Inside the artist's studio with Janet Laurence

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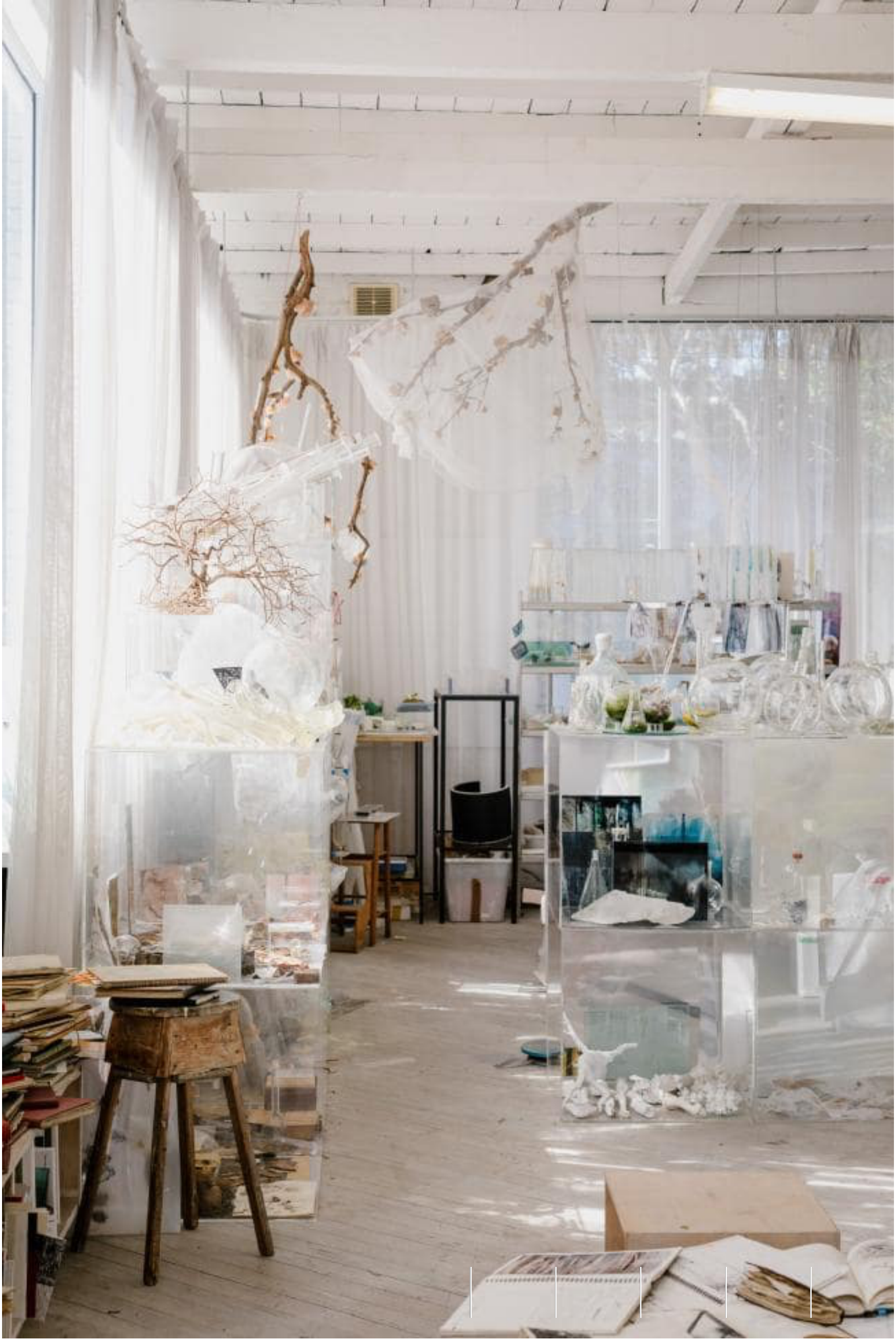
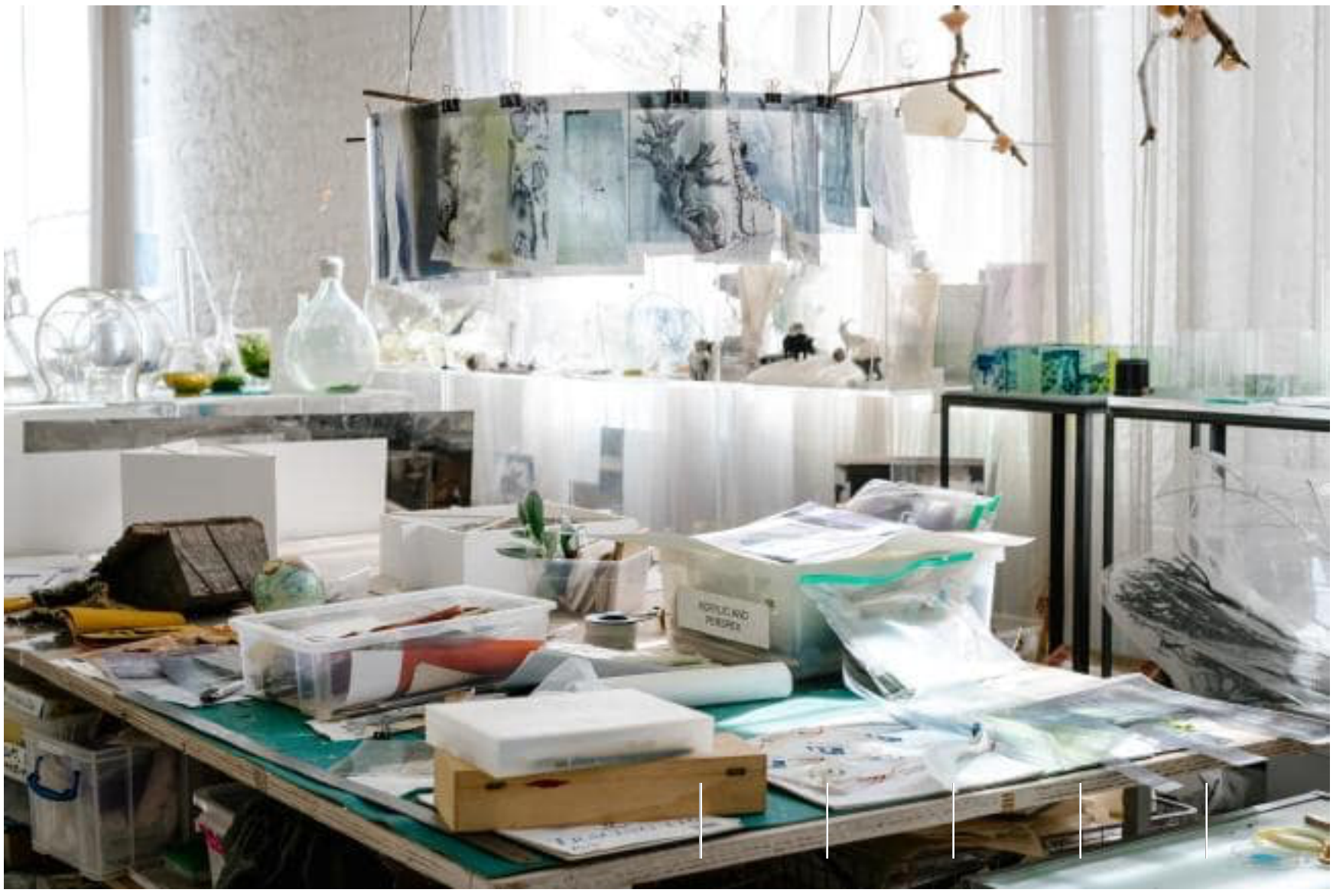
With a retrospective currently on show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, *Vogue Living* sat down with the acclaimed artist in her Sydney studio. Photographed by Jacquie Manning.

Janet Laurence (https://www.vogue.com.au/vogue-living/arts/15-artworks-to-see-at-sydney-contemporary-this-year/image-gallery/ec854750f62dbdf110c0f5d919cfff26) is nose deep in a pile of sketchbooks and botanical books and surrounded by remnants of her expansive, decades-long body of work when I walk into her Chippendale studio on a sunny autumn afternoon. Flanked by intriguing clusters of glass jars, beakers and cut-off tree branches, the Australian artist was in the midst of preparing for a massive retrospective (on now until June 10 at Sydney's **Museum of Contemporary Art (https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/829-janet-laurence/)**) when we sat down to chat about her illustrious career.



With works spanning some 30 years, *Janet Laurence: After Nature* is the first major survey of the artist's work, which spans sculpture, installation, photography and video. The exhibition's pieces have been carefully selected by the MCA's chief curator Rachel Kent and include many of the key works from Laurence's career, thanks to loans from public institutions around the country. While it's impossible to summarise the scope of Laurence's oeuvre in one sound bite, her obvious love and appreciation for the natural world in all its guises is a major undercurrent to her work.

Below, she chats to *VL* about her MCA exhibition, past and present work, and inspiration.



Your body of work is huge. How did you go about deciding which work you would include in the exhibition?

I worked very closely with the curator, Rachel Kent, and she actually said to me, knowing my work very well, she said I'd like to have these works and she named them all and I was a little alarmed because some of them were big installations that really no longer existed so that of course meant re-making some of them.

And the other ones she wanted involved museum loans, no private loans. So we've also borrowed objects from the Powerhouse Museum, the Australian Museum and Mount Annan Botanic Gardens. And then the other part of the exhibition, the retrospective part, is the big new work that was commissioned by the MCA and that's a huge, massive gallery. That was quite a challenge to think about, but I quite instinctively felt what I wanted to do with it. It was a continuity of work I'd been making on a very small scale and never to any conclusion, so this gave me the opportunity to pull all those things together.

What was it like revisiting and remaking things that you'd kind of left behind?
The funny thing is, you make a new work version, so it's completely new. I mean, *Birdsong,* which was a huge, giant ring of birds is now a diorama of a much smaller number of birds and a much more intense viewing of it. It's a completely different piece. *Deep Breathing* is there, *Hospital for the Barrier Reef* is a whole fresh new work in a room that's specially designed for it with film projections.

So, every older work I've had to re-make. The big dead tree called *Heart Shock* I've done different times at different museums, always with a different tree, so it's actually completely different according to the tree. This time I got the tree from Mount Annan Botanic Gardens, it was a big and dead and they cut it down for me. Brought it to be fumigated for two months…. it's such a huge, huge tree they had to cut it to get it to size and put it back together again! It's a very big job. But the amazing thing about that tree is I chose it exactly because it has these fabulous beetle drawings all the way up.

How long have you been working on this?
Oh, over a year.

It must be kind of amazing to go over it all. For you it's almost like your poring over old diaries…
Seeing as you say that, I was a bit surprised when the MCA came to visit my studio and they suddenly said "Oh, sketchbooks!" and I went "I haven't looked at my sketchbooks for years, they go right back." He said they'd love to see them so all my sketchbooks got looked at and opened and photographed and now there's a whole vitrine full of sketchbooks sitting there too. That was, of all the things, the most alarming for me to go back on because I seriously

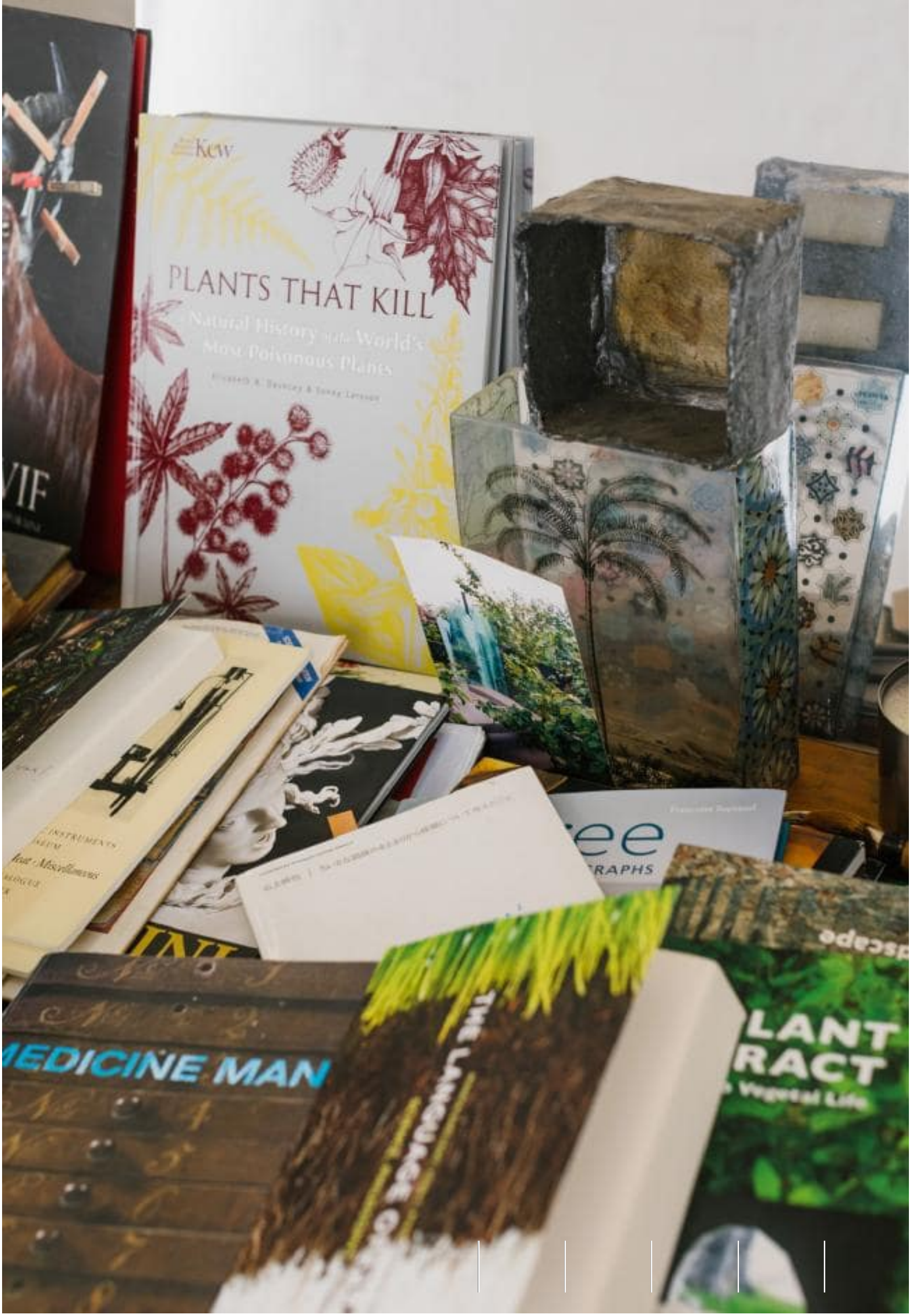
hadn’t looked at them and they go back so far. I was alarmed at what I’d written. I thought, ‘I can’t remember that I could have even written such philosophical thoughts!’ Written in pencil by hand, whole poems…!

Did you find when you went over them you could rediscover ideas that you’ve forgotten about?

Yeah, well I sort of realised there had been a real consistency in my thinking for a long time, but I was amazed by how deeply I had gone into things, because you don’t really remember that.

Sometimes the act of putting something on paper, it's almost emptying your mind of something, then you move onto something else.

Exactly, I think so. Funnily enough, I went to Sicily last year and I kept thinking 'Oh, I've been here before'. I mean, I knew I'd been here before but it was different, it felt very different. I was there in the '70s and it was very Mafioso and I have these sketchbooks *full* of drawings and accurate descriptions of everything I ate and everything else [laughs]. And I was regretting so much I hadn't read that before I went this time!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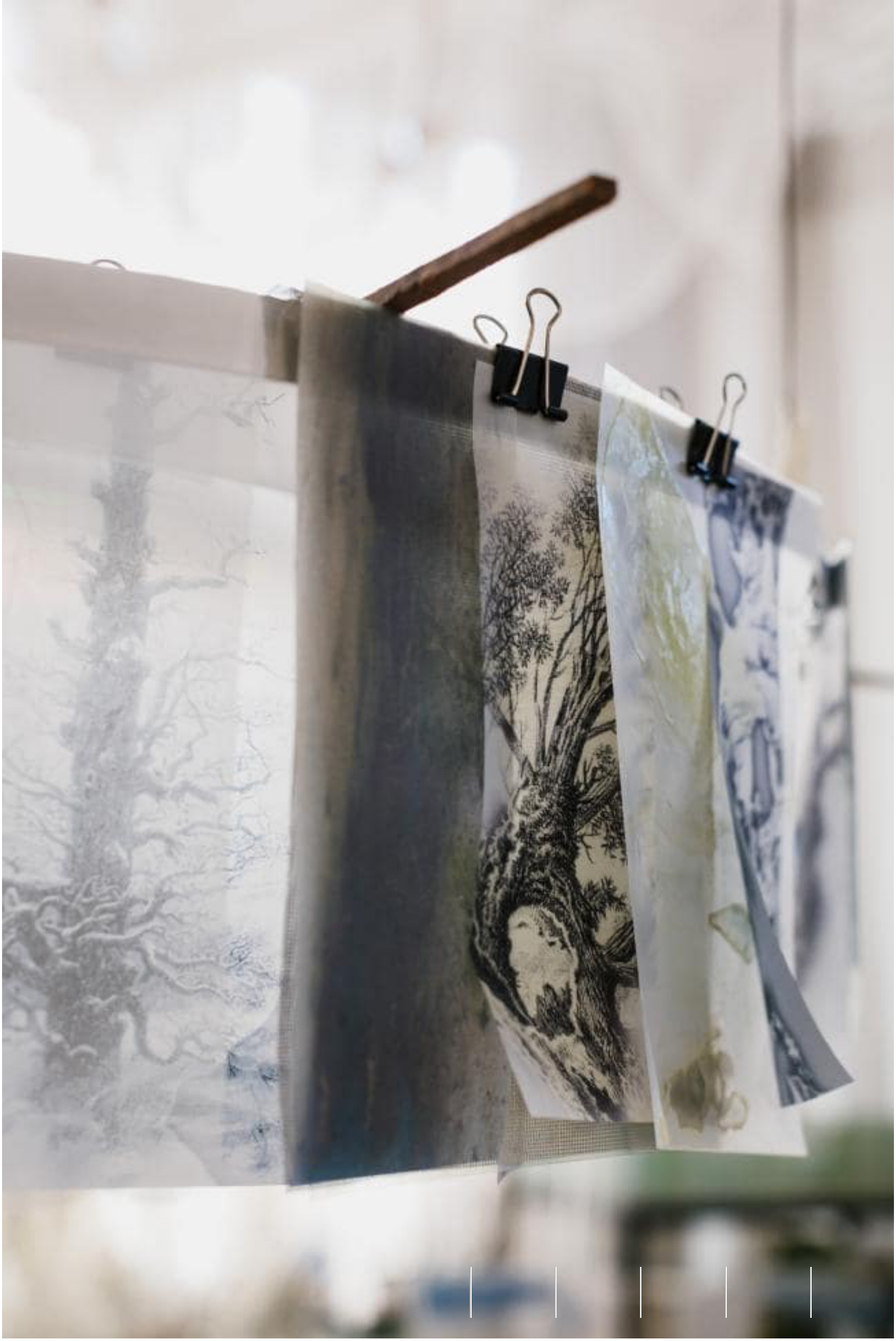
Can you circle back to that time when you were studying in Italy, what was that like?

Oh, it was an amazing time for Italy, Italy in the ’70s was considered to be quite a poor country. But I lived in the countryside and I was exposed to a wonderful movement in art called *Arte povera*, focusing on the materiality of the work. And the art school was amazing, there was an energy crisis and it went on strike. Because Italy sold all its power to Scandinavia in this energy crisis! [laughs] Yeah, it was a very formative period, I think.

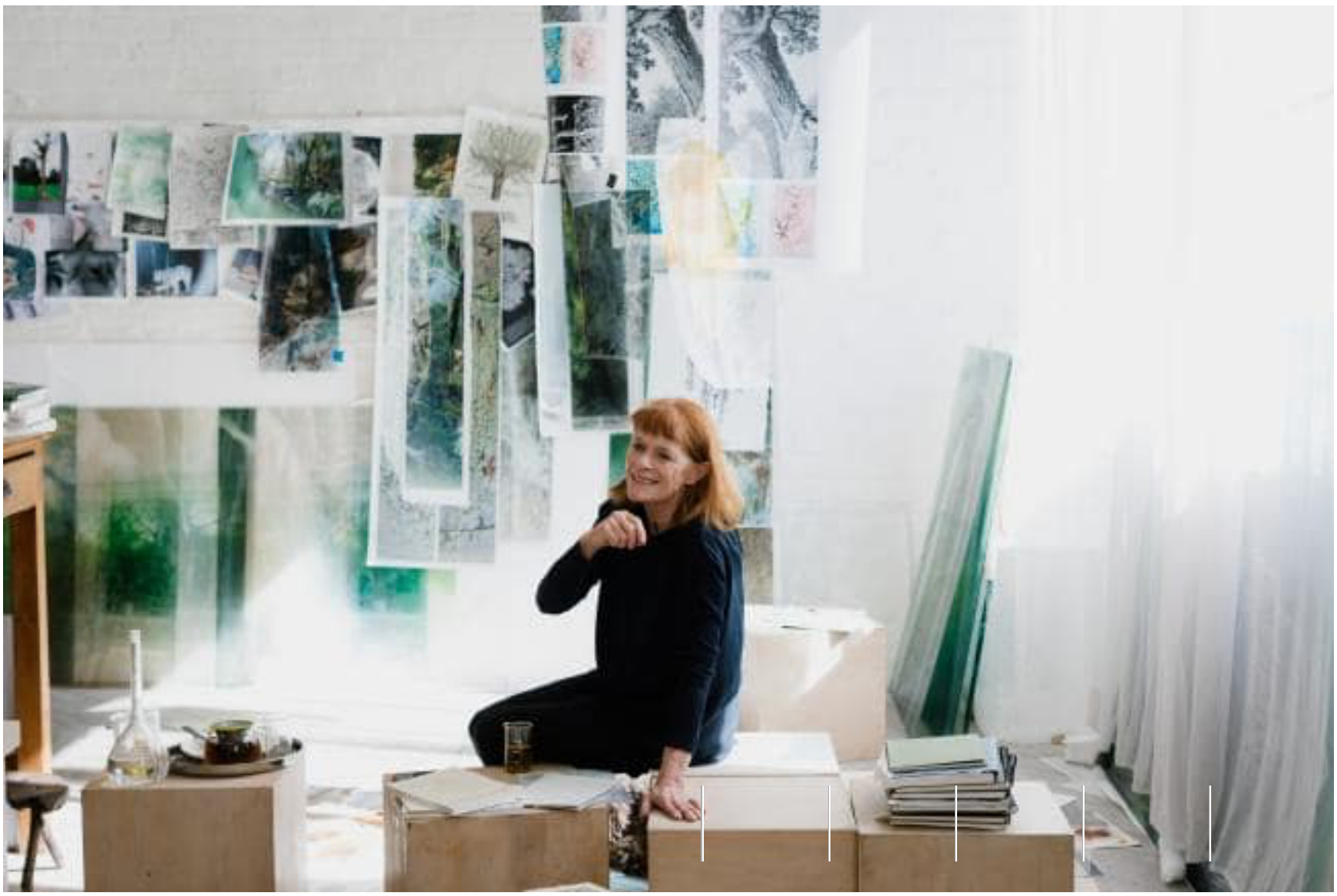


And then you went and studied a few years later in New York, is that right?

New York was an amazing place to be when I was there which was in the early ’80s, it was just a great time for artists being in Manhattan. Artists hardly live in Manhattan anymore.

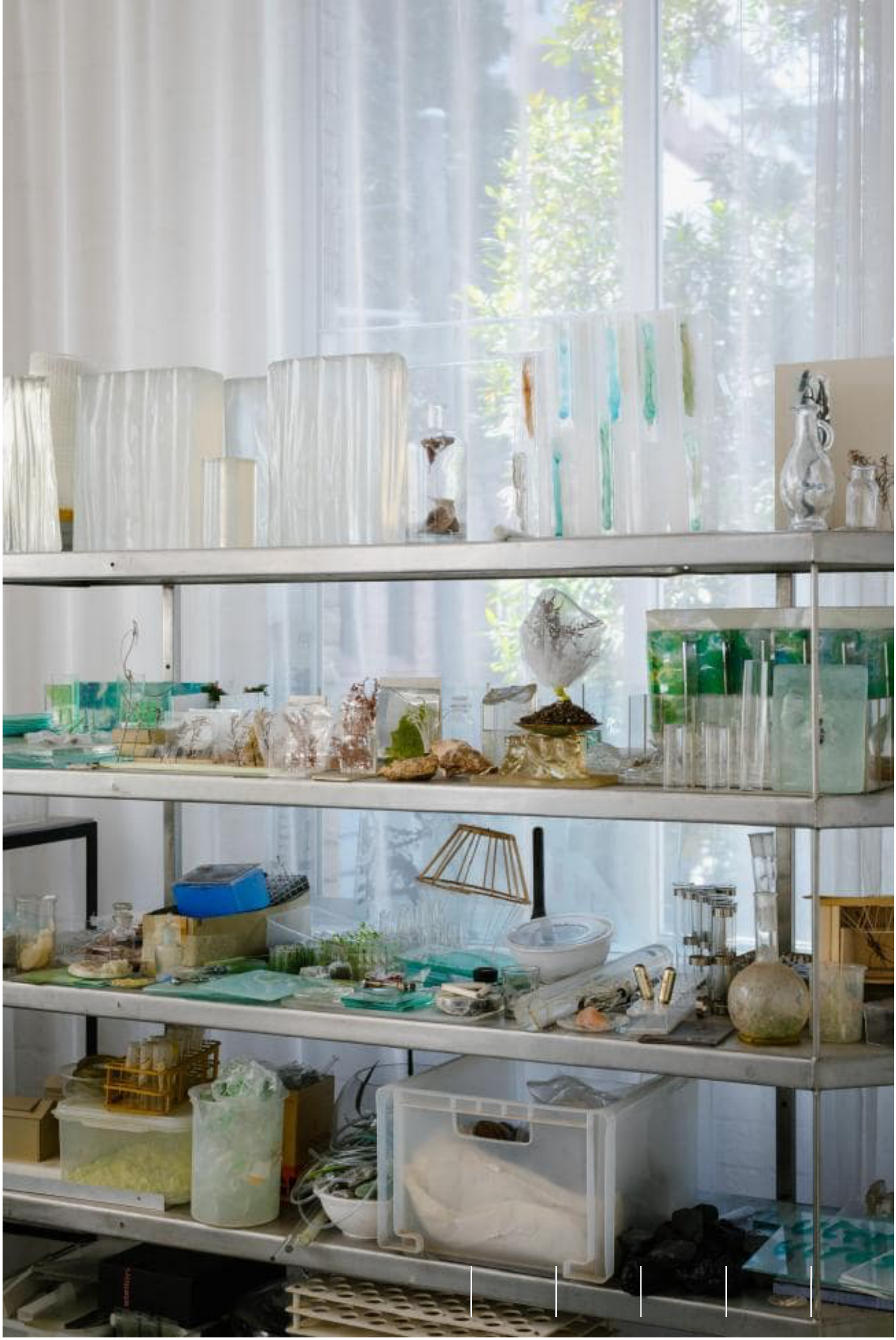
No, they couldn’t afford it!

I lived in SoHo and I was watching it transform and I was being exposed to the land artists and all the earth-works artists, so to speak, and a whole lot of art that we weren’t seeing here.



Obviously it was a different time, but how do you think the art world in New York differs to how it is here?

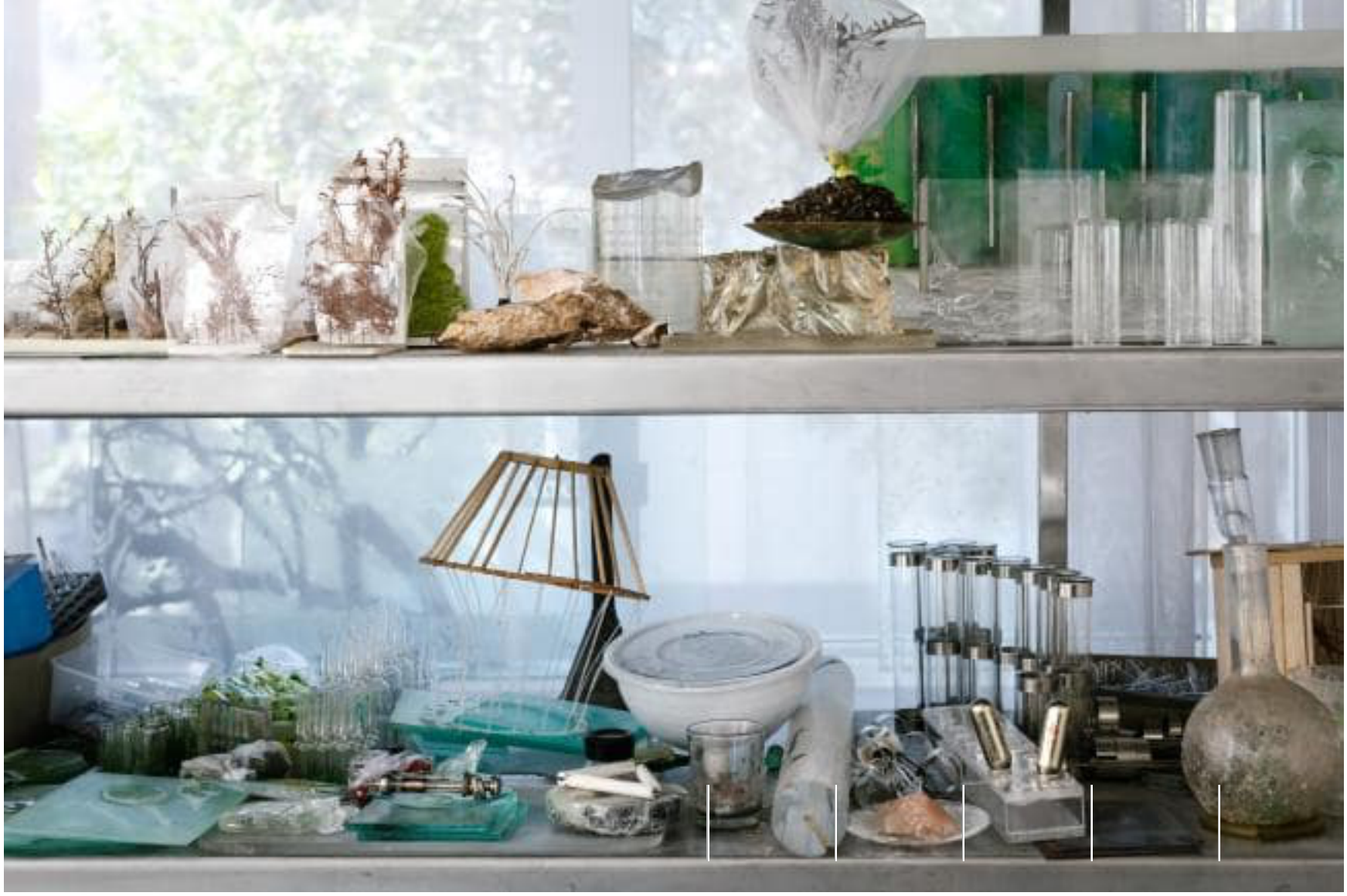
Oh, it’s a much bigger industry there. And it’s a totally respected industry, it’s a big part of the American economy. It’s a big profession for many artists there and there’s just so many really major galleries and major museums.



Did you find it hard to be in places like Italy where there's such an obvious heritage and New York, where art is very supported and you can actually make a living from it. Did you find that hard coming back to Australia?

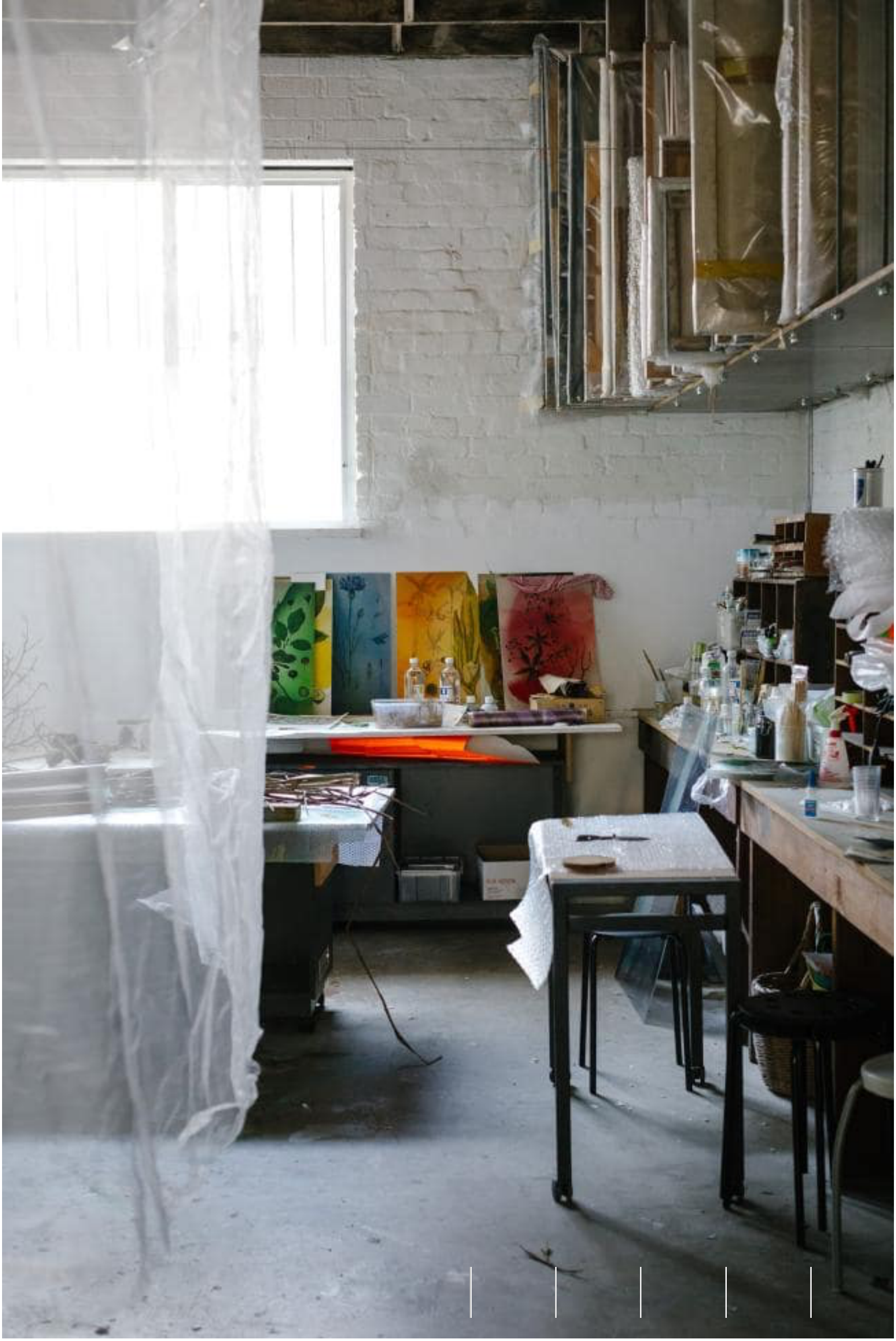
Yes, I found Australia very small, but it felt like there are great seeds of possibility here, galleries were starting to be set up and I guess I've been through this period where the art world has just grown into something. It's pretty significant here, although we don't have a government that recognises that, unfortunately.

I mean in that very period our governments have become more and more conservative, strangely enough. So, I left Australia at the moment when the Whitlam [government] came in with the whole intention to promote the arts and all these people got amazing fellowships to go and study and they realised how important culture was to life and now we're at this point where we have a government that doesn't have any recognition whatsoever. It's actually quite alarming.



I know it's always been kind of struggle for artists in Australia but do you think it's getting particularly worse?

I think there was a period where there was more money in Australia to support art, and now lots of the smaller arts organisations that were set up have had to fold. There was this huge flowering period that now, it seems to me, has become much tighter and people are looking more towards private money, like they do in the States. But, of course the thing is in the States, philanthropy is a hugely respected and embraced way of life there, whereas here it's still not. Of course, I've got to know a lot of amazing philanthropists here, and it is growing, but there it's just… it's always been really big and respected.



You have a long-term appreciation and fascination with the natural world, when do you think that developed?

You know, I think I just grew up with loving it and feeling very comfortable within it. When I first lived in Europe, I was spending a lot of time in [nature] and I compared my experience to living in the real countryside of Australia, which I had observed and experienced as a child, and then I also compared it against the nature of cities.

I thought how weirdly we had colonised this place. Our whole agricultural industries had developed this European approach to a very foreign land and I wanted to explore that discordancy. That was one of my reasons for wanting to come back to Australia – to try and explore that through art. Then I got a job as a flying artist where I was able to fly around to all these remote places.

What was that like?

It was amazing in a tiny little plane with a wonderful ceramic artist you've probably heard of called Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, who has since sadly died. So, we'd just land in all these little places. There were all these people hungry for a taste of art since they lived so remotely. It also involved visiting a lot of Indigenous people, in those days there were mission stations and things, so I really saw how it was.

But the other alarming thing was also seeing [that our approach] to art was the exactly same approach to farming - people just applied a European perception to the landscape. They didn't actually look at it how it was, but they were just painting it through the eyes of a European Impressionist. So that was kind of funny and I realised that we can't see what this place is. So, then I just decided I wanted to start exploring it a bit more and art was a great means for doing that.

You've used so many different mediums to express that.

Yes exactly, even though I started as a painter I will often keep resorting to painting to sometimes hold different mediums together, but I just want to use whatever I need to get the effect I want.

You must have seen our approach to nature evolve throughout your whole career. Does it give you endless ways to interpret it?

Yes, well of course, it's interesting because it's now become so political. For me, for a long time it's been a very political issue, but now there's not a day when it's not in the news in some way and yet there's just two sides. On the one side we're learning more about it and there's more and more wonder expressed about it and at the same time we're destroying it. These two things are going hand-in-hand. I do think it's coming to a big head.

Janet Laurence: After Nature *is on now at the Museum of Contemporary Art until June 10. Visit:* ***mca.com.au*** **(https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/829-janet-laurence/)**

JANET LAURENCE (/tag/janet-laurence)