

ENTERTAINMENT ART & DESIGN VISUAL ART

All together now: making art out of the natural world

By **Megan Backhouse**

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As soon as Janet Laurence stepped into the sun-bathed, yellow-painted bedroom in the Johnston Collection's house museum, she knew she wanted to strew the bed with ginkgo leaves. Gold ones.

And so for weeks the museum's volunteers dashed about collecting the autumnal drop of *Ginkgo biloba*. So tenacious is this ancient tree that it can survive city air pollution, pinched soil space, even an atomic bomb blast, and still put on an autumn show as golden as the detailing on William Johnston's antique bedspread.



Artist Janet Laurence with some of her recent work. JACQUIE MANNING

When I visit the museum that was once Johnston's house there is so much feather-light foliage being stored in the office that it can't be contained in its designated books and boxes. Stray leaves are snagged against the skirting boards.

Leaves lurk below tables. They catch on your shoes.

By the time you read this, every last one will be piled – like fine golden sheets – on the late antique collector's bed. Johnston's living room display cabinets will house an elaborate concoction of botanical specimens and his kitchen will be transformed into a laboratory of glass vials, twisting tubes, plants and plant fluids.

Tricks of light will make his courtyard garden feel like it is inside the 1860 East Melbourne terrace he bought in 1952, remodelled to resemble a Georgian townhouse and bequeathed to the people of Victoria shortly before his death in 1986.

Laurence wants her site-specific art installation – the latest instalment in the museum's "house of ideas" series, opening this Monday – to reflect how gardening "was a big thing in William Johnston's life and in his mind". "He had a garden here and another elsewhere. A garden becomes very important to a person. You create it and it grows with your help and, while I was in this house, I thought about that."

But she also thought about the fragility of plants and animals and of wilderness areas and how, "When you go into a forest or other wild place you are overwhelmed by the wonder of it and, at the same time, you think, my god this could all be lost."

And she also considered her installations from a "plant perspective". "The funny thing is when I use plants in my work I have conversations with them. I look at them and I think, what do you want, who would you like to be with."

All her ruminations were tied to her desire to highlight the interconnectedness of all living things, and of how we are all part of a much wider web of interdependence. The day after we speak, Laurence is off to a University of Sydney conference looking at "the question of what justice means in a multi-species context".

After the Johnston Collection show opens she flies to Germany to work with animal specimens housed in a natural history museum in Bonn and, later in the year, to Iceland to look at mosses and lichens among other plants.



A detail from Janet Laurence's *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef* (2015). JACQUIE MANNING

While there is a hardcore environmental message at the centre of much of Laurence's work, her art never comes over as strident. She treads lightly, building up her installations with transparent layers of glass and gauze. Visitors to her recent survey show (*After Nature*) at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art spoke about how her work evoked both the pain of loss but also the pleasure to be had in experiencing the natural world.

"I want to entice people. I don't want them to go running away thinking I am banging them over the head," she says. "I find that making art can create a space of possibility and hope," Laurence says. "I am genuinely very worried about what we are doing to this planet. It is horrific. Here in Australia we urgently need to act to really care for this land or we are going to be in big trouble."

A dedicated home gardener (she has turned the once rubbish-strewn public land out the front of her Balmain, Sydney home into a wild-feeling space filled with "hundreds of different greens"), Laurence says her art works are more influenced by plant and animal science than they are by gardening.

"But, in a funny way, I think there is a lot of crossover (between my garden and my work.) I feel like my garden becomes like this permanent ongoing artwork. It has its own voice, and I love that. Gardening is a more slowed down way of working. The garden demands that you get more in to plant time."



Janet Laurence at her new installation *After Nature*. LOUISE KENNERLEY

Janet Laurence: *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, July 8–September 17 at the Johnston Collection in East Melbourne, \$25. Go to johnstoncollection.org for session times.
