

COLLECTOR'S DOSSIER: JANET LAURENCE

WITH A STRING OF NOTABLE PUBLIC COMMISSIONS BEHIND HER, JANET LAURENCE TURNS HER ATTENTION TO THE ENVIRONMENT, CREATING IMAGE-SPACES WHERE NATURE, MEMORY AND LOSS COLLIDE WRITES **INGRID PERIZ**. PORTRAIT BY **SONNY VANDELDELDE**.

Writer **George Alexander** once described the imperative behind artist **Janet Laurence's** works as "trying to hold the world like water in leaking hands." Laurence's career is a lot more durable than this might suggest. Judged "a serious candidate for the title of Australia's leading public artist" and the subject of **John Beard's** 2007 Archibald-winning portrait, Laurence is widely known for her commissioned public artworks. For more than 25 years she has ranged across painting, sculpture, photography and installation, working with pigments and ash, stuffed birds and she-oaks, scientific instruments and all manner of glass. Her early work alluded to alchemy; she now works with scientists, designers and architects but across this dizzying range, what is constant is, as Alexander implies, a fascination with the world's mutability, with the flux and transformation of all its elements.

The Sydney-based Laurence says her work aims to get "to the memory within the matter". When writers used the word "alchemy" to describe her work from the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was to point out the way Laurence could hint at the transformation of matter, through the action of rust, fire or acid. Sometimes this was physically present in the work, such as *Quill/Fire* (1991), which combined rusted steel, photocopy, oil paint and charred wood in a stylish post minimalist fashion. Other works could suggest this transformation, like the treated photos *Trace efface* (1991) where images of what looked like denuded landscape alternately dissolved or became gummed up with imperfections within photographic processing. Laurence could hint at magical transformation while pointing to the elemental: a 1994 installation at Queensland Art Gallery used the chemical elements found in the human body, embodying the alchemical dictum *solve et coaugula*, or separate and join together.

Ephemerality is the word Laurence uses to describe this sense of fusion and flux and the devices she uses to achieve that effect today – "veiling, transparency and translucency" – are clearly legacies of her early painterly work. She says: "I think I have





always had a relationship to painting and fluidity, and it is always still a binding medium in all my work." She also talks about the sense of "slowed space" she wanted her works to create. As the 1980s progressed her installations became, in the words of Museum of Contemporary Art senior curator **Rachel Kent**, "increasingly architectural in their orientation," engaging the space of the urban environment.

A key work here is *Edge of the Trees* (1995) produced with **Fiona Foley**, who was responsible for its Indigenous component, in collaboration with architects Denton Corker Marshall, for the Museum of Sydney. Commissioned to address the site's history – the first zone of contact between the original Cadigal people and their British colonisers and subsequently, the site of the first government house – *Edge of the Trees* allowed Laurence to realise her goal of wanting a work's "space to have a sense of place". The work's 29 columns combine salvaged wood with a listing of individual and species names in Latin and Aboriginal languages, with the names of First Fleeters and embedded organic elements like feathers and bone, the lot bathed by a soundscape of Koori voices listing Koori sites lost in Sydney's growth. *Edge of the Trees* proved prophetic for Laurence. Increasingly,

she would exploit the "immersive" potential of installations while the multi-levelled collaboration demanded by the project would be a feature of her practice in succeeding decades.

Edge of Trees is also what Laurence calls "a memory space for the botanical history of the site," the salvaged lumber coming from a native species that no longer grows in the area. The living world – past, present and future – has become an abiding concern in both her commissioned pieces and her regular practice. She explains: "Our connection to the living, organic world is an ecological concern," adding that she wants her work to "create spaces of perception that can bring us into contact with the life-world." Does she consider herself an environmental artist? "I do," she answers, "although I don't like the term."

In 2000 Laurence completed *In the Shadow*, an explicitly reparative work for Sydney's Olympic Park in Homebush Bay, which regenerated a polluted waterway, incorporating extensive plantings of she-oaks with moving fog and 21 glass measuring wands which indicated the water chemistry, monitoring its change. She calls the resulting green, ribbon-like space an "alchemical zone," as well as a metaphor for the transformation from industrial past "into a green and living site for the

"I think I have always had a relationship to painting and fluidity, and it is always still a binding medium in all my work."

From far left:

Janet Laurence, *Heart Shock*, 2008. Australian eucalypt with latex tubing and glass vials containing organic substances, dimensions variable. Installation view at the Adelaide Biennial 2008.

Janet Laurence, *The Green That Was [Crimes against the Landscape Series]*, 2008. Duraclear, polished aluminium, pigment on acrylic, mirror burnt wood, 100 x 430cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ARC ONE, MELBOURNE



future". Laurence has no doubts that art "can translate scientific realities into engaging experiential spaces that open the potential for a broad public engagement, empathy and knowledge of the natural environment". Perhaps this is not simple idealism speaking. In the 1984 book *Biophilia*, the noted Harvard biologist **Edward O Wilson** argued for humans' innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes. Understanding biophilia as those connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life, Wilson wrote, "hopes rise on its current".

A six-month VACB studio residency in Japan in 1998 left a continuing impact on Laurence, who appreciated the intermingling of house and garden space in Japanese house design. (Laurence has been exhibiting regularly in Japan since 1991.) A keen practical gardener herself, Laurence is also influenced by the history of Western gardens, particularly glasshouses, which in her work often become sites of desolation or melancholy. *Ice Glass House* (2006) from the *Botanical Residue* series, shown at Galerie Düsseldorf in Perth last year, looks blasted, ghosted out by a bomb, while several works from *After Life of the Great Glass Houses* delight in the tracery of metal that holds the glass structures together like veins on a leaf. Occasionally Laurence plays with shadows produced by the image and this, coupled with layers of translucency, makes the image appear to disperse and dissolve. She can also exploit the various qualities of glass itself, whether real or photographed and here she can fully mine

photography's pathos. In *Only in Memory*, from the *Crimes against the Landscape* series shown at Melbourne's Arc One Gallery in 2008, tree ferns appear constrained, their bleached images literally bound behind glass. Similarly suggestive of loss is *Forensic Sublime* from the *Crimes against the Landscape: Styx Forest* series, where glass instruments holding botanical specimens contain death as much as life, while *Glance in Glass* from the same series features a glass bubble, its anamorphic distortion of the landscape it reflects conjuring up dystopian spaces of memory.

It might seem paradoxical that an artist attracted to flux and transmutability should choose to work on large-scale memorial works designed for permanence, but Laurence's ability to engage memory and nature in works invested with a sense of place has found a sympathetic public as well as numerous institutional supporters. With **Jisuk Han**, she completed the commemorative *Veil of Trees* for the Sydney Sculpture Walk in 1999. Collaborating with Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects, she produced the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* for the Australian War Memorial in Canberra in 1993 and the Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner in London in 2003. Other commissioned works include the award-winning coloured glass windows at the Central Synagogue in Bondi, called *49 Veils* (1999, again in collaboration with Han), *The Breath We Share* (2003), The Sidney Myer Commemorative Sculpture for the Bendigo Art Gallery, *Waterveil* in the environmentally-friendly CH2 Building for Melbourne



City Council (2006) and *The Memory of Lived Spaces* (2007) for Changi Airport in Singapore.

Despite the demanding schedule of public artworks and commissioned pieces, Laurence maintains a constant exhibition presence in commercial galleries. In addition to those already mentioned, she shows regularly with Jan Manton in Brisbane and her work is frequently seen in Australian art institutions and overseas. Her forthcoming show with Adelaide's Hugo Michell Gallery, *Things that Disappear*, is a collection of work from the past five years. Prospective collectors who know Laurence's public persona can see further examples of her work at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Australia. They can also refer to **Peter Emmett's** 1998 monograph as well as the multi-authored *Janet Laurence: The Green in Glass* from 2005. And for a good dose – literally – of Laurence's work, there is *Elixir* in the Niigata Prefecture of Japan, where as part of the 2003 Echigo-Tsunami Triennale she converted a traditional wooden storage house into a glassy lab-like space that is, in her words, "part botanical museum and part apothecary". Working with locals, Laurence produced plant-based elixirs that are available for consumption at the site. ■

Janet Laurence's forthcoming exhibition, *Things that Disappear*, will be shown at Hugo Michell Gallery in Adelaide until 2 August 2009.

"It's the way Janet Laurence works that is so enduring. Objects, memories, traces ... the work itself grows out of natural processes."

From far left:
Janet Laurence, *Cellular Gardens Spill*, 2008. Duraclear, oil pigment on acrylic, 51 x 107cm.
Janet Laurence, *Carbon Capture [Landscape & Residue Series]*, 2008. Duraclear burnt wood, pigment on acrylic, mirror, 100 x 200cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ARC ONE, MELBOURNE

TONY BOND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF CURATORIAL SERVICES, ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

"It's the way **Janet Laurence** works that is so enduring. Objects, memories, traces ... the work itself grows out of natural processes. Increasingly she's looking at organic and geological materials that somehow fix an understanding of time and being." **Tony Bond** acknowledges that other artists, such as **Anselm Kiefer** and **Joseph Beuys**, have done this kind of thinking and working but says: "What is unique about Laurence is that she captures something simple in a formal way."

Bond has been familiar with Laurence's practice since the 1980s. Her first exhibition in 1981 at ICA Central Street in Sydney smartly kick-started a solo show the following year at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Bond says, "... there is no doubt she is already established as a significant player in Australian art." With over 60 solo exhibitions, 11 awards, 17 residencies and grants, 21 commissions and inclusion in 35 public collections, who is going to argue with that?

People engage with her art. Bond notes: "In relation to objects, Laurence's work is indifferent; she's interested in the ephemeral, being able to work within specific cultural and historical contexts." Further, Laurence is highly adept at responding to specific sites using a range of materials. The artist's project at the 2003 Echigo-Tsumari Triennale is one such example. *Elixir* involved Laurence working with local villagers preparing plants for infusion in vats of shoji. Creating an elixir bar was her way of reconnecting us with the healing benefits of these plants and, says the curator, "sampling the sake made the afternoon rather pleasant!"

Courtney Kidd

JAN MANTON DIRECTOR, JAN MANTON GALLERY

Manton recognised Laurence as an impressive artist when she first sighted some of her early commissions skilfully rejuvenating sites, such as *Veil of Trees* (1999), *In the Shadow* (2000) and *Translucidas* (2002). Manton then met Laurence through artist **Judith Wright**. Artist and gallerist were clearly impressed with each other, so Manton came to represent Laurence's work in her Brisbane gallery.

"Janet's works engage us intellectually and visually ... surely this is the essence of meaningful art practice. Her work occupies the liminal zones of art, science, imagination and memory. She seeks to understand our place in the natural world."

Manton is excited at what awaits in Laurence's forthcoming exhibition at the gallery in 2010. "She has significant audiences here in Australia [and] dedicated collectors that I sell to." She is convinced Laurence will continue to be a major player in Australian art in the years to come: "Her work is relevant to our concerns about environmental degradation, endangered species and loss of wilderness. It will keep being acquired by collections and collectors who value her unique view of nature and the natural world ... We don't so much look at her works but enter them, immerse ourselves in the world of nature."

Courtney Kidd

SUZANNE HAMPEL DIRECTOR, ARC ONE GALLERY

Suzanne Hampel had long admired **Janet Laurence's** interest in alchemy and materiality. Hearing that Laurence had left Anna Schwartz she invited the artist to join Arc One. "Janet has created a unique niche for herself, both in the art world here and internationally, by moving away from painting as such to create reflective spaces in the form of assemblages and three-dimensional constructions."

Hampel is fascinated by Laurence's curiosity with the transformation of matter and substances, sighting a recent response from clients who commissioned work. The artist had created a sculptural installation of glass panels with images of ghosted tea trees and live olive trees in the client's small courtyard (They'd moved from a much larger property.) Clearly the clients were delighted: "We'll be able to watch the growing saplings through the veil of ancient, dreamlike trunks ... what a gift ..."

Perhaps this explains why Laurence's work has such a following. "As far as the secondary market is concerned Janet's work is rarely to be seen. It would seem collectors are loath to part with it," Hampel says.

This shortage of earlier works is not a serious problem according to Hampel. "As far as where to begin collecting ... I think that her work over the past few years continues to go from strength to strength. There are small works available as well as some editioned works that range in price from \$2000 to \$10,000.

The most recent solo exhibition at Arc One included 10 works ranging in price from \$11,000 to \$45,000, attracted strong sales, and included the hallmarks of Laurence's practice – lingering creations that live and breath in human spaces.

Courtney Kidd & Ingrid Periz

Timeline images:

1991: Janet Laurence, *Forensic*. Lead ash, wood, photograph, straw, laboratory glass, Perspex, fluorescent lights and x-rays, 600 x 700cm. Installation view at The Wharf, Sydney. COLLECTION OF THE ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES. PHOTO: TIM MARSHALL. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

1995: Janet Laurence, *Memory Matter*, 1992-5. Stainless steel, black steel, photograph, zinc, aluminium, wood, veneer, oil, wax, burnt wood, shellac oxides, 192 x 240cm. PHOTO: ROBERT NELSON. COURTESY: THE ARTIST, ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, MELBOURNE/SYDNEY AND SYSTEMS END

1997: Janet Laurence, *Trace Elements*. Sandstone blocks from demolished Sydney buildings, stone, glass, salt, oil, text of lost and threatened species, dimensions variable. Installation view at SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, for *Australian Perspecta*, 1997. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

2000: Janet Laurence, *In the Shadow*. Fog, casuarina forest, bulrushes, resin marblo wands with stainless steel bases, with texts and numbers indicating water chemistry monitoring. Installation for Boundary Creek, Olympic Park Homebush Bay Sydney 2000. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

2003: Janet Laurence, *Elixir*, detail, wooden traditional house, glass panel screenprinted with poured paint and plant and fluids, blown-glass vials, plant extracts steeped in shoji, laboratory glass. Permanent installation, 2003 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, Japan. PHOTOS: SHIGEO ANZAI AND JANET LAURENCE. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

2008: Janet Laurence, *Only in Memory [Crimes against the Landscape Series]*. Duraclear, oil pigment on acrylic, 100 x 215cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ARC ONE, MELBOURNE

1947

Born in Sydney

1977

Completes studies at University of Sydney and Academia Belle Arte, Perugia (later completes Masters at COFA in 1993)

1981

Solo exhibition at ICA Central Street, Sydney

1988

Peter Emmett's monograph *Janet Laurence* published by Craftsman House

1985

Included in *Australian Perspecta* at AGNSW



1992

Included in *The Boundary Rider* as part of the 9th Biennale of Sydney



1995

1996

Appointed a trustee of AGNSW, a post held to 2005; Begins two-year Australia Council fellowship

2000

Completes *Stilled Lives* at Melbourne Museum, as well as the commission *In the Shadow* for Sydney Olympic Park (right)



1997

Rockefeller Foundation residency in Bellagio, Italy; *Trace Elements* included in *Australian Perspecta* (below)



2005

Survey exhibition at ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra

2007

Appointed to Australia Council's Visual Arts Board

2009

Shortlisted for the 2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award

2003

Completes *Elixir* for the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in Japan (below)



2008

