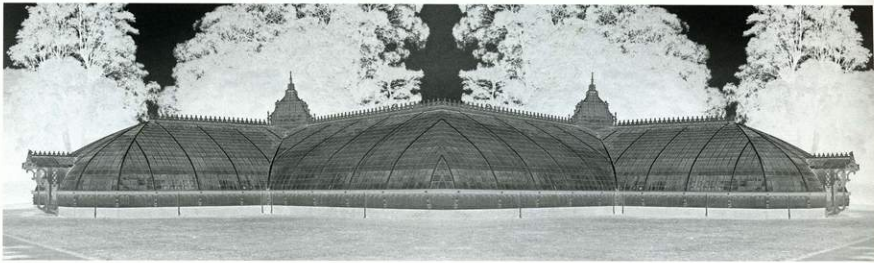


## CLEARLY INVISIBLE



MONTREAL-BORN ARTIST PENELOPE STEWART'S PHOTOGRAPHY AND INSTALLATION WORK EXPOSES THE CONTRADICTIONS IN BOTH ART AND ARCHITECTURE.

TEXT ANDREW KING

PHOTOS PENELOPE STEWART

The point of convergence between architecture and the visual arts is sometimes a very muddy place, with misunderstanding, misappropriation and misinterpretation occurring in both directions, and often simultaneously.

It is refreshing, then, to find a body of work that engages architecture in all its nuanced depth while remaining firmly embedded in its own art-making milieu. Penelope Stewart has been immersed in an admirably transdisciplinary, critically recognized art practice for over two decades. In her words, she is "fixated on invisible architecture." She is concerned with the simultaneity of what is usually seen as binary tensions: architecture and ornament, nature and culture, real and imaginary, visible and invisible, absence and presence. These tensions are what collectively give architecture its power.

Much of Stewart's work is photography-based. The photographs themselves are powerful and evocative, usually concerned with the articulated ornamental detail or composition. Once created, they are generally not left to themselves. They are manipulated through inversion, projection, printing and installation, and usually operate within in a much larger "in situ" work that also engages space, materiality, the body and most importantly, the senses.

Stewart's work is most interesting when the fragmented photographic details are magnified and transposed onto scrim-like material and inserted into a gallery or installation setting. These pieces reconfigure existing spaces through the creation of temporary, mobile architectural interventions, superimposing ephemeral structures within existing conditions. The works implicitly question normative architectural ideas about scale, sequence and tectonic composition while embedding themselves into meaningful space that a nuanced architecture can rarely achieve.

A poetic iteration of this work is *Terminal* (2006), installed on a derelict train platform in Buffalo, New York. The work weaves a nine-foot-high piece of photo-printed cloth through the columns of the platform for over 500 feet. It is loosely attached and engages with the prevailing winds to complete its form. The tension between materials (the silk organza scrim and the found and corroding iron) placed in the context of a moribund architecture project presents a surprising optimism through recalibrated perceptions and expectations.

A more ambitious work altogether is Stewart's *Genius Loci*. This is a large

ABOVE: HOUSE OF PROMISES (2008) IS AN 84" X 28" LAMBDA PRINT ABSTRACTING A 19TH-CENTURY CONSERVATORY. BOTTOM: COMPLETED IN 2006 AND INSTALLED ON A DERELICT TRAIN PLATFORM, *TERMINAL* IS A 9' X 500' PHOTOSCREEN-ON-ORGANZA INSTALLATION THAT BILLOWS IN THE WIND, ACCENTUATING THE ABANDONED INDUSTRIAL ARCHITECTURE.

body of photo-based inquiry, spanning several years and several distinct projects. The work implicates the glasshouses and conservatories of the 19th and 20th centuries. Stewart refers to them as "Barthesian sites of loss and desire," which basically explains the complex tension between the utopian and modernist intentions, and the explicit and implicit ornamentality they often exhibit. This is fertile ground for an artist interested in contradiction in both art and architecture.

The dialogue between art and architecture is increasingly complex. It is a worthwhile endeavour when each discipline is mutually understood and the relationship mutually beneficial. It is at its best when both art and architecture are fascinated with each other, thereby bringing about gentle and nuanced lessons. Penelope Stewart offers us such lessons. **CA**

*Penelope Stewart has upcoming exhibitions at CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, NY; Musée de Joliette in Joliette, Quebec; CraftACT Design Museum in Canberra, Australia; and the York Quay Gallery at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto. Stewart is represented by Edward Day Gallery in Toronto. Andrew King is a practitioner and educator currently teaching at McGill University's School of Architecture and Carleton University's Ariele School of Architecture and Urbanism.*

