

## Beside/Under/Within: Penelope Stewart's *Canopy* Series

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Number 79, Spring 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/8810ac>

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### Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

### ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this document

Rodgers, M. (2007). Beside/Under/Within: Penelope Stewart's *Canopy* Series. *Espace Sculpture*, (79), 39–40.

ence those found in redolent nature — mossy greens and rusty earth colours, birch-bark whites and storm cloud greys are judiciously applied in such a way as to appear to have been the result of the natural intrusions of time and weather. The more one looks at the works, the more they seem to integrate and insinuate themselves within the landscape they inhabit.

The interiors glow with an infusion of warm patinas of blush and saffron, looking as if they bear the markings of having spent the summer being kissed by the sun and the moon and the stars as they have stood night and day exposed to the elements. They radiate from within.

Their situation amongst the flora and fauna of the courtyard was ultimately an important factor for Collett in their creation. These are not sculptural forms that have been placed upon plinths for decorative effect. Rather they are associational, referencing and responding to the environment where they have been installed. And interestingly the environment seems to have reacted by responding to the works. The largest sculpture sits within a pool, an impluvium. It is differentiated from the other sculptures in that its construction consists of forms taking the shape of recognizable natural phenomena — shells, plants, rocks.

Each layer of this sculpture, which stands over six feet tall, has a distinct sensibility, rather like the Renaissance palazzos whose first floors were for trade or commerce, second floors for entertaining and upper floors for family and those of intimate acquaintance. The first layer is foundational and rock-like, with each ascending layer becoming more organic and delicate in appearance and composition. Within the pool in which it is placed are algae-covered rocks and drowned leaves. The colours of these mosses and leaves and rocks mimic those found in the sculpture, having occurred after the passage of summer's time and well after the creation of the work by Collett.

*Impluvium* is a body of work that is harmonious and symbiotic with the environment it inhabits and, in a certain way, transcends. The natural setting with its proliferation of birch branches and twisted foliage parallels physically the composition and forms of the sculptures. Viewers cannot help but make the association between the artworks and the natural world they inhabit. And as the days pass into weeks, the weeks into months and the months from one season to another, the changes in the plants and trees, the rusting of the steel plinths, echo the fabricated markings of time's passage which

Collett has given her work.

Many of the statues stand, upon their plinths, at figure-size. In viewing them one almost has the sensation of encountering another figure or form, but one that has been transformed by the migration of time. Perhaps too, this association is furthered due to their materiality — ceramic works are created from clay from the earth. And as we all know, one day each and every one of us will also return to the earth — ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

Any act of creation can be regarded as a leap of faith on the part of the artist and of the viewer. The artist creates work hoping that his/her meaning will be apparent and meaningful. The viewer hopes that the meaning(s) s/he brings to the work are ones that the artist intended. In this way, through time and cultures, across religious and language separations, people have connected with those from the past, purely through experience with an artwork. But one is always reminded of the hands that created the work, that may now have been still for generations or centuries. Nonetheless, despite the temporal divides there is a connection with that man or woman that links the past and the present. The art object becomes a symbol that "speaks" and whose

voice can be heard by generation after generation.

The *Moiré* sculptures that make up *Impluvium* with their evocations of rust, age and time passing do not speak to the viewer only of decay, but also of growth. They reflect the transience and brevity of life but also remind us that some things do not change and are eternal. Their physical construction mimics the layers of history and the myriad possibilities of meaning to be found in the world around us.

These sculptures may not be able to contain the rainwater, but they do become vessels that contain meditations upon mortality and temporality. As such they are truly impluviums, with their symbolic import being the reserve from which present and future generations can draw meaning. ←

Susan Collett: *Impluvium*  
Burlington Art Center  
June to September 2006

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## Beside / Under / Within Penelope STEWART's *Canopy* Series

Margaret RODGERS

Over a number of years Toronto-based artist Penelope Stewart has used organza to cloak and veil interior spaces. *Canopy* is a recent series that acts as both departure and continuation of her practice. In this ongoing project, the artist has installed five hundred feet of screened fabric both indoors and outdoors, beginning with *Canopy* at the Stride Gallery in Calgary, and then in variations of the work in such geographically diverse sites as VAC Clarington, Engramme in Quebec City, Canberra National Domain, Australia, and Central Station, Buffalo, New York. This year it will be mounted in New Jersey where Stewart is the recipient of a 2006 International Sculpture Center Award.

Stewart has often focused on aspects of enclosure, sewing delicate material over built environments, masking and softening the rhetoric of architectural features.

A kitchen in Toronto, a derelict synagogue in Prague, an unfinished industrial space in St. Catharines, have all become reinvented through the employment of her signature medium.

In *Sentinels*, an earlier related work, the artist presented screened images of Ionic columns on panels that stirred in the slightest movement of air current and draped casually upon the floor, imaged/imagined structural properties belied by their fragile materiality. In this work, notions of permanence and the monumental are subverted with subtle wit. By repeating the image on its supporting wall, a compounding effect emerges, creating a vaporous three-dimensionality and, depending upon point of view, a moiré effect that has been likened to a TV screen and to the remediating of both photography and architecture



→ Penelope STEWART, *Canopy*, 2006. Central Station, Buffalo, New York. Photo courtesy of the artist.



through the employment of craft techniques.<sup>1</sup>

The *Canopy* series combines many elements found in Stewart's practice: her use of photographic silk screening, fabric design, and sewn work. The relationship between architectural adornment and the natural world is a dominant theme, this underscored in her choice of image. Informed by the nature-inspired motifs of Art Nouveau, and in particular that of fin-de-siècle photographer Karl Blossfeldt, Stewart has photographed, and then reproduced by serigraph, the sinuous tendrils and curved shapes of plant specimens that appear in the Gothic and Neoclassical

develop into a continuous and kaleidoscopic unfurling of pattern. At Clarington, installed on a low ceiling and lit from above, the canopy is imbued with cocoon-like properties, inviting the feeling that it could descend and enwrap its audience. At Stride and Engramme, where the piece is afforded more height, it floats above the gallery space, puffing into a cloud-like formation. At Engramme, where it is flanked by windows, it rises above a landscaped view, thus emphasizing both removal and connection from/within the natural world. Hand-held mirrors accompany these ceiling-mounted versions. Reflected into infinity, the imagery

houses and the incomparable Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Among Buffalo's many significant architectural treasures currently in need of restoration is Buffalo Central Terminal, an important example of railroad Art Deco architecture. Built in 1929, it was an Amtrak station until abandoned in 1979. Since 1997 an organization has been in place to undertake restoration and preservation of this landmark site.<sup>3</sup> Again Stewart plays with historical echoes and personal memory, calling the installation *Terminal*, a title that holds out both hope and despair for a way of life that now exists as echo and a longing.

In Canberra, as *chora*, the idea of the canopy is expanded to include the encircling of a free-standing colonnade. Surrounding an extended pergola in the Senate Rose Garden of Australia's Old Parliament House, Stewart creates an acoustic envelope where the spectator can become participant, sit within and listen to the surrations made as its baffles respond to movements of air. Stretched around the facing columns, the entire length of fabric is revealed in duplicate as it doubles back in mirror image.

The viewer's experiences take place beside/under/within the canopy, each incarnation of the work offering another reading. The enormous and diaphanous fabric is imbued with a whispering, pulsating rhythm that can suggest pre- or neo-natal experience. Stewart has employed images of both her mother and daughter in several earlier projects, and in 2000 she exhibited a bookwork titled "*O*" of *existence* in reference to "birth as the starting point of all the stories we tell about ourselves and the world."<sup>4</sup> The billowing, muffling, enfolding, the repetition of image, the reaction of the filmy fabric to the body's motions and very breath, is a powerful physical experience rife with psychological intensity. This phenomenon can be read in terms of Lacanian psychology where "Lacan says that the mother is the fundamental *Ding*, the thing that is always lost and that repetition tries to recover and yet always misses."<sup>5</sup>

Inevitably comparisons arise between Stewart's "wrapping process" and the mega-projects undertaken by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. However the *Canopy* series is gentle and intimate where the latter is monumental. In her parody of the grandiloquence of

architecture, the hermeneutic response has precedence over public bombast. How each person takes in the act of being within or underneath the work is Stewart's dominant focus. She describes her own way into the knotty world of aesthetic theories and philosophical discourse as always beginning with her own physical reaction to information.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, as one sits within or under the canopy, Plato's allegory of the cave does come to mind. The gray images could be shadows, mere memories, either imagined or as flickers of a past reality. Inside is a space of safety and comfort at one level, and at another it is a space invested with desire and memory traces, of longing for a grander past, when solid stone communicated signs of permanence and underscored society's values. Shift and instability are features of contemporary life, mutability an enduring condition and ultimately resulting in the loss of the referent. Baudrillard says that the "copy" has no original. The copy is all we have to go on.<sup>7</sup>

Supported by theoretical concepts that range through classical mythology, postmodern theory and Platonic philosophy, Stewart's remarkable oeuvre returns effectively to the experiences of the body and its relationship to space and environment. ←

Margaret RODGERS is the author of *Locating Alexandra* on Painters Eleven member Alexandra Luke (Toronto: ECW, 1995) and has had writings published in *ESPACE*, *Canadian Art*, *Artfocus*, and the *Journal of Canadian Studies*.

NOTES

1. Amy Gogarty, "Remediating Craft," [www.craftculture.org](http://www.craftculture.org) (Australia: Spring 2004), 7.
2. Designed by Sproatt and Rolph, it was completed in 1924 and in fact won its architects a gold medal from the American Institute of Architects.
3. <http://centralterminal.railfan.net/>
4. Anna Carlvaris, exhibition publication, *EXPRESSION*, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe (Saint-Hyacinthe, QC: April 2001), n. p.
5. Richard Feldstein, "Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Including the First English Translation of *Position of the Unconscious* by Jacques Lacan," *SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture* (NY: Albany State University of New York Press, 1995), 14.
6. Penelope Stewart, June 13, 2006.
7. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994). Originally published in French by Editions Galilée, 1981.

←  
Penelope STEWART,  
*Canopy*, 2006. Engramme,  
Quebec City. Photo courtesy  
of the artist.



Revival edifices found in Toronto, Canada. During a residency in the Netherlands, Stewart absorbed black dye into roses, accentuating their delicate tracings of veins and capillary structure. Here she photographs similar subject matter after it has been translated into stone and cement by architects and stone carvers.

A tiled pattern, derived from a photographed detail on Soldiers' Tower, is screened in grey ink on five hundred feet of organza. The original is a Gothic-inspired portico that shelters the names of University of Toronto members who died in the world wars, and is situated on that campus adjacent to Hart House.<sup>2</sup> Stewart has flattened the floral-inspired motif and ribbed vaulting into a repeating design. These decorative and symbolic beginnings lead toward both conceptual complexity and accessibility of experience.

Originally conceived as a ceiling piece, swells of fabric

calls up Stewart's interest in Plato, not only in terms of the simulacrum, but also in his emphasis on the importance of the role of mathematics in understanding the world. The tiled image has its own mirror-like dimension in its repeated pattern, the motion of the viewer animating its permutations, the image removed by several generations from its references in nature as well as in stone.

In Buffalo, New York the piece is extended to become a horizontal strip that skirts a deserted train platform. Here, the pristine quality of organza, that fabric more commonly seen at First Communion and weddings, is surrealistically juxtaposed against the musty squalor of dereliction. Once a thriving Great Lakes port, Buffalo suffers from the blight that has plagued many North American cities. Poverty and decay coexist with pockets of urban renewal, fine universities, Frank Lloyd Wright