

# *Eden & the Apple of Sodom*

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Janet Laurence



## *Janet Laurence and the Unquiet Museum*

George Alexander

1

**A**rtists over the last 50 years have used all kinds of materials to make art: from traditional (like oil paints or clay), to totally synthetic (like vinyl acetate, even crashed Alfa Romeos); from 'raw' (like blood or pollen), to 'cooked' (like bricks or Brillo Boxes). In the early 1980s Janet Laurence used painting as an alibi for making ravishing assemblages and three-dimensional constructions, and over the years she has had a fertile run as an installation artist, in both the natural and the built environment. Installation is a practice of space, a making of space inside a space. And just as those hard-to-define transitional periods between seasons are beloved by artists for their quickening influence on the life of the spirit, so Laurence probes those in-between places that are active in revealing an elemental world that wears the materials and colours of some inner life.

She spent the first part of the last 15 years investigating the *physical quality* of materials (raw and cooked), and the way in which *processes* transform the substance of the materials themselves. The way in which oxides act almost gleefully on metal, the way things crystallise mathematically, or abrade patiently, or combust ferociously. The way matter endures, fatigues, frays, flakes, warps or scales.

For Laurence seeing is inseparable from touching. From the beginning her seductive work made you feel your hands twitch in blind empathy, sense the scratchy feel mixed with sweetness in her grasses, furs, and bales of straw. Tactility seems to be the source and estuary of her practice. Increasingly in her work, bodily actions and surrounding objects become undivisibly part of each other.

2

Laurence's affinities are with *Arte Povera*, an Italian art movement from the mid-to-late sixties of art made from poor or cast-off materials, and Process Art, an art that is committed more to the creative means, than the ends. Unstable materials are set in



Janet Laurence *Fugitive in light* (detail) 2002  
duraclear photographs, glass, acrylic, voile, oil, oxides, ash,  
marble, natural science specimens and projected images  
dimensions variable

motion and their interaction over time is the work, not the immutable art object. It is a way of invoking nature without forcing it into a museum-ready shape. But there is always a closeness of feeling, intense tactility, and tenderness of application in her work.

The work of the late 1980s began as a kind of research project requiring a particular language of materials for Laurence to articulate a quasi-science of 'imaginary solutions'<sup>1</sup>. Very soon her studio started filling with fur, bones, nests, pods, shells, formulae, diagrams, x-rays, vials, test-tubes: part-lab, part-shrine.

There is in all her work a recurring set of themes and categories: permanency versus transience, organic blurring into the inorganic, and importantly, order versus flux: pitting the orders of knowledge as forms of containment (whether of anatomy or chemistry; periodic tables, or rules of measure, or laws of relation) against the evanescent flux and fidgets of brute matter.

'Containers of the uncontainable', writes Peter Emmett in his monograph essay<sup>2</sup>. As if one were trying to hold the world like water in leaking hands. Nature, it implies, has these pre-formal potencies and we impose language and semiotic orders over them as a mode of control. We set up definitions over the self-unfolding orders of interaction in nature to get our bearings<sup>3</sup>.

Throughout the 1990s Janet Laurence's work extended the gallery space into the urban fabric, and the word she mentions, more and more, is ecology. Ecology, implicit in many older, indigenous cultures, asserts that everything in the world—every object, feeling, emotion, action—is influenced by a huge, all-inclusive web of factors. This is a logic of interconnectedness across boundaries of time and place, and exposes as obvious and unshakable the responsibility humans of the present have to the earth's entire population<sup>4</sup>.

### 3

The artist becomes a kind of proto-chemist then, minus the heavy symbolism. While the role of art, beyond mere formalism, seems nearer to a form of sympathetic medicine: manipulating life and consciousness in matter, blurring the organic and inorganic, connecting processes, while trying like an alchemist of old to resolve the problems of inner and social disharmonies.

All of this is part of art's original charter: nature's consolation prize for dying; dealing with the irrepressible dead (even the animal dead), and our lack of a means to assimilate them emotionally and mentally.

Being dead's a drag, the only pleasure is being alive. But we die, and because of this, thought film theorist Andre Bazin, other forms of insurance are sought. 'If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis', he wrote, 'the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation.'

4

Laurence's current work in *Eden & the Apple of Sodom*, continues her interest in museum collecting and the display of specimens in glass showcases and vitrines. Here the lost Eden of species, the stuffed birds and dead mammals, are re-grouped through the use of veils and mirrors and glass shelves. The illusions of space created by transparency (trans-appearance) and reflection, not only ensnare the viewer, but seem also to revivify the animals, as if by some homeopathic magic. Homeopathic, because it requires some of the poison to provide the cure.

The taxidermist's art (from *taxi* movement; *dermy* skin) is both faithful and sceptical of appearances. What's dead? What's alive? The eyes, in particular, seem to be both unflinching, and resigned, before the unspeakable fact of their own death. Taxidermy is an ambivalent art, it seems both a dotting compliment and a vile insult: on the one hand, 'Hamster Taxidermy, remembering your best friend forever'; on the other, the violence of the dissecting table (think of those special ear-opening skinning knives for separating the skin on the back of the tufted ear from the cartilage.) The results, of both taxidermy and Laurence's installation, succeed by sticking closely to the tangible texture and hide of animals, while remaining wedded to another place, to something absent and intangible.

Knowledge of animals is accumulated in labs and on dissecting tables. Or tracked with devices fixed on their backs with a gun, while radar and sonar chart their movements in the wild. Numbered bands of the dead animals are then collated and filed away.<sup>5</sup> How disbarred do we feel from Eden?

Laurence's practice is about poetic apprehension, not informational understanding. It's art's way of sidestepping the nosiness of science—with its built-in epistemological and technological desire to know everything. Here instead is a mode of peripheral vision, the eye adrift in the uncertainties of mirrored reflection and the slidings of veils, which can enrich, distort, and ultimately annihilate, matter-of-fact looking.

Here, through veils and projected images, we ponder the enigma of appearances. These curtains are not heavy, thick and opaque, but light, feminine and transparent. They evoke skin and membrane. Laurence herself makes this equivalence between flesh and cloth. Calling to mind the ancient and esoteric notion that skins cover everything we see. (Note Velasquez' *The Tapestry Makers*, or Shakespeare's 'These our actors ... were all spirits and are melted into the air ... and like the baseless fabric of this vision dissolve into an insubstantial pageant'.)

These diaphanous draperies remind us of the pass with the cape in bullfighting. The veil deceives us as the cape deceives the bull. What seems solid melts into thin air. But the air takes on a metaphysical dimension.

## 5

'What is an artist?' asked Federico Fellini, 'But an amateur who finds him/herself between a physical reality and a metaphysical one. Before the metaphysical one, we are all amateurs and provincials' <sup>6</sup>.

And as provincials we seek answers to questions that are only ever partial. Each new work by an artist uncovers another question, which gets annoying; but this provocation maintains one's curiosity. For without mystery, without curiosity, and without the form imposed by partial answers, there can be no art.

A last Biblical image: Janet Laurence on Noah's barge, dressed in some Felliniesque bridal veil, walking towards the prow.

### Notes

1 Peter Bennett *Janet Laurence*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1988.

2 The science of imaginary solutions, the French artist Alfred Jarry named 'pataphysics'.

3 This Cartesian cur, defined by separation and order, can be seen in works like *Mein* (1987), where bodily proportions and elemental energies are traced in shells, tendrils, coils of hair, nests, pods, pigments, grasses and shells; and in *From the Shadow* (1989), where long lines of ash and charcoal and lime form a cross, and on the walls are gridded pigments and oxides. Or *Blindspot* (1989), where bouey, fun, straw, wheat, charcoal, carbon, chalk and wax are all laid out across architectural columns and sections.

4 Consequently over time there is a growing social and civic context for the work. Collaboration follows, with architects, engineers, environmental scientists, fellow artists and craftsman. Among her public commissions: The War Memorial in Canberra, The Museum of Sydney, Melbourne Museum, The Joining Church in Paddington. Most emphasise a near Japanese sense of the permeability between inside and outside, architecture and landscape, as reflected in the *shoji* screens and Zen gardens of that country.

5 The tar is the oldest of all written forms. Writing had to be invented to preserve lists; stories you can remember. When Linear B was an undeciphered script, scholars hoped for hexameter uplift. Once cracked the inscriptions proved to be storehouse inventories. Lists gratify imaginations fixated by things. Stuffed animals in museums become things. A sort of static pleasure really: once you've got a spotted owl, you have a spotted owl.

6 Quoted in John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous*, Vintage International, 1991.