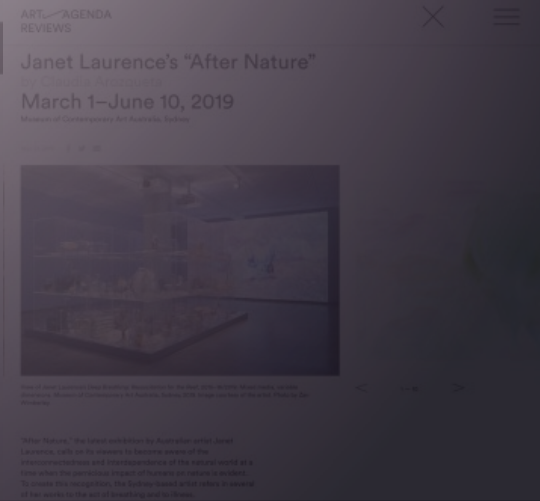
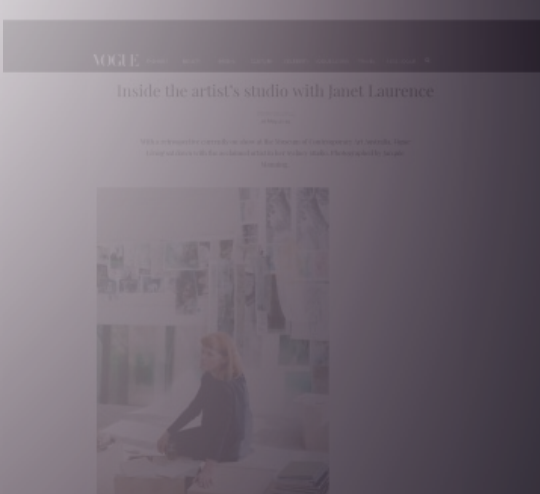
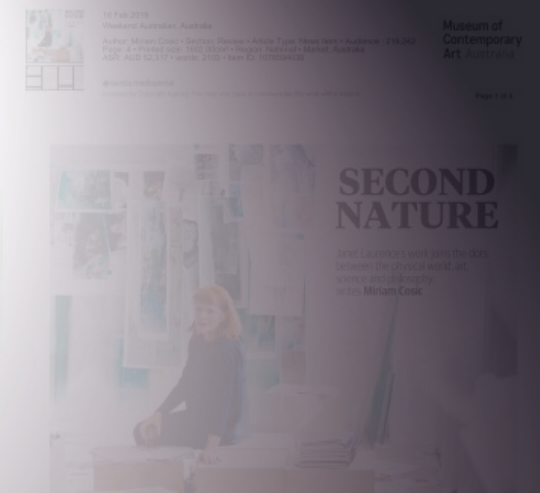
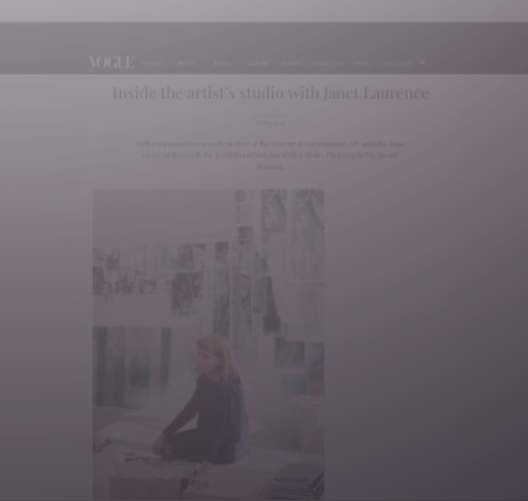
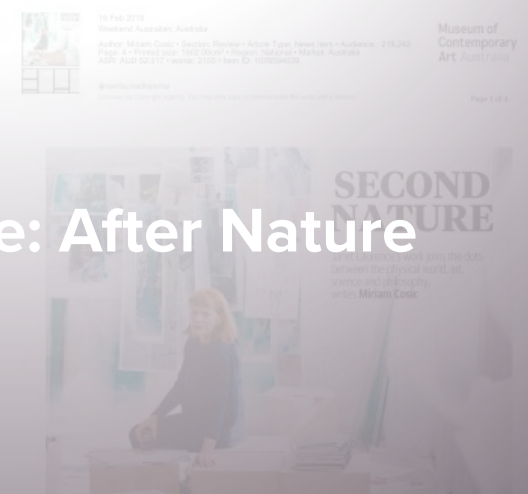
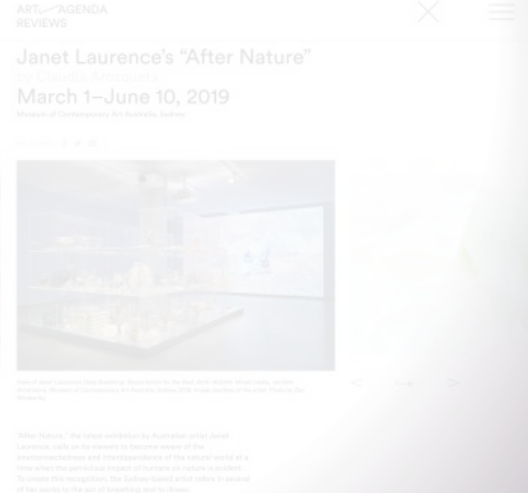
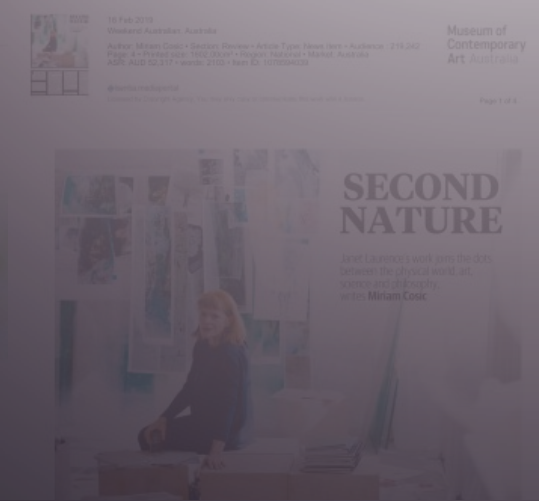
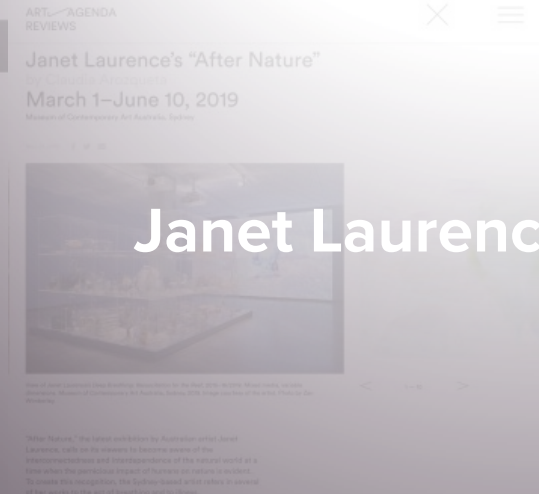
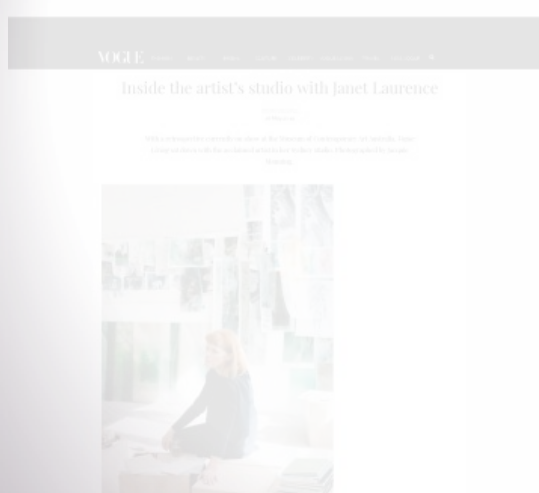
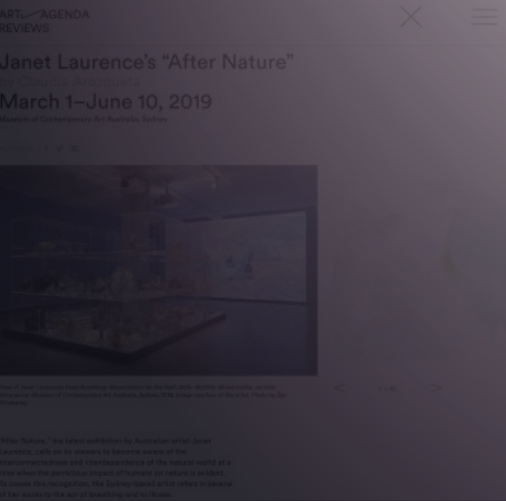
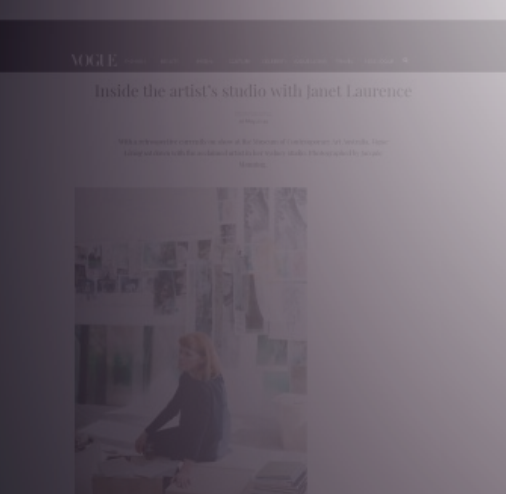


# Museum of Contemporary Art Australia



# Janet Laurence: After Nature

**3**

PIECES OF COVERAGE:

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ESTIMATED COVERAGE VIEWS:

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The Weekend Australian

(IMAGE 1 OF 4)



# SECOND NATURE

Janet Laurence's work joins the dots between the physical world, art, science and philosophy, writes **Miriam Cosic**

CIRCULATION:

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**T**here is a book waiting to be written about Janet Laurence's life. Since the Sydney artist first became an independent adult, she has roamed the world. In her youth, she did youthful things: working as a waitress, a dog walker, you name it, across Europe; fixing up an old mill with a boyfriend in Italy; being rescued by Turkic nomads in the Hindu Kush when her car hit a rock on an 18-month overland trip, London to Singapore, with another boyfriend; studying Italian in Perugia and art in Perugia, Sydney and New York. That only skims the surface.

As a mature artist, she is still roaming the world. Now she is driven by the infrastructure of the international art world: a commission here, a fellowship there, participation in an exhibition somewhere else, a solo show on occasion. "It's not a madly commercial practice," she says wryly as we discuss the income of freelancers in a money-mad world. "And I only do commissions that work with the particular interests and concerns that I have. They often enable you to carry some of those ideas into a space." This kind of serendipity has taken her right across Australia and from Germany to Mexico, from

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Japan to Ecuador.

Now a gamine and spirited 71-year-old, Laurence's motivations endure. She is boundlessly curious and, since childhood, has revered the

natural world. Her practice makes use of zoological, botanical and mineral specimens in collages and installations. She paints. She is in constant conversation with scientists and philosophers. Natural history museums trust her with loans for artworks. She loves and advocates for animals.

On March 1, the Museum of Contemporary Art will open *After Nature*, a large-scale retrospective of her installations from all over. In some, the originals had been saved; some have been exhaustively reconstructed. And a massive new installation, standing more than 5m tall, has been commissioned by the MCA. Called *Theatre of Trees*, it is the culmination of a decade's research into the medicinal and psychologically healing powers of plants. The viewer can walk among metres of translucent veils imprinted with botanical images to reach three subsidiary, self-contained environments that examine Knowledge (a library), Wonder (a herbarium) and Desire (an "elixir lab" from which visitors will be invited to drink).

Laurence grew up in Wahroonga, in the days when it was still quite rural. She was one of four children. Their father was director of the Royal Blind Society, their mother a writer manque.

She attended Abbotsleigh private school, which was nearby (motto *Tempus celerius radio fugit* is roughly "time flies faster than a weaver's shuttle"), under the famously feminist headmistress Betty Archdale. "I had a horse and my horse took me for beautiful adventures into nature," she recalls.

"In those days there were incredible little bush trails everywhere, linking suburbs before huge freeways were built." One day a week the girls were even allowed to ride their horses to school. Other days, Laurence's faithful dog would walk to school and be waiting at the gate to collect her when the final bell rang.

She had no specific interest in art or botany in the early days — and no one in her family had, either — but that connection with nature was seminal. "I was interested in a more holistic experience of it rather than specifically plants," she says now. "I couldn't wait to ride through certain pathways because they were deep in leaves, things like that. It was very much the experience of being in it."

Eventually, art beckoned, but she was discouraged. Her parents thought it was the kind of thing you did as a hobby. Archdale was a crusader for women getting the professional qualifications that would allow them to be financially

independent and have choices in life. "When I went to see her, she said, 'So you want to be a basket weaver, do you?'" Laurence says. She took art as a subject nonetheless.

"There were no role models of women artists," she says. That, despite the wonderful roll call of artists who also happened to be women in this country? "I know," she replies, "but it wasn't visible then. I went into other things, then wandered the world. I spent a long time travelling." She lived in Italy for a few years, in the Chianti countryside near Siena, after studying in Perugia. It reinforced strong memories of visiting her mothers' relatives on a farm in central Queensland as a child.

"I'd been very disturbed by being there during drought, seeing the cattle dying and the whole thing. It really disturbed me deeply." She knew things were getting worse from overhearing the adults talking. "Living there was such a battle. They started off as extremely well-off landowners but now they are struggling. There were huge sheep stations there, and horses and cattle, but in my lifetime it's become a desert.

"They cleared land, had sheep on it. And there's climate change. It was like a little picture of how we colonised Australia." Living in the countryside in Italy, such memories of home began to haunt her. "I became really conscious of that in my early 20s and realised I needed to come back to Australia and really look at our country," she says.

For her undergraduate degree at what is now UNSW Art & Design, she researched the concept of the sublime: the 18th-century concept

and the 20th-century practice engaging with the awe evoked by the beauty and power of the natural world. Think David Caspar Friedrich's famous 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, except Laurence was studying artists such as Mark Rothko. She had also been taken with members of the Arte Povera movement in Italy who sought to link the individual back to nature. Afterwards, she moved to New York for postgraduate study. There she encountered the Earthworks artists.

Some young artists are in a hurry for fame and fortune, but Laurence took her time. She was in her mid-30s when she exhibited her first installation in Sydney in 1981, returning briefly from New York to install it. *Notes from the Shore* was both physical and aural. It drew on Philip Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach* and used minimalist music in tandem with natural elements such as sand and casuarina needles to meditate on nature of tide lines.

Fast forward, and by 2017-18 the Art Gallery of NSW was showing her in conversation with greats of art history. When it showed *Rem-*

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(IMAGE 3 OF 4)

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*brandt and the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum*, it reserved a space upstairs for a cabinet of curiosities that Laurence built, based on the research on paintings of the era by Dutch conservateurs. Her aim was to explore the intersection between art, science and nature in the 17th century.

Her segue through art qualifications was relatively conventional, but Laurence's engagement with the natural world was more offbeat. "I was so curious about all those things and developed those interests myself," she says. "I worked for a herbalist in London. And the people you come across, the profound education they can give you. I had that with a couple of people. There was one who was a writer called Stuart Legge, who'd give me books and talk to me so much about literature. And we'd go riding on the Downs and he'd explain everything. I was trying to explore our relationship to land — and I still am!" Mentors, she agrees, is too superficial a term.

Laurence is bustling around her studio in Sydney's inner west when we meet to discuss the exhibition. People come and go: deliverymen, co-tenants of the airy industrial space. Her labradoodle, Muddy, prowls the place. Her space is Dickensian: wooden floors and high dusty windows, cluttered with tables, boxes,

vitrines, specimens of plants and shells and minerals, and small preserved parts of animals. Books are everywhere: some bookmarked, some open at a spread. Many are about botany and about natural history. But there are other books, too.

She has had productive engagements with a huge variety of writers, from the indefinable WG Sebald to the French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard, to the biology professor David George Haskell to Barbara Bird Rose, an American transplant to the University of NSW who specialised in "environmental humanities": the interfaces between science and art, nature and culture, and the politics that inform, and are informed by them. These writers have provided epigraphs for Laurence's works and edifying reading and personal conversations. The title of the MCA exhibition is taken from Sebald's elegiac 2002 prose poem *After Nature*.

Given her cosmopolitan life, it's not surprising perhaps that when Laurence settled down, it wasn't with an ordinary Australian. The richness of the wider world has always beckoned. Her husband, Brian Zulaikha, is an architect who came to Australia when he was five. His family had fled Iraq after World War II, when things were getting dicey for the Sephardic Jews who lived there and, like many of them, they fetched up as refugees in South India.

The two of them have a light-filled contemporary house overlooking Sydney Harbour from the west, with a magnificent natural garden. Her Instagram feed is filled with the snaps and videos she takes when walking Muddy by the water or through wild spots. And yet Laurence and Zulaikha are also very urban. Wearing arty black most of the time, they are fixtures on Sydney's intellectual scene, constantly out and about at art exhibitions, lectures, concerts, and theatre.

In her studio, she is taking me on a tour. All the "stuff" she has in the rooms instils a sense of wonder. Laurence's work is filled with enchantment; indeed she calls on the ancient study of alchemy, which dealt with processes of creation and transformation.

It is also, inevitably, pervaded by ephemerality, the knowledge that everything changes and death beckons the mortal. She is as preoccupied with environmental degradation as she was during those frightening visits to her relatives'

drought-stricken farms. She reads and travels and thinks in order to reach for an understanding of the dangers threatening the natural world in the Anthropocene era and to convey what she finds to viewers of her art. Her politics have never waned.

In 2012, she presented a show for the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation called *After Eden*. It was another of those serendipitous projects. Gene Sherman has been a force in the Australian art world but is also a committed activist for animal rights and a vegan. She was chair of the group Voiceless for a number of years. *After Eden* was a startling voyage through photography, video, taxidermy and paint, past wolves and pandas and owls, exploring the destruction of habitats even while holding out hope for healing.

Her work *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef*, now held by the Australian Museum in Canberra, was first shown in Paris for the 2016 Climate Talks. It will be on show at the MCA. In his essay for the beautifully produced *After Nature* catalogue, Iain McCalman, the ANU historian whose books have included the profound and profoundly readable *The Reef: A Passionate History — The Great Barrier Reef from Captain Cook to Climate Change*, wrote: "Laurence's blend of artistic talent and scientific understanding enables her to dramatise the complex calculations, formulae and data that are usually contained in scientific papers." And further on: "Janet Laurence is never didactic; she offers no glib answers or facile solutions. Instead, she is a magus of art who simultaneously engages our minds and hearts in a quest to save the greatest marine this planet has ever known."

At the moment, she is riffling through the

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workbooks she has kept for decades. She shows me pictures and dried plants and other memorabilia that fall out of them. Her memory is triggered and she talks of places and the revelations she has had in them. She is a chatterbox once she gets started, and one thing leads to another. The books will go into the Library section of the MCA commission.

I tell her I'd like to stow away here, hide out in a corner to read her books. She laughs out loud, delighted to find someone who is as gripped as she is by the things that consume her.

*After Nature* is at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art from March 1 to June 10.

## WEARING ARTY BLACK MOST OF THE TIME, LAURENCE AND ZULAIKHA ARE FIXTURES ON SYDNEY'S INTELLECTUAL SCENE



Janet Laurence  
preparing for her  
2019 exhibition at  
the MCA

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# Inside the artist's studio with Janet Laurence

YEONG SASSALL  
16 May 2019

With a retrospective currently on show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, *Vogue Living* sat down with the acclaimed artist in her Sydney studio. Photographed by Jacque Manning.



**Janet Laurence** is nose deep in a pile of sketchbooks and botanical books and surrounded by remnants of her expansive, decades-long body of work when I walk into her Chippendale studio on a sunny autumn afternoon. Flanked by intriguing clusters of glass jars, beakers and cut-off tree branches, the Australian artist was in the midst of

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DOMAIN AUTHORITY: **82**

gaseous, bubbles and cut on tree branches, the Australian artist was in the midst of preparing for a massive retrospective (on now until June 10 at Sydney's [Museum of Contemporary Art](#)) when we sat down to chat about her illustrious career.



With works spanning some 30 years, *Janet Laurence: After Nature* is the first major survey of the artist's work, which spans sculpture, installation, photography and video. The exhibition's pieces have been carefully selected by the MCA's chief curator Rachel Kent and include many of the key works from Laurence's career, thanks to loans from public institutions around the country. While it's impossible to summarise the scope of Laurence's oeuvre in one sound bite, her obvious love and appreciation for the natural world in all its guises is a major undercurrent to her work.

Below, she chats to VL about her MCA exhibition, past and present work, and inspiration.



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(IMAGE 2 OF 9)

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**Your body of work is huge. How did you go about deciding which work you would include in the exhibition?**

I worked very closely with the curator, Rachel Kent, and she actually said to me, knowing my work very well, she said I'd like to have these works and she named them all and I was a little alarmed because some of them were big installations that really no longer existed so that of course meant re-making some of them.



And the other ones she wanted involved museum loans, no private loans. So we've also borrowed objects from the Powerhouse Museum, the Australian Museum and Mount Annan Botanic Gardens. And then the other part of the exhibition, the retrospective part, is the big new work that was commissioned by the MCA and that's a huge, massive gallery. That was quite a challenge to think about, but I quite instinctively felt what I wanted to do with it. It was a continuity of work I'd been making on a very small scale and never to any conclusion, so this gave me the opportunity to pull all those things together.

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together.



**What was it like revisiting and remaking things that you'd kind of left behind?**

The funny thing is, you make a new work version, so it's completely new. I mean, *Birdsong*, which was a huge, giant ring of birds is now a diorama of a much smaller number of birds and a much more intense viewing of it. It's a completely different piece. *Deep Breathing* is there, *Hospital for the Barrier Reef* is a whole fresh new work in a room that's specially designed for it with film projections.

So, every older work I've had to re-make. The big dead tree called *Heart Shock* I've done different times at different museums, always with a different tree, so it's actually completely different according to the tree. This time I got the tree from Mount Annan Botanic Gardens, it was a big and dead and they cut it down for me. Brought it to be fumigated for two months... it's such a huge, huge tree they had to cut it to get it to size and put it back together again! It's a very big job. But the amazing thing about that tree is I chose it exactly because it has these fabulous beetle drawings all the way up.



**How long have you been working on this?**

Oh, over a year.

**It must be kind of amazing to go over it all. For you it's almost like your poring over old diaries...**

Seeing as you say that, I was a bit surprised when the MCA came to visit my studio and they suddenly said "Oh, sketchbooks!" and I went "I haven't looked at my sketchbooks for years, they go right back." He said they'd love to see them so all my sketchbooks got taken down and arranged alphabetically and then chronologically so they're sitting full of

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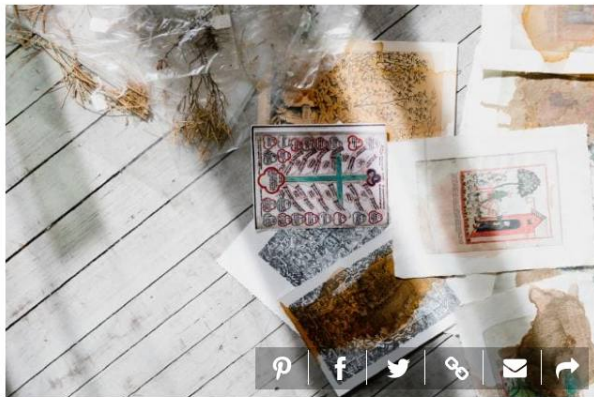
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looked at and opened and photographed and now there's a whole vitrine full of sketchbooks sitting there too. That was, of all the things, the most alarming for me to go back on because I seriously hadn't looked at them and they go back so far. I was alarmed at what I'd written. I thought, 'I can't remember that I could have even written such philosophical thoughts!' Written in pencil by hand, whole poems...!



**Did you find when you went over them you could rediscover ideas that you've forgotten about?**

Yeah, well I sort of realised there had been a real consistency in my thinking for a long time, but I was amazed by how deeply I had gone into things, because you don't really remember that.



**Sometimes the act of putting something on paper, it's almost emptying your mind of something, then you move onto something else.**

Exactly, I think so. Funnily enough, I went to Sicily last year and I kept thinking 'Oh, I've been here before'. I mean, I knew I'd been here before but it was different, it felt very different. I was there in the '70s and it was very Mafioso and I have these sketchbooks full of drawings and accurate descriptions of everything I ate and everything else [laughs]. And I was regretting so much I hadn't read that before I went this time!



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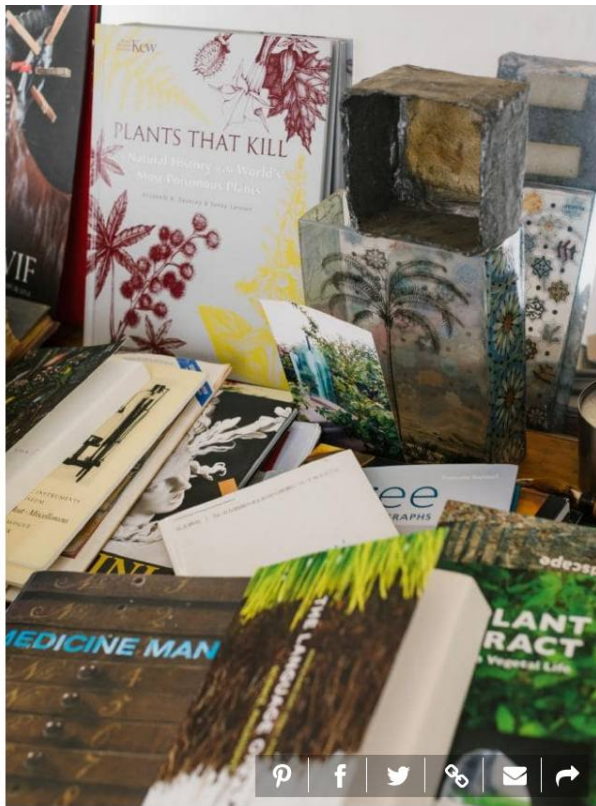
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Can you circle back to that time when you were studying in Italy, what was that like?

Oh, it was an amazing time for Italy, Italy in the '70s was considered to be quite a poor country. But I lived in the countryside and I was exposed to a wonderful movement in art called *Arte povera*, focusing on the materiality of the work. And the art school was amazing, there was an energy crisis and it went on strike. Because Italy sold all its power to Scandinavia in this energy crisis! [laughs] Yeah, it was a very formative period, I think.



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**And then you went and studied a few years later in New York, is that right?**

New York was an amazing place to be when I was there which was in the early '80s, it was just a great time for artists being in Manhattan. Artists hardly live in Manhattan anymore.

**No, they couldn't afford it!**

I lived in SoHo and I was watching it transform and I was being exposed to the land artists and all the earth-works artists, so to speak, and a whole lot of art that we weren't seeing here.



**Obviously it was a different time, but how do you think the art world in New York differs to how it is here?**

Oh, it's a much bigger industry there. And it's a totally respected industry, it's a big part of the American economy. It's a big profession for many artists there and there's just so many really major galleries and major museums.



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**Did you find it hard to be in places like Italy where there's such an obvious heritage and New York, where art is very supported and you can actually make a living from it. Did you find that hard coming back to Australia?**

Yes, I found Australia very small, but it felt like there are great seeds of possibility here, galleries were starting to be set up and I guess I've been through this period where the art world has just grown into something. It's pretty significant here, although we don't have a government that recognises that, unfortunately.

I mean in that very period our governments have become more and more conservative, strangely enough. So, I left Australia at the moment when the Whitlam [government] came in with the whole intention to promote the arts and all these people got amazing fellowships to go and study and they realised how important culture was to life and now we're at this point where we have a government that doesn't have any recognition whatsoever. It's actually quite alarming.



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**I know it's always been kind of struggle for artists in Australia but do you think it's getting particularly worse?**

I think there was a period where there was more money in Australia to support art, and now lots of the smaller arts organisations that were set up have had to fold. There was this huge flowering period that now, it seems to me, has become much tighter and people are looking more towards private money, like they do in the States. But, of course the thing is in the States, philanthropy is a hugely respected and embraced way of life there, whereas here it's still not. Of course, I've got to know a lot of amazing philanthropists here, and it is growing, but there it's just... it's always been really big and respected.



**You have a long-term appreciation and fascination with the natural world, when do you think that developed?**

You know, I think I just grew up with loving it and feeling very comfortable within it. When I first lived in Europe, I was spending a lot of time in [nature] and I compared my experience to living in the real countryside of Australia, which I had observed and experienced as a child, and then I also compared it against the nature of cities.

I thought how weirdly we had colonised this place. Our whole agricultural industries had developed this European approach to a very foreign land and I wanted to explore that discordancy. That was one of my reasons for wanting to come back to Australia – to try and explore that through art. Then I got a job as a flying artist where I was able to fly around to all these remote places.

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JUN 10 2019

(IMAGE 1 OF 3)

# Janet Laurence's "After Nature"

by Claudia Arozqueta

March 1–June 10, 2019

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney

May 21, 2019   



View of Janet Laurence's *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef*, 2015–16/2019. Mixed media, variable dimensions. Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Zan Wimberley.



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(EST.) MONTHLY VISITS: **22.9K**

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**63**

"After Nature," the latest exhibition by Australian artist Janet Laurence, calls on its viewers to become aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the natural world at a time when the pernicious impact of humans on nature is evident. To create this recognition, the Sydney-based artist refers in several of her works to the act of breathing and to illness.

Respiration unites almost all living organisms: we are a breathing biosphere. Plants, animals, and humans depend and are co-dependent on the consumption and generation of oxygen and carbon dioxide. The essential rhythmic cycle is a vital and restorative force, and, like nature, it is something that humans take for granted unless signs of sickness are perceived. This dismissal of nature is the concern at the foundation of Laurence's work.



of nature is the concern at the foundation of Laurence's work.

With ecological devastation and climate crisis looming on the horizon, Laurence engages with plants and animals endangered by habitat deprivation. *Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins)* (2005) shows endangered plant specimens from the Australian rainforest in glass vials resting on metal stands, all connected to long silicon breathing tubes. By presenting these threatened plants as intubated patients who need assistance to breathe, Laurence aims to generate empathy. However, more than achieving an emotional resonance with the plants' condition, the piece becomes a reminder of the symbiotic relationship between humans and trees: trees supply oxygen, which humans breathe; humans in turn produce carbon dioxide, which trees respire.

In an adjacent room, *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef* (2015–16/2019) is another hospital-like installation. Here the patients are some species of coelenterates from the Great Barrier Reef. Corals play a crucial role in controlling the levels of carbon dioxide in the ocean and in preventing coastal erosion. Due to increasing water temperatures, these animals have suffered extreme bleaching, which occurs when the colorful algae that live inside the corals are expelled, causing loss of color and leaving them vulnerable to disease. Stored in acrylic cube shelves, surrounded by test tubes, flasks, gauze, and other laboratory equipment, the white coral skeletons have red or green thread delicately woven in their tentacles, signifying a transfusion of color and tubes that intend to keep their respiration. Two video projections that flank the installation show colonies of these marine invertebrates in their splendor, radiating bright colors in their varied textures, and surrounded by multicolored fish that rely on reefs for their survival. Creating a contrast between the vivid video projections and the anemic objects, Laurence successfully draws viewers' attention to the ecological impact of habitat loss.

Laurence's most recent work occupies an entire gallery in the exhibition. A testament to the artist's long-term fascination with woody perennial plants, *Theatre of Trees* (2018–19) is a large-scale immersive installation comprised of a number of long hanging mesh and silk veils imprinted with images of woodlands and archival scientific images that the artist assembled over decades. Arranged in three concentric circles, mimicking the rings of a tree trunk, the installation is a tree and also a forest, within which visitors can walk and observe the transparency and delicacy of the fabrics that mirror the fragility of these plants. In three adjacent rooms, Laurence displays various historical and botanical books, specimens, and plant extracts exhibited in vitrines, which didactically illustrate the importance of trees not only as crucial elements in the carbon cycle and as producers of oxygen, but also as providers of shelter and medicine.

Laurence's installations tend to be complex and full of details, but the most compelling work in this show moves away from this elaborate style. Created during a residency at Taronga Zoo Sydney, *Vanishing* (2009) is a black-and-white single-channel video



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(IMAGE 2 OF 3)

(EST.) MONTHLY VISITS:

22.9K

(EST.) COVERAGE VIEWS:

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Sydney, *Vanishing* (2009) is a black-and-white single-channel video showing endangered species such as tapirs, snow leopards, silverback gorillas, and giraffes. The camera zooms in on areas of their bodies, so the viewers only see the animals' fur moving as they breathe. The isolated and solitary images reflect the lives of these captive animals who, deprived of all control, have nothing left to do but breathe. The alluring sound of the animals' respiration hypnotizes, empathically connecting viewers and animals through the same frail inhaling and exhaling sound.

"After nature" draws viewers' attention to breathing as a simple but commonly inadvertent sign of life that interconnects humans to other living organisms. By showing these lifeforms in peril, the artist brings light to the sorrowful state of illness created by the anthropocentric disrespect for wildlife. One in which millions of species, including our own, are under the threat of no longer being able to breathe.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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