

Opinion

After Nature: Aesthetics of Care in a Time of Loss

Contemporary artist Janet Laurence explores loss, grief, empathy and care in her immersive new exhibition, *After Nature* (<https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/829-janet-laurence/>), currently showing at the MCA.



Heartshock (After Nature), 2008/2019. Image courtesy the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, photograph by Zan Wimberley.

By Dr Adrienne Hunt, Research Affiliate, Sydney Environment Institute

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Contemporary artist [Janet Laurence](http://www.janetlaurence.com) (<http://www.janetlaurence.com>) is no stranger to loss. Over the past thirty years, her immersive works have drawn on environmental destruction, bleaching corals, extinction and deforestation. Reviewed here by SEI research affiliate Dr Adrienne Hunt, *After Nature* (<https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/829-janet-laurence/>),

curated by MCA Chief Curator Rachel Kent, brings together decades of Laurence's work and research, as well as introducing newly commissioned pieces to create a truly immersive exploration of fragility, transience and grief.

Visitors to *After Nature* find themselves immersed within their contemporary ecology, drawn in and participating by deep thinking and feeling. Laurence's exhibition presents us with realities and hard truths whilst engaging us with its carefully considered aesthetics of empathy and respect. Each of the works lends itself to multiple personal interpretations, engendering feelings from remorse, to hope.

A horizontal eucalyptus tree is adorned with gauze bandaging and laboratory glassware, evocative of field medicine and a healing process, whilst hinting at an exercise in futility. Evidence of the tree's past co-existence with insect larvae is scribbled on its trunk, a reminder of the scope of what is lost when one tree dies. The piercing, judgemental gaze of the all-knowing but long dead owl reminds us all of our dependency on biodiversity.

A sense of re-enchantment with trees is evoked by several works in this exhibition. One work features living endangered rainforest species, displayed as infants on life support, being nurtured into existence. It is a potent reminder of the importance of plants to our existence and of the vulnerability of our trees and forests. In the experiential work *Theatre of Trees*, the visitor threads their way through ethereal billowing panels, as if through a mature forest. Soaring five metres to the ceiling, the panels are printed with forest imagery, overlain with rippling projections of trees, dappled light, leaves and birds. The feeling is one of being in the living forest, and of encouragement towards a renewed love and respect for the forest and all that lives amongst it.

Deep Breathing (Resuscitation for the Reef) was shown at the Australian Museum and in Paris for COP21 in 2016. Manuela Lopez Mañan, who [wrote about the exhibition for SEI](http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/deep-breathing-resuscitation-of-the-reef/), (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/deep-breathing-resuscitation-of-the-reef/>) notes that "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." Photo by Zan Wimberley.

Several of Laurence's works are potent reminders of practices that commenced with the Enlightenment. They reference scientific methods, taxonomy, dissection and archiving, practices that build knowledge, but when applied to non-human nature can reinforce an anthropocentric view of nature as being separate and subservient to humans, valued only for its use to us. One of these works, *Deep Breathing (Resuscitation of the Reef)* focusses on the Great Barrier Reef. Just as marine specimens and photographic plates might be exhibited within a museum of natural history, the cases are packed with intricately arranged objects displayed in transparent acrylic cubes. Fragments of bleached coral are scattered throughout, some are tinted as if restored to their former living state, some are bound up with colourful or black threads, and some are juxtaposed against laboratory glassware and

tubing as if being measured or resuscitated. The overall effect is luminous and compelling. The viewer here is drawn in close – becoming part of the display and implicit in the implications.

Quiet contemplation is fostered within these white cube gallery spaces at the MCA. Indeed, the relative silence of one space emphasises the haunting call of an owl, surviving only as a taxidermied specimen and an audio recording. Within a dark, sound-proofed room a video of exotic animals at rest plays, and the viewer finds themselves engaged in a meditative and empathic experience. Two videos screens, side by side show two endangered animals in close up, emphasising the mechanism of slow breathing of fellow mammals – the gentle expansion and contraction, the rise and fall of the rib cage, the breath in and the breath out. It is almost impossible for the participant to not modify their human breath in synchrony with these non-humans.



Janet Laurence talks about the ideas and process of developing *After Nature*. Video courtesy of the MCA.

All of the works in this exhibition can be interpreted as referencing oblivion and its guises – loss, extinction, neglect and indifference. Photographs and videos feature throughout this exhibition, serving as proof of something real, of a thing's existence in its time, but presented to us in ways that combat nostalgic, sentimental interpretations. Images are layered, made obscure and ambiguous, in muted and even inverted colours. Videos of the underwater wonders and realities of the Great Barrier Reef are projected onto opposite walls of the *Deep Breathing* exhibit — shown in inverted colours as translucent negatives, and in silence. Crown of thorns starfish and fields of dead coral appear as moving radiographic images; whilst colourful fish swim amongst surviving coral in surreal negative saturation. The effect is both sickening and mesmerising.

Ecological empathy is at the heart of what is needed to heal the world and save it. At no time in Laurence's exhibition does the viewer find themselves marvelling at nature, as if it was separate from our human self. Rather, we are reminded of what has been lost, what is imperilled and at stake by continuing to seek agency over nature. We are encouraged towards a more active engagement, towards an ethics of care, respect and empathy.

Janet Laurence's *After Nature*, (<https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/829-janet-laurence/>) curated by MCA Chief Curator Rachel Kent, is exhibiting at the MCA until June 10.

Dr Adrienne Hunt (<http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/person/dr-adrienne-hunt/>) is a Research Affiliate at the Sydney Environment Institute. She completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours, Class I) in Photomedia in 2018 at the Sydney College of the Arts, informed by the environmental humanities and supervised by Anne Elias. Adrienne commenced the BVA with a professional background in clinical and applied health sciences, and in health education, and she is currently an Honorary Research Fellow with the Discipline of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of Sydney.

Janet Laurence (<http://www.janetlaurence.com/>) is a Sydney-based Australian artist who exhibits nationally and internationally. Her practice examines our physical, cultural and conflicting relationship to the natural world. She creates immersive environments that navigate the interconnections between organic elements and systems of nature. Within the recognised threat to so much of the lifeworld, she explores what it might mean to heal, albeit metaphorically, the natural environment, fusing this with a sense of communal loss and search for connection with powerful life forces. Her work is included in museum, university, corporate and private collections as well as within architectural and landscaped public places.