

JANET LAURENCE: AFTER NATURE

Essay by Chief Curator Rachel Kent



Nature needs no home; it is home.

David George Haskell, 'The Songs of Trees', 2017

Janet Laurence: After Nature is presented at the MCA from 01.03. – 10.06.19.

For over 30 years Janet Laurence has explored the interconnection of all living things – animal, plant, mineral – through her multi-disciplinary practice. Working across painting, sculpture, installation, photography and video, she has employed diverse materials to explore the natural world in all its beauty and complexity, as well as the environmental challenges it faces today: the age of the Anthropocene.

Laurence's practice has encompassed small objects through to vast installations. Increasingly, over the years, she has worked beyond the museum's walls to transform public sites through her immersive installations and environments using evocative natural materials such as ash and straw, minerals and oxides, living plant matter, corals, taxidermy birds, and more. Researching historical collections and drawing on the rich holdings of natural history museums, her practice has brought together various conceptual threads over time that encompass themes of memory and matter; alchemy and transformation; ephemerality and transience; threatened creatures and environments; and notions of healing and physical, as well as cultural, restoration.

Empathy lies at the core of Laurence's multi-dimensional practice, expressed in her concern for, and nurture of, the fragile objects and creatures within the works. It also reflects her desire that we – as viewers, and human beings sharing the planet with other species – identify with and care for them as well. In this regard her work speaks to

essential questions around reciprocity, understanding and co-existence: the fundamentals of survival and growth in a perilous age. It asks the questions: How can we help others to help ourselves? How can we work together to save our planet for future generations? Bridging ethical and environmental concerns, Laurence's art reflects on the inseparability of all things and represents, in her words, "an ecological quest".

Born in Sydney in 1947, Laurence spent her early twenties in Europe and Italy, where she studied in Perugia and came into contact with the work of the Arte Povera artists. She then returned to Australia to continue her undergraduate studies; and relocated to New York from late 1979–1981 to undertake her graduate studies there, returning once more to Sydney in 1982 to begin an MFA at the newly established College of Fine Arts. There she met fellow artists including Joan Brassil (1919–2005) and Joan Grounds (1939–) with whom she would establish lasting friendships. Like Laurence, they were working with installation practices and ephemeral materials that were out of step with much of the modernist painting and sculpture being exhibited in Australia at the time – "we had a philosophical connection", she recalls. "Joan Brassil was inspiring in the work she made and I felt like she was a peer. She was interested in looking at things in nature, and which could become art – so we shared that." Bronwyn Oliver (1959–2006) became another friend and peer through the postgraduate program with her evocative metal sculptures of spirals, spheres, seedpods and other organic forms.

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Reflecting on her time in New York, Laurence notes that even then, she was making early installations that sat at the intersection of art, environment and architecture. Particularly drawn to the earth works of the late Robert Smithson, she sought to integrate art within the wider built environment through her own practice. She recalls, "Living in New York brought me in touch with Earthworks artists including Smithson and his writings, which I really engaged with. His ideas of entropy and matter itself as the work, its reflection into mirrors, and the juxtaposition of geological time and human history, [were all meaningful for me]. So too was his interest in the temporal and its connection to the landscape and its transformations, and his ideas around site and non-site."

Based in Lower Manhattan at this time, Laurence would often walk past environmental artist Alan Sonfist's permanent installation *Time Landscape* (1965–), in Greenwich Village. A living, growing garden comprising flora native to Manhattan Island in the early 17th century, before European habitation, this too had a profound impact: "It drew my interest to works of art about the natural environment that could actually be an

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MERSCH
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environment.” Originally conceptualised in 1965, when he was 19, Sonfist had written of his landscape intervention, “As in war monuments that record the life and death of soldiers, the life and death of natural phenomena such as rivers, springs, and natural outcroppings need to be remembered.”¹

Like Smithson and Sonfist, Laurence too was a keen observer and writer on art in context, and wrote articles for architectural journals to this effect. During this time, she maintained detailed sketchbooks and analytical written statements about her work that reveal a strong interest in French philosophy and phenomenology, particularly the writings of Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Writers on art and nature have also had a profound impact on Laurence over time, particularly the German expatriate WG Sebald and his prose poem *After Nature* (2002). Leafing through Laurence’s sketchbooks – which she continues into the present – there is a consistency of thought that runs through them, expressed through diagrams, sketches and written notes in pencil and ink. Interleaved between the pages are dried leaves and other small tokens that illuminate the proximity of concept and matter.



Left: Janet Laurence with her work *Solids by Weight, Liquids by Measure* from the *Periodic Table* series, 1993. Right: Janet Laurence’s sketchbooks at her studio, 2018. Photograph: Jacquie Manning

Laurence showed her first installation and sound work *Notes from the Shore* in Sydney at 1 Central Street Gallery in 1981, returning temporarily from New York to install it.

Drawing inspiration from American composer Philip Glass's 4-part opera *Einstein on the Beach* it explored the tidal line of the sea and fused a minimalist, serial aesthetic with natural materials in its realisation. Subsequent exhibitions at the University of Melbourne (1983) and Artspace, Sydney (1985) saw Laurence extend her interest in materiality and space; and her encounter with the Mildura Sculpture Triennial, held between 1961–1988, left an indelible mark: "It was the most exciting thing I saw. I loved it because I felt an empathy with that kind of work." Further encounters with the ephemeral practice of Marr Grounds, who had exhibited regularly in the Triennial, and with Rosalie Gascoigne's carefully structured installations comprising found and salvaged materials, were equally significant. During this formative period a residency at James Cook University took Laurence to the Great Barrier Reef – a powerful thematic focus of her later practice – and she showed the resulting work at the Perce Tucker Regional Gallery (1982).

Laurence's works of the later 1980s reflect her growing interest in themes of 'material and matter', as expressed through the juxtaposition of metals and oxides, and organic substances such as fur and ash. An installation at the Canberra School of Art Gallery in 1988 comprised two lines upon the gallery wall and floor, one made up of carbon and the other, ash and salt. Her *Blindspot* exhibition of 1989, at Sydney's Ivan Dougherty Gallery, extended this approach across three galleries. One contained a suite of 84 black rubbed carbon drawings that wrapped around the walls as a continuous line. Another was transformed through white ash on the walls and floor; and a third space situated in between the larger galleries comprised photographs of fur and straw, their surfaces overlaid with shellac and honey.

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Janet Laurence

Drawing on the linearity and grids of minimalist art, Laurence's works of the late 1980s–1990s equally worked against its formality, introducing movement and chance through elemental traces and fluid spills. Increasingly, they took the form of vertical panels made up of multiple, similarly scaled units, their surfaces suffused with minerals, oxides, resins and organic matter. "I was looking at this dialogue [between material and matter] and thinking about different ways of ordering: such as the Periodic table, and the role of science. But I was doing this as a female artist and didn't want to follow an academic line; I liked the idea of a more poetic side to it, which was the alchemical side as it were – a side step. It was a feminist idea of not wanting to fit into this mould and to work around it. I still think alchemy is amazingly poetic."

Leaned upright against the gallery wall, or presented horizontally along it, Laurence's panel works have a powerful bodily presence and scale. "I was really interested in the haptic experience of the body and how differently we relate to matter and how it is remembered by the body," she says, adding, "the panels became like charts: a way of setting up an experience. So the big panels along the wall, which you move past, have a *bodily scale* and they are like *bodies of matter*." Like charts – but also a way of "containing matter" – Laurence's horizontal works housed densely packed materials within each 3-dimensional box structure such as hay and ash, as well as backlit duratrans prints.

Several major public commissions also presented themselves at this time, allowing Laurence to work beyond the gallery system in public space. Presented as "columns of matter", *Four Pillars* (1992) took the form of four towering pillars of glass, wood, nickel and silver marble for the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, working with Tonkin Zulaikha Harford Architects; and *Edge of the Trees* (1995), a collaboration with Aboriginal Australian artist Fiona Foley, was presented outdoors in the forecourt of the new Museum of Sydney. Combining objects and sound, this installation reflected Laurence's increasingly multi-sensorial approach to art in context; sound has remained a characteristic of many installations since, as has the incorporation of moving imagery.

Despite opening up the possibilities of her installation works, *Four Pillars* and *Edge of the Trees* gave Laurence the sense of being strangely external to the Australian art world: "I was doing these odd things in places outside the known, academic art world." Public projects and site-specific commissions nonetheless became a highly significant aspect of Laurence's practice through the 1990s and 2000s, into the present; and they have been realised in Japan, the UK and Europe to critical acclaim. Laurence undertook an Australia Council Residency in Japan in 1988, and in 2005 realised an 'elixir bar' project for the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial. She has continued to exhibit regularly in Japan, drawing inspiration from its traditions including wabi sabi, the appreciation of transience and imperfection.

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Janet Laurence, 'The Measure of Light' (detail) from the *Periodic Table* series, 1993. Salt, fluorescent light, zinc, stainless steel, lead, aluminium, laboratory glass and x-rays. Photograph: Richard Stringer

Laurence's works of the 1990s are characterised by their intuitive exploration of the relationship of matter and memory, and of alchemy and the transformation of materials from one state to another. "I had always been interested in alchemy," she says, "but then I started to work with it [directly in my art]. I began overlaying chemistry and alchemy, and would make my long columns and plates and put chemical symbols plus alchemical ones onto them." A key body of work to emerge at this time was Laurence's *Forensic* series, which she first developed for the exhibition *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art* (1991) at Sydney's Pier 4/5, curated by Sally Coucaud.

In her statement for the accompanying publication, Laurence wrote in stanzas: "installation involves one bodily and engages senses other than the sense of sight / my work is made up of parts which relate to the multitudinous spatial whole as microcosm to macrocosm." Expanding on the transformative nature of the work, she added, "there is an elemental and alchemical language of materials and processes ... in their relationship with one another, they set up a potential for transformation / fire transforms matter into spirit, ash is residue, it has potential for life again".²

One exhibited work *Forensic #1* was subsequently reconfigured into a 12-metre line of boxes of matter interspersed by light, and acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales for its collection. Backlit photographs of fur referenced Laurence's dog who had died 18 months earlier, giving the work a personal element of mourning.

In this regard it prefigured a much later work, made at the time of her father's passing, with both works reflecting themes of transformation and life into death. She further threaded slender glass thermometers through boxes of straw as a means to reflect "our own materiality that transforms" – cold into heat, stillness to movement.

A subsequent solo exhibition at Queensland Art Gallery, *The Measure of Light* (1993), expanded Laurence's exploration of material and matter, and alchemy and transformation. It also presented a new work comprising a grid of metal plates upon the gallery floor, on a bed of salt. Over the course of the exhibition, the salt slowly corroded the different metal surfaces, their degradation varying according to the type of metal and its reactivity. There was a curiously earthy, vernacular quality to the work too, with its metallic browns and salty white encrustations reminiscent of the Australian landscape seen from the air. This 'view from above' was not in fact unfamiliar to Laurence, who had worked briefly as a Flying Artist in her thirties, following her return from Europe. Teaching art in stations and communities in far north Queensland, she had made countless aerial sketches on the flights in and out, observing the intense beauty and fragility of the land, and "how badly we had dealt with it" through land clearing, intensive farming and the introduction of European livestock.

A related work of this period, *Solids by Weight, Liquids by Measure* (1993), comprised multiple vertical panels, at the base of which sat small shelves containing substances such as yellow sulphur, pink salt and charcoal. References to the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian's early naturalistic drawings of a chrysanthemum, passing through different stages of growth and eventual death, ornamented the surface of some panels; and Laurence speaks broadly about the artist's wider impact on her practice, particularly his later abstract works in which scenes from nature dissolve into pure line and colour. The scientific names and symbols for different metals – from lead (Pb) through to gold (Au) – also appeared across the surface of the panels, reflecting processes of alchemical transformation from base to precious metal.

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Janet Laurence

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Themes of materiality, memory and transformation have found expression through Laurence's art into the present. During the 1990s, however, her practice expanded its focus to embrace the natural world, in all its variety and wonder, and the museums that have collected and classified it. In 1998, through an invitation from the Melbourne Museum, she was exposed to the inner workings of the institution – including its vast storage bays, and the taxidermy animals housed there in custom designed storage boxes, drawers and plastic shrouds. "I began to think about the plight of animals," she recalls, "and I became entangled in the stories and foundations of these museums, and their colonial histories." As she walked past the silent, staring animals each morning, they took on a life of their own and their stories began to unfold: "I began to think about ways to give them a new life."



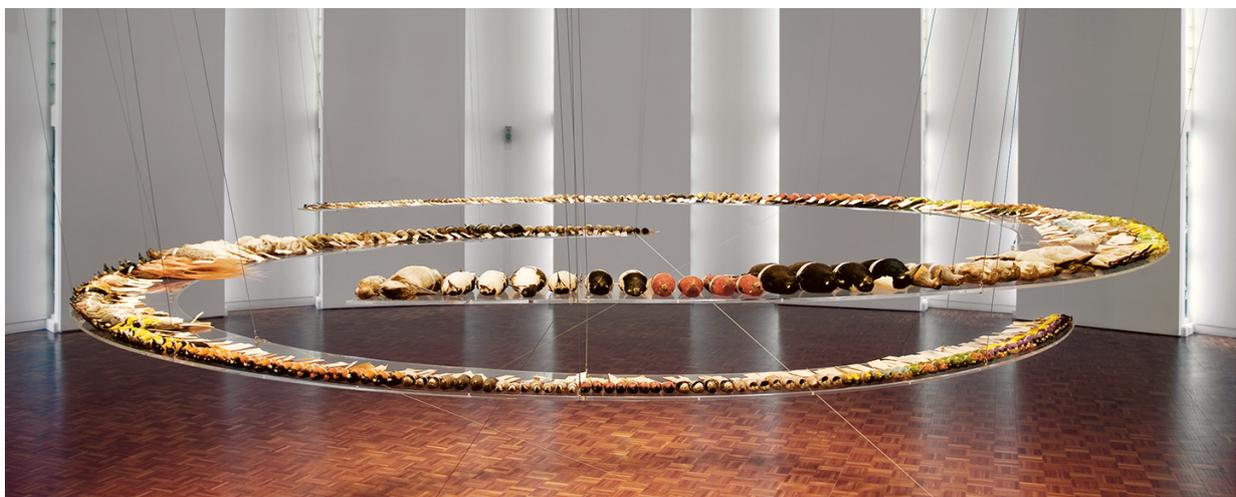
Janet Laurence, 'After Eden', 2012. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney. Video, mesh, acrylic, steel, scientific glass, taxidermy specimens. Photograph: Jamie North

A major exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, entitled *Muses: Janet Laurence, Artist in the Museum* (2000), drew upon the Melbourne Museum's collections and brought its taxidermy animals out from storage and into the context of art. Some were in their museum stillage, braced and silent, others presented under their translucent plastic sheeting, as though in a half-light. The effect was haunting. "It felt transformational," she says, "like an afterlife of these specimens, making them something other than what they are in their [former] life and scientific story. You don't have to be didactic: it can be a more poetic approach. That is in the realm of projects with artists, which can give collections new meanings."

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Muses also featured an earlier project entitled *Unfold* (1997), originally created for the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This immersive installation took Laurence's photographs of natural history displays in the great museums of Europe as a starting point. Printed onto transparent duraclear film and suspended in a long corridor formation, with reflective glass panels, the images created a ghostly, fleeting effect when visitors passed between them. Subsequent works extended these concepts of immersion, transparency and reflection, and introduced ideas of 'veiling' and the creation of 'membranous spaces' that alter one's physical and emotional experience.

Veiling has remained a constant theme within Laurence's practice, reflecting the slow accretion of substances or layers and the act of looking through, partially. In a written text entitled 'Veiling Space', she observed: "Veils are made up of skins, of fluids, of texts, and of matter, and are spilt over the transparency of glass. Glass, which itself is a static fluid, contains a viscosity with a trace of its own lineage – like a veil within a veil." Extending this approach, Laurence has incorporated semi-transparent materials including tracing film, muslin, gauze and fine-grain mesh to poetic effect in her recent work. Suspended from the gallery wall or ceiling, and transformed into corridors or spatial enclosures, these layers of material create a ghostly effect in which objects and images – as well as viewers themselves – are both revealed and obscured. In some instances, she extends this veiling further, adding video projections onto layers of fabric and an interleaving of moving imagery that shimmers and sways with the dynamic movement of bodies passing through space. This approach finds expression in *Unfold*, as well as subsequent installations and environments including a major project for the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, entitled *After Eden* (2012): a series of semi-enclosed, suspended mesh cylinders, each housing discrete objects and environments, like microcosmic worlds-within-worlds.



Janet Laurence, 'Birdsong', 2006, assembly of taxidermy bird specimens from the Australian Museum, suspended acrylic ring, sounds of birdcalls and wind flutters

Birdsong is both a stark
reminder of our changing world
and a wake-up call to action

Other key works of this period extend her interest in the natural history museum and its relationship to taxonomy, preservation, and potential regeneration. Laurence's 2006 installation *Birdsong* comprised two semi-circular, suspended shelves in transparent perspex, which housed an array of bird skins from the Australian Museum, Sydney. Arranged in orders of colour and scale, the stuffing-filled skins with their open eye sockets were at once mesmerising and melancholy; aged museum tags attached to tiny claws noted the taxonomic details of each bird and the date of its preservation. Many of these specimens were assembled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and are now endangered, some critically so, or even extinct.

As a memorial of sorts, *Birdsong* is both a stark reminder of our changing world and a wake-up call to action. Rampant urbanisation, deforestation, and the destruction of natural habitats will be our legacy for future generations, it suggests, unless we try urgently to change our ways. A further work *Vanishing* (2009) extended these themes via projected video footage, mirrored glass and layers of suspended semi-transparent fabric. Made during a residency at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, *Vanishing* featured footage shot by Laurence of dwindling and imperilled species – a snow leopard, lion, Kodiak bear, Silverback gorilla, sloth, tapir, giraffe and elephant – that are the focus of conservation and breeding programs. In the filmed footage we see the animals in repose, resting or sleeping. The imagery is partial though, almost abstract in places: a flank gently rises and falls; the camera pans across a neck, fur, hairs on a muzzle; and an audio recording accompanies the work, capturing the slow intake and exhalation of breath.

On a more personal elegiac level, *Vanishing* was created when Laurence's father was on life-support in hospital. In its focus on breath, it obliquely references the passage of life, as closure approaches.

Since the early 2000s, the lives of plants – from their natural habitats, to their human uses – have also been central to Laurence's practice. Inextricably linked to her works which ponder the fate of species, they reflect the awareness that we, as humans, are part of a much wider and infinitely complex, yet fragile, system of coexistence and dependency. Our human engagement with nature and the connection between living things has led Laurence to explore the plight of endangered, pristine environments such as the Styx and Tarkine wilderness areas of Tasmania and the Great Barrier Reef on Australia's north-east coast; the forests of Bhutan and Brazil; and the fate of countless

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animal species within them that face extinction through human activity and environmental destruction.

Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins) (2005) presented endangered rainforest species in delicate glass vials that are supported in upright metal stands, and connected by test tubes as though undergoing medical resuscitation. Glass and scientific glass apparatus (beakers, test tubes and more) are recurring elements in Laurence's recent practice as a metaphorical lens, allowing us to 'see into things' more clearly and anticipate the environmental threats that might otherwise go unnoticed in our busy daily lives. In a recent interview, she added, "Glass is the thing that creates visibility; glass creates lenses, windows. Scientific glass is something that I've continued to use, for its symbolic use in the fact that it indicates transformation, or the alchemical story of one material transforming into another."³

Revealing and amplifying these concerns, Laurence combines matter and material in her work with the careful precision of a medical scientist. Her carefully suspended plants and their delicate support structures reflect moreover the precarious balance of all things, and how easily it can be undone through careless human activity.



Janet Laurence, 'Cellular Gardens (where breathing begins)', 2005, dimensions variable, stainless steel, mild steel, acrylic, blown glass, plastic tubing, rainforest plants, Museum of Contemporary Art Collection

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Cellular Gardens came about following a Ford Foundation residency undertaken by Laurence in Chiapas, Mexico, in the early 2000s. Here, intensive deforestation and land clearing had taken a devastating toll upon the environment and local Indigenous communities. The Ford Foundation had purchased and returned land to the community to create an environmental sanctuary and butterfly habitat, inviting artists from around the world to observe its progress. As part of her residency, Laurence made veils of semi-transparent fabric, which she suspended and photographed from the trees; lengths of plastic tubing brought a medicinal, healing aspect to the work, which she titled *Selva Veil* (2005). Laurence also photographed seeds and plant matter while in Chiapas, printing the resulting imagery onto duraclear panels and suspending them, one overlapping the next, as a way to “reimagine the regrowth of the forest” through art. As a literal intervention in the forest, Laurence’s *Selva Veil* series is both poetic and pragmatic: a response to threat and the desire for regeneration.

Laurence’s powerful installations *Heartshock* (2008) and *Blood and Chlorophyl* (2014) extended this concept of life support, symbolised through lengths of silicone tubing attached to the branches of a fallen tree. Alternately, they suggest tendrils or shoots of new growth, stretching outwards across the gallery floor. Exploring the innate connection of all living things, it takes its title from the writings of Deborah Bird Rose, the renowned American born Sydney-based environmentalist, academic and author. “It’s the idea of our vascular system, and that of a plant,” Laurence says, “but it has chlorophyl and other fluids running through it, and we have blood. It’s about a correspondence between.” She adds, “When I went to Chiapas, for the first time I was confronted by a threatened landscape, an old-growth forest being actively destroyed by developers and economic imperatives. I remember thinking I wanted to work with this more urgent human impact on our landscapes, rather than just speaking conceptually and aesthetically. I became politicised.”

Bird Rose has written movingly about the interconnection of plants, animals and humans, and their life cycles, over millennia. Responding directly to Laurence’s work, she acknowledges the ‘synergy between Janet’s work and mine’, and quotes from her acclaimed 2011 book *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* as follows: “For some four billion years life and death have been working together, each finding its own level in relation to the other, and together sustaining a family of life on Earth, a family that is always changing, always finding connections, generating fit, seeking an always shifting balance in an Earth system that is itself far from equilibrium. We humans emerged in dynamic relationships with animals and plants; with them we share our dependence on water and air, and we share basic energy and basic substance: blood, and its plant counterpart chlorophyll.”⁴

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Following her experience in Chiapas, Laurence travelled in 2005 to the Styx Valley in Tasmania, home to the world's tallest hardwoods and old-growth forest that were under threat from the logging industry. There, she worked with the Tasmanian Wilderness Society to see what was happening on the ground, and created several bodies of work in response. One was entitled *Rape of the Styx* (2006), in reference to Richard Flannagan's essay of the same name; and another, *Crimes Against the Landscape* (2008–2010). Unapologetic in her politicisation, she says: "I felt I had the possibility of speaking through my art." At the same time, bushfires were raging through national parks on the mainland; Laurence documented their aftermath, placing the blackened trees on 'life support' with tubing and photographing them. "You know though," she adds, "that with eucalypts, they will grow back, unlike the old-growth forest." Laurence returned to the forest several months later with a truckload of laboratory glass, to make the photographic series *Forensic Sublime* (2008), which was subsequently acquired by the McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery in regional Victoria (2012). Unapologetic in her politicisation, she says: "I felt I had the possibility of speaking through my art."

Laurence's most recent works incorporate plant and animal specimens within transparent vitrines and *wunderkammer* environments, as a means to reflect upon the fragility of natural world, its plight and potential restoration. A trope of the great encyclopaedic collections of Renaissance Europe, the *wunderkammer* or 'cabinet of curiosities' sought to reveal a microcosm of the natural world in all of its spectacular variety and wonder. Laurence's *wunderkammer* presentations take the form of multiple stacked, transparent perspex boxes that viewers walk around or between, exploring the contents within. Each cube houses an assortment of objects and specimens, some enshrouded in gauze and others reconfigured by the artist in combinations of colour, scale, and taxonomic relation. Visually rich and compelling, Laurence's *wunderkammers* are spaces where science and the possibilities of art come together. Equally, they can be spaces of memory, loss and mourning, as in the case of *Deep Breathing – Resuscitation for the Reef* (2015–2016).

Deep Breathing – Resuscitation for the Reef considers the world's largest coral reef and living structure: the Great Barrier Reef on the northeastern coast of Queensland, Australia. A meditation on climate change and the destruction of once pristine ocean habitats, it was conceived for the global initiative Artists 4 Paris Climate 2015 and presented at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. The following year it was reconfigured for the Australian Museum, Sydney, in 2016, drawing upon its rich marine collections including fish, turtles, clams and coral specimens.

In mid 2014 Laurence undertook an artistic residency through the Australian Museum at Lizard Island, working alongside marine scientists there to observe and research the reef. Supporting some 600 types of hard and soft coral, as well as countless marine plant and animal species, it has suffered extensive bleaching in recent years due to rising water

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temperatures, causing unprecedented coral death and habitat loss. Laurence's installation comprised transparent glass shelves lined with white coral and marine specimens in hand-sewn muslin skins, some wrapped with funereal black thread and others with red. They signify the possibility of colour returning – but only if we take urgent action and address the way we live now, for future generations.



'The Matter of the Masters' (detail), 2017. Mixed-media installation. Photograph: Christopher Snee

Other *wunderkammer* installations by Laurence have returned to her earlier preoccupation with material and matter, and the history of art itself. *The Matter of the Masters* (2017), presented at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, took the materials used by the Dutch masters including Rembrandt as its starting point. Inspired by modern conservation research around Dutch painting, it charted the transformation of 'things coming from nature' into pigments, glazes, and objects of timeless cultural significance. *The Matter of the Masters* demonstrates once more the interrelation of all things and, moreover, our dependency upon the natural world in creating objects of lasting human value. Another *wunderkammer* work in the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection, *Memory of Nature* (2011), instead reprised a site-specific installation made by Laurence for the 17th Biennale of Sydney (2010). Situated in the city's Royal Botanical Gardens, it took the form of a 'plant hospital' or space for intervention and resuscitation. Entitled *Waiting: A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants*, Laurence's Biennale work resembled a glasshouse that visitors could enter into and walk around. Reconfigured for the gallery, the aftermath was placed on view as dried plant specimens, burnt bones, and seeds for potential regrowth.

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Reflecting on her *Deep Breathing* installation, Laurence speaks of its evocative title and notions of resuscitation and breathing life back into the reef. "It conjures up so much ... I've used breathing in various works over time; this is like deep down breathing or creating life. It's like a poem too. I was looking at all the things destroying the reef and finding a visual way to express them. A lot of parallels were evident and corresponded with ailments and life-support systems for humans. I wanted to engender empathy – but how do we do it for strange sea creatures, corals? With mammals people can feel very loving and connected, but it's harder with marine life. So a lot of the objects aim to endear you to them – to become wondrous, almost childlike before us." Two film projections accompanied the *wunderkammer* structure.

In one film Laurence has altered the footage and made it very pale, like a watercolour: it looks faded like the reef itself, with the occasional burst of bright colour. The second film is in black-and-white and filmed around Lizard Island.



Janet Laurence in her Sydney studio. Photograph: Jacquie Manning

Themes of death and regeneration, threat and survival, continue to inform Laurence's art today. A major new installation, commissioned by the MCA Australia, brings together a decade of her research into medicinal and psychotropic plants as a metaphor for the healing power of the planet. *Theatre of Trees* (2018–2019) is a large circular structure composed of three concentric rings, like those of a tree, that viewers are invited to walk within. Inside, they are literally enveloped by the towering mesh structure, which hangs over 5 meters in height and supports multiple suspended, overlain translucent panels

that have been imprinted with imagery of the natural world. Most are drawn from photographs taken by Laurence herself on her global travels through old-growth forests and wilderness environments. Others contain imagery that has been reworked from art historical sources, as well as documentation from conservation and activist organisations.

“It seems to be a very logical arrival to be doing this new work,” Laurence says today. “It’s a culmination of looking at these ideas around the huge stories of trees, and the threats to them. It’s the science, the politics, the history and the philosophy; and the imaging of them in our lives ... Walking through the city I was imagining it without trees, which would mean without birds, without habitats. Looking at the relationship of people and trees there’s [also] such an ancient, mythological side to it all, which includes the transformation of people into trees – like Daphne for example in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*.” Artists too have played a central role in relation to the care and conservation of trees. She cites the German artist Joseph Beuys as influential for his environmental activism and communal actions, including *Aktion 7000 Eichen (Action 7000 Oaks)* (1982), which saw the artist and volunteers planting oak trees through Kassel for the *documenta 7* exhibition there.

Trees have been a fixture of Laurence’s art since the beginning: from her public commissions including *Veil of Trees* (1999) for the Sydney Sculpture Walk, through to her *Selva Veil* works, and beyond. She has also built up an extensive archive of her own photographs of trees: “I’m observing them and this terrifying loss. I’ve had a deep environmental consciousness for as long as I can remember. Trees factor into that consciousness, so I look also at the loss of forests and the enormity of that for our planet. I look at trees with enormous wonder and joy, but at the same time, the realisation that they are [gravely] threatened. There is the feeling of this can’t last.”

In his recent book *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature’s Great Connectors* the British-born American biologist David George Haskell considers our intrinsic relationship to nature around us. A personal journey shaped by environmental and scientific research, each chapter considers a particular species of tree, its life story, community and network of relations. Working against the notion of a “binary landscape of nature and nonnature”, whereby humans sit apart from all that is around them, he reminds us of our connection to and conversation with the wider natural world. Of this “world of networked kinship” he concludes, thus: “Nature yields no dividends; it contains the entire economy of every species. Nature needs no home; it is home. We can have no deficit of nature; we are nature, even when we are unaware of this nature. With this understanding that humans belong in this world, discernment of the beautiful and the good can emerge from human minds networked within the community of life, not human minds peering in from outside.”⁵

These wise and profound words resonate with Laurence's *Theatre of Trees* for both speak to us as who we are, as *nature*; and they encourage us to respect and care for the trees that give us oxygen, nourishment, shelter and life itself.

Laurence's large circular structure is expanded by three smaller, enclosed environments identified as 'Knowledge', 'Wonder' and 'Desire' that radiate out around its perimeter like nodes or self-contained habitats: a reading room or library, a herbarium and an 'elixir lab'. Each contains an array of objects and materials for viewers to consider or interact with. They include books, drawings and videos in the first enclosure; exquisite historical plant specimens and eucalyptus oils in the next; and a communal meeting space where visitors are invited to experience the fragrance and taste of medicinal plant juices, served to them by performers in white laboratory coats.

**Trees for me are the great
signals of change.**

Janet Laurence

Laurence spent several weeks in Brazil in late 2017, researching edible and medicinal plants at the private foundation and sculpture park Inhotim Institute in Belo Horizonte. As part of her residency there, she conducted workshops with local school students and staged an elixir lab that anticipated her subsequent Sydney presentation. Prior to this, she staged a 10-day *H2O Water Bar* at the Paddington Water Reservoir in 2016, inviting Sydney locals to sample different types of water from around the country and participate in water-themed events – talks, musical performances, and more – to learn about this fundamental, precious substance of life.

Reflecting on *Theatre of Trees*, Laurence says, "Trees for me are the great signals of change. They become a register of what's happening through climate change, pollution, poisoned waters ... Yet we are still land clearing in a dry country like Australia, despite crippling drought and the knowledge that we should do the opposite: that we need to regenerate this planet." Working beyond an art world context, Laurence speaks to wider issues that affect our daily lives and future survival. "There's something very satisfying about making art that is also about regenerating and caring for nature," she concludes. Demanding that we shift our focus from "a human-centred perspective" to a wider multi-species approach, her art encourages awareness, empathy and action – "for how else are we to live ethically in this world?"

Rachel Kent is Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

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All quotes in this text, unless otherwise specified, are drawn from interviews between the author and artist in August and September 2018.

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The catalogue will be available at the MCA Store soon.

1 Allison Meier, hyperallergic.com/337906/time-landscape-alan-sonfist

2 Janet Laurence, artist statement, *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art*, exhibition catalogue, Pier 4/5, Sydney, n.p.

3 'Artist Janet Laurence on The Matter of the Masters', documentary video produced by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2017.

4 Deborah Bird Rose, 'Blood and Chlorophyll – Janet Laurence', 14 March 2014, available at deborahbirdrose.com/2014/03/14/blood-and-chlorophyll-janet-laurence/