



# Betty Goodwin

from the collection of Salah J. Bachir

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Curated by Marnie Fleming

## Betty Goodwin and the afterlife of images

by Gabrielle Moser

What survives in the work of an artist such as Betty Goodwin after her death? Apart from the incredible wealth of physical art objects Goodwin created during her prolific five-decade career, there is also a daunting creative animus that permeates the life and work of the Montreal drawer, sculptor and installation artist. Often characterized as a “late bloomer” who came to prominence in the art world in the late 1960s and 1970s when she was already in her forties, Goodwin has been variously mythologized as a humanist, an avant-garde outsider and a secretive introvert. She was not only an “indefatigable warrior who ‘burrow[ed]’ ... into the material [until] the result [was] right,”<sup>1</sup> but also “humble, genuine ... [and] grounded in an acute sensitivity to the human condition.”<sup>2</sup>

As a writer that came of age towards the end of Goodwin's life, it is hard to know what more there is to say about an artist who has been profiled so frequently and analyzed so carefully in contemporary Canadian art history, and whose own texts, words and references have been painstakingly archived through her notebooks, interviews and exhibition catalogues. Goodwin's drawings and sculptures, which operate in a carefully controlled tension between an invitation to intimacy and a cagey, enigmatic distance, often compelled writers to search the artist's biography for clues to their meaning, almost as though the intimate nature of her working methods—drawing on translucent mylar in graphite and oil stick, or imprinting tactile objects such as vests and gloves into soft copper etching plates—directly mirrored her personal connection to the works' content and themes. While Goodwin's thoughts about her practice offer a profile of an intensely dedicated, contemplative artist, I am interested in how her work continues to speak (both to us and for itself) now that the immediacy of her own voice has been lost.

This retrospective of Goodwin's work, drawn from the private collection of Salah J. Bachir, provides us with a condensed overview of the artist's diverse creative output. It underscores her consistent engagement with depictions of the human figure, from an early figurative oil portrait, to her famous tarpaulins, drawings of swimmers and megaphones, to the more recent sculptural works. If, as Goodwin once mused to filmmaker Claude Laflamme, “it sometimes takes time to understand the completeness of what has been said,”<sup>3</sup> then what is it that these artworks are not yet finished saying? And how might we decipher their messages differently from this new vantage point that allows us to consider her life's work apart from her biography, as a series of distinct but remarkably interconnected attempts at reconciling the potency of images with our fraught attempts to communicate with one another?

From her earliest depictions of the human figure, Goodwin's works investigate the way that physical bodies communicate or bear traces of their highly charged psychological states. Awkwardly posed and often alone in her sparse, transparent compositions, Goodwin's subjects are frighteningly isolated. The contorted limbs in the images from her Carbon series, such as *Knotted Arms* (1988) and *Untitled (Figure Animal series)* (1987, 1991), suggest a frantic but futile need to communicate (with one another? with the viewer?) that has been impeded by physical barriers such as rope or the hands and feet of other unseen actors. The hazy, nondescript landscapes in which these bodies float have been compulsively erased and re-worked by the artist's hand, as though the seemingly direct act of drawing is likewise a loaded and incomplete attempt at communication. As curator and art dealer Jessica Bradley suggests, the verb “to draw” is an apt metaphor for Goodwin's practice as a

Previous page: Betty Goodwin, *Untitled (Black Screen series)* (detail), 2003, pastel, graphite, oil stick and tar on Mylar, 82.5 x 50.8 cm, collection of Salah J. Bachir, ©The Estate of Betty Goodwin.



whole: as a series of “extended and arduous attempts to make thought and sentiment concrete, to pull them, symbolically, from their embededness in the interior life and into the world.”<sup>4</sup>

*Do you know how long it takes for any voice to reach another* (1986), also from the Carbon series, makes this desire to translate one’s interior life to the exterior world explicit in the work’s title. Picturing two nearly life-sized but fragmented bodies reaching towards one another, the drawing is modeled after prehistoric imagery found in Spain’s La Saltadora caves.<sup>5</sup> The title, a phrase frequently employed by Goodwin, is borrowed from American poet Carolyn Forché’s *The Country Between Us*, an anthology

of writing inspired by her work as a human rights activist in El Salvador. In it, Forché asks,

do you know how long it takes  
any voice to reach another?  
knowing that while birds and warmer weather are  
forever moving north,  
the cries of those who vanish  
might take years to get here<sup>6</sup>

Stretching across two separate sheets of mylar, the distance between which constitutes another kind of metaphysical gulf “between us,” Goodwin’s figures seem to be on the verge of overcoming their physical isolation

Betty Goodwin, *Study for Column*, 1986, oil stick and graphite on paper, 53.3 x 72.4 cm, collection of Salah J. Bachir, © The Estate of Betty Goodwin.



Betty Goodwin, *Untitled (Figure Animal series)*, oil stick, tar and graphite on Mylar, 43.2 x 27.9 cm, collection of Salah J. Bachir, ©The Estate of Betty Goodwin.



and separation. But the dark, obliterated sections of these anonymous bodies also lend the scene a sinister undercurrent, as though the connection between two voices always comes too late, after their speakers' bodies have already vanished.

Even when Goodwin's characters share the same pictorial space, where communication seems possible, the results of these interactions take on violent and even deadly aspects. *Untitled (Bent Figure with Heart and Foot)* (1993–95), for instance, depicts a central figure offering her (disturbingly realistic) heart in one hand while another foot (her own, or that of an unseen adversary?) lands squarely on her back, rejecting the offer and pushing her downwards. In another image (*A Burst of Bloody Air*, 2003), a cloud of murky red liquid comes forth in the place

of a voice, subsuming the speaker altogether. To speak and be heard is not just a form of metaphysical expression in Goodwin's work, but a matter of life and death.

Communication and survival also come to the fore in the artist's most renowned series of drawings, the *Swimmers* (1981–86). Picturing bodies diving, floating or sinking in eerie masses of translucent fluid, Goodwin's swimmers seem to struggle against the currents that support them. Over the course of the series, the elegance of limbs moving through water gives way to images of distress and sometimes rescue, creating the sensation of "a subtle ache, an ambiguous but cumulative unease."<sup>7</sup> The spectre of loss emerges here again through the ambiguity of the figures' gestures. They bring to mind British poet Stevie Smith's famous tale of a man who, having

Betty Goodwin, *Untitled (Figure Animal series)*, 1987, oil stick, pastel and graphite on Mylar, 30.5 x 45.7 cm, collection of Salah J. Bachir, ©The Estate of Betty Goodwin.



Betty Goodwin, *To erase great chunks of reality*, 1997, oil stick and graphite on Mylar, tarpaulin, 180.3 x 152.4 cm, collection of Salah J. Bachir, ©The Estate of Betty Goodwin.

swum too far from shore, cannot communicate his dangerous predicament to those on the beach. “I was much further out than you thought,” Smith writes, “and not waving, but drowning.”<sup>8</sup>

In Goodwin’s longest series, the Tarpaulin sculptures and installations (1974–2000)—which centre on square sections of the torn and mended fabric used to cover cargo in shipping trucks—the poetics of precariousness and loss are made personal and tangible. The Tarpaulin pieces that appear in the Bachir collection — *To erase great chunks of reality* (1997) and the arresting sculpture *Voyage* (2000)—which show prone and abject bodies in front of or below large swaths of the dark fabric, transform the tarpaulins into allegories for the human skin: both bear traces of the movement and life of their contents. Yet, in a perverse kind of metaphysical logic, the lasting materiality of the inanimate and utilitarian tarpaulins Goodwin has chosen to stand in for the human figure end up underscoring their transience and eventual immateriality after death.

Despite the sense of loss and death that permeates many of Goodwin’s drawings, they also “embody a resilience, a sense of possibility and renewal within the work itself.”<sup>9</sup> The fragile bird’s nest floating in a cloudy sky in *Beyond Chaos n°1* (1998), for instance, might represent a life cycle of seasonal change. Similarly, the Megaphone series, started in the 1980s and continuing into the 2000s, offers a rare vision of hopeful communication in Goodwin’s body of work. Used to make calls to action, to amplify the human voice and make calls of distress, the megaphone offers a way to project one’s message out of one’s immediate setting and into another, where it may have resonances in the future.

*Nothing follows in a straight line. There is a push and pull, then a switch over. It is in this process that information keeps multiplying.* — Betty Goodwin<sup>10</sup>

In a cyclical movement, Goodwin’s practice continuously returns to its own iconographic sources, allowing imagery and figures to cross over into one another’s worlds. Running counter to the modernist ideal of a “straight line” of chronological art history that sees artworks as ultimately finished, Goodwin’s practice

emphasizes a ghostly, circular time where forms and ideas live on, continuously and messily resurfacing from the unconscious. The German art historian Aby Warburg has called this notion of time the *Nachleben*, or “after life” of images. For Warburg, the force of potent images and forms is never completely lost or fully finished, but instead survives across time and place, making itself apparent in recurring themes that continue to speak to us as viewers. Importantly, this survival is not an orchestrated one. Because it is based in memory, the survival of images does not fit into the narrative arc of official history, emerging instead in its discrepancies and counter-narratives. Much like the elaborate notebooks Goodwin kept throughout her life, from which ideas and images were taken sometimes years or decades after their inception, the survival of images entails “a complex set of operations in which forgetting, the transformation of sense, involuntary memory and unexpected rediscovery work in unison.”<sup>11</sup> This messy, unconscious survival of images allows us to see Goodwin’s intuitive depictions of human relations not as some universal ideal of the timelessness of the human condition, but rather as a persistent testimony to the way that images of the body continue to shape our interactions with one another across time and place. In Goodwin’s work, as seen through the lens of the Bachir collection, bodies and locales become unmoored, haunting one another and now us.

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bogardi, “The studio,” *Canadian Art* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 86. <sup>2</sup> Josée Belisle, *Betty Goodwin* (Montréal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2009), 27. <sup>3</sup> *Betty Goodwin: heart and soul*, video, directed by Claude Laflamme (Montreal: Entreprises de réation Panacom inc., 2002). <sup>4</sup> Jessica Bradley, *Betty Goodwin: Signs of Life* (Windsor, ON: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1995), 9. <sup>5</sup> Yolande Racine, “The Unfolding Paradox,” in *Betty Goodwin: Works from 1971 to 1987* (Montréal: Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 1987), p. 28. <sup>6</sup> Carolyn Forché, “The Island,” in *The Country Between Us* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981). <sup>7</sup> Robert Storr, “Surfacing,” *Betty Goodwin: Works from 1971 to 1987* (Montréal: Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, 1987), 36. <sup>8</sup> Stevie Smith, *Not Waving But Drowning: Poems* (London: A. Deutsch, 1957). <sup>9</sup> Bradley, 22. <sup>10</sup> Kitty Scott, *Betty Goodwin* (Edmonton: Edmonton Art Gallery, 1990), 4. <sup>11</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time,” *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2 (2003): 275.



Betty Goodwin, *Untitled (Figure with Megaphone)*, 1988, oil stick, graphite, and carbon powder on Mylar, 30.5 x 20.3 cm, collection of Salah J. Bachir, ©The Estate of Betty Goodwin.

## Curator's Acknowledgements

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Betty Goodwin has created some of the most emotionally complex and deeply compelling images in the history of Canadian art. It seems appropriate that her sublime works have been appreciated by Salah J. Bachir—a collector, a philanthropist and a maverick. Bachir demonstrates a wide-ranging cultural curiosity, an impressive vision and an unwavering support of Canadian art. My most profound thanks must go to him for sharing his collection with us.

*Marnie Fleming*