

JANET LAURENCE

AFTER NATURE

Sheets of sheer fabric hung in a dim gallery in Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA). Each banner bore a drawing based on photographs of old-growth forests. Wandering through the concentric circles of voile, viewers were enveloped with dappled light and heard the birdsong of the endangered black cockatoo, before reaching a shaft of light at the work's core. The installation, *Forest (Theatre of Trees)* (2018–19), commissioned for Janet Laurence's first major survey, "After Nature," was perfectly balanced, evoking an experience of nature without seeking to reproduce it. This is Laurence's mastery—harnessing materials both organic and manufactured to situate humans as part of the natural world, subverting the perception that we are above or outside it.

Laurence, born in Sydney in 1947, was deeply impacted by Arte Povera and Land Art—movements that she encountered during her early studies in Italy and New York. Returning to Australia for her postgraduate studies in the early 1980s, she met kindred artistic spirits working against the prevailing modernist grain of the time by using ephemeral materials and installations. She has continued to work with these media for over three decades, exhibiting in a variety of contexts, including public spaces.

"After Nature" encompassed works across these three decades, including early pieces such as the installation *Solids by Weight, Liquids by Measure* (1993), featuring columns of metal plates quoting chemical and alchemical symbols, interspersed with motifs recalling Piet Mondrian's drawings of a chrysanthemum's growth and decay. The life cycles of animals, vegetables and minerals are explored in parallel throughout Laurence's practice. The art-science of alchemy—evoking material and conceptual transformations where memory remains, even as form changes—is central.

While she worked with natural materials such as ash, straw and fur from early on, the artist has said that it wasn't until the early 2000s, after witnessing the impact of land clearing during a residency in Chiapas, Mexico, that her material choices became deliberately political. Since then, Laurence's practice has been concerned with the environmental impact of humans, with climate change being an overriding concern. *Heartshock (After Nature)* (2008/19), another large-scale installation, comprised a tree felled by drought, with medical gauze binding laboratory glass and salt rocks to its branches. In the neighboring *Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins)* (2005), slender steel structures frame a series of hand-blown glass vessels connected by loops of hospital-grade silicone tubing. Sitting in the glass containers were endangered plant species from Tasmania's Tarkine wilderness area. The scientific and natural

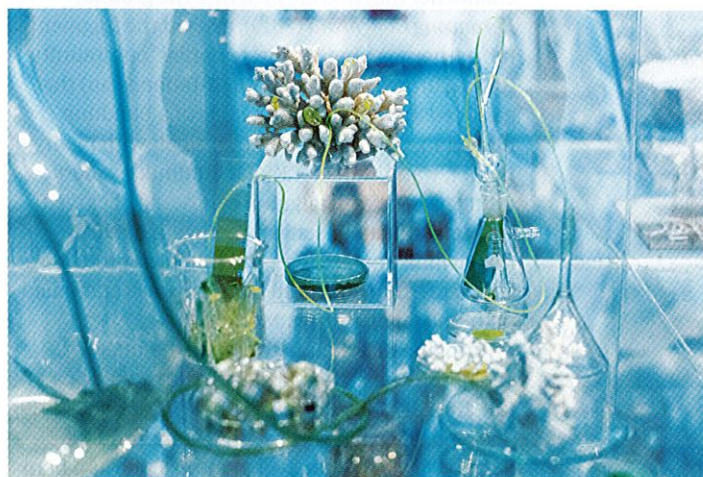
worlds met inversely in these two works, as the support and the supported. In *Heartshock*, nature dictated the form of the work, and in *Cellular Gardens*, it was cradled within a human-made life-support system. The juxtaposition of the two pieces served as a reminder of our inextricable relationship with the earth.

Several works in the show drew on natural history museum collections. *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef* (2015–16) was reassembled for the exhibition using objects from the Australian Museum, including coral and wet specimens set within acrylic cases. The work was interlaced with pigments, from blood red to sea green, appearing on thread, laboratory glass and organic objects. This was bookended by video projections containing tonally adjusted footage of coral and marine life, recorded during a residency at Lizard Island, a site where the Great Barrier Reef is monitored for coral bleaching. The central portion of *Deep Breathing*, with its objects resting on mirrored bases, recalled the fractured transparency of a mineral, while the shimmering, pearlescent reef footage evoked the lining of a mollusk's shell. From manufactured and digital substances, Laurence conjures the microcosmic and organic, creating a work of startling beauty and sadness.

Around the periphery of Laurence's fabric *Forest* were three laboratories—a herbarium, an elixir lab of medicinal plants, and finally a library of illustrations, notes, books and objects. Lit with low, warm light and punctuated by cross sections of a tree trunk, these workshops gave visitors the feeling of having entered a secret hollow. In this way, Laurence tempers the cool eye of observation with a warm sense of discovery, creating a space to understand the world anew.

CHLOÉ WOLFSON

*Visit our Digital Library at library.artsiapacific.com for more articles on Janet Laurence.





was Marwa Arsanios's *Who Is Afraid of Ideology? Part 1* (2017) and *Part 2* (2019), two documentaries about all-female Kurdish communities surviving, and thriving, in a rural area of eastern Turkey and a town without men in northern Syria, respectively. Confusing the boundaries between history and embodied knowledge, Lawrence Abu Hamdan's video installation *Once Removed* (2019) features the artist interviewing a young Druze man whose extensive knowledge of the Lebanese Civil Wars that occurred before his birth comes from his purported past life as a soldier who died in 1984.

With subtle thematic links to each of the two other sections, Zoe Butt's exhibition "Journey Beyond the Arrow" delved into the "movement of humanity" and the tools, technology and beliefs that undergird "voluntary and involuntary patterns of discovery, conquest, witness and exile across land and sea" through the works of 27 artists who have ties to Asia or the Asia-Pacific region. At the Al-Hamriyah Studios, Léuli Eshraghi's performance *tagatanu'u* (2017-) took place around a ceremonial circle (*alofisā*) dedicated to their ancestors and narrated a multilingual account of a lovers' tale between an eel named Tuna and a human named Sina. Jompet Kuswidananto's installation of a bird-shaped chandelier that had crashed into the ground, *Keroncong Concordia* (2019), evoked the fragmented mixed-heritage in the "intercolonial" community (Indo-European-African-Dutch-Indonesian) that gathered around the music style of a Bandung nightclub. Similarly grandiose, albeit with plenty of humor, was filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik's gallery-filling narrative installation composed of carved wooden and rattan sculptures that imaged an Ifugao indigenous tribe's god Inhabian protecting the community against a tsunami-wave embodied in the avatar of Marilyn Monroe.

Bringing history into the present, Butt's exhibition revisited many historical traumas. Khadim Ali's massive mural *Standing Flames* (2019) depicted a winged version of Rostam from the *Shahnameh*, who has been appropriated as a hero

of Taliban propaganda. Phan Thao Nguyen's three-channel video *Mute Grain* (2019), and related silk paintings about the period of Japanese occupation in Asia, portrayed individuals' stories from the 1945 Red River Delta famine that caused the deaths of more than two million people. Meiro Koizumi's three-channel film similarly reexamines Japanese imperialism, with a recording of a former soldier (now quite elderly and suffering from dementia) recounting his participation in war crimes. The scenes of testimony, which are almost unbearable to watch, are then reenacted by contemporary Japanese youth in an attempt to achieve societal responsibility.

Instead of "leaving the echo chamber," as the title proposed, the curators tried to redefine the function of this space, in the words of their collective statement, "in order to move toward a multiplying of the echoes within, such vibrations representing the vast forms of human production." This seemed like semantic overreach and an unnecessary effort to redeem a genuine structural problem about how people receive and communicate information in the 21st century. The great thing about platforms like the Sharjah Biennial remains—despite all the criticisms the art-world punditry lobs at this exhibition format—exactly the plurality of artistic voices brought together in one location. And yet in reality, there exists an obvious but frequently overlooked conduit between the art world and the real world in the form of sustained community engagement and activism. That is one area in which biennials, in part due to their limited duration and the assemblage of artists from far-flung locations, struggle to perform. The voyeuristic, traveling-circus aspect of the art world frequently dislocates artists and curators from places where they are already having an impact on people's lives in the real world. We should think again about why it is that leaving the echo chamber is so difficult for the art world, however desirable in principle. Perhaps we enjoy nesting in our own echo chamber a little too much.

HG MASTERS

*Visit our Digital Library at library.artasiapacific.com for past reviews of the Sharjah Biennial.



Opposite page, top

MOHAU MODISAKENG

Land of Zanj

2019

Photographic documentation of live processional performance at Kalba Ice Factory and Kalba Beach on March 8, 2019, during the March Meeting Program at Sharjah Biennial 14. Photo by HG Masters for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

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HUGUETTE CALAND

Tete-a-Tete

1968

Oil on canvas, 118.1 x 118.1 cm. Installation view of "Making New Time," at Sharjah Biennial 14. Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.

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LEÚLI ESHRÁGHI

tagatanu'u

2017-

Photographic documentation of performance at "Journey Beyond the Arrow," at Sharjah Biennial 14. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.