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Janet Laurence— The Palm at the End of the Mind

As an exhibition *The Palm at the End of the Mind* is an experience *par excellence*.

The multifaceted installations created by Janet Laurence within Fairhall, presents The Johnston Collection (TJC) through the perspective of the artist and brings a new dimension to the interior of this grand home.

Janet Laurence is well-known for her artistic prowess and adventurous spirit. Her exploration and use of mixed media and seminal installation works afford her a place as one of Australia's finest talents and in *The Palm at the End of the Mind* Laurence brings an original and contemporary focus to the outstanding period furniture and *objets* that define TJC.

The collection was established by William Robert Johnston, a prominent 20th century Melbourne antiques dealer, collector and property investor. His passion for beautiful objects began at the age of eight when he received a Minton teacup (circa 1815) from his grandmother. From small beginnings Johnston's collection grew to an astounding 1400 pieces, including English Georgian and Regency and Louis XV furniture, paintings, ceramics and *objets d'art*, and today the collection is regarded as one of the best of its kind in Australasia.

Upon Johnston's death, provision was left for Fairhall, his Melbourne home and the collections to become a showcase for all to see and, after suitable renovation, the house was opened to the public in November 1990 as a gallery. One of the interesting aspects of this curated home/gallery is the instruction left by Johnston that the atmosphere of Fairhall was to remain as a home, not as a typical gallery and, to this end, there are no museum labels or item texts to be found.

TJC is a hidden treasure tucked away in leafy East Melbourne, although exhibitions such as *The Palm at the End of the Mind* bring a wider audience to Fairhall. Director and passionate curator of TJC, Louis Le Vaillant has instigated a revitalisation of the gallery through a program of events that includes lectures, tours and collaborations with artists.



text—Jan Henderson
photography—Luts Photography

opposite—Janet Laurence in the garden of Fairhall, home of The Johnston Collection. below top and bottom—Some of the small objects included in the exhibition that reference landscape detail





above—The quilt in the Yellow Bedroom spread with dried ginkgo leaves.
left—beautiful images of flowers and leaves have been placed in unexpected places adding richness to the visual experience



With an eclectic mix of speakers and interesting occasions on the program, Le Vaillant is providing the opportunity to enhance and complement the idea and history of Fairhall.

Inviting Laurence to contribute her vision was a masterstroke, as each room has been infused with the artist's imagination and the interior has been brought to life in a fresh and sometimes unexpected way. New sits beside and within the old and there is texture and layering as is the inimitable style of Laurence. The artist's hand is both subtle and overt, depending on the situation and surroundings; however, every vignette is a pure delight. Laurence brought many of her personal *objets* to TJC and these are interspersed throughout the exhibition. They bring additional meaning and depth to the in-house curated collection, but also convey an intimate message from the artist.

As nature and landscape are integral to Laurence's work they were also important to Johnston and so these themes have been woven into the fabric of the installations, but are most dominant in the room that adjoins the charming terrace garden on ground level. Laurence has populated the interior with lush greenery; plants and foliage are placed

beside heavily ornate consoles, aged paintings and period chairs, and an immense table in the middle of the room features a plethora of various leaves seemingly randomly arranged but, of course, intricately placed for visual effect.

Upstairs in the Yellow Bedroom, through the simple addition of dried ginkgo leaves scattered on the bed cover, Laurence has created a scene of great beauty that stirs the imagination. The scene is captured in a small cheval mirror that then reflects the vision back into the room. The display is perfect, so simple but oh so beautiful.

The title of the exhibition is from a poem by the US poet Wallace Stevens. Laurence admits that writers of art and landscape have had a profound impact on her over time and so with *The Palm at the End of the Mind* the idea was to provoke and evoke thinking about 'disappearing' especially in relation to nature and the current Anthropocene epoch.

The Palm at the End of the Mind is an exquisite exhibition and food for the soul for anyone who appreciates beautiful *objets* and perfect curation underpinned with history and thought.

Janet Laurence is represented by ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne. johnstoncollection.org

above—Overview of the Garden Room at Fairhall that Laurence has curated as a celebration of landscape and *objet*