

## Janet Laurence

To meet Janet Laurence is to appreciate that there are still ethereal beings who walk amongst us; to visit her studio is to enter a realm of mystery and beauty approaching the sacrosanct. What Laurence has created for the *Natural World* exhibition is a simultaneously intimate and mystical experience within a public space. It is also a unique opportunity to encounter four of her most spectacular works within one gallery.

Born of alchemy and an appreciation of the divine in the everyday, the intoxicating magnetism of the natural world and our intrinsic (yet so often denied) interrelationship with it, Laurence's ground-breaking immersive environments and installations have graced distinguished galleries, museums, universities and public spaces, architectural and urban landscapes and public, corporate and private collections across Australia, Europe and Asia. For more than 35 years, her work—including elements of photography, painting, sculpture and film and often incorporating unorthodox and found materials—has celebrated the intersection of ecology, natural history, transformation, experimentalism and environmentalism.

Her reverence for nature matched by an irreverence for canon, border, boundary, classification and categorisation, Laurence has not hurdled frontiers; she has glided—seemingly effortlessly—through them, rendering them invisible in her wake. As one of Australia's premier contemporary artists, Laurence's success is a unique and glorious form of sedition—a seductive, wondrously feminine, subtly feministic and profoundly purposeful advance against conformity of concept, material and form, almost singularly focused on reawakening us to the essential power, the precious, ancient beauty of nature—and the urgent need to conserve it.

For the *Natural World* exhibition, Laurence has created a spectacular, verdant corridor to immerse us in the inner world of plants. This installation is framed by her translucent *Conversations with trees*—a series of images which disperse and distort to offer shimmering, light-dappled glimpses of moss-shrouded trunks floating in symbiotic entanglements and misty latticed overlays—a shifting window into the fragility and wonder of the innermost sphere of the forest. This tableau flows effortlessly into *Can you hear the plant song?* (a tapestry which has been borrowed back from a private collection especially for this exhibition), depicting a curiously lifelike plantscape. Spun in lush greens and bluish hues from natural-dyed organic threads, this piece elegantly embodies the interconnectedness of the natural world.

In conversation with these elements, the filmic composition *What could a garden be?* records Laurence's creation of a garden exhibition in a sequence of dissolving images of emerald foliage morphing into light-flooded close-ups of roots suffused in fluid, water moving through glass tubes. In a slow interplay of intimate views into the cellular realm of plants, the artist herself appears, ghostlike, as spirit, spectre separating into many selves to draw us deeper into the story, the many co-existences beneath the surface of her fertile leafy terrain.

Through the centre of this immersive experiential space, *The force that through the green fuse drives* glimmers and refracts in a series of plinths bearing laboratory glass objects suffused in light and teeming with living, pulsing, trailing, unfurling plants—a reminder of the complex, magnificent alchemy at work deep within each curling stem and trembling leaf.

Elsewhere, in Laurence's *Elixir Lab*, white-coated 'lab assistants' invite visitors to imbibe mysterious solutions distilled from native Australian plants—a suggestion of our need for nourishment and our interdependency on these half-seen beings whose life-story is constantly unfolding at the edge of our consciousness.

Together, Laurence's pieces embody invocation, evocation, incantation—and she is high priestess, sage, sorceress, plant whisperer offering us invitation to commune, to enter this secret world she has discovered. This is an exhortation to open ourselves to the wondrous amongst us. Laurence urges us to become present to the hum and rhythm of the entire cellular network throbbing around us – to absorb, inhale, imbibe, enfold, to be at one with this incandescent, enigmatic, fragile, magnificent world of foliage.

In this new sensory vocabulary she has created, Laurence lures us to immerse ourselves in the ancient language of earth, reminding us how once we did not live separately, but in splendid communion. And if we listen, not with our ears, but with our whole selves, we might hear it whisper...

### Of being

*high on a branch  
on a soaring crown, far above the middle  
of  
everything that is all cicadas calling to prayer:  
stilled  
iridescence caught in sunlit air—  
swollen  
droplets suspended mid-flight, mirroring glistening fronds,  
a leaf belly cupping golden light, invoking us  
to  
shed our skins, release all our atoms:  
let them fall  
apart still sparking—de-fused, diffuse, drifting off; to sink  
into  
the moist earth; seep into the pulsing womb suffused with ancient wisdom:  
of how  
to trust without knowing when to hang on, how to let go;  
to have the ability to resist gravity in states out of quo;  
to be  
divisible by light—body unto body: disembodied,  
soaring  
out of dust into earth—from dirt to root to stem—to leaf: remaking light  
to feed;  
to carry, baptise, flourish, to harbour new life;  
to realise  
we are all made of pieces of each other—frozen out of time, through space, that  
the greater  
part of us has gazed past all that is known, beyond the heavens themselves;  
to recognise  
in the crash of a branch in the out there somewhere,  
a memory  
infused in cells falling to earth—immersed, engorged, dispersed:  
an echo  
of all that is everything cycling through dirt  
to rise  
to a branch  
on a soaring*

*crown  
in a grove  
of trees  
somenwhere  
in the out there.*

Unlike other works of Laurence's, this immersion is not an elegy, a dirge to nature's shrinking domain; it is a love-song to teeming persistence, praise to the enduring unconquerable perseverance of trees and plants. This is work of pure and tender love—liminal, electric, biological. It is living, breathing, pulsing. Sensual, seductive, immersive. It is praise, prayer—organic, glorious, sublime and of course characteristically visionary. There is great tenderness here – this is psalm, descant, a genuflection to the ancient, intrinsic wisdom of earth. It is light-dappled and filled with verdant hope. As plants will lean inexorably towards the light, so too does Janet Laurence's extraordinary, bewitching and immersive *The Natural World* installation, irresistibly drawing us with it.