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After Nature: An Exhibition by Janet Laurence

Words by **Georgina Reid** | March 26, 2019(<https://theplanthunter.com.au/contributors/georgina-reid/>)

There's a cruise ship docked outside the Museum of Contemporary Art at Sydney's Circular Quay. It's bulk obscures the Opera House on the opposite point, and dwarfs the once controversial apartments behind it. Artist Janet Laurence and I joke about how there was so much fighting to prevent them being built, and yet, the ship – on whose enormous flat screen television I watch music videos whilst waiting for Janet in the gallery's rooftop café – is allowed to grace the space without question. It's huge visual impact transient; its environmental footprint hidden, for now, beneath the surface of the water.

Janet and I are meeting for lunch to discuss her new exhibition, *After Nature* (1 March – 10 June, 2019), but we're both too hungry to launch straight into interview questions. So we start with the question of the cruise ship, and on it goes. Over bibimbap our conversation traverses a landscape of care, grief and action, framed by Janet's energy and curiosity, and

punctuated by patches of dark humour.

The last time I met with Janet was in her garden in East Balmain. There we spoke of her garden being an artwork. An expression, like much of the work in *After Nature*, of care, concern and connection. Janet was featured in the book I wrote last year, *The Planthunter: Truth, Beauty, Chaos and Plants* (<https://www.booktopia.com.au/the-planthunter-georgina-reid/prod9781760760236.html>), because to me she epitomises the Gardener – a person committed to not only caring for all life, but also choosing to act on behalf of it, of us.

I'm excited to speak with Janet again, to see how she's gardened this exhibition, but I come to our meeting under a cloud of grief. Looking into the pain being inflicted on the world, on us, is not easy, yet looking away isn't an option. And so, the grief arises and falls away. On and on. "I feel overwhelmed with sadness sometimes. I feel terrible lament", Janet says when I ask her how she, after working for so long with the pain of the world, copes.

“We have to still be able to act. That’s the only way. The action of giving and caring for others is very like the experience of love. You are giving beyond yourself.”

Janet's action is art. And in *After Nature*, the thread of her action, her thought, her expression, is tied up with care. Questions of the value placed on caring, and what it means to care are ever-present, and increasingly pressing. "The nurturing side of life is what we really need now. And yet, the destructive jobs – the economic, corporate jobs, where there's no one responsible – they get paid all the money. But what do they do? They kill, they destroy, they plunder. They look for economic possibility always at the expense of the environment. And all the jobs that are about caring are not given value. The gardener symbolises the caretaker of the planet. It should be the most noble profession. But what's noble now? A banker? What are they doing? How are they caring?"



Theatre of Trees. Image by Jacquie Manning



Janet Laurence. Jacquie Manning

We finish our lunch and head downstairs to the exhibition. Janet takes me first to Theatre of Trees, a new work commissioned for this exhibition. Three circles, reflecting the growth rings of a tree are comprised of layers of fabric drape from the ceiling. Shadows of trees float in layers, moving with the breeze, and with the movement of people through the space. It's atmospheric, haunting, and otherworldly. A library, elixir bar and herbarium inhabit the corners of the room. The call of a black cockatoo echoes through the space.

"Trees for me are the great signals of change. They become a register of what's happening through climate change, pollution, poisoned waters ... Yet we are still land clearing in a dry country like Australia, despite crippling drought and the knowledge that we should do the opposite: that we need to regenerate this planet," says Janet of the work.



Theatre of Trees. Image by Jacquie Manning



Theatre of Trees. Image by Jacquie Manning

We head to the other side of the gallery. The works here span Janet's 30-year career and have been selected by curator Rachael Kent as illustration of a continuous thread running through Janet's output. In *Heartshock/After Nature* (2019) a *Eucalyptus obtusa* tree lies on its side in the middle of the gallery, its limbs bandaged with gauze. The tree's trunk is engraved with criss-crossing beetle tracks. Janet and I squat down and she shows me the beetle in its display case at the base of the trunk. Each beetle makes its own distinct marking on the trunk, she tells me, her finger tracing the etchings in the wood.

Another work, *Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins)* (2005) presents endangered rainforest species in delicate glass vials, supported by tall metal stands, and connected by test tubes, as though undergoing medical resuscitation. *Deep Breathing (Resuscitation of the Reef)* fills a small room. The work, in the words of Iain McCalman "invites us to plunge our heads underwater to see the Great Barrier Reef through the lens of a multivalent artistic and scientific creation, an underwater wunderkammer which impels us to empathise, to engage, and to act."

McCalman continues: "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... But 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."

In *Vanishing* (2009), a black and white video of threatened mammals (snow leopard, sloth and giraffe) at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, fills the wall of a small room. The flanks of the animals rise and fall as audio recordings of their breathing plays loudly within the space. On the opposite wall is a mirror of the same size as the screen. The rasping animal breaths are mesmerising, and the mirror reflects what Janet's been suggesting in her art for decades: we are all – snow leopard, bug, human – connected. It's a simple, powerful motif.

Whilst I am walking with Janet through the exhibition, many people come to speak to her, all thanking her for her work. "I've been surprised how so many people have come up and said thank you. I didn't expect that at all. I'm so delighted they care. And yet, we struggle against a government that doesn't care one bit. The economy takes precedence over the health of the planet. That's the thing that needs to flip. So many people care, yet we're still not winning against the top-down force of politicians, who are increasingly fearful of and forceful against environmental activists."

"You know who you should have here, don't you?" asks a woman to Janet as we're leaving. "The cabinet", she states. "When we were walking through your beautiful, billowy trees I thought to myself, Scott Morrison should be walking through here," she tells Janet, emotion in her voice. Janet replies, with a warm half laugh: "Oh, he'd just be seeing a whole lot of timber, not trees."

Janet Laurence sees it all. The forest, and the trees.



Heartshock/After Nature (2019). Image by Jacquie Manning



Cellular Gardens (Where Breathing Begins) (2005). Image by Jacquie Manning

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