

# Janet Laurence

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Sydney artist Janet Laurence has long explored the natural world through her photographic, sculptural and installation works. From zoos to natural history museums, jungles to glass-houses, the natural world and its human impact are explored through her art. Laurence first came to prominence in the 1980s for her sculptural installations featuring naturally occurring materials such as lead, ash, minerals and oxides; and for her translucent photographic panels upon which she would pour liquid pigment in delicate spills and pools of colour. States of flux or transformation are alluded to in these works, from the organic to the chemical; and the artist has travelled extensively through Europe and Asia researching and exhibiting her projects.

Building upon her earlier works, Laurence has incorporated living plant matter within recent installations. Suspended tree branches are attached to lengths of plastic tubing in some pieces, suggesting a form of medical life-support. In others, young plants and saplings are housed within delicate blown glass vessels, emphasising their fragility and peril in today's environmentally challenged world. Acutely aware of current environmental issues, and the need to regain ecological balance, Laurence has worked in Tasmania in areas of endangered rainforest; and she is currently collaborating with non-governmental, environmental organisations to undertake new research.

For this exhibition Laurence presents two works: an installation of living plants in blown glass supports, acquired for the MCA Collection in 2005; and a new, two-screen video installation filmed during the artist's three-month residency at Taronga Zoo, Sydney in 2009. *Cellular Gardens (where breathing begins)* (2005) comprises a series of upright steel supports and glass vessels with interconnected medical tubing. Each vessel houses a juvenile rainforest plant in soil and water crystals; the delicate forms sprouting green under artificial light give emphasis to their precarious surrounds. Laurence observes: 'I want the work to be seen as a piece about our interconnection with nature. Within the glass vials, the young plants reference the fragility of our natural environment and the hope of survival. The systems of tubes reference both medical life support systems and, within

our own bodies, vascular and respiratory systems. It is of course the green plants that we depend on for our oxygen to survive.'<sup>1</sup>

The interconnection between all living things – human, animal, plant – also finds expression in her video projection *Vanishing* (2009-10), which focuses on endangered species from around the world. Re-created for the Museum, it documents the abstract contours and gentle, rising-falling motion of various imperilled animals (a Silverback gorilla, snow leopard, Kodiak bear, for example) in repose on one screen. On the other screen, we see the camera panning down the animal's bodies in a falling motion to reveal thick fur, stripes, claws, and snouts. The amplified sound of breathing precedes our visual encounter with the work: we are drawn in and lulled, slowly becoming aware of the precariousness of what we see. There is another, more personal association within the work which was created shortly after the death of the artist's father. Laurence would visit her father in hospital as he lay suspended between life and death, within a tangle of medical apparatus and breathing equipment. Connecting the personal and the universal, *Vanishing* is a meditation on the deep connections we share.

Speaking of her current works, Laurence says she is 'working with the fragility of the natural world'.<sup>2</sup> Passionate and melancholic, they use the poetic as a means of drawing our attention to what we stand to lose. They equally acknowledge hope and survival in a time of peril.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Laurence, J., 'Cellular Gardens (where breathing begins)', unpublished artist's notes, 2005.

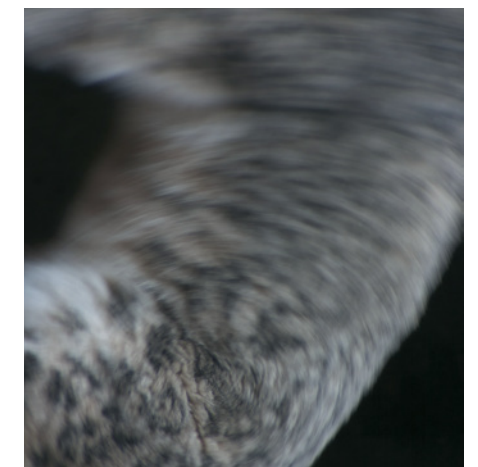
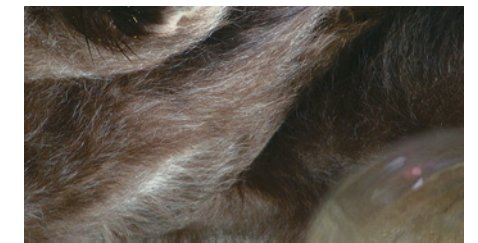
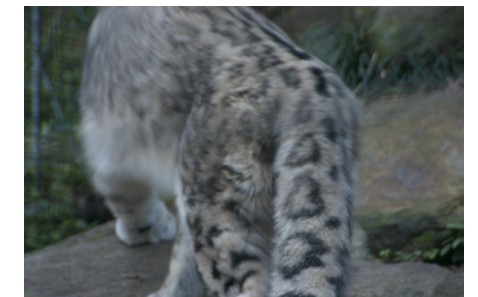
<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the artist, May 2010.



Above left:  
**Janet Laurence**  
*Vanishing* (installation view) 2009  
on display in the 2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award, National Gallery of Victoria, 2009  
2-channel video, with colour and sound  
9 minutes  
Digital media production: Gary Warner  
Sound: Jane Ulman  
Courtesy the artist, BREENSPACE, Sydney and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne  
Image courtesy the artist, BREENSPACE, Sydney and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne © the artist  
Photograph: Selina Ou

Above, top to bottom:  
**Janet Laurence**  
*Snow Leopard* 2009  
digital image  
Image courtesy and © the artist

**Janet Laurence**  
*Vanishing* (detail) 2009  
digital image  
Image courtesy and © the artist



**Janet Laurence**  
*Snow Leopard* (detail) 2009  
digital image  
Image courtesy and © the artist



**Janet Laurence**  
*Cellular Gardens (where breathing begins)* 2005  
stainless steel, mild steel, acrylic, blown glass, rainforest plants  
dimensions variable  
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased 2005  
Image courtesy and © the artist