

About the Cover

We Are All But Wardian Cases

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The idea of “home” has an immense emotional impact on us. Home is where we have settled, built our lives, and adapted our world around us. Home is where we feel safe. It builds our confidence and our strength to be there. But what of those of us who have left it all and moved on, not just to another neighborhood or town, but uprooted completely to help colonize a new country, willingly or not? For many colonists, even in the twentieth century, the new home is first a matter of survival and secondly somewhere to build a life. When Europeans colonized Australia and the New World, survival meant adapting to new building materials, new crops, and new food sources. But it also meant bringing many of the familiar plants and wildlife of their old countries to colonize with them. They did this for survival, for convenience, and for an emotional connection to their familiar place. They brought goats, sheep, cattle and wheat. But they also brought the native songbirds, flowers, and trees that reminded them of the home they yearned for. The ensuing ecological devastation is both familiar (Crosby, 2004), and one that continues.

This year’s winner of the EcoHealth Biennial Art Competition, Susan Hauri-Downing, embodies the duality of home in her life, and in the cover art for this issue—“A Wardian Case Experiment” (2011). Originally from South Africa, transplanted to Australia at a young age, and now living in Switzerland, Susan has experienced colonialism’s impact on the environment firsthand. Like many of us, she tends an indoor garden that includes memories of her



Australian home, and like many of us, she yearns for that lost part of her life.

In her art, what seems to be a moss covered seed pod is a literal manifestation of her own culture clash. Here, a native Australian *Banksia* inflorescence is a vessel for Swiss moss to flourish on. Both plants are endemic to their respective origins and unable to survive together in nature. Their juxtaposition is only possible in the artificial environment of the Wardian case.

Wardian cases became popular during the early nineteenth century as a way to bring exotic plants back to

curious Europeans. They also gained popularity in Australia to bring a piece of home—European grasses, crops, and other flora, and to give colonists the emotional and agricultural connection to their origins. They were also used to transplant rubber trees and coffee to other colonial countries where similar ecosystems, oceans apart, allowed Europe to dominate production globally.

But, perhaps, our winning artist's piece represents something a little deeper than a Victorian curio, or a play on two contrasting ecosystems. Those of us who have uprooted our origins and transplanted our lives watch these self-perpetuating ecosystems thrive in their seal-closed vials. They remind us that the mementos we bring with us into our new ecosystems are but a thin, gradually fading memory of our former lives, merged in our own new vessel with the rich culture of a new world. To us, and to all colonists, willing or unwilling, Susan Hauri-Downing's Wardian case represents both the internal merging of our cultures within ourselves, and the isolation without.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Susan Hauri-Downing labels herself as an “eco-artist”, drawing from the natural worlds around her to create artwork that provides not only visual aesthetics but also a statement about the significance of land management and its effects on native Australian species. The artist repurposes donated supplies or surplus materials whenever possible. Similarly she draws on the support, services and resources of volunteer organizations or of government

funded individuals/groups to network, share information, reduce costs, and to add passionate and concerned voices to the issues being explored. Production of her works often involves groups of people who share particular concerns and who might act as consultants, designers, participants, technical specialists or evaluators. Sometimes her artistic role may be simply as a facilitator.

During the last six years Susan Hauri-Downing's art practice has been strongly influenced by the birth of her now four and half year old twins and by the ecological contradictions of moving back and forth between Australia and Switzerland. Each work is unique, but focuses on exploring the ways in which the global cultivation of native and foreign plant species represents personal and cultural signifiers of human needs, including aesthetics; cultural ties to the past; food security; availability of traditional food, materials for artifacts; and medicines.

ON THE COVER

A Wardian Case Experiment (2011) by Susan Hauri-Downing. Digital photograph, 76 cm × 114 cm. This artwork was the first place winner for the 2012 EcoHealth Biennial Journal Cover Art Competition.

REFERENCES

Crosby AW (2004) *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. Cambridge University Press