

archival fonds – are profoundly fertile ground for the work of one of Canada’s most important contemporary artists.

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Betty Goodwin: Work Notes. ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO. Mounted at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 22 September 2010–24 April 2011.

Over the course of her artistic life, Montreal artist Betty Goodwin (1923–2008)¹ avidly created notebooks and sketchbooks, using them to record images, thoughts, quotations, and technical processes. These notebooks were central to her artistic practice and the vital role they played is clearly demonstrated in “Betty Goodwin: Work Notes,”² curated by Georgiana Uhlyarik, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), where they are being displayed for the first time.

Goodwin’s notebooks comprise an integral part of her fonds, bequeathed to the AGO’s E.P. Taylor Research Library & Archives.³ Along with the notebooks, the fonds contains correspondence, photographs, small objects kept in her studio, and other material, as well as 102 printing plates, a selection of which are also on display here.

“Betty Goodwin: Work Notes” is part of an exhibition entitled, “At Work: Hesse, Goodwin, Martin,”⁴ which explores aspects of the studio practice of Eva Hesse, Betty Goodwin, and Agnes Martin. The three parts are thematically linked, however, each had its own curator. The exhibition as a whole is cohesive; it shows the varied approaches of these three mostly contemporary artists, and viewers are able to contrast the methodologies applied by these three, very different, artists. Each area is tightly focused on a particular aspect of the work and working process of the artist under consideration: “The Islands,” Martin’s suite of twelve subtle paintings;⁵ the fragile and enigmatic “test” sculptures by Hesse;⁶ and Goodwin’s notebooks and printing plates.

Although the artworks in each section are supplemented by documentary

- 1 See Jessica Bradley and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds., *The Art of Betty Goodwin* (Toronto, 1998) for a discussion of Goodwin’s life and work, including an extensive chronology and bibliography.
- 2 <http://www.ago.net/betty-goodwin-work-notes> (accessed 4 January 2011).
- 3 <http://www.ago.net/special-collections> (accessed 4 January 2011).
- 4 <http://www.ago.net/at-work-hesse-goodwin-martin> (accessed 4 January 2011).
- 5 See Ulrike Growe and Heinz Liesbrock, eds., *Agnes Martin : The Islands*, trans. Hugh Rorrison and Dieter Schwarz (Düsseldorf, 2004).
- 6 See Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh, 2009).

material to provide context, the Goodwin exhibit is the most successful as it provides the viewer with a rich understanding of the artist's creative process. Archival material is placed in dialogue with finished artworks and an ample, but not overwhelming, amount of contextual material is provided. The Goodwin notebooks are displayed in the centre of the gallery space in glass cases, while large-scale works are hung on three of the walls, with a fourth, large work placed at the entrance of the "At Work" exhibition. These pieces are representative of some of the major series in Goodwin's oeuvre, including her "Tarpaulins" series and her "Nerves" series. Another, smaller piece, "Untitled [Nest and Stone]" (1991) – shown in the exhibit "En hommage à un cadeau d'Eva Hesse à Sol LeWitt" [Tribute to Eva Hesse's Gift to Sol LeWitt]⁷ – provides a link to the Hesse exhibit located in the adjacent galleries. The printing plates, along with finished prints, are presented in a smaller room off the main gallery.

Contextual material in a variety of formats is provided, which is fitting for an exhibition on an artist who frequently mixed media in her drawings, sculptures, and installations. A documentary video on Goodwin is on view at the entrance to the exhibition space⁸ and ten photographs of the artist's work space, taken by Geoffrey James, hang on the fourth wall of the gallery.⁹ The photographs and the video depict Goodwin's work studio, the materials she used, and the items from which she drew inspiration. Goodwin speaks about her notebooks in the video and is shown working from them as she draws. Two audio stations are provided for visitors: the first contains three tracks of people familiar with Goodwin and her studio (her dealer, an artist who visited Goodwin's studio, and a collector); and the second contains a recording of Amy Marshall Furness, the Rosamond Ivey Special Collections Archivist at the AGO, who describes the studio space and the appraisal process used when acquiring the studio materials. Finally, a touch-screen monitor is installed in the gallery, allowing visitors to virtually flip through selections from three of the notebooks.

Eighty-six of the 116 sketchbooks and notebooks in the Betty Goodwin Fonds are on display. A number of the notebooks will be rotated out of the cases, and pages of the notebooks are flipped every three weeks for conservation purposes. Over the course of the exhibition, ninety-eight separate notebooks will be on view.¹⁰ They date from the late-1940s to the early-2000s, and are grouped together in roughly twenty-year segments, but are not arranged chronologically. The notebooks are of various forms and sizes and contain quotations, diary-like entries, photographs, and sketches and studies, primarily drawn in black

7 See Richard Gagnier, *En hommage à un cadeau d'Eva Hesse à Sol LeWitt* (Hull, 1991).

8 *Betty Goodwin: heart and soul*, DVD, directed by Claude Laflamme (Montreal, 2002).

9 These photographs are reproduced in: Georges Bogardi, "The Studio," *Canadian Art*, vol. 11, no. 3, (Fall 1997): pp. 86–93.

10 I thank Amy Marshall Furness for providing me with details about the notebooks on display and for providing me with additional information about the Betty Goodwin Fonds.

ink. They are filled with tabs and Post-It® notes that the artist used to access particular pages. Where pages were removed from the books, Goodwin would insert photocopies.

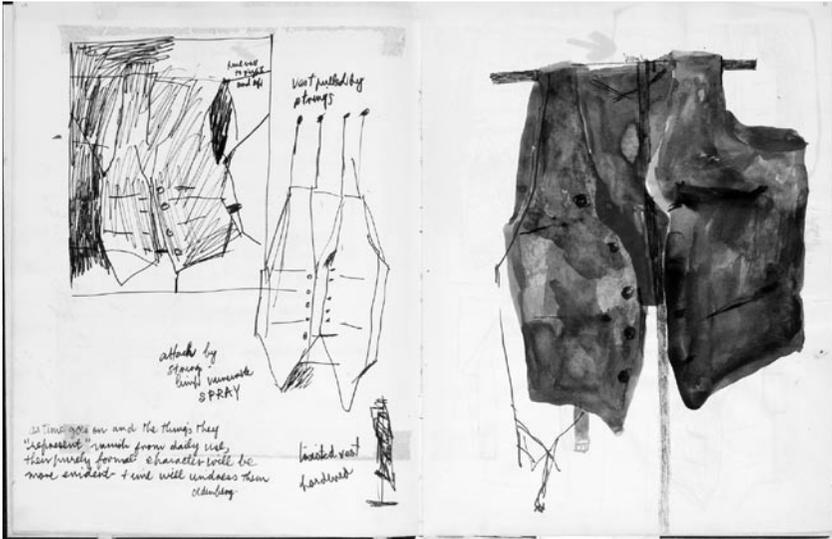


Figure 1: Betty Goodwin, *Notebook 62*, 1972-1976, Promised gift of the artist to the Art Gallery of Ontario. Credit: Courtesy of Craig Boyko, Art Gallery of Ontario. © 2010 Gaétan Charbonneau.

The juxtaposition of notebooks created in different years shows the development of Goodwin's ideas and her concerns over time with particular motifs. The body, in particular, is a frequent subject. The various notebooks contain similar forms, but the figures are treated very differently over the years. Goodwin also often explored another theme: passages, structures, and confined spaces. She created her art in large series and her ideas evolve over time in the books. She frequently returned to her ideas, working through the possibilities of each until the subjects were exhausted. Particularly for her early prints, compositions and colours would be refined in her sketchbooks before being committed to the printing plates.¹¹ For her later, large-scale works, Goodwin did not work directly from preparatory sketches, for, as she explained, "when you change the scale all the possibilities change."¹² She continued, however, to explore themes, jot down

11 Rosemarie L. Tovell, *The Prints of Betty Goodwin* (Ottawa, 2002), p. 15. Tovell provides small reproductions of pages from Goodwin's notebooks on pp. 11, 60, 62-63.

12 Robert Enright, intro., "A Bloodstream of Images: An Interview with Betty Goodwin," *Border Crossings*, vol. 14, no. 4, (Fall 1995), p. 50.

ideas, and record technical notes for these larger works in her notebooks.

In addition to being a space for the preliminary exploration of ideas that would appear in her finished work, in certain pieces, Goodwin's notes themselves would appear as part of the artwork. In her "Steel Notes" series (1989), for example, Goodwin incorporated quotations that she had recorded in her notebook directly onto the works,¹³ and "Notebook '87" (1999),¹⁴ a serigraph print made late in her career, was made from a photograph of a pair of pages in one of her notebooks.

It is quite illuminating to stand in front of a selection of notebooks – where Goodwin explored variations of a composition and the development of her motif – and be able to immediately look up and see a finished work. This is the case with the display of her large-scale work, "Do You Know How Long It Takes Any One Voice to Reach Another (or Moving Towards Fire)" (1985), and the contemporaneous notebooks that contain the visual predecessors to the bodies in the final work, as well as the text of the title, a quotation taken from a poem by Carolyn Forché.¹⁵

Goodwin started creating her elaborate notebooks during the time she began her breakthrough "Vest" series in 1969, initiating a new manner of working and thinking.¹⁶ She frequently spoke of the importance of the notebooks to her working practice. She stated that she was "constantly keeping notes. I feel like everything is a continuation of my studio as I walk down the street or visit exhibitions or read. All of this flows into my notebook in one form or another."¹⁷ Goodwin would frequently review her notebooks, spending hours in the morning looking through them.¹⁸ The notebooks and sketchbooks were sites where the ideas for her work could germinate. Images and motifs were developed, refined, expanded, and stripped bare in the notebooks. An idea might be recorded in her book but left untouched for an extended period of time until she was ready or able to devote her attention to it. Goodwin explained: "I often look back at my sketchbooks and see things I wrote down but wasn't able to push forward. I didn't understand then how to get them to work. But sometimes, years later, there are things I can bring out."¹⁹ The notebooks were storehouses,

13 France Morin, "Betty Goodwin: In Conversation with France Morin, New York, April, 1989," *Betty Goodwin: Steel Notes* (Ottawa, 1989), p. 110.

14 Tovell, Cat. 187, p. 221.

15 Gabrielle Moser, "Betty Goodwin and the afterlife of images," *Betty Goodwin from the Collection of Salah J. Bachir* (Oakville, 2010), p. 3.

16 Tovell, p. 10.

17 Morin, p. 114.

18 Gerald Hannon, "Secrets and Lies," *Canadian Art*, vol. 15, no. 3, (Fall 1998), p. 54.

19 Jessica Bradley, "A Conversation with Betty Goodwin: From two interviews in Betty Goodwin's Montreal studio, March 30 and April 14, 1998," in Jessica Bradley and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds., *The Art of Betty Goodwin* (Toronto, 1998), p. 55; Enright, p. 52 and Bogadi, p. 93. See also Tovell, p. 44.

where thoughts could be safely preserved before being explored and returned, on different pages and across multiple books, in a modified form.

Where the notebooks highlight the conceptual development of Goodwin's art, the section of the display focusing on Goodwin's printmaking shows the technical processes she employed. Typically, an artist destroys her printing plates upon finishing a series, making Goodwin's plates a unique resource. Twenty-five plates created in many of her most important series are on display, including those featuring gloves, shirts, vests, and parcels. Goodwin used a soft-ground etching technique where an object, such as a glove, was placed directly on the plate and run through the press. An impression would be left in the ground that coated the plate and, when exposed to acid, the impression of the object would be etched into the metal. In the exhibit, the original parcel, the plate, and a print of "Parcel for Karachi Two (Parcel VIII)" (1971)²⁰ are all on display, illustrating how she achieved the final print.

Archival material does not always lend itself to display in a gallery space. When it is exhibited, it is frequently, and sometimes necessarily, stripped of its documentary context due to the constraints of display methods. Records should ideally be understood in relation to other documents in a file or series, a perspective that is difficult to recreate in a gallery setting. In this exhibit, however, much of the impact of the records has been maintained because of the number of volumes and pages on display; by displaying each notebook surrounded by other, similar books, the sense of documentary dislocation often found in displays of archival material has been alleviated. Although viewers are only able to see one pair of pages in each book (with the exception of the digitized notebooks that can be virtually explored on the computer monitor in the gallery), the interplay of themes and ideas across the books are evident, as are the relationship of the notebooks to the works mounted on the walls of the gallery. The display provides the viewer an opportunity to see the variety of forms of recordkeeping and the heterogeneous content found in Goodwin's notebooks. A sense of the central role of the notebooks in her life and artistic practice is strongly conveyed through both the scope of the display and the careful consideration of which works from the AGO's permanent collection were selected to accompany them, as well as the richness of the contextual material provided.

Betty Goodwin's art is not easily understood but, rather, is dense and mysterious. The notebooks, with their intimate scale, may be more approachable, although they too do not give up Goodwin's secrets easily. Her art is powerfully ambiguous and its mystery is not lessened with access to her working records. The art remains affecting even with the additional knowledge that can be gained from the archival material. Goodwin stated that she liked it "when

20 The parcel, plate, and print are reproduced in Anne F. Maheux, "Betty Goodwin's Printmaking: Process and Materials," in Tovell, p. 61.

a work operates on different levels and different things work for different people.”²¹ The notebooks provide avenues to navigate the complexity of her work while still allowing viewers to come to their own conclusions.

The exhibition clearly demonstrates the richness of the Betty Goodwin Fonds and, beyond merely showcasing its treasures, the curator has worked with the AGO’s archives to select and present materials that enhance the viewing public’s understanding of Goodwin’s art. The success of this exhibition should encourage other curators to work with archivists in order to collaborate on displays in which archival materials play a leading role.

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21 Enright, p. 52.