
Arts

ROSANNE BARRETT

J

anet Laurence wants you to experience the fragility of our natural environment as you walk through her immersive new installation, *Theatre of Trees*. Hanging voile and mesh panels display ghostly trees, offering a translucent bushwalk. Separately, a huge fallen tree from Mount Annan's Australian Botanic Gardens traverses the room, small bandages wrapped ineffectually around its massive branches. And tiny creatures from the Great Barrier Reef float onscreen through their ocean home, which is hooked up to life-saving machines.

This is *After Nature*, a retrospective of the Australian contemporary artist's three-decade career currently showing at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art.

"There is a constant theme throughout my work, which is addressing our natural world," says Laurence. "That obviously takes different perspectives to view and to experience within ourselves. In this case it's asking questions about the relationship between the materials and the memory and all the stories."

Laurence's work at the intersection of art, the environment and architecture has made her one of Australia's most renowned contemporary artists. From Japan to Germany, England and New York, her work graces public spaces, museums, corporate collections and universities in the form of large-scale installations, permanent collections and public art.

"I hope my exhibition will draw people into the importance of our natural world and the part we can play in helping to care for it," she says. "I think art is a good way to bring this attention to a wider audience."

At Sydney's Botanic Gardens, Laurence's collaboration with Jisuk Han produced a snaking path of red gums and glass panels adorned with Australian poetry.

In Singapore's Changi Airport T3, her blend of photographic panels and painted glass created an internal green wall that reflects back to the viewer.

And her alliance with Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects – where her husband Brian Zulaikha is a founding partner – for the Australian War Memorial in London cast the names of bitter battles in panels of engraved granite and bronze forming a ring of remembrance. Her work was a collaboration with Peter Tonkin.

Laurence, however, is adamant that her message should be determined by the viewer. She does not wish to issue instructions to her audience.

"It is not didactic," she says. "I think that's how art can speak; instead of a slogan or a poster, it can offer a more poetical and sometimes playful or experiential way of bringing you into the issues. I like a work to provoke the thoughts around it, as though it is engaging in a conversation with the viewers."

MCA chief curator Rachel Kent says Laurence, now 72, has brought together different concepts over her career, in a variety of materials.

"Laurence's practice has encompassed small objects through to vast installations," she says in the curatorial essay on *After Nature*. "Increasingly, over the years, she has worked beyond the museum's walls to transform public sites through her immersive installations and environments using evocative natural materials such as ash and straw, minerals and oxides, living plant matter, corals, taxidermy birds, and more."



Force of nature

Artist Janet Laurence's evocative works exists at the intersection of art, the environment and architecture





Clockwise from left: Artist Janet Laurence at her MCA exhibition; Laurence's studio; the installation *Theatre of Trees*; and a fallen tree with bandaged limbs



HOLLIE ADAMS

Over the past decade Laurence has worked predominantly with museums, curating and arranging their collections into her own thematic works in a play on museology. But she is once again feeling a passion for public art. She says creating the MCA's *Theatre of Trees* made her think about the benefits of the vast scale and the design process of public art.

The process of mapping out, integrating the elements with the ambient light and conditions, was also a positive reminder of her previous public art.

"I enjoyed it, thinking about the experiences people can have," she says.

A wave of new architect-designed developments in Sydney has highlighted the importance of public art, Laurence says, while the City of Sydney has also encouraged the movement. She is a committee member of its Public Art Advisory Panel.

"Public art is very important in our cities today," she says. "It should never be constrained to being just a kind of decorative ornament. Some artworks have the power to evoke meaning in a place."

Laurence is considering a return to the medium that brought her to attention. First, though, she will present the House of Ideas at Melbourne's Johnston Collection museum, reimagining a historic home, Fairhall, and its collection of English Georgian and Regency artefacts and objects, as well the garden. The exhibition will open in July.

It will be her first work within a historic house. Fairhall was once owned by the Melbourne collector and antiques dealer William Johnston and the collection has been transformed by prominent guest curators, including designer Akira Isogawa, The Australian Ballet artistic director David McAllister, and architect Pascale Gomes McNabb.

Director Louis Le Vaillant says Laurence is known for her ability to rethink the collections of museums through her art.

"Laurence's exhibition will be an intimate and immersive experience that will offer insight into the wonders and properties of the plants that now surround us," he says. "[It] will respond, not only to the immediate environment of Fairhall, but also the significance of Enlightenment ideas and the physical collecting of the natural world embodied within the [Johnston] Collection.

"I also think that it is timely in relation to Johnston and Laurence's care for the natural world, and how much we have learned over the past 200 years or more that we struggle, within a world of natural and aesthetic beauty, to listen to the warnings that nature is sending."

Following her Melbourne curation, Laurence will travel to Bonn in Germany to work with the Zoologisches Museum Koenig, a renowned natural history museum. Her work is diverse, and while its expression may change, she says it is all linked.

"They are quite nice projects and very different, but somehow for me it all just connects. The different mediums used are just what is required. I don't have a big gap between them. It all comes out of a similar concern." **M**

Janet Laurence After Nature is on at the MCA until June 10

JACQUIE MANNING X 3

