

The Glasshouse Men

An Exhibition by Michèle Noach
At The Lost Gardens of Heligan, 2008

The project that became *The Glasshouse Men* came from an unexpected visit to The Lost Gardens of Heligan in 2007. I was actually visiting Eden with fellow artists regarding a long-term commission there, when we were lucky enough to be taken around Heligan.

I was very affected by The Lost Gardens, and felt moved in a way I couldn't specifically identify but seemed connected to its past and also its extraordinary location and atmosphere. The detailed guided walk we were lucky enough to have with founder Candy Smit and Peter Hampel added inspiring key information. As a result, when we returned home I realised I was thinking continually about the place, even though Eden was our main commission. With strange speed a fully formed piece of work developed before my eyes.

The American Civil War was the first truly "photographed" war. After the war the poverty-stricken Confederates, on the losing side, were reduced to recycling glass photographic plates of themselves as panes on the many greenhouses in The South. These greenhouse plates held fading images of the dead or defeated soldiers for years, until the sun bleached them away.

Given that Heligan was abandoned because so many gardeners and estate workers were killed in WWI, I decided to make lenticular panes for occasional sections of the ten Heligan greenhouses (some designed by Joseph Paxton), in an echo of the post-Civil War practice.

These panes each hold three images, depending on the angle viewed and are:

1. A plant of that specific greenhouse or of nearby location
2. A soldier or equipment of the First World War (pertaining to The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, the unit the gardeners all fought in)
3. A gardener or his affects

As people passed by the greenhouses they caught glimpses of these images which came and went as they moved past. Heligan has something of a reputation for ghosts: I'm was hoping to provide them with a window to look out from.

This installation was an attempt to depict, without the usual tired war icons, not just that young men made an enormous sacrifice and suffered desperately when they went to fight, but that they were men from all walks of life. That everything was affected, everything decimated. From the local male population to the regional industries. Even gardens. The normality and ordinariness of a greenhouse is suddenly cast in the bleak light of WWI and those who played a part. From peacefully growing cucumbers to trench warfare and, for very many, a frightening death in a unknown place. I hoped to make the vanished lives of those gardeners briefly vivid again, to those visiting the gardens. It was a short-term celebration and memorial for those families of the gardeners, many of whom still live locally.

The Lost Gardens of Heligan bought half the installation pieces at the end of the run and these are kept on site.



Lenticulars

Lenticulars are made by interlacing (in this case three) separate images and placing a plastic screen over the top which comprises thousands of lensed ridges. This enables the viewer to see any one of the 3 images from slightly varying positions.

It's a process that has developed from Victorian optical cards to Cold War-era badges, 1960's election merchandise and 'moving' graphics on postcards. Psychedelia found its natural medium in lenticulars. China knocked out millions of exquisitely mis-registered lenticular badges and toys in the 60's & 70's and the process is still surprisingly complex. I have collected them since childhood.

I normally use three images that I originate as paintings, drawings, monoprints or etchings. For Heligan I also used a few photographs, as we were lucky to have a few precious archive images. (I also spent time in research at the DCLI Regimental Museum, as well as at Heligan and the local war memorials). These three images are then locked in slices and only made comprehensible when the lensed screen is placed, very accurately, on top.

The joy of lenticulars, for me, is the ghostly and childish pleasure in seeing images vanish and appear before your eyes. A contained but elusive & liquid world.



The Old Saw, Michèle Noach, 2008 (lenticular)

Exhibited in The Old Tool Shed as part of *The Glasshouse Men* at The Lost Gardens of Heligan