



# IMPOSSIBLE PLANTS: THE TROPICS OF BERLIN ESSAY BY CAITLIN EYRE

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*“When one looks down from the high balconies of the Loddiges’ palm haus or the Pfaueninsel at Potsdam in the bright midday sun, one is for a moment completely deceived as to where he is. One thinks that he is looking from the summit of a hill in a tropical climate onto a small palm grove. Admittedly, one misses the view of the deep blue sky and the greater intensity of light; nevertheless, the imagination is here more active, the illusion greater, than in the most skillful painting.”*

— Alexander von Humboldt (Berlin, 1847)<sup>i</sup>

The plethora of artificial indoor biospheres located in and around the city of Berlin have been a constant source of inspiration for contemporary Australian photographer Henry Trumble (b. 1980, Adelaide). In his latest photographic study, *Impossible Plants*, Trumble explores the way in which the technologies of artificial structures allow the cultivation and display of tropical plants in environments in which it would be naturally impossible to do so. Simultaneously fascinated and unsettled by the way that biospheres mimic the natural landscape and sustain exotic plant life, Trumble is particularly drawn to the elements that hint at the considerable human effort invested in making artificially constructed displays of nature appear ‘natural’. During the course of his research, Trumble has visited a number of biospheres, including the Potsdam Biosphere, (*Biosphäre Potsdam*), Gardens of the World (*Gärten der Welt in Erholungspark Marzahn*), Blankenfelde Botanical Park (*Botanischer Volkspark Blankenfelde*) and the Tropical Islands resort. While many of these ‘natural’ sites are dazzling in their display of exotic plants, they are often littered with elements that only serve to confirm and enhance the artificiality and impossibility of the tropical surroundings. To highlight the irony of this contradiction, Trumble’s series poignantly documents the extensive human and technological interventions that are required to shape, transform and sustain the fantasy of exotic tropical gardens in the heart of Western Europe.

The historical and conceptual framework within which contemporary biospheres reside stems from a rich and extensive European tradition of collecting, housing and displaying exotic plants. In Germany, this tradition can be traced to the thirteenth century, when the crusading military order known as the Teutonic Knights “cultivated tropical plants and kept exotic birds” to serve as reminders of the foreign lands where their order was founded.<sup>ii</sup> Such collections formed the initial foundations for the ‘cabinets of curiosity’ (*Wunderkammer*) that were popularised in Germany and throughout Europe during the seventeenth century. Bolstered by an increase in travel and trade with the East, cabinets of curiosity allowed collectors to display exotic, rare and unusual objects from distant foreign lands, thereby symbolically conveying mankind’s progress and growing control over nature. In the eighteenth century, prominent European households kept a small room dedicated to the maintenance and display of exotic citrus fruits. Known as Orangeries,

these purpose-built rooms were often fitted with a complex network of steam producing stoves to recreate the humid environment of the plants' native habitat. These spaces allowed collectors to cultivate exotic vegetation that would otherwise not survive the cold temperatures of their new surroundings. In the nineteenth century, widespread technological advancements in heating, glass manufacture and iron production led to the rise of grand indoor 'winter gardens' capable of housing large-scale displays of tropical plants and, in some cases, menageries of butterflies and birds. Winter gardens effectively allowed mankind to defy nature by sustaining chunks of the exotic natural world in unsuitable climates and creating a way to experience tropical environments in the midst of bitter European winters. While the great expense required to build, maintain and power winter gardens initially restricted their use to the upper classes, the eventual introduction of public winter gardens gave other social classes the opportunity to enjoy the exotic pleasures that these sites provided.

The photographs in 'Impossible Plants' provide ample visual evidence of the complex management systems and supportive structures that reside just beneath the fantasy of contained environments. Drenched in light, saturated with rich colour and strewn with themed props and backdrops, the photographs compliment and enhance the simultaneously dazzling and unsettling artificiality of the landscapes. Looking beyond the dazzling surface, Trumble captures a varied array of the human 'interventions' that are discernible to the observant onlooker, including camouflaged speakers, electricity boxes and cables, themed backdrops, ropes and frames to guide tree growth, drainage grates, light fixtures, barely camouflaged staff doors and botanical name plates. In many instances, institutions have gone to great lengths to reproduce immersive reconstructions of the environments and ecosystems in which the plants naturally reside. Such large-scale constructed environments frequently incorporate a selection of carefully arranged elements that mimic the plants' natural habitat, including above-ground ponds, fibreglass rock formations, captive birds, expertly landscaped rainforests and staged desert scenes. The inherent theatricality and artificiality of these carefully considered scenes produces a simultaneous sense of fascination and unease in the viewer, who is both awed by the transportive qualities of the constructed environments and all too aware of the considerable effort required to produce and maintain them.

In order to create an immersive environment that transports visitors to a world beyond that of reality, all aspects of the experience have been carefully staged and managed within the supportive space that the biosphere provides. However, there are significant cracks in the fantasy that these institutions put forward to visitors. While some of the photographs focus on the fine details of artifice and control within the scene, the broader atmospheric shots draw attention to the structural mechanisms within which the exotic landscapes are constructed and contained. The broad shots reveal hints of reality that leak into the edge of the frame and ultimately destroy the magic of the fantasy, such as the biospheres' iron and glass roofs, suspended light frames, sprinkler systems, plumbing pipelines and other infrastructure that is essential to the construction and maintenance of the space. With the appearance of a giant film set, the photographs of the idyllic sky printed backdrop that forms the landscape at the Tropical Islands resort is a poignant example of the reality that lurks just beyond the camera's lens. While the incredible scale of the backdrop is indeed immersive and transportive, the corners of the backdrop are crumpled and creased, almost as though the backdrop itself is buckling under the weight of the fantasy it sustains.

Caitlin Eyre (b. 1989, Adelaide) is an Australian arts writer.

*i. Alexander von Humboldt, Kosmos: Entzurf einer psychischen Weltbeschreibung, Vol. 2, Cotta, Stuttgart, 1847, p. 97 ii. Todd Curtis Kontje, German Orientalisms, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004, p.182*