

# The Industry of Motherhood: Spring Hurlbut's "L'ascension" and Julia Margaret Cameron's Wings

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Producing Women  
Ces femmes qui produisent ...

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## Article abstract

Les rapports entre le travail, la maternité et la reproduction trouvent des expressions remarquablement diversifiées dans la production de l'artiste canadienne contemporaine Spring Hurlbut et de la photographe anglaise du XIXe siècle Julia Margaret Cameron. Dans cette étude, j'essayerai de montrer comment le travail des deux artistes se retrouve à l'intersection du poétique et du politique. Contrairement aux artefacts d'Hurlbut, les images de Cameron sont des lieux d'inscription de sa propre créativité artistique au-delà des normes particulières de la féminité de la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle. La photographe a choisi de résister au style pictorialiste alors en vogue, et aussi de s'opposer à l'idéal de la classe moyenne victorienne représenté par « l'ange à la maison ». Sa production n'échappe pourtant pas à son moment historique et elle n'essaie même pas de le faire. Issues de temporalités fort différentes, Cameron et Hurlbut se seront toutes deux intéressées à définir conceptuellement la maternité dans leur art, la déconstruisant et reconstruisant pour mieux la représenter. Dans le travail d'Hurlbut, cette représentation revêt une forme artistique qui reste à la fois éphémère et douloureuse comme un mauvais souvenir. L'Ascension rappelle la profonde douleur des femmes de l'époque victorienne face à la mort de leurs enfants. Dans l'exposition, l'expérience du deuil est exacerbée par des références presque cliniques à ces instruments industriels d'aide à l'allaitement qui contribuèrent au haut pourcentage de la mortalité infantile. De leur côté, les images d'enfants ailés de Cameron expriment une grande tendresse pour l'enfant qui était – ou pourrait déjà être – perdu.

Les activités culturelles de Spring Hurlbut et Julia Margaret Cameron, lorsque considérées à l'aune du paradigme victorien de la féminité domestique de la classe moyenne, créent une tension entre les concepts de travail et de maternité. Cette étude tente d'explorer l'art d'une femme par celui d'une autre et crée un lien féministe entre des époques, tout en conservant une approche matérialiste.

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# The Industry of Motherhood: Spring Hurlbut's "L'ascension" and Julia Margaret Cameron's Wings

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## Résumé

Les rapports entre le travail, la maternité et la reproduction trouvent des expressions remarquablement diversifiées dans la production de l'artiste canadienne contemporaine Spring Hurlbut et de la photographe anglaise du XIXe siècle Julia Margaret Cameron. Dans cette étude, j'essaierai de montrer comment le travail des deux artistes se retrouve à l'intersection du poétique et du politique. Contrairement aux artéfacts d'Hurlbut, les images de Cameron sont des lieux d'inscription de sa propre créativité artistique au-delà des normes particulières de la féminité de la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle. La photographe a choisi de résister au style pictorialiste alors en vogue, et aussi de s'opposer à l'idéal de la classe moyenne victorienne représenté par « l'ange à la maison ». Sa production n'échappe pourtant pas à son moment historique et elle n'essaie même pas de le faire. Issues de temporalités fort différentes, Cameron et Hurlbut se seront toutes deux intéressées à définir conceptuellement la maternité dans leur art, la déconstruisant et

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In March 1996, Toronto artist Spring Hurlbut mounted an exhibition in Montreal at Concordia University's Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, entitled "*L'ascension*." The exhibition, curated by Karen Antaki, consisted of an installation (also titled *L'ascension*) of iron cots, cribs and bassinets, a series of framed assemblage works, and various groupings of objects manufactured in the Victorian era for use by mothers or child-care workers.<sup>1</sup> In her exhibition, Hurlbut juxtaposed a profound concern for the material conditions of western, industrial-era mothers with a hauntingly austere aesthetic sensibility. Each collection of objects reflected various class-specific aspects of child-rearing through the lens of loss: the loss of a child.

Spring Hurlbut's exhibition, "*L'ascension*," addresses the situation of nineteenth-century women in England, France and the colonies of both countries by entwining the theme of Industrial-era production with maternal reproduction. Her exhibition registers a series of lateral insertions: the insertion of nineteenth-century mass-produced items into the calm white space of a modernist gallery, and the insertion of a late twentieth-century, feminist consideration for the lived experiences of nineteenth-century women into the presentation of these items.

Rather than posit the "private," domestic and essentialized notion of nineteenth-century womanhood as Other to contemporary experiences of women, I should like to balance this investigation into Hurlbut's exhibition with the artistic production of a woman from the previous century. I will here adopt Hurlbut's exhibition as a lens through which to visit the work of nineteenth-century photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron

(1815–79), in order to weave together the discursive threads of maternity, labour and domesticity which historicize both women's creative work.

In the nineteenth century, and in the years before the outbreak of World War II, it was a common practice of the middle class to photograph the bodies of the recently deceased, particularly infants and children.<sup>2</sup> In *Le dernier sommeil*, one of the key pieces exhibited in "*L'ascension*," Hurlbut refers to this custom with her use of a framed deathbed portrait (fig. 1). Here the artist evokes photography as a votive gesture, intending the photograph as both a commemorative object and as a stand-in for the dead, a supplement for the absent child. This use of mimesis and its failure to "be" the object or person represented is underscored by Hurlbut's use of indexical representation, in which a mark or trace refers to that which is absent. The child in *Le dernier sommeil* is present indexically through the starkly empty crib positioned beneath the image. Image and crib function together to create a representation of the lost child. The vacant bed, in another layer of signification, refers to reproduction and regeneration through its veneer of beeswax. The scent of honey occasions manifold associations: the methodical industry of bees, the honey and mead of mythical paradises and afterworlds, and metaphors of renewal and interdependence.

The beeswax which embalms *Le dernier sommeil* is a significant reference within the exhibition. The bee, flying from flower to flower, is the agent of spring, fertilizing and feeding throughout its flight. The bee is both productive and vulnerable. Its best defence, the sting, is also its final defence. The bee dies with this

Figure 1. Spring Hurlbut, *Le dernier sommeil*, 1995. Installation, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal. Black-and-white photograph, metal Victorian crib, beeswax (Photo: Toby Maggs. Reproduced with the permission of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery).



gesture of self-preservation. "*L'ascension*," the title of the exhibition, suggests that the collection of objects bear the theme of ascension. Their obsolescence provides the objects with archaeological meaning. These objects, however, speak volumes through their precise arrangements and the implications of their titles. Hurlbut mediates the cast-iron bed frames, pristine glass nursing bottles and sterling silver nursing shields to emphasize the class divisions and gender issues which attended their production. Understood indexically, the objects signify women's labour in a culturally and historically specific period. Through this work, Hurlbut threads a delicate tension between her late-twentieth-century feminist sensibility and the Victorian construction of Woman and motherhood. This tension is both political and poetic, as I will attempt to demonstrate in this essay by using the work of nineteenth-century artist, Julia Margaret Cameron, as a theoretical foil for Hurlbut's exhibition.

In order to consider the implications of such an overlapping it is necessary to consider the relation between metaphors of [re]production as suggested by critical theorist, Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak, and to keep ready the ambiguous meaning of the word "poetic." The poetic, according to the *Collins English Dictionary*, is that which is characteristic of poetry. Poetry, according to the same dictionary, is that which manifests poetic qualities. As is characteristic of any scrutiny of language, the delineation of meaning fails, here looping back between noun and adjective, creating an equivocal space which I will appropriate for an action: the poetic act. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to suggest that the poetic act occurs with great frequency in artistic production where artists use an economy of means in order to make their representations, literal or otherwise. I would like further to suggest that, in relation to the art of Hurlbut and Cameron, the metaphors of transcendence apparent in their work are intimately linked to Spivak's discussion of metaphors of [re]production.

Closely following Spivak, I would argue that the female body is a paradigm of production, a fact glossed over by the terminology of capitalism. Labour, birth and reproduction are terms which have been etymologically appropriated, sanitized and sanctioned for masculinity, that is, made "public," palatable, visible. Spivak argues that the ethical force in Marxism derives from the idea of there being a fractured relationship between human beings and their work. Thus conceptualized, this relationship constitutes labour, property and worker as commodities, but is insufficient to describe the complex situation of a woman producing a child. Spivak writes,

The possession of a tangible place of production in the womb situates the woman as an agent in any theory of production ... [aspects of Marxist analysis are] inadequate because one fundamental human relationship to a product and labour is not taken into account.<sup>3</sup>

Spivak suggests that in women's experiences of pain, normality and productivity may be reconstructed.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of women's bodies as sites of production reconfigures notions of alienation and abnormality through pain, and is furthermore useful for reconsidering pain itself in feminist terms, for considering the experiences of women. It is also a step towards reading maternity as an active, productive, producing state. For this paper it is crucial, given the conflation of motherhood with womanhood typical of nineteenth-century discourses of gender, to refuse the category "Woman;" to accept instead the layering of indexical reference in "*L'ascension*." The beds and nursing aids offer not one, but multiple representations of womanhood and maternity, each considering the class and historical position of both their nineteenth-century users and contemporary viewers.

In the year 1863, in a small English village called Putney Heath, Julia Margaret Cameron's daughter gave her a camera as

a gift.<sup>5</sup> With great enthusiasm, the upper-class mother of five embarked upon an extremely successful career as a photographer.<sup>6</sup> Her production of images was contemporary with the objects in Hurlbut's exhibition. Using unorthodox techniques, Cameron encouraged the element of chance in her work, cherishing the blots, streaks and blurring which occurred across the surfaces of her portraits and mythological tableaux vivants.<sup>7</sup> For Cameron, photography only became high art through the balancing of her skill with the unexpected. These elements became the foundations of her photographic process. Unlike her peer, Oscar Rejlander, in his moralistic, allegorical, epic photcollage, *The Two Paths of Life* (1857), Cameron did not seek the seamless compositional and narrative paradigms of pictorialism for her images.<sup>8</sup> This intriguing decision meant that her method emphasized rather than softened the specks of dust which settled over the plates during exposure. Stains, blots, fingerprints and streaks, magnified through the collodion process, became compositional elements, adding texture and an ethereal mood to the work.

Cameron's work was also moralistic and allegorical; however, the use of "real" time in exposure technique and the acceptance of chance in the darkroom resulted in images that are deeply etched with mood and personality, in contrast to Rejlander's anonymous, pliable and cutout nudes. The trace of Cameron's "hand," furthermore, is apparent through her choice to leave intact that which critics called mistakes. She was not applauded for her choice. Highly popular as she was, critical acclaim eluded her, for this fascination with process outweighed a commitment to pristine results.<sup>9</sup> She steadfastly refused to retouch her prints. In the *Photographic Journal* of May 15, 1865, critics of her work responded to her technique by saying that they could not agree with popular sentiment in favour of her results. They were, they wrote, "convinced that she will herself adopt an entirely different mode of reproducing her poetic ideas when she has made herself acquainted with the capabilities of the art."<sup>10</sup>

Like Hurlbut's organization of artifacts in "*L'ascension*," the evidence of Cameron's aesthetics is on the surface of her work. Misty blurs, ghostly streaks and floating orbs become indexes of labours undertaken. The relations of labour, maternity and reproduction find markedly divergent expression in Hurlbut's and Cameron's work, but both operate as intersections of the poetic and the political. Unlike Hurlbut's artifacts, Cameron's images are inscriptions of her personal artistic creativity upon the normative surfaces of mid-to-late nineteenth-century femininity. She chose to be at odds with the pictorialist styles in vogue, and also to be at odds with the middle-class ideal of the "angel in the home." Her work, however, does not escape its historical moment, nor does it attempt to. Cameron relied on important male literary figures, such as Henry Wadsworth

Longfellow and Robert Browning, as subjects for her portrait photography, while women tended to appear as part of her romantic, Arthurian tableaux-vivants. These choices place her securely within the emerging cultural themes which found their canonized expression in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and later in the Bloomsbury Circle.

While she was not explicitly concerned with the biological and social modalities of motherhood, Cameron's body of work, none the less, may be read for its own, historically specific construction of femininity and, particularly, of maternity. Clearly, Hurlbut and Cameron's practices operate[d] in markedly different cultural circumstances. Hurlbut's feminist work has frequently sought to complicate the construction of "Woman" both in allegory and history.<sup>11</sup> Her production is articulated, as mine is, within the relative privilege of a white, anglophone and first-world subject position. Cameron, on the other hand, was a Victorian woman of sufficient means to support her "eccentricities," her artistic practice. She was unusual within her class and gender for her high-profile success as a photographer.<sup>12</sup> Her particular privileges were her level of access to a powerful cultural peerage, which elevated her own work by association, and her own financial status.

From these vastly different positions, Cameron and Hurlbut have both been concerned to address maternity conceptually in their art, thus to de- and reconstruct motherhood for the purpose of representation. In Hurlbut's work, this representation takes the form of art that is both ephemeral and yet painful like a memory. Hurlbut's "*L'ascension*" remembers the heavy losses which Victorian women suffered in the death of their children. This sense of loss is sharpened in the exhibition by the almost clinical references to how industrially produced nursing aids contributed to the high infant mortality rate. For Cameron's part, her images of winged children also communicate a sense of yearning for a child that has been – or may yet be – lost.

Cultural theorist, Carol Armstrong, has proposed that Cameron sought in her images to allegorize photography as a maternal endeavour, as

something altogether different from technical mastery; pertaining, rather, to the domestic, the incestuously familial and the feminine: as something like hysteria – the hysteria of the mother ... Over and over again she used the body of the child to allegorize that notion of photography.<sup>13</sup>

As Armstrong suggests, Cameron's many images of sleeping, winged and allegorized children can be read as fetishized metaphors for photography itself, their flesh an almost "perverse record of a fascination with the allure of childish bodies."<sup>14</sup>

Cameron's popularity and commercial success prompt me to suggest a further rationale for the fetishized infant body in

her work. Her "fascination with the allure of childish bodies" and her "[capitalization] on photography's facility, that of mass-production, to make her work as accessible as possible"<sup>15</sup> could be interpreted as a response to the infant mortality rate in England at the time of her artistic production. According to Pat Jalland, the death rate in England and Wales per 1000 live births under the first year of life was 154 in 1840, 148 in 1860, 153 in 1880, and 154 in 1900.<sup>16</sup> This rate was markedly lower, but still a great consideration, for the wealthier classes. As Jalland writes, "[t]he middle and upper classes benefited from better diet, sanitation, and living-conditions, but even they experienced the deaths of an unacceptably high proportion of their children."<sup>17</sup> For the working and lower-middle classes, the post-mortem photographic portrait offered a more affordable alternative to the traditional portrait in oils.<sup>18</sup> Given this widespread practice, it would seem that photography promised a form of alchemy to the bereaved parents. Providing a transformation of its subject into image, it allowed the dead child's preservation through representation.<sup>19</sup>

The technical and aesthetic parallels which link Cameron's images of living children to the deathbed portrait are striking. In each case, the child is arranged as though sleeping, and long exposure times were deployed in order to give arresting clarity to the photograph. I suggest that such representations symbolize both individual and collective grief over the phenomenon of high infant mortality. In Cameron's work, the memorializing function of photography, and its creed of the "real," is water stained. Her moves into an activity of representation beyond the capture of earthly life can be inferred through the following excerpt – her reaction to the death of a friend's baby:

... might we not all have seen that it had an angel's soul already blessed ... The mysteries of Heaven it had to teach unto you, thro' the memories of the sacred kisses, your hand and your foot can never forget ... [you have] yielded to God an unspotted Angel.<sup>20</sup>

Cameron's frequent use of the winged child as the subject of her images has been contextualized by the author of one monograph as the visual equivalent to the visceral fragility of Victorian babies (fig. 2).<sup>21</sup> Cameron, a nineteenth-century producer of photography who was absorbed with visual metaphors for transcendence, makes a point of historical reference to and resonance with the themes and objects in Spring Hurlbut's exhibition, "L'ascension."

The title of Hurlbut's exhibition engages the manifold meanings of the word, "ascension." To ascend is to move, to climb or go upward, to rise. Ascension is also to go towards a source, or beginning. And, appropriately for Hurlbut's exhibition and for the purposes of this study, an ascension can signify

Figure 2. Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Nestling Angel*, 1870. Black-and-white photograph (Reproduced with the permission of the Royal Photographic Society, Bath, England).

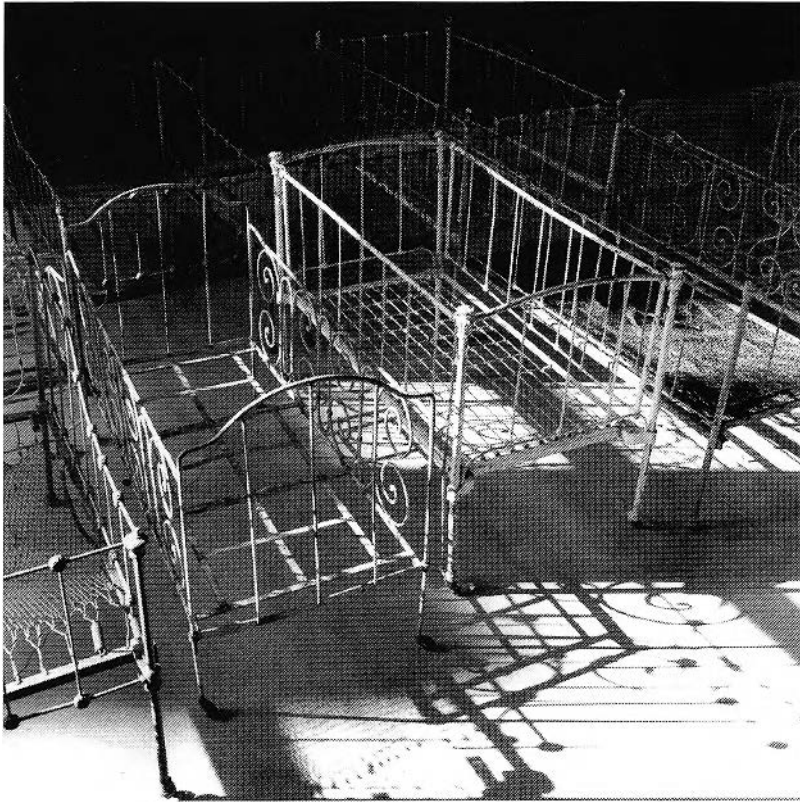


a mapping or tracing backwards in time. In earlier, related exhibitions, Hurlbut flooded the space with her collection of beds, allowing only limited passages for visitors' movements, and drawing their gazes downwards. In her 1995 installation, "La somnolence," for example, low-hanging lamps institutionalized the space while a recorded female voice, singing a lament for her lost child, evoked a sense of grief or despair (fig. 3).

By contrast, for the installation *L'ascension*, viewers are invited to walk less cautiously through the spaces of the gallery, finding children's cots scaling the walls, summoning our gazes upwards. The beds' skeletal forms interlace with the spindly shadows they cast on the gallery's white, vertical surfaces (fig. 8). Each bed suggests a fragile tension between presence and absence. Like old blankets that have been loved to shreds, the beds represent the human element within the anonymous, erosive processes of time. Their spidery shadows gently contrast with Hurlbut's almost museological presentation of late-nineteenth-century nursing aids. None the less, the exhibition's overriding themes of maternity, mortality and hope follow the spiralling lines of the beds' curves towards a suggestion of metamorphosis.

In Hurlbut's work there is a dialectic between a shadowy sense of loss and a persistence of hope. Hurlbut's art is fre-

Figure 3. Spring Hurlbut, *La somnolence*, 1995. Installation, Power Plant Gallery, Toronto. View showing Victorian bed frames for children and infants. Not shown in image: contemporary lamps and mouldings, sound recording (Photo: Arnaud Maggs. Reproduced with the permission of the artist).



quently a lament, but it is the fruit equally of historical investigation and a desire to visit the margins of well-rehearsed narratives. It is here, in these margins, that she inscribes her often oppositional and sometimes ambiguous critical challenges. The quality of hopefulness found in her production is linked to the often indeterminable outcome of a politicized act. Politicized acts, such as making art that has strong links to feminist, materialist critique, require hopefulness in order to function well. As Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of Hope*, “the attempt to do without hope ... is a frivolous illusion ... As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness.”<sup>22</sup>

Hurlbut’s politics and aesthetics are here woven together in her artistic analysis of an historical legacy. As I will elaborate below, she addresses the conditions which contributed to the high infant mortality rate in Western European countries, and refers to the complex discursive system in which working-class women were both disruptive to middle-class ideals of family and home, yet necessary to the efficient functioning of industrial production. By using visual art as her medium, Hurlbut refers to this scapegoating of women, to the way they were blamed for the “massacre of innocents.” She simultaneously evokes the degree to which Victorian society, and particularly contemporary women, grieved those deaths. Furthermore, her

careful selection and display imbues the objects with a sense of loss that hinges on industrial capitalism’s ethic of gain.

Thus the artist expresses her critical observations, but in such a way that opens an interpretive space for suggesting how this particular group (white, Western and largely Christian) of nineteenth-century women hoped for the transcendence of the souls of their children. The dialectic expressed in the exhibition, “*L’ascension*,” registers an unsteady synthesis of loss and hope. It is less a resolution than it is a hovering, temporary agreement of the unexpectedly related topoi of critique and poetry. There is here an overlapping of materialist feminist investigation and what I will name at this juncture the poetic act. An artist choosing to represent transcendence could easily revive notions of artist-as-shaman, or art-as-religion. To focus on those interpretive tools, however, would fail to do justice to Hurlbut’s, or, for that matter, Cameron’s work.

England’s official concern over high infant mortality rates was in full swing by the time that Julia Margaret Cameron was establishing herself as a photographer. Moralists, journalists and political commentators located the cause of the deaths of

babies and children in the bodies and actions of women – women who worked in the mills and factories that were the spawn of the Industrial Revolution. Statistics suggested that the mortality rate increased significantly when the mother was occupied with paid labour outside the home. Reverend J. Clay’s “Report on the Sanitary Condition of Preston[, England]” for 1832–43 states, “[T]he death rate for children under five years of age of gentlemen and professional men was ... 17%; among tradesmen 38% and among [mill] operatives 55% ...”<sup>23</sup>

If this example may be taken as representative, there clearly was a higher infant mortality rate among the working classes. Critics of women’s paid labour, however, rarely acknowledged key contributing factors to the mortality rates, such as overcrowded living conditions, poor nutrition, limited economic access to medical care; nor did they acknowledge the fundamental economic need for many women to earn a wage to support their families.

The censure of working mothers in Victorian England was communicated through a moralistic discourse. In 1863, Reverend Alexander Munro published “Our Unemployed Females – What May Best be done about Them?” in which he claimed,

men have powers that fit them for permanent toil: women for slighter and briefer efforts ... for maternal mildness and

the watchful offices of affection. All their organs are tender, yielding and sensitive. Out of the home they are, in great measure, out of their sphere, and though nature may be overborne by usage, yet if long thwarted, nature will have its revenge.<sup>24</sup>

Individuals such as Reverend Munro believed the working mother's daily absence to be the foremost cause of her child's death; in other words, nature taking its revenge. In addition, critics presented this working woman as avaricious, self-indulgent and immoral, fraying the fabric of English society. The pith of this fabric, apparently, was the womb: its products assumed by commentators to be of little or no importance to its owners – errant mothers.

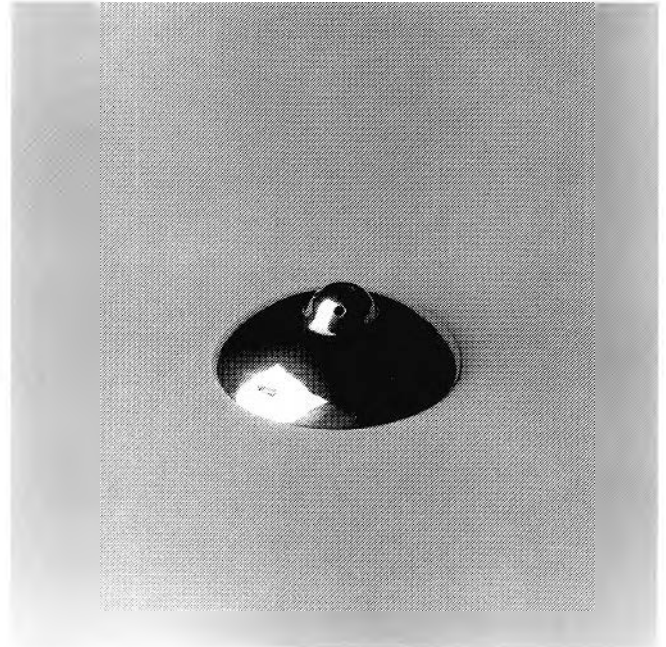
Hurlbut's work reconsiders this discourse, and the women who were its subject, via an emotional engagement with the terminology of capitalism. Her decision to present certain objects so as to emphasize their industrial origins rather than their domestic use challenges the terminology of "labour" and "reproduction." Meanwhile, other objects bear an emotional charge of hope for the lives lost, acting as metaphors for the maternal love and grief that were rarely documented by nineteenth-century social critics. All objects displayed through the installation were mass-produced, with the intention of being sold to working and middle-class women. In the case of working-class women who purchased the nursing aids (such as the nursing bottle seen in figure 6), these objects were in fact used as substitutes for their bodies, whose ten- and twelve-hour work days prohibited regular breast-feeding.

A Mr Ferrand was quoted in 1844 as saying that the average, female, married textile factory operative would have

half an hour to dress and suckle her infant and carry it out to nurse; one hour for household duties before leaving home; half an hour for actually travelling to the mill; twelve hours' actual labour; one and a half hours for meals; half an hour for returning home at night; one and a half hours for household duties and preparing for bed, leaving six and a half hours for recreation, seeing and visiting friends and sleep ...<sup>25</sup>

In the same year, an inspector of textile mills in northern England notes that women's "labour is cheaper and they are more easily induced to undergo severe bodily fatigue than men."<sup>26</sup> The presence of women in the factories and mills of Industrial-era England was at once a great threat to middle-class morality and a great boon to capitalism, which requires women's unpaid domestic labour and their underpaid factory labour in order to function fiscally. In their respective ways, Hurlbut's and Cameron's work both register the human costs of this profoundly inhumane system.

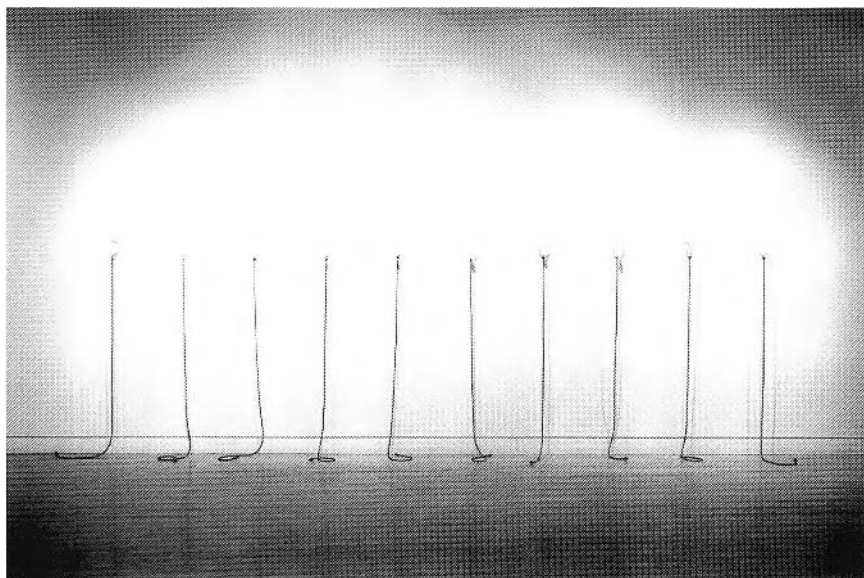
Figure 4. Spring Hurlbut, *Les bouts de sein*, 1996, detail. View of one component from thirty-piece installation. Cast sterling silver nipple shield (Photo: Arnaud Maggs. Reproduced with the permission of the artist).



The objects that comprise "*L'ascension*" carry with them the trace, or index, of lives lost and mourned and of the female bodies that produced those lives. Anachronistically, Hurlbut's late-twentieth-century art sketches an iconography of past losses, through the indexing of gender-specific, female labour. As the unretouched "mistakes" on Cameron's images are the index of her labour, the empty cradles, nursing bottles and nipple shields in Hurlbut's installation are indices of their nineteenth-century female users. The mechanics of mass reproduction depended greatly upon those members of society who were responsible for biologically reproducing the nation: women. This slippage between industry and biology, the iconic link between object and female body, is elegantly expressed in Hurlbut's *Les bouts de sein*, French for "nipple" (fig. 4). Here, Hurlbut has taken a mould of a nineteenth-century nipple shield and cast it thirty times in sterling silver. These nipple shields came in two varieties: one with a puncture to enable nursing, the other with no puncture. These shields were used to protect women's nipples from being permanently crushed inwards from the tight lacings and stays of nineteenth-century fashion. A woman's nipple, if so crushed, would not permit future breast-feeding.

*Les bouts de sein* signifies an unseen activity: the nursing of children. Hurlbut presents these casts in a rigidly regular row: they stud the wall like rivets. The soft warmth of a woman's breast is here sublimated to the integrity of the machine, to industrialization's promise of anonymous, limitless reproduction. A further tension emerges in *Les bouts de sein* upon discovery that these shields were commonly cast in diverse materials,

Figure 5. Spring Hurlbut, *Les biberons infanticides*, 1996. Installation, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal. View showing antique glass nursing bottles and rubber suction hoses, mass-produced ca. 1860-1910 (Photo: R.T. Simon. Reproduced with the permission of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery).



Cameron's production to redefine the image. A parallax shift is one in which a change in the position of the observer results in an apparent change in the positioning of an object. "*L'ascension*" informs the twentieth-century observer of the "conditions of production" of nineteenth-century England. I contend that with this reading, Hurlbut's work parallaxically shifts the meaning of Cameron's photography from allegory to metaphor. No longer does Mary Hillier operate only as the model, only as the "Madonna," or as idealized femininity. She operates visually as herself, a working-class woman whose children, by virtue of her class position, would have dismal chances for survival.

In other words, if the reader privileges the presence of Hillier-the-maid rather than Hillier-the-model/Madonna,<sup>31</sup> a poignant

including lead.<sup>27</sup> The possibly deadly effects of using this material as a covering for the body and a conduit in the nursing of children is a link to another collection of objects in Hurlbut's exhibition, *Les biberons infanticides* (1996).

In *Les biberons infanticides*, glass nursing bottles with rubber hoses of exaggerated length rest against the wall in another, evenly spaced row (fig. 5). These bottles, curved in reference to women's breasts, might initially appear to be simply a didactic presentation of mass-produced objects from another era. However, the black rubber hoses take on a serpentine, ominous quality when one understands the title of the work. Curator Karen Antaki states in the exhibition catalogue that the hoses attached to this type of bottle were breeding-grounds for bacteria (fig. 6). As many women of the working classes did not have the option of breast-feeding during their twelve-hour workdays, the frequent use of these bottles resulted in a ninety-percent mortality rate for their babies.<sup>28</sup> The bottles' toxicity was known to manufacturers long before they ceased to be produced in 1910.<sup>29</sup>

Cameron's *Divine Love* of 1865 (fig. 7) is at first glance a photographic version of the well-known, Western, "Madonna and Child" iconography. The model for this and many of her tableaux vivants was Cameron's parlour-maid, Mary Hillier.<sup>30</sup> The compositional emphasis of Hillier's breast through line, light, shade and contrast with the exposed, vulnerable nipple of the child will not, against the understanding that "*L'ascension*" brings to bear upon the situation of working-class, nineteenth-century English women, reify the notion of "divine love." Read side by side, any emphasis upon stereotypes of maternity in Cameron's work must shift to allow the historical context of

irony is permitted to seep into the beauty of this image. The "divine love," then, would be the hoped-for heavenly sanctuary desired for these children, while the clasping of infant to breast could then be read as an invocation of safe passage to this imagined afterworld. The historical, political and geographical moment at which Cameron produced this image was such that

Figure 6. Spring Hurlbut, *Les biberons infanticides*, 1996, detail. View of antique glass nursing bottle with hose and inscription, "Our Darling's Bottle" (Photo: Arnaud Maggs. Reproduced with the permission of the artist).

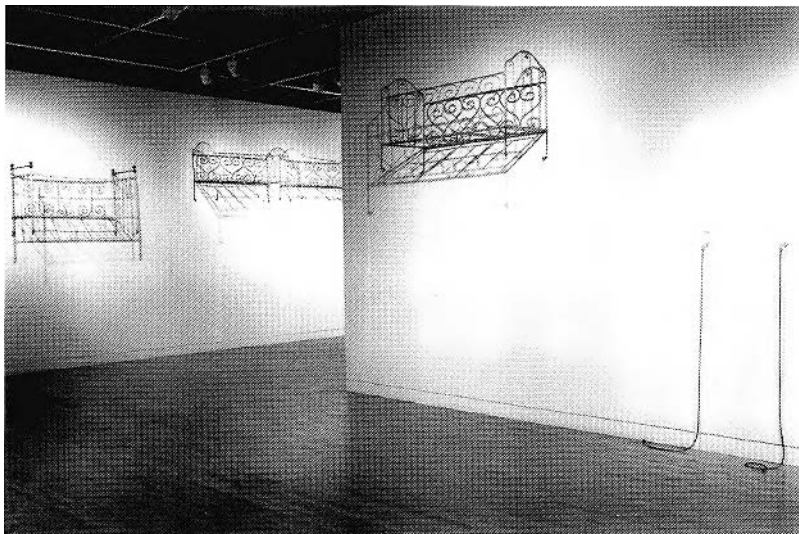




Figure 7. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Divine Love*, ca. 1865. Black-and-white photograph of Mary Hillier and Freddy Gould in character as mother and son or Madonna and Christ (Reproduced with the permission of the Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin).



Figure 8. Spring Hurlbut, *L'ascension*, 1996. Installation, Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal (this view depicts the exhibition in which this installation first appeared, also titled "L'ascension"). View showing detail of *L'ascension* at left (Victorian children's bed frames) and *Les biberons infanticides* at right (Photo: R.T. Simon. Reproduced with the permission of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery).



her class position allowed her an elasticity of choice. She chose to make art. Hillier, however, as a member of the laboring class, did not have an equivalent freedom of movement. As a reader of these photographs, then, I choose to read through the lines of class division which Hurlbut makes visible on the walls of a late-twentieth-century Montreal art gallery, in order to read into this image of Mary Hillier as object, as allegory, and retrieve Mary Hillier as subject. Interpreted as a representation of Hillier-the-maid, Cameron's allegory becomes the poetic act; an unintentional metaphor for the invisibility of working-class women's actual lived experiences in nineteenth-century discourses of motherhood. The kiss Hillier presses against the child's forehead is, in its divergence from traditional Madonna and Child compositions, the point on the photograph's surface which reveals Hillier as an historical person. The kiss is a farewell to allegory.

#### Conclusion

The cot and image together form *Le dernier sommeil* (fig. 1). The last sleep – an essay in a dialectic of preservation and decay. The cot is skeletal and bereft of child, bedding or comfort. Here it is not the intangible meaning that is important, but the meaning in the tangible. Hurlbut's collections provide the material context for her discussion of Victorian infant mortality; however, their presentation also presents a means of escape. The framed image in *Le dernier sommeil* is sealed behind glass, but the flaking, mottled cast-iron bed is the real index of life/death; beeswax covers the delicate whorls of its construction, a nod to both the labour and sweetness that constitute existence. Surrounding this piece, children's bed frames hover on the walls of the gallery, some arranged neatly in rows, while others seem to hesitate on their ascent towards the ceiling (fig. 8).

Spring Hurlbut and Julia Margaret Cameron's cultural activity, when laid across the Victorian paradigm of middle-class, domestic femininity, sets up a tension between the terms of labour and maternity. Hurlbut has chosen to work on the theme of nineteenth-century motherhood, child rearing and maternal loss. Cameron, for her part, worked through a variety of subject matter, in-

Figure 9. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Venus Chiding Cupid and Removing His Wings*, 1873. Black-and-white photograph (Reproduced with the permission of the Royal Photographic Society, Bath, England).



cluding the theme of maternity, and created her art at home. In each case, a woman's production of art for public, economic and visual consumption undermines the fiction of a cloistered, domestic realm that is creative only in terms of biological reproduction. For both artists, the acts involved in making art are also votive acts, functioning as an index of lost children, maternal grief, and the primacy of creation and labour, in all senses. And finally, they are poetic acts, acts which do not find easy interpretation but whose origins are located in the compassion both women have felt for the struggles of others.

Hurlbut's interest in the deadly effects of Industrialization on the lives of working-class women and children reveals itself in this method of display, through its reference to anonymous labour. The beds, however, scaling the walls and appearing in unexpected corners, appear to be more than an index of the reproductive but now void womb. The ascension of the beds is awkward, unsteady – anthropomorphic. They borrow from their inheritance of the absent bodies of children and, in their fram-

ing of immateriality, indicate the angle of ascent. This upward angle ascends also to the past, to Cameron's *Venus Chiding Cupid and Removing His Wings* of 1873 (fig. 9), in which the winged female model has the power to remove and, presumably, to replace Cupid's means of flight. Hurlbut's theme of transcendence finds a fraternal twin here, in the again unexpected pairing of materiality and metaphor. For, if the parlourmaid may, in the embodiment and name of Love, give the gift of flight, then the wing, like the ascension of the bed, is the index of hope.

#### Notes

- 1 Hurlbut's installations often share their name with the title of the larger exhibition. To avoid confusion, I will use double quotation marks to indicate that I am referring to the exhibition, and no quotation marks when referring specifically to the installation within the exhibition.
- 2 See Marion Rinhart and Floyd Rinhart, *The American Daguerreo-*

- type (Athens, 1981), 299–300; see also Amanda Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron* (London, 1986), 126–27.
- 3 G. C. Spivak, "Feminism and Critical Theory," in her *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London, 1988), 78–85.
  - 4 Spivak, "Feminism and Cultural Theory," 80.
  - 5 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, xi.
  - 6 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 3.
  - 7 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 7.
  - 8 Edgar Yoxall Jones has written a monograph on Rejlander's contributions to the photographic medium. See *Father of Art Photography: O.G. Rejlander, 1813–1875* (Newton Abbot, England, 1973). Two versions of *The Two Paths of Life* are reproduced here as the frontispiece.
  - 9 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 20.
  - 10 James Glaister and Hugh W. Diamond, "Report of the Exhibition Committee," *The Journal of the Photographic Society of London*, 10 (May 15, 1865, published 1866), 63–64.
  - 11 See, for example, my discussion of *Artemis* (1990), *Sacrificium* (1991) and *Tongue and Dart Entablature, Lesbian Cymation* (1990), in "The Strength and Fragility of the Egg: Spring Hurlbut's Interventions in the Classical Idiom," M.A. thesis, Concordia University, 1996. These works are all from Hurlbut's 1992 exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, titled "Sacrificial Ornament."
  - 12 Carol Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography," *October*, 76 (Spring 1996), 115–41, esp. 127.
  - 13 Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light," 119.
  - 14 Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light," 115.
  - 15 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 28.
  - 16 P. Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York and Oxford, 1996), 120.
  - 17 Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 121.
  - 18 Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 288.
  - 19 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 127.
  - 20 Quoted in Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 126.
  - 21 Hopkinson, *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 126.
  - 22 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York, 1997), 8–9.
  - 23 Margaret Hewitt, *Wives and Mothers in Victorian Industry*, 2nd edn (Connecticut, 1975), 113.
  - 24 Reverend Alexander Munro, "Our Unemployed Females – What May Best be done about Them?," *Manchester Statistical Society Transactions* (1862–63), 37–38, cited in Hewitt, *Wives and Mothers*, 3–4.
  - 25 Quoted by Lord Ashley, *Hansard Debates*, 1844, vol. 73, col. 1092, cited in Hewitt, *Wives and Mothers*, 22.
  - 26 Mr Saunders, quoted by Lord Ashley, *Hansard Debates*, 1844, vol. 73, col. 1379, cited in Hewitt, *Wives and Mothers*, 22.
  - 27 Karen Antaki, *Spring Hurlbut: L'ascension*, exh. cat., Montréal, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery (Montréal, 1996), 10; and public lecture by artist, March 13, 1996, Concordia University. See also Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*.
  - 28 Antaki, *Spring Hurlbut*, 9, and Hurlbut, public lecture, March 13, 1996.
  - 29 Antaki, *Spring Hurlbut*, 9.
  - 30 Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light," 131.
  - 31 Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light," 131. In this essay, Armstrong uses a second subtitle: "Mistress, Maid and Madonna: Portrait of Mary Hillier."