

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

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## PROFILE

Artist Janet Laurence explores the relationship between the metaphysical and the physical by giving voice to our fraught but soul-deep relationship with the world in which we live. “My first review read, ‘Janet Laurence deals with nature and the dark side of life and this is not where a woman should be.’” She dissolves into peals of laughter. “It was a female writer!” By *Neha Kale*.

## Artist Janet Laurence and the cost of living

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Janet Laurence.

CREDIT: BRETT BOARDMAN



Janet Laurence has always found home in the natural world. For the past three decades, she has charted the near-infinite web of connections we share with the living things around us – from delicate, yellow-green saplings to hulking silverback gorillas. And yet her studio is in Chippendale, in inner Sydney, in one of the few remaining high-ceilinged warehouses not yet swallowed by the swanky apartments that are fast-starving this neighbourhood of artists.

In its stairwell, I loiter a little nervously and call her mobile, which trills inside with a loud froggy *rribbit!* Inside, the light-filled space, where Laurence has worked for 15 years, reads like an extension of her artistic persona – adventurous but utterly approachable, philosophical yet rooted in the workaday. A Perspex cabinet is filled with dried ferns, fragments of coral, vials containing powdered minerals. Her dog, Muddy, dances around piles of books – German botanical encyclopaedias and volumes with titles such as *The Word for World Is Still Forest*.

A far corner of the studio is given over to a scale model of *Theatre of Trees* (2018-19), a hanging installation made up of see-through panels printed with paintings of trees, rendered from photographs Laurence has taken over a

lifetime of travelling. The work mimics the bone-deep pleasure of wandering through bushland – complete with howls, screeches and bird calls. It is the centrepiece of *After Nature*, Laurence’s first major career survey at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art.

Wearing black leggings and dangly gemstone earrings, Laurence serves me Japanese green tea and lays out a giant peppermint meringue for us. She’s warm and gracious, prone to enthusiastic declarations. But her cerebral intensity burns at junctures of our conversation, especially when talk turns to topics such as the poets and philosophers (Gaston Bachelard, W.G. Sebald) that inform her practice, or the apathy of those in power when it comes to the destruction of habitats.

It’s been 19 years since Laurence first worked with MCA curator Rachel Kent, on *Muses: Janet Laurence, Artist in the Museum*, a 2000 exhibition in which the artist brought taxidermy animals from the Melbourne Museum into the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Although Laurence has been working nonstop since the ’80s, she cites *Muses* as one of the purest expressions of her artistic instincts. “When I saw those animals I realised, my God, I really want to show them in an art museum,” she says, laughing. “The need to observe the world and make art is like needing to write in a diary. But with some exhibitions, like this MCA show, I know that I’m getting to say what I want to say.”

Laurence was born in Sydney in 1947. One of four children, she grew up in Wahroonga, once the domain of towering forests of blue gums. Her father was the director of the Royal Society for the Blind, and her grandmother a published poet.

“My childhood was really kind of ordinary,” she says. “I didn’t really have any role models but I always had a dog and a horse, and when you have animals you take care of them but then they take you into their world. I’d ride with my horse down tracks that I wouldn’t usually go down because I would be frightened [by myself]. Suddenly, I would enter the world through his consciousness.”

Her eyes grow bright and crinkle a little at the corners. “It made me see things and look.”

**“WHEN I WAS WORKING WITH TAXIDERMY ANIMALS, THEY WERE SO LIFELIKE. I USED TO TALK TO THEM. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH IS JUST A BREATH.”**

The seeds – so to speak – of Laurence’s visual language were sown in Perugia, Italy, where she lived in her early 20s, drawn by an interest in European poetry and a connection with a landscape she’d encountered as a child in storybooks. This spirit of inquiry and near-Romantic sense of curiosity would become the driving force of her practice. Laurence would spend the next 30 years exploring the relationship between the metaphysical and the physical. Her investigations – from early, minimalist installations that revolve around memory, matter and transience to ambitious sculptures that draw on organic materials to site-specific greenhouses and plant hospitals installed in public spaces and gardens – reveal the symbiosis between the natural world and the nature of existence.

Perhaps more than any other Australian artist, Laurence’s trajectory has both pre-empted and paralleled our growing awareness about the fate of our planet. It makes us conscious but also appeals to our conscience in the process.

“Back [in the 1970s], there wasn’t much intimacy with the landscape in Australian culture or awareness of

Indigenous culture,” she says. “In Italy, I went to language and art school and thought I was going to be there forever.” It was in Italy that she came across Arte Povera, the avant-garde 1960s movement in which Italian artists such as Giuseppe Penone embraced “poor” and natural materials – soil, rags, rocks and trees – to critique modernist ideas of progress.

On scholarship in New York City in the late '70s, Laurence was witness to the practice of the Earthworks artists, who explored the environmental imagination and the way memory could be imprinted on the landscape. These works transformed her understanding of what art could be – Alan Sonfist’s *Time Landscape* (1978-present), a plot planted with native flora that had been razed to make way for the city, and Walter De Maria’s *The New York Earth Room* (1977), a loft filled with 140 tonnes of dirt that still exists in Soho.

“*The Earth Room* was one of the first artworks I walked into when I arrived in Soho,” Laurence says. “I’ll never forget it. In Australia, we had this European tradition of Impressionistic landscape painting and nothing really engaged me. But in New York artists such as Robert Smithson were writing about natural history. Joseph Beuys was showing at the Guggenheim. The world of installation opened up to me, this idea that art itself could be matter.”

Two years after *The Earth Room* opened, scientists would warn the United States government and the mining industry that burning fossil fuels would lead to catastrophic increases in the earth’s temperature.

*Notes from the Shore*, Laurence first solo exhibition in 1981 at Sydney’s Central Street Gallery, explored the edge of the ocean using sand, earth and casuarina needles. It was soundtracked by composer Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*. There’s an old newspaper photo that shows Laurence standing in front of the installation wearing a fisherman’s sweater, her expression near-euphoric. Not that the show convinced critics.

“My first review read, ‘Janet Laurence deals with nature and the dark side of life and this is not where a woman should be.’” She dissolves into peals of laughter. “It was a female writer!”

She returned permanently to Sydney in 1982 to further her postgraduate studies at the City Art Institute, becoming friends with a pair of artists who were also working with ephemeral materials, Joan Grounds and Joan Brassil. Laurence says female artists working in the '80s faced a pressure to engage with the era’s dominant feminist conversation. “Women were saying that they weren’t part of nature and it looked like my work was melting into nature. [But] I felt that I was a feminist, so it was this funny thing.”

The idea that culture is masculine and nature is feminine is shady Enlightenment logic, often peddled by white, male explorers to rationalise abuses of power. But although Laurence is critical of Australia’s colonial view of the landscape, these Western dualities sometimes inform the aesthetics that underpin her practice. Her reliance on Enlightenment tropes can sometimes feel jarring. At the MCA, in *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef*, corals from the Great Barrier Reef are arranged like jewels inside a *wunderkammer*, an ode to the cabinet of curiosities that originated in 16th-century Europe and were a precursor of natural history museums. Cabinets of curiosity possess the sting of colonialism for me, curiosity depending so much on who’s doing the looking.

But here the polyps are sutured with thread and attached to a network of pipes and beakers, a hospital for an ecosystem on life support. The corals are sheathed in muslin, suggesting the limits of the Enlightenment mentality and the power of peeling back the layers of the world around us.

“I get questioned a bit about how people can feel empathetic in today’s world [and the work] is about creating empathy with the corals,” Laurence says of *Deep Breathing*, which was first exhibited in Paris during the United Nations climate change conference in late 2015. The installation was the product of a mid-2014 residency she undertook through the Australian Museum where she worked alongside marine scientists at Lizard Island Research Station on the Great Barrier Reef. Here, Laurence was able to witness up close the ways rising water temperatures had killed marine plants and animals while bleaching a huge proportion of the 600 types of coral.

“James Cook University took me to the Great Barrier Reef in the 1980s and ... I can see the difference between then and now and understand why scientists are depressed. But the act of creating a healing language is my way of trying to feel positive.”

Science entered Laurence’s practice in the 1990s, a decade she devoted to using metascience as a lens for understanding ideas around transience and transformation, action and consequence while exposing the

elemental DNA we share with the natural world. Minimalist works such as *The Measure of Light* (1993), a metal grid covered with salt installed on the floor of the Queensland Art Gallery, cast the corrosive power of rust as a metaphor for the slow erosion of the Australian landscape. Her most famous public installation – *The Edge of the Trees* – was created in collaboration with Indigenous artist Fiona Foley in 1995, and is a forest of 29 pillars inscribed with botanical species in both Latin and Aboriginal languages.

*Solids by Weight, Liquids by Measure* (1993), a series of vertical panels hovering over jars containing yellow sulphur, pink salt and charcoal, quietly commands the back wall of the MCA retrospective. Its formal simplicity – am I an animal, vegetable or a mineral? – still exudes a mysterious aura, which seems to sit outside time. “We talk about an iconic artwork that is timeless and frozen, but I don’t know if I believe in that,” says Laurence, “because art is always so affected by everything that’s happening around it.”

In 2005, Glenn Albrecht, a philosopher at the University of Newcastle, invented the term “solastalgia” to describe the psychic pain sparked by climate change. In the same year, Laurence installed an apothecary that dispensed plant elixirs as part of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in Japan. “I want my art to be a part of the world. I want my paintings to show their stages and processes. Alchemy gave me a structure to talk about transformation. Things don’t stay the same, nature doesn’t stay the same. As you become older you witness these changes... They are vivid.”

Since the early 2000s, Laurence has worked in a register that’s both political and elegiac. It insists on triangulation – the viewer, the artwork, and the world of which both viewers and artworks are part. At the MCA, *Vanishing*, a 2009 video work made on a residency at Sydney’s Taronga Zoo, zooms in on sleeping Kodiak bears, elephants and snow leopards. Their breathing is loud, primal, each inhalation a tug of war with extinction.

“My hope is that people stay long enough so the work echoes their breath, echoes their connection,” she says. “The animals are really on life support and not long before that my father was on life support and the breathing machine was just going and going. At the zoo, I was very low but through the work I was able to engage.”

*Vanishing* finds an unlikely resonance with 2005’s *Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins)*, a sequence of metal stands that prop up vials of endangered rainforest plants from the Australian Botanic Garden at Mount Annan in south-western Sydney. Their shoots quiver slightly even as they’re anchored in the soil. *Cellular Gardens* was conceived in the wake of an early 2000s residency in Chiapas, Mexico, an area of dramatic deforestation. For Laurence, the process of respiration has long symbolised the way living things – people, animals, plants – are connected. “Everything living is breathing – you put plants in a jar and the condensation is enormous,” she says, grinning. “When I was working with taxidermy animals on *Muses*, they were so lifelike. I used to talk to them because I’d forget they were dead. The difference between life and death is just a breath.”

Both times I visit the MCA retrospective, I find myself wandering through *Theatre of Trees*. Inside the installation, children congregate, peering through the mesh screens as if trying to make out what lies beyond the silhouettes of branches, the shadows of eucalyptus. Laurence tells me that watching them has been the greatest pleasure of *After Nature*.

“I recently saw these gorgeous kids when I was photographing the trees in Callan Park near my house and they were putting up drawings of trees with eyes and mouths with the words, ‘Trees have feelings too, stop hurting them’,” she says. “Children experience the world at a different level and, as artists, we have to remain children to evoke that ... For a moment I wanted to put them in my show, too.”

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