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# Establishing Roots and a Means to Grow

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**Establishing Roots and a Means to Grow**

A Printmaking Installation in the Wellesley College Botanic Gardens

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Prerequisite for Honors in Studio Art  
under the advisement of Phyllis McGibbon

Wellesley College

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## I. Acknowledgements

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Thank you Kristina Jones, Gail Kahn, and the staff at the Wellesley Botanic Gardens for providing the guidance that made this highly collaborative project possible.

And lastly, I thank my family and friends for instilling in me a love for learning and hard work. It was only with their support that this project was realized.

## II. Introduction

“Art is a discovery rather than a given.”<sup>1</sup>

My senior thesis project, while ever evolving, has consistently been driven by the impulse to know and question. While my experiences were rooted in the typically two-dimensional medium of printmaking, it was only after I sought to expand beyond the physical boundaries of the page that my art-making grew.

Although the product of my journey resides as a site-specific printmaking installation in the Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, it began as a general exploration of pattern and patternmaking. I established the focus of my work only after I gained the opportunity to create a project for the Botanic Gardens through the Suzanne Kibler Morris ‘44 Fellowship. Since then, I have spent extensive time in the greenhouses, working in dialogue with the plants and architectural space. The imagery for my prints is gathered from the plants, and the work is installed in the space where I collected inspiration.

## III. Establishing Roots: Finding My Way

My work is, and has always been, rooted in the act of making. In my first few semesters at Wellesley College, I worked almost exclusively in pen and ink. My drawings, created from cross-hatching and stippling marks in pen, were both time consuming and labor intensive. I have consistently been attracted to techniques that allow me to have a sense of tactility with my materials, working in a repetitive yet non-redundant process.

Printmaking is a medium one can only learn from attentive observation and practice. By listening to the sound of the ink as you roll it out onto the glass, setting the pressure of the press, and observing how evenly your ink is applied on the block (tilting it side-to-side to examine the ink

1. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Place, Art, and Self* (Santa Fe: Center for American Places, 2004), 22.

shimmering in the light), you gain a sense of awareness to the materials. Printmaking has compelled me to be bolder with my art-making decisions. When creating monotypes for example, I sequentially build-up multiple layers of color on the same surface. There is an inherent uncertainty in the process that appeals to me. It is impossible to know for certain what the image is going to look like until I pull the page from the plate. There exists a detachment from perfection and an emphasis on developing a curiosity for possibilities. This curiosity is aided by the fundamental nature of multiplicity in printmaking. While previously I would spend hours on a single drawing and have one final product, with printmaking I could now make multiples of the same image and experiment with them in different ways. I prefer to make prints in series, rather than editions. Each print is a unique iteration of the same imagery, and together they function as a whole.

Drawing has become a habitual practice and an action that has helped me learn to see differently. In *The Storm of Creativity*, Kyna Leski writes, “When you draw from life, you are constantly conversing back and forth between what you see or sense and how you conceptualize these in the form of the drawing...you’re feeling and seeing at the same time.”<sup>2</sup> There is a relationship between seeing, looking, and watching. While seeing may be passive, looking and watching are active behaviors. It may simply be by chance that something catches my eye while I pass down the street; other times I seek out compositions. To help guide the creation of my imagery, I use photographs, direct observations, and memory as visual references. At the beginning of the fall semester, I was challenged to complete one hundred drawings in five days. No restrictions were set regarding the subject matter; I simply needed to complete one hundred. The subjects of my drawings were of no particular significance, but rather everyday objects or spaces—piles of dishes in the kitchen, trash cans in the painting studio, and strangers in the airport. While my sketchbooks now serve as physical documentation of my observations, it is the sustained act of drawing that I

2. Kyna Leski, *The Storm of Creativity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 87.

found truly valuable. I have taken this lesson with me throughout the duration of the year. It is important for me to slow down and take the time to notice what is around me. I constantly evaluate how I can transform what I see into ink on paper.

#### IV. Moving Beyond Boundaries

While being rooted provides comfort in the familiar, pushing beyond what we accept for certain helps us grow. In *Place, Art, and Self* Yi Fu Tuan writes, “we feed on places and artworks, and that, so fed, we grow. The self, in other words, is not fixed...rootedness is not the answer if only because it sets the self into a mold too soon.”<sup>3</sup>

In my early work as an undergraduate, my compositions were restrained to the dimensions of the paper I was given. However, my work more recently has transformed by physically expanding beyond a singular image. I have developed a natural tendency to make compositions that grow beyond the borders of a two-dimensional page or three-dimensional space. The organization of my work in the Pendleton West thesis studio for example has been described as having a viral



Figure 1: Pendleton West Studio Space, Spring 2017, Full view (left), Detail of corner (right).

3. Tuan, *Place, Art, and Self*, 4.

expansion. Prints and objects are layered one on top of another, cut out and into, and hung on lines of string. In the far corner of the room many pieces are hung closely together, but farther away they grow outward and diffuse (figure 1). This impulse is also noticeable in my sketchbooks. My drawings consistently reach over the page spread, expanding beyond the physical edges of the paper (figure 2).



Figure 2: Selected sketchbook pages (2016).

My process is organic and involves working in fragments, first producing several individual pieces and subsequently linking them together to form a larger body. Leski writes, “When you gather, you become your own search engine.”<sup>4</sup> As if drawing in my sketchbook, I work loosely and mostly from memory. In the studio, I will take several large sheets of newsprint, sit on the floor, and place them all around me. In a process of expansion and then contraction, I slowly create a bank of visual possibilities and then quickly extract the most essential. I generate more than I need, but I do not feel pressure to use all that I have created. In some respects, nature works in similar ways. In *Shapes: Nature’s Patterns: A Tapestry in Three Parts* Philip Ball writes, “We shall see that nature’s artistry

4. Leski, *The Storm of Creativity*, 57.



is spontaneous, but it is not arbitrary...form is naturally selected from a palette of possibilities.”<sup>5</sup>

Working in a generative mode allows me to see the possible outcomes before they are on the page in ink.

My thesis project in the Botanic Gardens has pushed me to discover how art can function in dialogue with the environment in which it is presented. American painter Frank Stella writes, “The experience of looking at a painting should not seem to end at its frame.”<sup>6</sup> While



Figure 3: “Figure Study,” relief prints on paper, stitching, size variable, installation view (2016).

Frank Stella refers to

painting, this assertion can be extended to other media including printmaking. Even before this thesis project began, my prints were attempting to expand beyond the confines of a flat pin-up wall in a studio classroom. I was beginning to consciously consider how my work functioned in relation to where it could be viewed. “Figure Study” was made in the spring of 2016 from relief prints on paper that were stitched into life-sized clothing and hung on a clothesline outside between two trees (figure 3). I was interested in inserting art where it was not expected to be found. “Figure Study” was not a site-specific project. I made the work and then determined where to display it. My project in the Botanic Gardens is a development of this consideration of space and place. I created the prints

5. Philip Ball, *Shapes: Nature's Patterns: A Tapestry in Three Parts* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2009), 11.

6. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: Frank Stella, 2011, [http://4cg99614zvx21of7ql3apu8c.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Teacher-Resource-Stella\\_07.26.12\\_HiRes.pdf](http://4cg99614zvx21of7ql3apu8c.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Teacher-Resource-Stella_07.26.12_HiRes.pdf).

with the proposed display environment in mind. The art and installation were designed simultaneously and in concert with one another.

## V. The Space

A greenhouse is a curated space. The plants on display are chosen from different regions of the world and are organized with the viewer's experience in mind. The Wellesley College Botanic Gardens feature three main rooms, each housing plants from different environmental climates. One can travel between desert, tropical, and wetlands biomes in a single visit. As noted by the Wellesley Magazine, "The Margaret C. Ferguson Greenhouses house the most diverse collection of plants under glass in the greater Boston area."<sup>7</sup> Completed in 1925,<sup>8</sup> the greenhouse has given numerous students and visitors the ability to get up close with the plants in this intimate space. The plants, displayed at table height or planted directly into the soil at one's feet, are meant to be visited, admired, and studied. Made from glass panels and a metal framework, the greenhouse balances structure and fragility. The glass walls and ceiling not only bring in natural light, but also allow one to see into the adjoining room. Here, the plants are nurtured in a shelter that provides protection from cold weather, allowing visitors to enjoy the display all year-round.

## VI. Installation

In the fall semester, photographs I took in the greenhouse served as my primary visual reference. After settling on an individual plant, I would make a print in a straightforward response to its form, shape, or color (figure 4). During the second thesis review in December, I was asked why I was choosing to examine certain plants over others. I later realized my intention was not to focus on specific plants, but rather capture the feeling and experience of being in each distinct room of the

7. Jennifer McFarland Flint, "Where Science Takes Root," *Wellesley*, Winter 2010, page 24.

8. Flint, "Where Science Takes Root," 24.

greenhouse. Rather than an illustration or a replica of what is already there, my prints in the spring semester are more of an emotional response to the Botanic Gardens. I wished to make prints which you understand through feeling rather than knowing.



*Figure 4: Natal plum in Wellesley College Botanic Gardens (left), An early illustrative print of the natal plum, pronto plate lithography, 10 x 12 (2016) (right).*

To accomplish this, I simplified the three houses (Desert House, Tropic House, and Hydrophyte House) into basic but distinct visual features. At times, I was responding to the plants themselves. Other times, I was acknowledging the layout of the room and how it specifies a path for visitors to travel. Sometimes, I was attracted to the pots, pipes, and windows. My prints emphasize and exaggerate these features. When placed in conversation with the plants, they make these connections visible. The full installation covers five sequential areas in the Wellesley College Botanic Gardens. The Desert House, Tropic House, and Hydrophyte House are distinct environments. I considered the areas between the three main rooms to be transition spaces, containing a combination of the art pieces from the previous room and the room to come (figure 5).

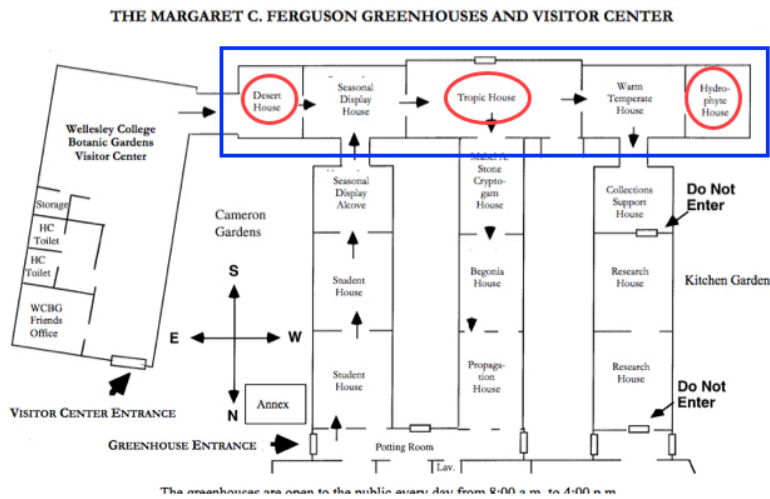


Figure 5: Map of the Wellesley Botanic Gardens, sequence of five rooms denoted by blue box and three main houses are circled in red.

## Desert House

The Desert House is reflective of *ordered multiplicity* and *containment*. There is a certain logic to the staggered positioning of the terracotta pots. Each container is an individual component, but amassed in multiples, they function as a visual whole. The cacti and succulents do not grow much farther than the brims of the pots in which they are planted. They have a definite center and regularity. While not necessarily dominant, I found the rusty orange color of the terracotta pots and the oxidized blueish green color of the pipes to be more compelling than the color of the cacti themselves (figures 6-8).



*Figure 6: Desert House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens.*



*Figure 7: Desert House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, detail of terracotta pots.*



*Figure 8: Desert House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, detail of blueish green pipes.*

My prints for the Desert House are a response to these observations. Using imagery of the cacti and succulents, I developed a composition and carved a large linoleum block (figure 9). The relief block was printed in burnt orange and blueish green on Clearprint vellum and Japanese paper. Taking advantage of the translucency of the material, I printed on both the front and back of the

paper. Ink sitting on one side can be viewed softly on the reverse. I experimented further by rotating and layering the image on the same surface. The prints themselves are contained within constructed wooden frames, taking up volume and functioning more like objects than two-dimensional surfaces. While the framed prints function as individual components, they present a more dynamic dialogue when viewed together and in conversation with the cacti.



*Figure 9: Linoleum relief block about to be inked and printed for Desert House prints.*

## Tropic House

The Tropic House is about *density* and *expansive growth*. There is a depth and layering of these leaves that entices you to look deeper and discover more. Furthered by the height of the room and the increased humidity, you quickly feel immersed in the tropics. Unlike the contained cacti in the Desert House, the plants in the Tropic House reach out and stretch beyond their containers (figure 10).



Figure 10: Tropic House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens.



Figure 11: Tropic House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, detail of leaves.



My prints for the Tropic House reflect this awareness. Taking the variety of leaf shapes as my inspiration for the imagery, I created a series of twenty monoprints on interfacing fabric.

Interfacing fabric is translucent, receptive to oil-based printmaking ink, and can withstand the wet conditions of the tropical climate habitat. Upon close observation of the Tropic House plants, I was fascinated to discover how the undersides of the leaves were often quite different than the exposed tops (figure 11).

My prints, as a result, are double sided.

While the front of each print is directly visible, it is only by a similar discovery that you will realize there is something else happening on the reverse. When creating monotypes, I allow the layering of color to build over time. Rather than separately mixing and printing orange ink, I work in two distinct steps—first printing a layer of red and then a layer of yellow. The prints are hung in clusters to give a sense of organic growth to their installation. Although the imagery of the prints is contained within the rectangular borders of the fabric, the echo of similar shapes and forms helps the series visually grow when displayed together (figure 12). It is my hope that these prints invite a second or third look. Rather than revealing themselves at once, they unfold over time. As in the Tropic House, you discover the space slowly.



*Figure 10: An initial installation test in the Tropic House, monoprint on interfacing fabric (2017).*

I was inspired by Henri Matisse's gouache and white paper "cut-out" series. The shapes he uses are organic and often plant-like, successfully merging color and line (figure 13). While his opaque shapes are made from painted paper, I use Mylar stencils to block and transfer ink between prints (figure 14).



Figure 13: Henri Matisse, "The Parakeet and the Mermaid," gouache on paper, MOMA, NY, NY (1952).

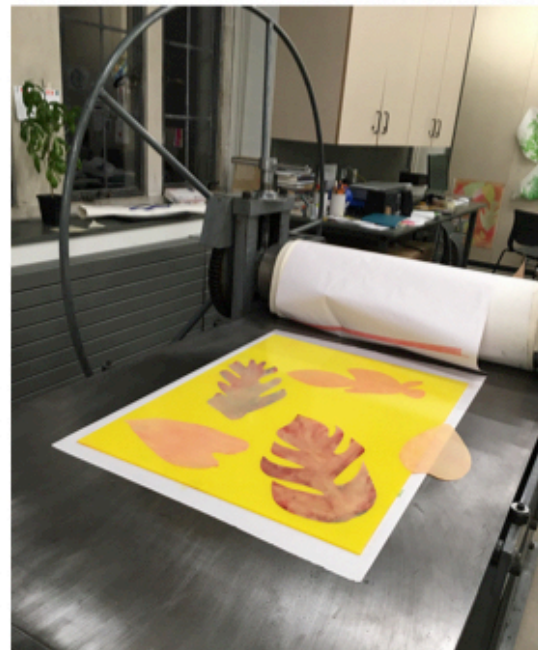


Figure 14: Monoprinting process: Ink saturated stencils (left), Inked Plexiglass with stencils on the French Tool Press.

## Hydrophyte House

The Hydrophyte House asserts *vertical climbing* and *recognition of a spatial endpoint*. The creeping fig plant crawls up the glass wall and the vines of air plants reach and curl onto stretched wires (figure 15). The plants in this space expand beyond their boundaries, but unlike the Tropic House, they climb upwards with directionality. The Hydrophyte House



Figure 15: Hydrophyte House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, detail of climbing creeping fig plant.

is the last room in the sequence. Upon entering this space, you come to the terminus of a flat glass wall (figure 16).



Figure 16: Hydrophyte House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, detail of the glass wall upon entrance.



*Figure 11: Hydrophyte House, Wellesley College Botanic Gardens, detail of red and orange leaves.*

My prints for the Hydrophyte House are a response to these observations. Taking the leaf shapes of the creeping fig plant as a jumping-off point for the imagery, I carved another large linoleum block. Propelled by the pops of orange and red found in select leaves in this space, I printed with similar bold colors (figures 17 and 18). While the block repeats to fill the dimensions of the fabric, rather than in a repetitive grid, the image slightly overlaps as it climbs upward. My prints are made on several sections of interfacing fabric, stitched together into a single long panel that hangs from the center

of the back wall. The dimensions of each fabric section deliberately reflect measurements of the glass panels of the greenhouse. The fifteen-foot print stretches from floor to the ceiling, becoming the background for the air plants in front and asserting the conclusion of the installation (figure 19).



*Figure 18: Relief printing process: inked linoleum block on the French Tool Press.*



Figure 19: Print for the Hydrophyte House in progress on the studio floor, relief print on interfacing fabric, stitching, 184 x 51.

## VII. Form and Function

It is not arbitrary that desert plants are contained, tropical plants grow outwards, and wetland plants reach upwards. Form is closely related to function. As Hallé notes, “Since Euclid, we have known that growth of any object augments its volume in relation to its surface area...We have seen that different modes of capturing energy have led plants and animals to adopt different forms.”<sup>9</sup> Desert plants store water and thus have more volume to surface area. The density of the tropics creates competition for sunlight, so tropical plants maximize exposed surface area by growing outwards.

While plant form follows function, my art aims to pursue certain aesthetic intentions. Unlike hanging art in a white-walled gallery, my installation must function in collaboration and communication with what is already present. In *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Brian O’Doherty writes, “Space was clarified not only in the picture, but in the place where the picture hangs”<sup>10</sup> My site-responsive prints grow with the elements of the Botanic Gardens rather than decorate the space. I am not only responding to the elements in the room, but also the sequence in which one experiences them. Whether following a pathway straight across the room or around the circumference, there is a certain logic to how one is supposed to move through the gardens. The order of the rooms has already been established and cannot be changed. There is a relationship between the plants and the art, and also a relationship between the viewer and the space. After spending time watching people interact in the greenhouse, I noticed that there were elements they would see and others they would overlook. My prints are both in open view and camouflaged into the surroundings. Scale, distance, and height of the installation are techniques I use to move the viewer’s attention from place to place.

9. Frances Hallé, *In Praise of Plants* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1999), 50.

10. Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), 39.

New York-based artist Tara Donovan has served as a constant inspiration. While her large-scale sculptures have biomorphic qualities, they are not representative of specific or identifiable natural forms. It is



Figure 20: Tara Donovan, "Untitled", Styrofoam cups, hot glue, aluminum structure, MFA, Boston, MA, (2003).

through her systematic process of amassing materials that she evokes patterns of organic growth. Donovan states, "my work is mimicking the ways of nature, not necessarily mimicking nature."<sup>11</sup> "Untitled" (2003), made from Styrofoam cups and hot glue, engages with multiplicity in a generative form, building a natural rhythm of growth without copying it. (Figure 20). In my own work, I aim to do the same: investigating the craft in which a plant grows as my reference, rather than the fully developed form that sits in the dirt in front of my feet.

### VIII. Art and Science

Leski writes, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."<sup>12</sup> Equivalently Ball argues, "Science is about finding good enough approximations to reality to give us some understanding of it, and not about capturing an absolute truth...Models are maps of reality: they include only the features one wants to study, and leave out everything else."<sup>13</sup> As a studio art and

11. Tara Donovan quote

12. Leski, *The Storm of Creativity*, 20.



chemistry double major, it has always been natural for me to move between thinking in both worlds. Artists and scientists aim to investigate the nature of reality to get closer to the truth. They engage in creative problem solving by asking questions, making observations, and drawing conclusions. To gain understanding, it is meaningless to copy something that is already in existence. It is more valuable to interpret what we see through a unique perspective—in our own words, drawings, or calculations.

My greenhouse prints do not reflect illustrated copies of plants, but rather my abstract interpretations. I alter scale and color while maintaining the integrity and recognizability of botanic shape and form. I aim to find a balance between simplifying forms and rendering details. I respond to what is compelling and minimize all other features. As I lead visitors to notice specific moments over others, I am curating a viewer experience.

British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy takes materials from nature, transforms them, and then integrates them back into the environment in which they were found. His site-specific sculptures and land art are produced in obscure locations and the primary evidence that remains are photographs. Unlike Goldsworthy, I use printmaking inks and purchased paper and fabric. It is his approach to interpreting nature however that I find appealing. By



*Figure 12: Andy Goldsworthy, 19 November, Elm leaves laid over stone held with water (2002).*

interrupting nature with distinctive human intervention, Goldsworthy draws attention to areas that

would have otherwise gone unnoticed (figure 21).

#### IV. Conclusions: Metaphors for Growth

When tending to a greenhouse, one physically plants seeds and watches them germinate and grow. They can branch out in many directions, but in the end, they are rooted from a singular beginning. With anything that grows, there are parts one can and cannot control. One can trim a plant, but it will always try to expand to its natural length and size, beyond the physical boundaries enforced.



*Figure 22: An early investigation with a repeated pattern, colored pen on paper, Photoshop (2016).*

While printmaking allows for the creation of abundance and variety, each print is rooted in the same matrix or stencil. There is also a similar balance between tending to and letting go. While it is easy to plan and prepare for certain ideas, it becomes important to learn when to let your impulse drive your intentions. There is value in having the patience to let something grow on its own. My initial proposal had a broad vision to investigate the topics of pattern and patternmaking.

At the time, I had considered pattern in the context of fabric and wallpaper

design. As shown in an initial mirror repeat study (figure 22), I took a single image and repeated it in

a consistent arrangement. While this method acted as a prescription for growing the image and exploited multiplicity, it had an inherent predictability that was no longer exciting to me. As the year progressed, I withdrew from working with this regimented repetition. As evidenced by my final prints, my definition of pattern is now more organic. The pattern is found in recognizable echoes of form or color through a series of prints. I kept to the same motives, but the project grew beyond what I had originally anticipated. The creative process is cyclic yet discontinuous. I learned to adapt to what was presented in front of me, working in incremental tweaks: observing, evaluating, and producing. There were moments of momentum interspersed with points of pause and hesitation. Evaluating my creative process brings me back to Kyna Leski. She writes, “You are making something of nothing, sense out of nonsense. You are finding your own way.”<sup>14</sup> While establishing roots creates a foundation, it is only when we push beyond what we know for certain we have a means to grow.

14. Leski, *The Storm of Creativity*, 57.

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Map provided by the Wellesley College Botanic Gardens

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## XI. Additional Figures



*Figure 23: Final Installation, Desert House.*



*Figure 24: Final Installation, Desert House.*



Figure 25: Final installation, Desert House.



Figure 26: Final installation, Desert House.



*Figure 27: Final installation, Tropic House.*



*Figure 28: Final installation, Tropic House.*



Figure 29: Final installation, Tropic House.



Figure 30: Final installation, Tropic House.





Figure 31: Final installation, Tropic House.



Figure 32: Final installation, Tropic House.



Figure 33: Final installation, Tropic House, detail.



Figure 34: Final installation, Hydrophyte House, upon entering (left), full view (right).



*Figure 35: Final installation, Hydrophyte House, detail.*



*Figure 36: Final installation, Hydrophyte House.*



Figure 37: Jewett Gallery installation.