspects of the human condition. "I'm usually a great burrower," says Goodwin. "I try — I hope I try — to get the essence of something. But I think when you reach some-

thing, you just always want to go further.... And every time you have an exhibition, you want to push forward."

Goodwin's best work emerged in the late sixties with her series of etchings of vests (1969-72) produced by making impressions on copper plates of actual, worn vests. These works suggested the presence of a human form through the allusion to movement. Other articles, such as bird nests, gloves and other pieces of clothing, were also incorporated into the series.

Although Goodwin has made collages, assemblages, sculptures and installations it is her drawings that have made her famous. For her, "drawing is the simplest way of establishing a picture vocabulary because it is an instant, personal declaration of what is important and what is not. Drawing is the most unalienated medium. It is private because it doesn't have an audience in mind — just the artist's expression."

Principal in her work of the late 1970s and early 1980s was the theme of "passage." While many have regarded her work from this period as more abstract and geometric, Goodwin insists that she has never been concerned with abstraction.

In 1982, Goodwin began her Swimmers series — exceptionally large drawings executed on translucent paper that the artist likens to skin and water. This series seemed to represent a radical departure for the artist, a more figurative one that used the gestures of human body. These works also combined materials such as oil, oil pastel, charcoal and graphite. As her point of

departure, she often used media images and photographs of people. And in the process of translating these to paper, she gradually erased the features that would identify her figures — a procedure she has maintained to this day.

Goodwin's Steel Notes series was Canada's entry in the XXth São Paulo International Biennial in 1989. France Morin, Canadian Commissioner to the Biennial, had to make the timely decision and chose one single artist to represent Canada. Said Morin, "In a world where human pain and suffering is reported daily, Betty Goodwin's work is a soft, steady voice about our vulnerability as living beings, as well as an agitated warning against the unmitigated violence we do to each other and to ourselves." For Morin, it is Goodwin's deep respect for human life so poignantly conveyed in her work that brings us into contact with our own frailty and confirms the pressing need to cherish and foster our humane spirit.

That humane spirit is most evident in her schedule for 1990. She participated in a show at the Schneider Museum of Art in Oregon in the United States for the end of world hunger and in a show entitled "Goya to Beijing" at the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, marking the anniversary of the massacre in Tienanmen Square. It will begin a world tour next year and will go to China when that country has a democratic government. Betty Goodwin's latest exhibition, which opened on September 1, is a one-woman show at the Edmonton Art Gallery whose theme is the use of steel. ♦