



## Janet LAURENCE

For several decades Janet Laurence has been making art that reveals a deep affinity with the natural world. Fascinated with the substances, systems and processes of transformation that occur within nature, she has been making works that are grounded in the idea that all living things are interconnected: a concept she refers to as the 'life-world'. Since she began exhibiting in the early 1980s, her works have continued to play out this idea through a series of connecting themes including alchemical transformations and biological processes; memory, history and perception; and increasingly, the human impact on the natural world, conservation, regeneration and environmental loss. From temporary, ephemeral installations to large-scale public artworks, her works have encompassed a range of media and formats, including painting, photography, sculpture and installation, and museological and architectural interventions.

Combining a material and conceptual interest in natural substances and their potential for transformation, Laurence has often incorporated elements drawn directly from nature, such as minerals, carbon, oxides, ochres, straw, ash, wax and seeds, and has referenced a diverse range of species of animals and plants in her works. The systems, structures and sites where nature is examined and displayed, such as natural history museums, botanical gardens, glasshouses and scientific laboratories, have also formed ongoing points of reference. Tensions between nature and culture have always been present in Laurence's works, but her position on this relationship is not always clear. Rather, her works reinforce her understanding of the 'interconnectedness' of things, expressed through her inclusive process of material accumulation whereby a diverse range of substances, surfaces, textures and images come into play. In many of her works, photographic images reproduced onto glass or other translucent materials form an important part of this process. Inherently fugitive and suggestive of memories, they are often combined with traces of substances or spillages of fluids to form part of the coalescence of matter that characterises her work. The veiling and layering of images, surfaces, shadows and reflections, which have become a defining feature of her work, emanate a strong poetic resonance. Evocative of cycles of growth, transformation and decay, but also of processes of recollection and perception, they suggest shifting states, transitional zones or spaces for reflection.

Laurence's installations often stem from a desire 'to express the space between memories and their slippage, or the fading of a dream as we wake'.<sup>1</sup> We see this at play in *Vanishing*, 2009, one of two new works made for the *2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award*. Comprised of an intricate layering of translucent veils and a sequence of moving images, it draws us into an intimate space of quiet observation. Slight movements within the fluid imagery alert us to the barely perceptible stirring of animals: fragments of their bodies shift in and out of our field of vision. We witness their slow breathing, and then they fade away. Within this intricate arrangement of projected images and materials, the elemental substances of salt and ash suggest residues of a devastated landscape. Combined with the fleeting imagery of living species, the overall impression is of an ecosystem in peril or in danger of extinction. A poetic meditation on absence and presence, and the space between life and death, this work could be understood as a kind of elegy to lost species and environmental devastation. However, as with many of Laurence's recent works that have focused on the preciousness of our ailing environment, the possibility of transformation, regeneration or resuscitation is implicit. A poignant installation of great emotional intensity, *Vanishing* encourages reflection and wonder at both the beauty and fragility of our natural ecologies. It leaves us to either despair at the potential losses that result from environmental destruction, or imagine how we might go about reversing its effects.

The combined strength and poetry of Laurence's art emerges from her capacity to distil her deeply felt experiences of the natural environment and implicate us in sharing her concerns. In a time of unprecedented environmental change, her works suggest that art has a transformative power to address these urgent issues, encouraging us to reflect on the preciousness of our environment and our own position within it.

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