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'In the Balance: Art for a Changing World' at the Museum of Contemporary Art

# A hospital for plants: The healing art of Janet Laurence

Felicity Fenner

RENOWNED AS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S LEADING SITE-SPECIFIC ARTISTS, Janet Laurence's most recent practice has involved the creation of environments that act as sanctuaries for the contemplation and regeneration of natural environments and plant life. During the recent 17th Biennale of Sydney (BoS), where the artist's latest work graced the Royal Botanic Gardens, Laurence spoke with Felicity Fenner about the artistic idea of the greenhouse, and the fragility and fecundity of plants.

**Felicity Fenner:** Your work in the public arena over the last decade eschews traditional perceptions of public art as inanimate and sculptural. I'm particularly interested in your work with plants. From *In the shadow*, 2000, at Sydney Olympic Park to *Waiting: A medicinal garden for ailing plants*, 2010, at the BoS, there is an imperative to create a space not simply for viewers to ponder site-specific and broader environmental issues, but that functions as a place where plants themselves can regenerate and flourish. In these and other recent works plants are the focus both sculpturally and symbolically.

**Janet Laurence:** The future of many plants is in danger, yet they are central to the earth and existence of all animal life. We are dependent on them for everything from the air we breathe to the food we eat. Plants are organic, not static, objects. They have life and movement. They will change and grow with time. Working with living plants you become very aware of their being, their needs and internal processes.

**FF:** *In the shadow* was made in response to the remediation of the Homebush Bay site. The native water plants and forest you planted have over the years created an area of dense vegetation that oxygenates an otherwise quite sterile precinct. When I first saw the work in 2000, it was dominated by the wands that you inserted into the water, emulating the scientific measuring of water chemical levels. The wands are still there as a residual reminder of the detoxification of that site, but it's the plants that are now

visually dominant. So, starting as one thing, the work has evolved into something else. Presumably it will continue to evolve.

**JL:** That's the challenge and pleasure of working with plants. *In the shadow* was intended to evolve with the growth of the trees and water plants. They brought bird and insect life to the area and enabled a sheltered space to enclose the fog component of the work. This created a living green space that contrasts from the surrounding built-up, open site of Olympic Park. Ironically, the artwork will be preserved as the site evolves. Unlike the work of a landscape architect that is removed or altered as the built environment changes, this planting cannot be removed by park authorities because it's an artwork.

**FF:** It's not only permanent but is fully integrated into its environment – the epitome of site-specific art.

**JL:** Yes, and art can bring into public view some confronting environmental issues that without the imprimatur of it being a creative work wouldn't ordinarily be presented, because so often scientific information is not permitted public access. So, as an artist, the Olympic Park commission was a major opportunity for me – not just to install a work, but to *heal* an environment.

**FF:** Knowing that they will have a life beyond the exhibition, how did you choose which plants to include in *Waiting*?

**JL:** The decision was for natives, which were sourced from the Forestry Commission of New South Wales. I selected plants with the help of a horticulturalist from Eden Gardens (who supported the biennale project), and a range of both healthy and sick plants hopefully to nurse back to health. I also consulted with Edward Liew, the plant pathologist at the Botanic Gardens. All the plants and soil brought in had to be tested. Those that posed a potential problem were wrapped in the veil-like tulle that plants are covered in to protect them from frost. Fortunately the wrapped plants have a sculptural as well as quarantining purpose. They suggest bandaged limbs, which is appropriate for the 'plant hospital'.

**FF:** That theme is also echoed in the architectural structure of *Waiting*. From the outside it resembles a military field hospital, but it also has an ephemeral mirage-like quality.

**JL:** The whiteness of the ‘hospital’ is minimal and clinical in contrast to the leafy green surrounds of the Botanic Gardens. I did have in mind those emergency tent hospitals, knowing it had to be a temporary structure. The structure lies somewhere between translucency and transparency, with the changes in light echoing those of a glasshouse or greenhouse.

I’ve long had an interest in glasshouses and their history, and also in the scientific and architectural history of glass as a medium that enables visibility. The biennale work also has a historical resonance in its location in the Botanic Gardens – it is installed on the site of the Garden Palace built in 1879 by the New South Wales colonial architect James Barnet, which was a reworking of the Crystal Palace in London.

**FF:** The plants look very fragile, each one being nursed back to health in a ward of the ‘hospital’.

**JL:** The fragility is a metaphor for the environment. Like a hospital, the installation is structured as wards, with different sections that parallel the physiological processes of plants. There is a ‘maternity/fertility’ ward for seeds and a green area of chlorophyll production, which is where the healthy plants are housed. Then there is a ‘carbon ward’ near the ‘intensive care’ and subsequent ‘morgue’ areas. In the morgue you just see the skeletal and ash remains of expired plants fused into glass.

The structure has medical, botanical and museological allusions – it resembles a laboratory and glasshouse, but also a vitrine such as those used in traditional museum displays of natural history. Yet unlike a museum display, this work is living. The entire installation is linked with tubes and vials through which water flows aided by a solar pump. It could be interpreted as the various elements of nature being inextricably bound and the entire system on life

support. When you look carefully, you can see that each glass vial in the work is its own glasshouse with a living plant inside. Some might see a reference to Joseph Beuys’s vitrines with their alchemical transformations in the process of healing. I regard Beuys as a father-figure of the green movement in art.

**FF:** *Waiting* cannot be viewed passively. You have to enter an intimate world of plant life and death, recuperation and regeneration.

**JL:** My real desire has always been to make spaces for audiences to enter and be enmeshed within. I am interested in the experiential and perceptual response that transforms into a memory experience. Moving through space is very different from looking at something, and the experience embeds itself very differently in our memory. You need time in the space, which hopefully enables reflection of the concerns in the work. I want the layers of meaning to unfold slowly.

**FF:** What are the plants ‘waiting’ for?

**JL:** The title comes from an article in a scientific journal about the physiology of plants, ‘Plants, Physics and the Silent Waiting of Plants’, which discusses the chemistry of how plants wait for the conditions to be right before they grow. This sense of patience, its interconnection with nature’s cycles and awareness of the species’ place within it, is something the human species has totally bypassed, no doubt at our peril.

**FF:** Do humans have the capacity for plant-like patience?

**JL:** I agree with Bill Kibble that ‘all things are possible when enough human beings realise that everything is at stake’. I use art to imagine ways of transforming and healing, even if as fictions within the work.

My installation for ‘In the Balance: Art for a Changing World’ at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) is about endangered species and attempts to draw the symbiosis between us, plants and other animals in the natural world. *Vanishing*, 2009, comprises footage of large mammals threatened with extinction.





far left and bottom right

Janet Laurence, *Waiting: A medicinal garden for ailing plants*, 2010, detail

Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney

17th Biennale of Sydney, 2010

Courtesy the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

Photograph Pardalote.com

opposite

Janet Laurence working on location in the logged Styx Forest, Tasmania, 2008

Courtesy the artist



Opposite, made more poignant by the sound of the animals' breathing, is a work already in the MCA collection, *Cellular gardens: Where breathing begins*, 2005, in which glass vials interconnected by tubes grow tiny new plants. There is a deliberate juxtaposition between the large animals and the tiny plants, as they're interdependent in the natural world but also endangered.

FF: Your environmental installations, with layered references to place, plants, animals and sustainability, very successfully provide a meditative space for the viewer to ruminate on possible meanings.

JL: I try to create a space somewhere between evidence and imagination. While my practice is based on deeply held convictions about the environment and our relationship to it – and I want the work to have a politically environmental voice – I think it's important that viewers make their own journey and experience it as a space of reflection and interpretation. Art, if it engages, can linger in the mind the way that pure information can't.

As artists make work addressing environmental issues it finds a place in the culture. So while artists might not have the capacity to directly effect change, they can certainly contribute to the political sphere by reaching people in more inviting and imaginative ways than scientists or politicians can. This is nothing new. Historically, landscape painting sought to record the beauty of nature, but also its destruction by industry. There's an element of critique in much of that work. The difference now is that we have the scientific proof of our adverse impact on the environment. We know what's going to happen in the future if we don't change course.

Janet Laurence, Breenspace, Sydney, 24 September – 6 November 2010; *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 21 August – 31 October 2010; *The 17th Biennale of Sydney*, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, 12 May – 1 August 2010.