

Equinox

Jessica Hood's *Equinox* captures the Palm House, one of the icons of the Adelaide Botanic Garden, as it has never been seen before. *Equinox* was photographed during the September equinox of 2011 and the March equinox of 2012. The Palm House is a spectacular glass structure that continues the tradition of glass in the Garden. Gardening “under glass” is a feature in the Adelaide Botanic Garden that dates back to the first director, George Francis. His Domed Conservatory, built in 1859, was unfortunately demolished in the 1950s to make way for a new hospital wing. Soon after Richard Schomburgk's appointment as director in 1865, he built his first glass structure, the Victoria House, for the famous Amazon waterlily (*Victoria amazonica*). Schomburgk and his brother, Sir Robert, are credited with the European discovery of the Amazon waterlily. Victoria House was a huge draw for Adelaide with the progress of the first flowering of the Amazon waterlily being reported daily in the press in 1868 and attracting 30,000 visitors during the four week period that followed. These are impressive visitor numbers, since the population of the colony was around 160,000.

While Victoria House was striking, especially with its exotic and iconic Amazon waterlily, Schomburgk's next project was more spectacular. The Palm House, made of cast iron and glass, was prefabricated in Bremen, Germany in 1875 and shipped to South Australia in kit form – to be assembled in Adelaide. The fragility of the glass combined with the long journey and some poor packaging ensured that much of the glass arrived broken. The building was erected on a raised podium, was planted out by Schomburgk and finally opened to the public in January 1877. Its design, architecture and construction were admired by all. In many respects it was one of Schomburgk's proudest achievements. And today Adelaide's Palm House is one of the most significant surviving examples of prefabricated glasshouses in the world – with most European examples now demolished or destroyed.

Equinox has emerged from Jessica's interaction with the Adelaide Botanic Garden and in particular with the notion of the garden as an archive. A Botanic Garden can easily be described as a museum of living plants. In Adelaide's case there is also a museum of “dead” plants or, more precisely, a collection of scientific specimens in the State Herbarium, a museum of “useful” plants in the Santos Museum of Economic Botany and a library, art collection and archive (including a photographic archive containing black and white photos, Kodachrome slides and glass lantern slides). Providing access to the “Gardens” for Jessica meant access to all these collections. There is a fine balance needed in all collections-based institutions – that of access versus preservation. The Botanic Gardens of Adelaide must ensure that the objects collected during the last 150 years are well cared for in order to be available for future generations, yet at the same time make them accessible for current research and inquiry. Locking up valuable and fragile items will preserve them – but for what purpose if access is never allowed? Furthermore, the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide is a public institution and its most popular collection – the living plants and in particular the trees - are very much accessible and enjoyed by the public.



However, access to the information about these trees is buried in the archives – black and white photographs, glass lantern slides, reports, catalogues, lists and other documents – not for general consumption but still accessible.

Interestingly, the notion of access in *Equinox* is very much entwined with the photographs having been taken between 10 am and 4 pm which coincides with the opening hours, or the “access” to the Palm House provided to the general public. Similarly, when *Equinox* is exhibited, it will be displayed in real time – the viewing time coinciding with the duration of time that the photographs were made.

The root of the term equinox – literally meaning equal night – refers to the similar duration of daylight and sunlight. Sunlight is of paramount importance for a Botanic Garden. The Sun is also the centre of our universe and sunlight provides the basis for our existence. It is through the Sun’s energy – via the process of photosynthesis and the creation of oxygen – that we live and breathe. Furthermore, the plants that grow and thrive in the Sun provide humanity with the means for much of our needs for food, fibre, fuel, shelter and medicine.

The projection of images onto glass panels reveals a connection to the glass in the Adelaide Botanic Garden, which now houses glass structures from the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The work also provides a record of a specific moment in time, an archive of the Palm House as it was in 2011 and 2012. The nature of the Sun, clearly represented by the unmistakeable inclusion of the projectors as the light source for *Equinox*, will lead to the eventual fading of the slides during the exhibition. A further reproduction of the series is required for longevity and as a result another set of the slides is reproduced for inclusion in the archives. This exposure to light and the elements is a parallel to every archival collection. Photographs and slides won’t last forever. The Palm House won’t last either (in fact after a conservation assessment it was meticulously restored in 1995) and the plant collection, as a living collection, has obviously changed over the years.

The important thing is that this icon of the Gardens has been preserved for the future and Jessica has provided another archival element in the form of the body of work that is *Equinox*. The slides of *Equinox* will become part of the Botanic Garden’s archive, where they will be stored in appropriate conditions to ensure that *Equinox* will be available for future generations. The importance of light in photography is brought to the fore by the images of the Sun in *Equinox*. This seems an apt metaphor for the direct connection of the Sun and our existence – and also symbolises the necessary requisition of a light source to be able to read the contents of any archive.

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Image: Samuel Sweet, 'Palm House' (handwritten caption on mount),
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