

# The Monthly

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MAGAZINE

CULTURE

**ART**

‘Janet Laurence: After Nature’ at the MCA

BY **Miriam Cosic**

**This survey offers a root and branch study of the natural world’s fragility**



Few overtly political paintings succeed, as activism or as art, and especially in this age of constant, overt public messaging. Few artists have the skill of a Francisco Goya or an Otto Dix, to pluck just two from art history, who could thrust the horrors of war right into our faces and make us grateful for it.

Twentieth-century modernism contained so many artistic, as well as political, shocks that we’re almost inured

to them. With postmodernism, political art became ubiquitous. After second-wave feminism began to bite and women artists began to tackle the purposes of the female body beyond the pleasure it gives to men, we grappled with Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) and Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* (1999). Urban Indigenous art in Australia is, not surprisingly, almost entirely political.

And yet by the 1960s, some artists were explicitly rejecting overt political didacticism; ironically, they had some of the most political practices of all. Joseph Beuys, the controversial and highly influential German artist and educator, a member of the Fluxus movement, followed a tradition that believed it “wasn't an artist's business to function politically in any material or organisation sense to change the world”, as Charles Harrison and Paul Wood put it in their anthology, *Art in Theory*, “but to do so through the example of his art”.

Beuys is one of Sydney artist Janet Laurence's ongoing influences. So is the Italian Arte Povera movement. Germano Celant wrote in the 1960s that, “(t)he artist-chemist organises living and vegetable matter into magic things, working to discover the root of things, in order to re-find them and extol them ... What the artist comes in contact with is not re-elaborated; he does not express judgement on it, he does not seek a moral or social judgement, he does not manipulate it.”

Other influences are Earthworks, the American environmental art movement, and Laurence's own bucolic experience of nature as a child; the shock of seeing her Queensland cousins' extensive farming property degrade during ongoing drought; and her own colourful and peripatetic life, moving around the globe to observe the biosphere and collaborate with others, often scientists such as botanists or environmentalists.

Laurence's work is highly political, but it doesn't shock and it doesn't preach. Rather, it offers beauty tinged with fear and mourning, and it stimulates curiosity: showing, not telling, us the measure of environmental endangerment. Laurence examines the plant world, and animals and minerals too, as well as the paraphernalia that has been used to study natural science since the Enlightenment. She is intrigued by the principles of alchemy, though she has the heart of a modern scientist, and by the “magic” to be found in the natural world.

*After Nature* is the name of a survey of her work currently on at the Museum of Contemporary Art, curated by Rachel Kent. It ranges across works made over years: some of them had to be reconstructed for this show.

The centrepiece is a new large-scale installation, *Theatre of Trees* (2018–19), an intriguing work commissioned by the MCA. Transparent fabric, hung from ceiling to floor in three concentric circles, is printed with plant and animal images: a hazy half-lit forest invites the viewer in. Walking through it, one comes across three sub-installations, each a bright *wunderkammer* on a different abstract theme. “Knowledge” is represented by books, images and stories; “Wonder” by a herbarium; and “Desire” is an elixir lab for medicinal plants. Each one snaps the focus back, after the dream state of the gauzy forest, to examine the minutiae on show: old books, natural history specimens, stones, bones, feathers, plants, bottles of dark liquids, small pictures, postcards, and much more. People lingered in each one, and I noticed younger visitors in particular, smart phones *not* in hand, absorbed in the detail.

*Heartshock* is another new piece. In the 2008 original, a large dead branch hung from the ceiling, with long, thin, transparent tubing hanging off its ends like the remains of a vascular system or an expansive life-support system. In 2019, *Heartshock (After Nature)* is a large dead tree, a *Eucalyptus obtusa*, found at Mount Annan with the assistance of the local Australian Botanic Garden, lying prone right across one of the galleries, some of its branches bound with white gauze: again, like the remains of a medical intervention. It is surprisingly moving. It's not as though we haven't seen dead trees lying around in the bush, their remains often harbouring a lively ecosystem of moss and ants and beetles. This, however, is monumental and about mourning, like dead royalty lying in state. One can see beetle tracks across the boughs and examples of the kinds of beetle that made them in a jar nearby. At one end, a stuffed owl placed high on the wall oversees the gallery. At the other are panels of oxidised minerals, a meditation on the periodic table.

*Cellular Gardens* (2005), in the same room, is also about death. The bright and healthy greenery of small plants, endangered forest species, are growing in glass containers that show the nourishing soil within, each supported by a metal frame. The subtext is the need for medical intervention to save, not just a single plant this time, but whole species.

On the subject of scientific frameworks, perhaps the most wonderful *wunderkammer*-like installation is *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef* (2015), originally made for the United Nations Convention on Climate Change in Paris that year. The agreement reached is still setting the agenda for governments' response to global warming. It's less alluring at first glimpse than *Theatre of Trees*, perhaps – fewer people seemed to

linger in the room – but it captivated me even on a second viewing. A tall rectangular perspex cabinet contains banks of open shelves that house myriad objects: shells, coral, sponges, specimen jars, scientific flasks and pipettes and funnels. Some of the natural objects are tagged by the Australian Museum in Sydney, from which they were borrowed. (In Paris, the specimens were borrowed from the Jardin des Plantes and other locations of the National Museum of Natural History).

The presence of the scientific tools flags human intervention: this time, the desperate measures that will be needed to save the World Heritage-listed reef from the effects of anthropogenic global warming. The work was originally inspired by a visit as artist-in-residence to the Australian Museum’s Lizard Island Station and was displayed at the museum in 2017. The historian Iain McCalman, who authored *The Reef: A Passionate History*, wrote in his catalogue essay, “Laurence’s blend of artistic talent and scientific understanding enables her to dramatize the complex calculations, formulae and data that are usually contained in scientific papers.” And further on, “Like a true healer, 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 organism this planet has ever known.”

*After Nature* is both intellectually deep and deeply moving. It may engage scientists and art-lovers in slightly different ways, and will enthrall those interested in both: it demonstrates the fragility and the imperilled beauty of the natural world, which we seem intent on destroying despite knowing that it both nourishes and sustains us. Laurence is a political artist for our times.

*After Nature is at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, until June 10.*



## **MIRIAM COSIC**

Miriam Cosic is a Sydney-based journalist and author.



Janet  
Laurence,  
*Centre of  
Nature*, 2018–  
2019,  
Installation  
with Janet  
Laurence:  
*Centre of  
Nature*,  
Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art, Australia,  
Melbourne, 2019,  
Image  
Courtesy and  
Photograph  
by the artist,  
Photograph:  
Nicola  
Cunningham