

# JANET LAURENCE



*Bird song* (2006) (detail), 700 birds from the ornithology collection of the Australian Museum, Sydney; sound piece by Ross Gibson and Jane and Phillip Ullman, 700cm diameter, installation at Object Gallery, Sydney



# POETRY AND ALCHEMY

*The distinctive artworks and installations of Janet Laurence reflect her lifelong interest in the interconnectedness of all living things and her ecological understanding of the world. Her works – in museums and galleries as well as outdoor sites and domestic spaces – are as much poetic and alchemical as they are scientific and art-historical, but they are always grounded in nature*

words: Laura Murray Cree portrait: Stephen Oxenbury



**L**ife-support systems for burnt and ravaged landscapes and, by implication, for an imperilled planet, have been a particular focus of Janet Laurence's work since 2004. Taking her portable laboratory of beakers, flasks, tubes, elixirs and veils to threatened or destroyed landscapes in Australia and Central America, she creates remedial installations in poetic homage to lost and endangered species. While regeneration of Tasmania's Styx forest is impossible – clear-felling and the imposition of an exotic pine monoculture having reduced the old-growth forest floor to ground zero – Laurence brings a unique vision to environmental catastrophe and its imagined reversal. She photographs her interventions from many angles, recently introducing a glass sphere that becomes, at times, a lens through which to capture the damaged or carbonised landscape. Later, in the factory, the images are transferred onto glass or metal, the artist directing the process and pouring fluids and pigments onto the reflective surfaces. The final layered works invite a corresponding reflection on the fragile ecology of the natural world.

For the 2008 Adelaide Biennial at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Laurence exhibited a suspended eucalypt, the limbs of which retained

a blushing smoothness. Silicon tubes and glass vials holding flesh-coloured fluids of varying transparency hung in floor-length "curtains" from the branches. Spectral shadows extended the physical reach and drama of the work. During the exhibition viewers questioned whether the fluids signified an intensive-care treatment for the tree or whether it was bleeding. The ambiguity of the work, titled *Heart Shock*, and its layered references to the human body, speak of the "life-world" in a critical, perhaps terminal, condition. Elsewhere, the suspended tree has metamorphosed into (*Exquisite*) *Carbon Corpse* (2008), an unadorned miniature specimen, blackened by fire and set on a mirror, its reflection reiterating the "states of loss and transformation of a burnt forest".

Laurence has long been drawn to reflective surfaces in her artworks, often favouring glass for its alchemical properties, transforming from liquid to solid through the agency of fire and allowing degrees of translucency and transparency. She talks about Leonardo da Vinci's "sfumato", his use of multiple layers of paint to create shadows of ambiguity, as in *Mona Lisa's* enigmatic smile. Such layering slows perception, evoking the passing of time and memory, causing the viewer to linger and look more closely, perhaps to meditate on mysteries that lie beyond

the veils. Today, Laurence is intrigued by scientific experimentation to exploit the "intelligence" of various materials, such as glass, which can be manufactured to respond to a finger touch, clouding over to control light and temperature in interior spaces.

Conversely, the transparency of glass is revelatory, reflecting the transient effects of light and allowing us to witness processes of change. Recently, working with glass blower Gabriella Bisetto, Laurence has investigated what happens when various plant specimens are placed into glass vessels as they are being made. She shows me dramatic photographs of Bisetto handling the molten forms, flames issuing from their apertures as Laurence introduces the organic material – seaweed, cinnamon sticks, seed pods, cones and other substances – finally to be sealed within their transparent egg-shaped sarcophagi. Laurence explains that the amount of carbon present within each substance determines how it burns.

She discovers later, in her studio, that the carbonised fragments transform within the vessels, intensifying their aura as art objects. In one egg, the seaweed breaks down to a powdery residue, which, in the process, gradually coats the glass in silvery greys; in another, seeds are released from their pods as a delayed



Transient in Light (2007), glass-fired screenprint, olive trees, 1200 x 100cm

Private collection



Janet Laurence's Sydney studio



consequence of the firing. Laurence has made a series of such works, titled *Carbon Futures*, one of which is destined for the 2008 Biennale of Architecture in Venice and the others for an upcoming exhibition at Arc One Gallery in Melbourne.

Breath is fundamental to the glassblower's art. Coincidentally, Laurence has referenced breath in several of her works, among them *Cellular Gardens: Where Breathing Begins* (2006), comprising living plants in glass vials alluding to the "lungs of the earth"; and *The Breath We Share* (2003), a commemorative sculpture for the Myer family, whose genealogy is inscribed on the winter branches of a tree printed on glass panels. Breath was seminal to her installation for the 1991 *Perspecta* exhibition in Sydney, for which she created a "room" from 250 bales of straw in *The Rocks Coach House*. Titled *Breathing*, the installation was accompanied by the taped sounds of horseshoes echoing on stone. Laurence says that the straw filled the space with a cloying warmth and smell. Unexpectedly, the golden bales seemed to move and emit sounds as if they

were, in fact, breathing.

The experience was immersive for viewers, despite their being unable to physically access the work, which allowed little space for movement around its perimeter and restricted sightlines to narrow gaps between the bales. In his 1998 monograph on Laurence's work, Peter Emmett remembered the work as: "Breath, body, animal, scent, the enticement of enclosure. She seldom explores inside spaces with such sensuality... preferring the liberating lightness of the outside. But each of her works has had a small cave, a place of dark and solitary dwelling."

In *Edge of the Trees* (1994–95), a constructed urban "forest" of 29 pillars, Laurence used elemental materials – oxides, shells, honey, bones and zinc – placed within "caves" or niches and sealed behind glass. A commission for the Museum of Sydney on the site of the colony's first government house, the installation was made in collaboration with Fiona Foley. Informed by earlier works such as *Solids by Weight, Liquids by Measure* (1993), the pillars of sandstone, wood and steel, with embellishments, memorialise the archaeology, geology, botany and human occupation, both Indigenous and European, of this significant place. Botanical names, place names, Aboriginal names and the names of

1 **Natural History** (2008), glass vials, botanical specimens, ash, wood and mirror, 120 x 160 x 40cm 2 **Botanical Residues (Clouded Memory)** (2006), Duraclear, shinkolite acrylic, aluminium, oil, pigment, 100x 230cm 3 **Carbon Futures** (2008), glass, carbonised botanical specimens, 30 x 25cm, glass blown by Gabriella Bisetto



passengers on the First Fleet are inscribed on the various surfaces; as pedestrians draw near the stark vertical forms they discover the niche inclusions and hear the whispering of names.

Memory is implicit in Laurence's quest to record, gather, cultivate and nurture endangered plant species. *Veil of Trees* (1999), her collaborative installation with Jisuk Han for the Sydney Sculpture Walk in the Domain, is a planting of the native grasses and forest red gums that once covered this gentle rise from Sydney Harbour. They weave through a passage of glass panels embedded with organic materials (seeds, pollen, ash, resin, honey) and engraved with the names of indigenous trees and fragments from Australian literature.

More recent examples include Laurence's domestic-scale "medicinal gardens" – where plants grow in glass vials and other containers – and a site-specific installation, *Transient in Light* (2008), of matured olive trees on ghosted-glass, set amid living saplings, casting shadows and reflections that flux and change with the light.

Laurence's reflective, immersive works focusing on disappeared or threatened fauna are equally evocative. These have been presented in a number of ways: as images of captive wild animals printed onto photographic film or glass,



Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

as in *Unfold* (1997), installed as a walkway at the Art Gallery of New South Wales; or, in conjunction with Laurence's natural history project centred on Museum Victoria's mammalian and ornithological collections, as taxidermy specimens. In *Muses* (2000), for example, species of deer, swathed in translucent white veils, were placed in lonely isolation on the gallery floor, while the fragile remains of owls and small birds were presented in glass vitrines.

*Elixir*, Laurence's permanent installation for the 2003 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, engaged local people and resources in the creation and continuing presence of her work. Community renewal is the *raison d'être* of this worldwide invitational event held in a remote area of rural Japan that is snowbound for six months of the year. Laurence reconceived a modest wooden storage-house as a permanent elixir bar, with plant-based tonics served in shot glasses. Together with farmers and villagers, she collected and prepared the plants for infusing in vats of shōju (Japanese wine), conjuring colourful herbal liquors for bottling in laboratory flasks and jars. These are displayed on solid wooden shelves, adding to the welcoming intimacy of the space. Overlapping glass panels printed with images of herbs and medicinal notations animate the raw

walls of the bar with reflected light and shadows.

Thinking of this project I am reminded that Laurence, as an art student, helped run a pub-restaurant in central Sydney, handpicking fresh produce from the markets each morning and cooking for an appreciative, artist-dominated clientele. Her interest in food and its transformations, as well as in nurturing others, was evident even then. As we discuss the lineage of her works, Laurence reiterates her appreciation of the interconnectedness of all nature, the life-world to which we belong and on which we rely for our existence.

The talk turns to environmental issues surrounding water and, inevitably, to *In the Shadow* (2000), her site-specific installation for the Sydney Olympic site. Here she planted a forest of casuarinas on the banks of the polluted waters of a local creek, devising wands that were installed to measure the water chemistry and indicate the level of purity. This work has obvious links to her commission for the front wall of Melbourne's CH2 (Council House) office building, designed with smart materials according to the latest biotechnologies to mimic the weather. The building is predicated on the purification of black water and the use of sun and wind to create a sustainable, comfortable, working environment.

Laurence is now working on a "contemporary idea and experience" of a herbarium. She visualises a site-specific work with "spaces of revelation" including a maze which, at its centre, will house a glass vessel containing botanical specimens that once grew on the site. The maze will be a variation of her 2003 installation, *Ghost Glasshouse* (Sarcophagi), which comprises glass panels inscribed with the names of lost species superimposed on ethereal images of 19th-century glasshouses. Like the exotic plants they once housed – transported by European botanists from their countries of origin – many such glasshouses no longer exist. The images Laurence has retrieved are suffused with memories of loss in the wake of the colonial enterprise.

Janet Laurence is a consummate artist, whose practice reflects her lifelong interest in the interconnectedness of all things. Her works are distinctive, risky and beautiful, always grounded in nature. They both reflect this world and reflect upon it, inviting us to pause and share the experience.

**melbourne art fair**  
Janet Laurence at Arc One Gallery,  
Stand D05

4 **Exquisite Carbon Corpse and Carbon Futures** (2008), burnt botanical specimen, mirror, glass, carbonised botanical specimens, dimensions variable, installation view, Jan Manton Art, Brisbane 5 **Cellular Gardens/Where Breathing Begins** (2005), living plants, medical tubing glass vials, blown glass vessels, black steel and polished stainless steel