

The Art of Reflection



Janet Laurence is one of Australia's most prominent public artists. But her distinctive installations are increasingly being commissioned for residential settings. **Paul McGillick** looks at her unique form of domestic art.

slow dissolve

janet laurence — NSW, australia



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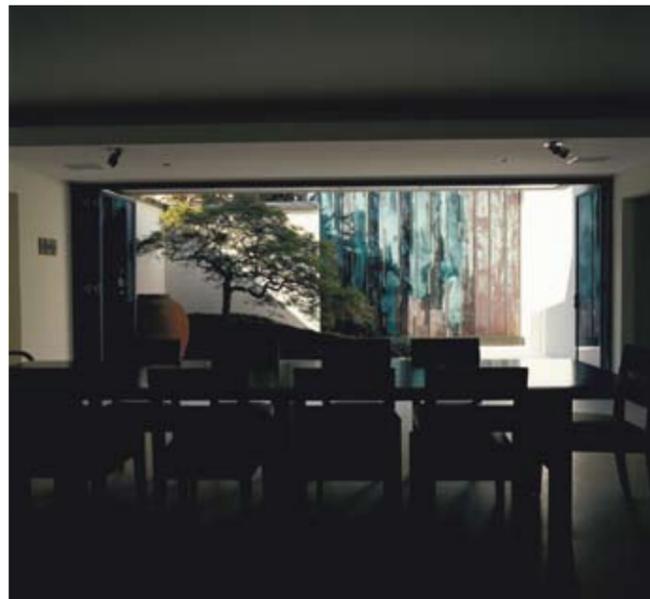
Janet Laurence has said that she aims to create 'slow space'. Like other 'slows' – slow food, slow education, slow towns and slow sex – the idea is to slow things down so that we have the chance to truly experience what it is that we are doing or what is happening. Basically, it is about getting the most out of being human. So, slow food is about using organic, local produce and really savouring its taste; slow towns use planning to calm or isolate traffic and give people the chance to genuinely enjoy their public space; slow education is about understanding and personal growth rather than cramming; and slow sex, well... think about it.

Typically, Laurence's work brings together the built environment with the natural environment. Sometimes, her pieces are outside – such as 'Veil of Trees' (1999) in Sydney's harbourside Domain parklands or 'Edge of the Trees' (1994) outside the Museum of Sydney – where they provoke reflection on the natural and historical context. At other times, they may be inside, perhaps part of a corporate lobby with public access (as with 'Water Veil', 2006, in the Council House 2 building in Melbourne, a milestone in the use of biomimicry in architecture) or in a more communal setting, as with '49 Veils' in Sydney's Central Synagogue (1997/98).

Whether it is reconciling inside and outside, the built and the natural or the haptic (felt) and the optic (seen), Laurence's work is invariably about resolving apparent opposites into a moment of harmony. If the installations engender reflection on a place – how it came to be what it is – we need to remember that out of reflection comes transformation. And transformation – sometimes Laurence refers to it as alchemy – is a major theme in her work. Equally, her work is about memory, often invoking memories which lie hidden in the individual or collective unconscious. With memory comes meaning – just as loss of memory (as with Alzheimer's disease) leads to loss of meaning and identity.

Laurence's bringing together of the public and private domains is a metaphor for bringing together our outer and inner worlds and thereby resolving Cartesian duality, or the separation of our objective and subjective lives.

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01 Janet Laurence tends her moss garden. (Photo: Paul Lovelace)

02 *Transient in Light*, 2007, Siber House Melbourne. Glass fired screen print, 900 x 250 x 100cm.

03 *Water Falling Freeze*, 2000, Baffsky House, Sydney. Glass over copper, stainless steel.

04 *Memory Enclosed*, 2004, Melbourne House. Duraclear, pigments, oil, glaze, 120 x 220cm.

05 *A Garden for Edna Walling*, 2000, private collection, Melbourne. Glass, aluminium, shinkolite, acrylic, duraclear, oil, glaze, pigments.



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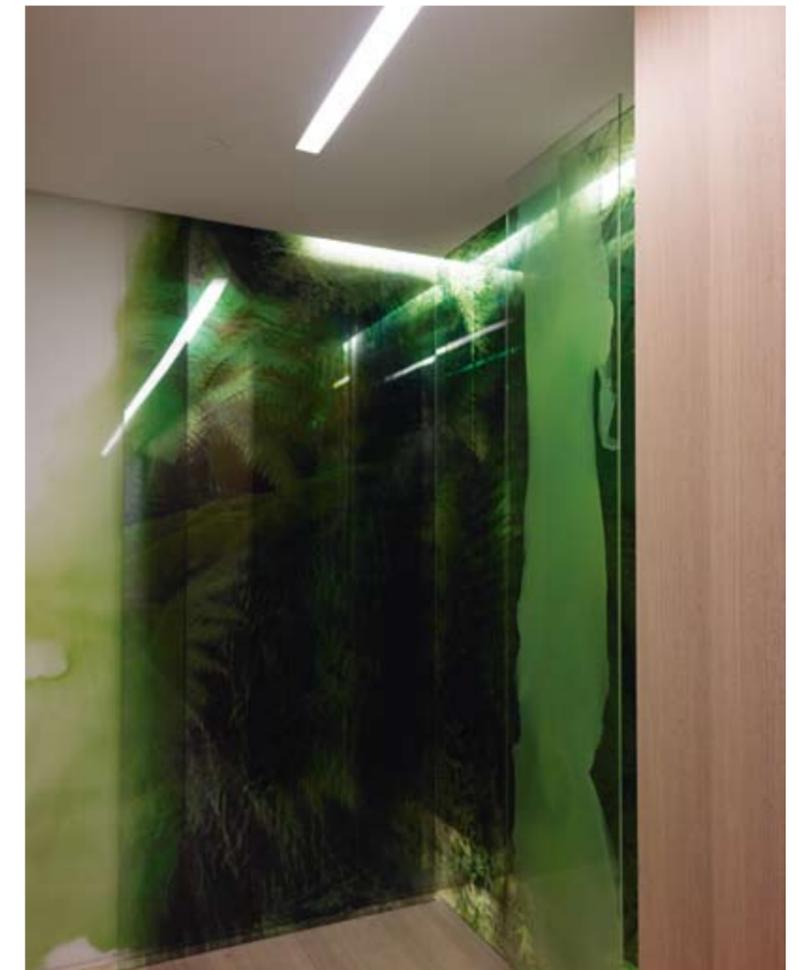
06 Janet Laurence in her Chippendale studio.

07 View from *Transpiration – The Breathing of Plants*, through to Circular Quay.

08 *Transpiration – The Breathing of Plants*, 2009, site-specific installation in Sydney apartment. Glass, duraclear, pigments, oil, glaze, 228 x 138 x 50cm.



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Glass has become a crucial material for Laurence in pursuing these themes. This is partly because it is a synthetic material which she can put against organic matter and so set up another opposition. But glass is also ideal for extending the metaphorical force of her installations. Glass is transparent, but it is also reflective. And while we can often see clearly through it, it can just as easily create distortions and a fugitive world which we cannot quite pin down. Laurence has exploited this in many works which use layers of glass with applied colour film images (sometimes abstract, but more often drawn from the natural world), setting up an optical conundrum. On the one hand, there is an illusion of depth, while on the other, we see the world reflected back at us so that we become

aware of a profound mystery – namely, that we are a part of the world we are observing.

Laurence talks about “the membrane between architecture and nature” – or, that thin, fragile point of connection between inside and outside, between the natural world and the constructed world of buildings and interiors. These, she says, are “sites which reveal the fragility of nature”. People often see her individual pieces in exhibitions and they want one. But they might also want a whole wall of that kind of work and so Laurence makes a whole wall for them – extending an exhibition piece into a site-specific installation.



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09
Janet Laurence in
her studio.

10
Janet Laurence in
her native garden
in Balmain. (Photo:
Paul Lovelace)

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Over recent years, Laurence has exhibited glass constructions which “played on the idea of glass houses”, inspired by botanical glass houses and by famous architectural examples such as Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House and Barcelona Pavilion. This coincided with a growing interest in botany (“I love all the botanical research”) and gardens. In fact, she is currently developing new work which explores the garden as a work of art – paralleling the moss garden, native garden and vegetable garden at her own home on Sydney Harbour which, in the great tradition of Chinese and Japanese gardens, are both aesthetic delights and opportunities for meditative work.

Increasingly, Laurence is being approached to create site-specific installations for private homes. “A lot of it,” she says, “comes about through my shows in the galleries. People recognise the sense of place in them and they also recognise that I am trying to connect architecturally in the work. They might say: ‘I’ve got a space which I’d love you to make a work for’. Because I was showing these glass houses with the garden reflected in them, I then did a lot of gardens as reflections into architecture. So, it set up the imagining for a lot of people of their own inside-outside reflected into a work of art in their house.”

Hence, a lot of her commissions for private homes are site-specific to those houses or apartments. “It might be,” she says, “these people’s gardens in panels placed inside their house that reflect the garden back into them in a way that changes during the day. So, there is this sense of transience.”

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Ghost Glasshouse,
2003, located in
a private garden.
Screenprinted glass,
stainless steel.

12
Plant Spill, 2004, in the
House in the Trees.
Glass, pigmented
resin, paint, 290 x 300
x 80cm.



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A room-dividing screen designed by Janet Laurence in her home in Balmain. (Photo: Paul Lovelace)

Through the imagery, the layering of glass, the reflections and the shifting light during the course of the day, Laurence's installations have the effect of dissolving the architecture into nature. In this sense, they work just as all her public art works – namely, to heighten our sense of place and of the mutability of life. Nature is in a state of constant transformation. Nothing is forever and yet within the immensity of nature, time itself dissolves into an eternal present.

If her public art makes us reflect on public space, her domestic installations trigger reflection on private space. The home is a refuge and so a place for reflection. Laurence's private installations use literal reflection to engender a metaphorical reflection on how fugitive, fragile and mutable our lives are.

Janet Laurence is represented in Sydney by Breenspace, breenspace.com, in Melbourne by Arc One Gallery, ar1gallery.com and in Brisbane by Jan Manton Art, janmantonart.com

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