



**Penelope Stewart,
Echo Utopias (Excerpts from the “Genius Loci” project),
Edward Day Gallery Toronto November 1 - November 30, 2008**

Though not a glass exhibition in the usual sense, this gallery installation employs glass as material, subject matter, and conceptual presence. If “psycho-horticultural” were a word, it would apply perfectly to Stewart’s work. She has created photographic images of glass structures, greenhouses, conservatories, and bell jars, which are then transferred onto glass, enlarged, or digitally manipulated to activate their attendant metaphorical and historical possibilities. The result is pointed inquiry into utopian vision and contemporary thought.

Science, innovation, experiment, and invention were aspects of the Industrial Revolution that would change the relationship between man and nature. Utopian visions of the garden functioned as romantic replacements for the natural world as it became co-opted through industrial development. The bell jar was a microcosm where study could take place, where specimens could be examined and experimented upon, where the authority of progress held dominance.

Each piece in this exhibition works toward an illumination of the duplicitous and ambiguous relationship between the “conserve” in conservatory, and the Victorian imagination as it is carried into our own time, what Stewart, in a prepared statement, refers to as the “simultaneity and instantaneity of the real, the imagined and the remembered.”

In *Trace Laminations* 2008 negative images of Victorian greenhouses and gardening sheds are mounted on plate glass panels, imitating oversized glass plate negatives from nineteenth century photographic practice. They are lined up on a shelf as if they were recently exposed and fixed, ready for printing. They cast their shadows against the gallery’s white wall in spectral presence. The imagery doubles back on itself when the artist remarks in conversation that during WWII, a shortage of glass led to the use of antique photographic plates as greenhouse glass.

In *Echo Utopias* 2008, Stewart has printed a suite of photographs consisting of real and imaginary greenhouses. Through digital manipulation, *house of promises* 2008, a large scale lambda print version of one of the photographed domes, has been imagined into a new configuration, this underscoring the fact that the structures, created from kits, could be varied according to owners' wishes.

The third component to the exhibition is the "Cloche" series 2008 which centres on a number of bell jars that the artist has photographed in a forested area where they reflect and contain their surrounding imagery, transit points for an imagined Eden. Three are exhibited as prints, while one reappears as a twelve-foot high panel in a DVD chronicle of its installation. In Kiwi Gardens near Perth Ontario, the bell jar and its botanical contents become a monumental insertion/intervention into a woodland setting.

The glass plates, photographed greenhouses, and bell jars resonate as apparitions from the nineteenth century with contemporary implications. While conservatories and greenhouses have existed for centuries, the Victorians embraced the concept enthusiastically, not only as a useful way to grow exotic plants and year-round edibles, but also as a thing of beauty, an estate status symbol that extended into the twentieth century in North American public gardens and those of wealthy scions. In London, the futuristic Crystal Palace of 1851 represented the epitome of Victorian glass structures. Like the greenhouses its designer Joseph Paxton had previously made, it was composed of prefabricated units and erected in six months. An architectural marvel, it housed giant trees and large fountains, and could later be disassembled and recreated elsewhere. Stewart's imagery exposes the structural relationships in greenhouses that originally came as kits to be assembled in variable formation. Indeed an internet search reveals that Victorian-style greenhouses can now be ordered on line.

The exhibition, in its display of this romantic vision is both beautiful and disturbing.

In Stewart's bell jars, nature has been captured, enclosed, and then repositioned. The pieces speak not only to Victorian interest in botanical study, science and invention, but also to current ethical and scientific discourse on genetic engineering.

Author, professor, and artist MARGARET RODGERS is the founder of the IRIS Group, a collective of woman artists based outside Toronto.