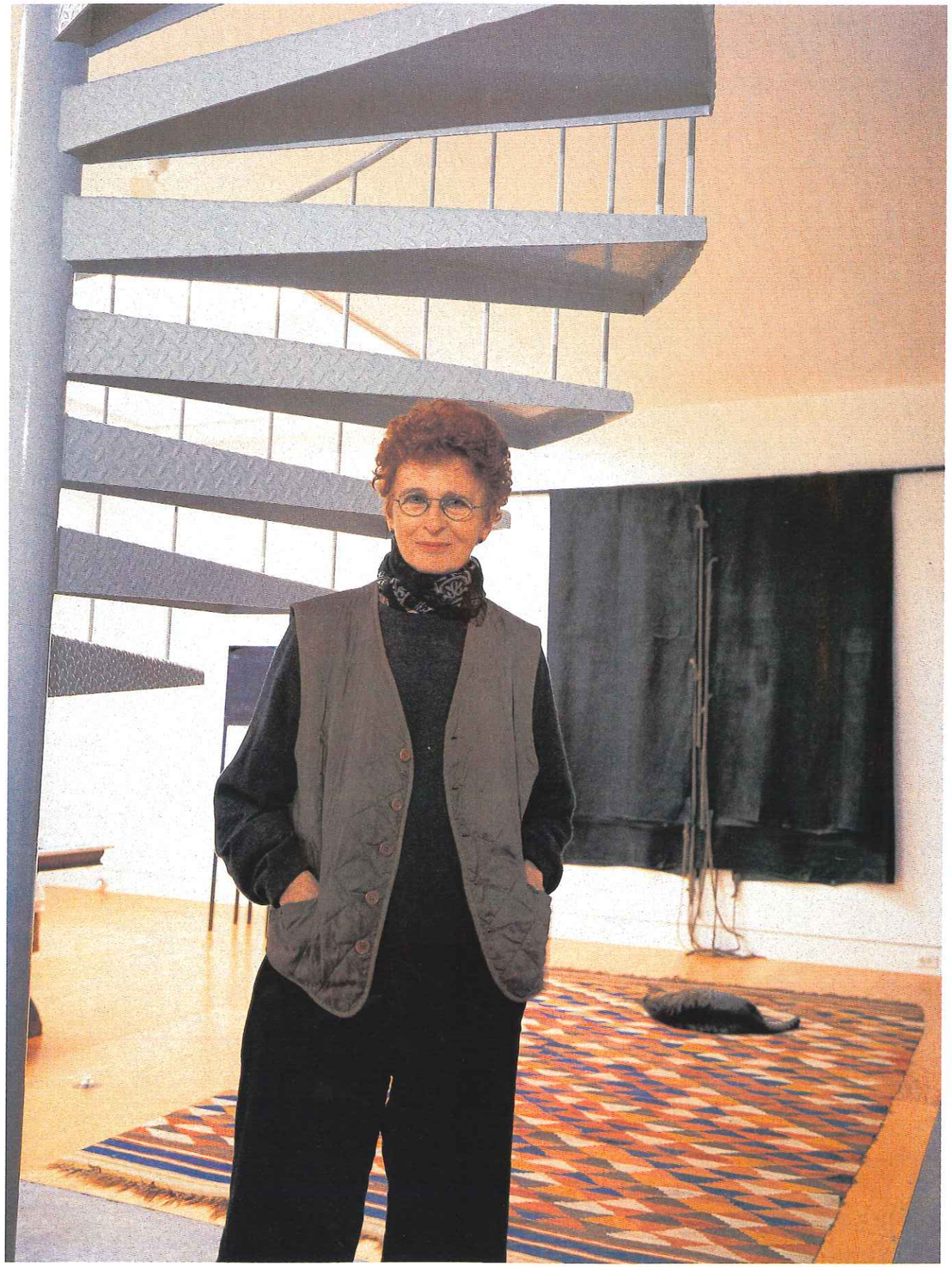


In her Montreal studio, on the eve of an important show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, artist Betty Goodwin offers writer Gerald Hannon a private lesson in

Secrets and Lies

"I'll tell you."

"I don't usually tell people, but I'll tell you."

"But if you write about it, you must find a way of telling it without telling it. Or you must forget it in fifteen seconds."

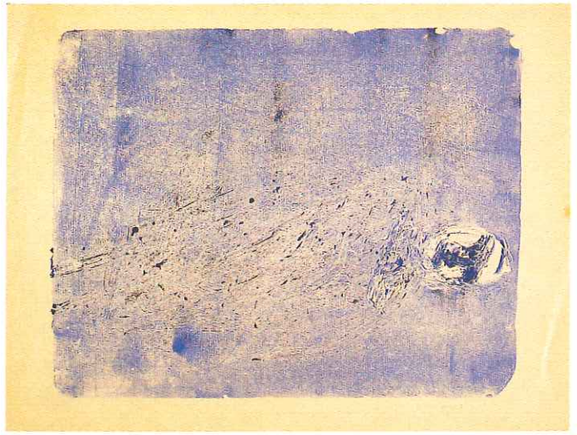
That is Betty Goodwin speaking. She is, among people who can still love art for its toughness as much as its beauty, one of our most celebrated artists, but she is far from a household name, even at seventy-five, even after years of arduous work. I have asked her what it was that exploded her into creativity, that suddenly seemed to transform what had been years of modest productivity and the occasional group show into critical acclaim, an international reputation and, this November, a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

She answers the question—reluctantly, a little haltingly, conjuringly. We sometimes hold the simplest truths as secrets, and there is nothing to shock in what she tells me. There is, however, a condition—"you must find a way of telling it without telling it."

What follows are not her words. It is not what she told me. It is not what happened. But it is true.

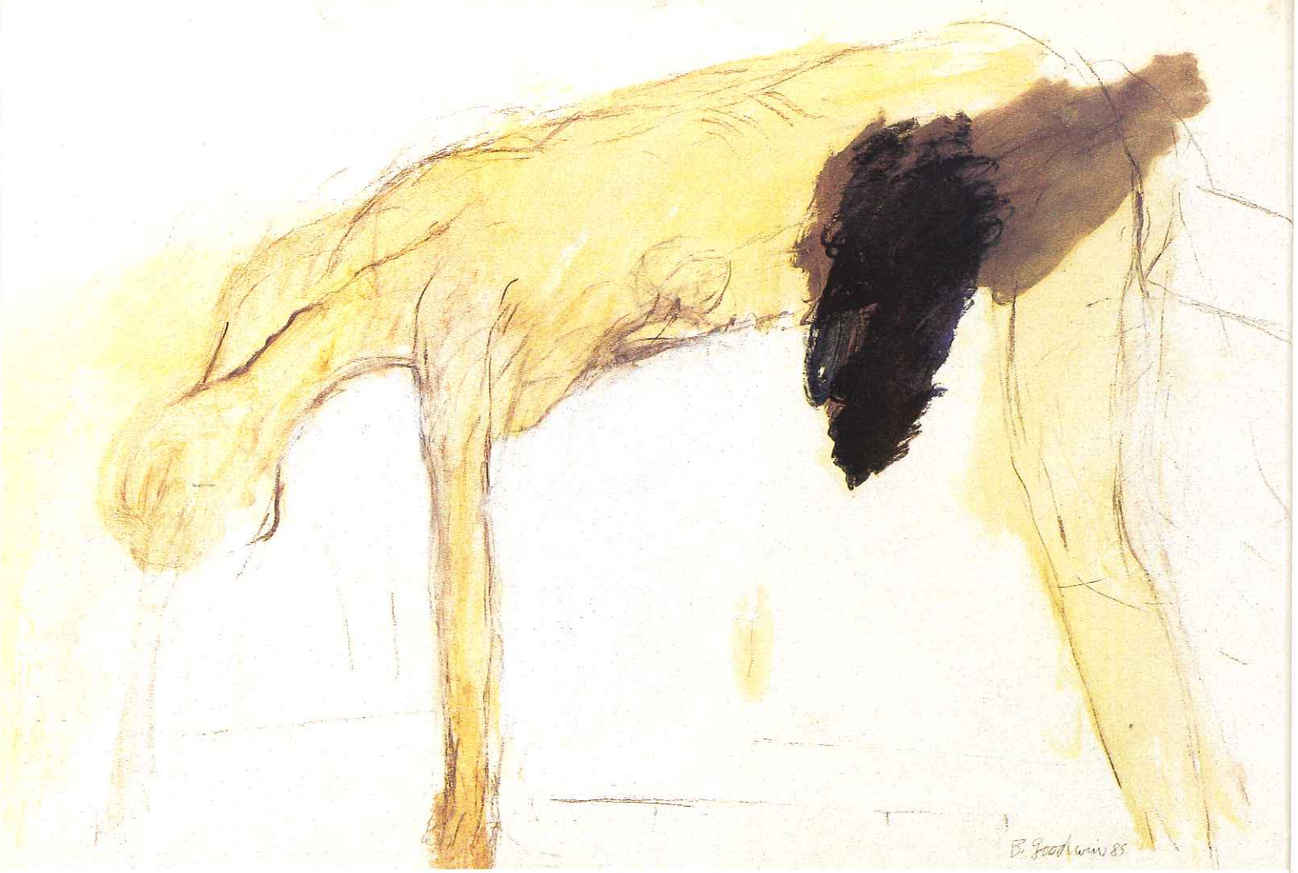
Once upon a time there was a shoemaker, a very hard-working, serious man who lived in a small house with his wife and daughter. He loved his little girl very much, and she returned his love, but he was a wise and thoughtful man, and he knew the child was often unhappy. You see, he had to work very hard just to maintain their modest home, put food on the table, buy clothes, and send the little girl to school. He rose early in the morning, long before his daughter had awakened, and went to his little shop in the city. He returned home late, when she could barely keep her eyes open, though he sometimes glimpsed in them her dreams of loss.

One evening, when she was half in a dream and wholly in his arms, he told her how much he loved her, and told her that if he should ever have to go away, he would leave her a box,



ABOVE: Betty Goodwin
Untitled 1963
Monoprint on paper 45.6 x 61.0 cm
Photo Carlo Catenazzi
Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario
© Betty Goodwin

PORTRAIT BY GABOR SZILASI



ABOVE: **Betty Goodwin**
Il y a certainement quelqu'un qui m'a tuée 1985
Charcoal, oil, acrylic and wash on wove paper mounted on fabric
61.0 x 91.0 cm
Photo Carlo Catenazzi
Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario
© Betty Goodwin

OPPOSITE: **Betty Goodwin**
Figure with Steel Bar (Distorted Events Series) 1990
Graphite, oil pastel, chalk, tar and wash on polyester film
213.0 x 132.0 cm
Photo Carlo Catenazzi
Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario
© Betty Goodwin

"I'm not after **chaos.** It's **after** me"

and in that box would be the most beautiful pair of shoes he had ever made. She would know then that he had loved her truly, even though they had been so much apart.

She was no longer a little girl when her father died. She grieved, and remembered the story of the box, and searched for it, and found it on a shelf in his shop. It had her name on it. She opened the box, and she wept, and her heart sang with a strange joy, for she knew her father had loved her truly.

In the box he had placed nothing but a small, round stone. She held its coolness to her eye, and knew she must fling it away.

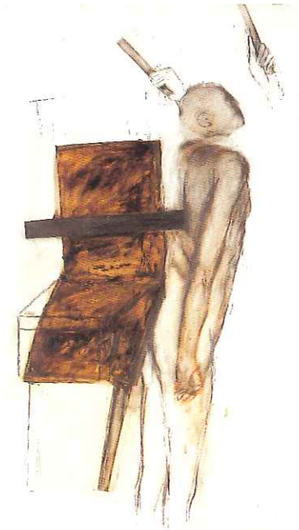
I am sitting with Betty Goodwin in her studio, a very large, white, skylit room attached to her home in the Plateau Mont-Royal region of Montreal. Though the room is some 1,600-square feet in size, we are placed to face each other, our staunchly upright chairs so close together that our knees almost touch as we talk. She is dressed entirely in black, her startlingly hennaed hair the most significant stab of colour in the room.

It is a room crowded with things, but it is scrupulously ordered. One large table is covered with pieces of metal and bits of machinery, but they are as rigidly laid out as graph paper. Even the walls—which hold finished works, works in progress, and the scraps, bones, coils of wire, dead birds and other detritus she may one day transform—maintain a kind of tumultuous order. She walks me by this stuff, talks to me about trying to push into chaos a tree that appears in one of the works, and when I ask her why she's after chaos, she says, "I'm not after chaos. It's after me," and then we pass another work, one of her Swimmers series, still in progress this one, and I can tell that she has to change something in it. She must. Talking to me all the while, she grabs a piece of white oil stick, quaveringly underlines the human figure so perilously adrift in its cunning sea, then rubs the white in with her fingers until it is only the faintest whisper.

She seems frail and walks a little hesitantly. But her hands have no hesitations at all.

We will spend several hours together over two days, and hesitations of another kind trouble our conversation more than once. She does not want to answer all of my questions, and at first I fear she may be committed to privacy, that detestable commodification, in our commodity-obsessed culture, of something that is important and worth preserving, and that is solitude. But I am wrong. "It's not privacy," she tells me. "It's secrets. It's their energy. I don't want it dispersed by telling. I want the strength, the electrical current, between me and them."

We get along well after that. If privacy is an ideology, secrecy is a strategy, and one I can respect. Secrets can be shared, and still be secrets. Secrets are pregnant, can provoke myths, can lead one to a shoemaker and his daughter and a cool, round stone against the eye. Secrets, for Goodwin, are one of the sources of the energy she mentions so frequently, and of which others, even younger others, are so in awe. ("She keeps me on my feet," says thirty-three-year-old Scott McMorran, a fellow artist she employs as her assistant two days a week. "And I get home totally wrecked and psyched.")



Even her house is a metaphor for secrets. From outside, it is, except for one window rather high above the street, a blank and featureless wall. The door drops timidly to the back of a narrow alcove. But inside, both studio and living space are alive with the brightness that tumbles through ceiling skylights and there is even, in this rather industrial block of Montreal, a small garden. Secrets are not her only resource, however. When I ask her why she goes for acupuncture treatments, she leans forward in her chair, looks conspiratorial, looks almost antic, and says, "energy. For the energy. When I left after a treatment the other day my head was clear. So clear. And often, it's fuzzy."

If so, it's a fuzziness not much in evidence. There is great clarity of purpose in her work. There is clarity of memory, too, modified by her energy-hungry reluctance to share too much biography. But I learn that she was born and raised in Montreal and, except for vacations and a few brief stints abroad, has lived here all her life. That her father owned a vest factory, died when she was nine years old, and "the landlord came and took the furniture, and we had to move in with my aunt, so I guess we weren't well off." That she wasn't very good at school, except at art. ("I was spaced out. I did what I was supposed to do. I was a loner, with few friends.") That she went to commercial art school after Grade 12 and worked briefly on a newspaper doing layout. That she met Martin Goodwin, a civil engineer, at a friend's graduation ceremony and "we danced together and that was it. A little explosion." That they have been married for fifty-three years and are still touchingly, palpably in love. That Martin has ever since created the space, both physically and metaphorically, in which she can create. That they had one child, a son, who died. That she has been influenced by Joseph Beuys (though a large photograph of the man, striding across a landscape, which once hung in her studio, had to go because it "emanated so much energy I had to sell it." That she once did a set for a ballet company and designed the poster for a production of Woyzek (the play, not the opera). That she has a photograph of Michael Jordan in her studio, because "I like him and I like basketball and I like the Bulls." That one shelf in her studio holds a collection of children's toys. That she destroyed a lot of her early work, and "I'm not sorry I did it."

There would have been a lot of early work. She says she was something like forty-eight years old when she experienced what she calls "a profound breakthrough," what a truth-telling lie might fable as the cool, round stone against the eye, and "before I knew it I was etching," adopting a process called soft-ground, in which the object to be represented is physically pressed against a copper plate. She started with gloves. Soon she moved to vests, old vests, ones she found at home first of all, then others she got from the Salvation Army. Much has been written about the poignancy of these pieces, and they are probably the easiest of her works to love. They are like X-rays of a life. They are mostly sombre in colour, but they occasionally incorporate the leavings of lives lived, and she places me before one to which she has added colourful bits of thread and fabric—though to say she has added

OPPOSITE: **Betty Goodwin**
Figure/Animal Series # 3 **1990–91**
Tar, graphite, oil stick, charcoal on mylar
219.5 x 171.0 cm
Photo Carlo Catenazzi
Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario © Betty Goodwin

them is true only in a strictly mechanical sense. It is rather that life and love have demanded it of her. She recalls travelling with a friend, knowing that one day AIDS could claim him, watching him pick bits of fabric from a crest on the sweater he was wearing. Did she ask him for them? Did she remove them from the car seat later? I didn't ask. There seemed indeed an energy there "that might be dispersed by telling."

Though her assistant, Scott McMorran, tells me that "she never feels she has done enough work, that she has to push on as fast as she can," she has in fact been prolific. The list of solo exhibitions, group exhibitions, installations and prizes goes on for pages, and reminds one that she has been respectfully reviewed in the United States and Europe as well as every major city in Canada. I ask her whether she enjoys the acclaim. She says it's a double-edged thing: "Sure, I'm glad that much confidence is shown in my work, but it also creates a burden. You're in a place that people obviously like, and so there's maybe a pressure to stay in that place, but you don't want to become repetitive." No chance of that, it seems, since the phrase she most often uses to describe the way she works is "pushing." You push for another angle on something you've done. You push, as she most famously has said, "until it pulls you in." And if it doesn't, you don't give up. You wait. She keeps notebooks, always has, rifles through them, finds ideas that once would not work and now will. McMorran tells me that she will spend a couple of hours in the morning looking through her notebooks, then might put something up on the wall that she's kept on hand for years. One of the works I saw incorporated a rusty old saw, and that tool, he says, "has been around for twenty, twenty-five years at least."

And what of her art? It is not easy. It is not light, or lovely. It is not ironic. There is great gravity of purpose in it. I found much of it difficult to respond to, and we talked a lot about that, though without any sense of hurt or hostility on her part. She is in fact a great guide to her own work and the work of others she admires. I remember in particular her description of an installation piece by Robert Irwin that she'd seen in New York.

She begins by closing her eyes. We are sitting across from each other in our upright little chairs in the middle of this vast room, and her hands weave back and forth to some internal rhythm, her eyes never opening as she tells how that work "just transports you," how there were eighteen rooms with walls of transparent net, how you could sense the complexities of the space, see people in varying degrees of "ghostliness," how it opens your mind, how joy is a response to such a creation. She tells me how she gets a high looking at Goya—"he's so good at painting brutality."

She also says, "it hasn't changed. It's getting worse."

She's speaking of the mindless, global brutality that has not changed since Goya's time, that she finds "so horribly disturbing," that shares the nightly television news with advertisements for deodorant and toothpaste. There is something rattled in the way she says these things, which lifts them beyond the send-a-donation angst of the good liberal in trying times. "It's horrendous, inhuman, but I feel I have to know about it. And this," indicating the walls around us, "is the way I cope. Without art, I would certainly be on the edge. Not that art," she adds glumly, "wipes all of it away."

Scott McMorran tells me that, yes, she lives her work. She really feels it. But she is "also a real contradiction. She can be tough, hard, sure of her opinions. But she is moved emotionally by many things. If she sees a dead bird on the street she'll become upset, we'll have to take it to a park to bury it. But then she'll get an idea into her head and she'll be unrelenting. She has to do it." (When I asked her if there is anything she can't do, she told me, "if I wanted to do something and I couldn't, I'd find out how.")

He also says, most charmingly, "she's my best friend." Then adds, with no provocation from me, "and we have a lot of secrets."

Her love of animals is not one of those secrets. They appear in her work, bound sometimes to the humans with whom they share this uncertain planet and who are sometimes their lovers and sometimes their tormentors. She has two cats, a tawny, aloof Abyssinian and a tubby and doting tabby. She has swum with dolphins, marvelling at their impossible sleekness and their guileless energy.

I ask her, finally, about music. I wanted as many doorways into her world as I could manage, and I wondered which composer's work would come closest to the sensibility expressed in her own. What was I expecting? Shostakovich, I suppose. Late Beethoven, perhaps. But no, the answer, and it is unhesitating, is Schubert. "It's the yearning," she tells me. "The yearning." And she talks of how she cannot play that music while she works, but what she can put on are recordings of the singing of the great whales because that too, she says, aches with an almost human yearning.

One last secret.

At my request, she is walking me round the studio to talk to me about her art, accepting the daunting task of trying to put into words that which words had been clearly incapable of expressing. We stop before one small piece, loosely framed. She has placed several crushed cigarette butts in the centre of a blank sheet of white paper. It is so arranged that the crumbling bits of ash will seek new patterns if ever the work is held or moved. She tells me what it means to her. She tells me I cannot write it.

Can I lie my way to the truth of this one? Could I fable you a woman so wounded by death, by a very particular death, that each night finds her wandering the most disreputable parts of the city until she...

Yes, I have the rest of the lie, my lie, a lie that might give you some of the truth. But I also realize that it is at the ellipsis that the art of Betty Goodwin happens. That everyone must wrest from that difficult ellipsis her own truth, buoyed in that struggle by the one open secret in the life and work of this remarkable artist—that a secret cunningly withheld is far more revelatory than fact. ■