

A microscopic view of plant cells, showing various structures like chloroplasts and cell walls. The image is in shades of green and yellow, with some cells appearing more brightly lit than others. The text is overlaid on this background.

JANET

LAURENCE

*The Alchemical*

*Garden of Desire*

JANET LAURENCE  
*The Alchemical Garden of Desire*





JANET

LAURENCE

*The Alchemical*

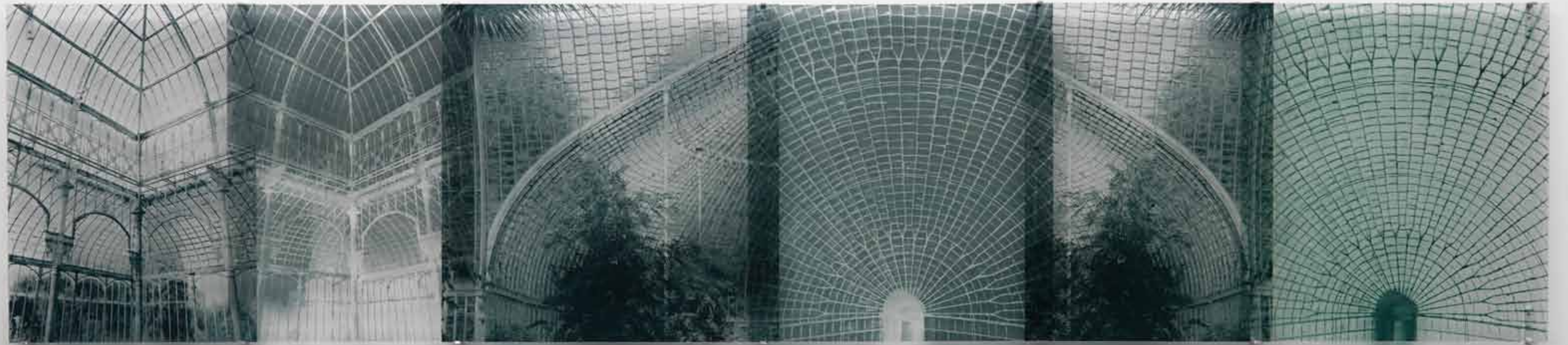
*Garden of Desire*



OPPOSITE:  
Anne ZAHALKA  
From the series *Tabloteops* 2012 (detail)  
Courtesy of the artist  
PREVIOUS:  
*The alchemical garden of desire* 2012 (detail)

## CONTENTS

- 8 **Foreword**  
Penny Teale
- 13 **In the Flower**  
Ingrid Periz
- 33 **Artist Statement**  
Janet Laurence
- 34 **The Alchemical Garden of Desire**
- 45 **Biography**



## FOREWORD

Penny Teale

Janet Laurence's outstanding reputation has been formed by her distinctive approach to investigating intricate aspects of the environment. Her art can be described as a synthesis of nature, science and architecture which transverses between the disciplines of installation, photography, painting and sculpture. She often uses specific environmental sites to explore ideas of the tangible — of nature in decline and renewal and the intangible — the inherent memories of these sites and the plants and animals that inhabit them.

In her most recent body of work, Laurence considers the process of tracing the 'memory of nature' through elaborate constructs of glass shelves and vitrines that contain and screen a collection of botanical images, specimens and natural curios. These works stand as a comment upon the volatility of nature whilst performing the role of a Museum, to protect and memorialise plants.

Janet Laurence's *The Alchemical Garden of Desire* is the second exhibition, in a series, where an artist has been invited to produce a body of work relating to McClelland's surrounding environment, the first exhibition in 2010 was *Andrew Browne: The Periphery*. In 2007, McClelland purchased with the assistance of the Robert Salzer Fund and Fornari Bequest, a major work by Janet Laurence from her *Crimes against the landscape series*. This work was a catalyst to this exhibition's development and also aligned with Janet's awareness and interest in the botanical and historical significance of the Langwarrin property, 'Cruden Farm'.

In 1928 Sir Keith Murdoch presented the Langwarrin property of 'Homefarm' to his bride, Elisabeth Greene as a wedding gift. This property consisted of old orchards, farmland and a home surrounded by a small cottage garden of roses and wisteria. Over the next eight decades Dame Elisabeth Murdoch transformed it as 'Cruden Farm' into one of the most distinguished and enjoyable gardens in Victoria.

In *The Alchemical Garden of Desire*, Laurence merges concepts of both past and present gardening traditions, juxtaposing collected botanical curios with living samples gleaned from the garden of 'Cruden Farm'. In this installation Laurence expresses both the existence of plants and the idea of a garden as protective haven for the botanic.

McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery is grateful to all of the many people involved in making this exhibition possible. We would like to thank Dame Elisabeth Murdoch AC DBE and 'Cruden Farm' staff, Michael Morrison,



FOLLOWING:  
*Forensic sublime (Crimes against the landscape series: Sixx Forest)* 2008  
mirror, oil glaze, Duraclear on Shikolite  
100.0 x 455.0 cm

Collection: McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery  
Purchased with the assistance of The Robert Salzer Fund  
and The Fornari Bequest, 2009

ABOVE

*Citradora* 2012

Duraclear on acrylic, mirror

59.0 x 270.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne

Joe Wilkinson and John Christie for their assistance and support of the project.

Thank you to Janet Laurence who has shown tremendous generosity and commitment during the development of this exhibition and Ingrid Periz for her perceptive and insightful essay. We would also like to thank Fran Clark and the ARC ONE Gallery staff for their assistance during the project's development. Lastly, we would like to extend our gratitude to David Lancashire Design and the dedicated McClelland team.

**Penny Teale**

Senior Curator

PREVIOUS

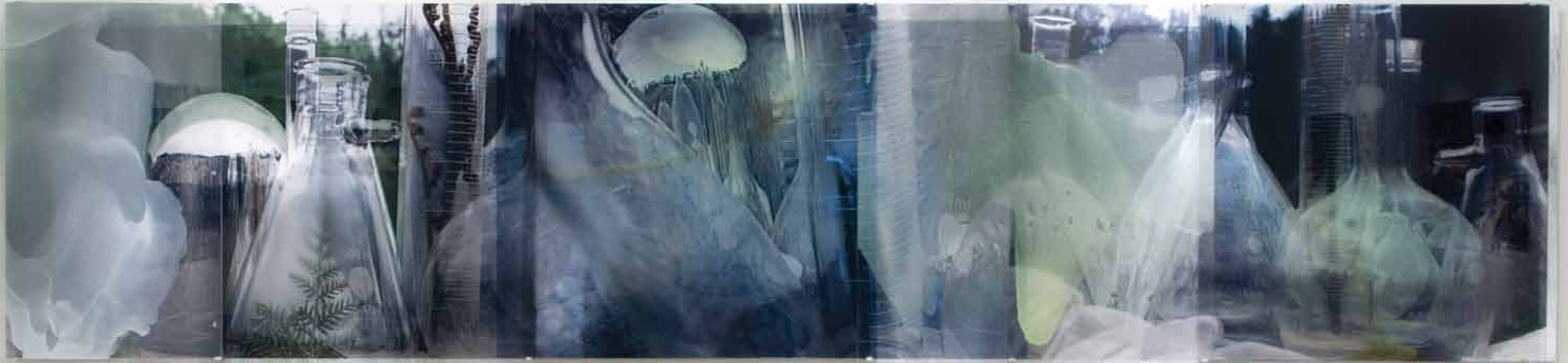
*Botanical residues* 2006

colour transparency on transparent synthetic polymer resin

100.1 x 447.0 x 7.5 cm (overall)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2007





## IN THE FLOWER

Ingrid Periz

*“The career of flowers differs from ours only in inaudibleness. I feel more reverence as I grow for these mute creatures whose suspense or transport may surpass our own.”* EMILY DICKINSON<sup>1</sup>

Janet Laurence’s *The Alchemical Garden of Desire* is structured a little like a flower. In the middle of the exhibition space a vitrine holds objects from the scientific business of botany, analogues for the business of flowers which is sexual reproduction. Floating around this centre of 3-dimensional models, plant fragments and vials containing botanical fluids is a succession of plant-based images, stand-ins for the petals that comprise the corolla and the attractants, if you will, that will pull us inward. Beyond this structural similarity the installation expresses, in Laurence’s words, “both the being of plants and the idea of a garden as a sanctuary for plants, almost a museum of plants because plants, like animals, are being lost in the wild.”

How can we speak of the being of plants, of Dickinson’s “transport” or “suspense” of flowers? Laurence’s “alchemical desire” is not so much human desire, although plants (and this exhibition) seek to engage it, rather it is a play on what she calls “the chemical reaction between plants”—their bio-chemical reactions—as well as “the fact that plants are in a state of desire.” From an evolutionary perspective, what plants ‘want’ is more plants, a continuation of their genetic makeup rather than their competitors’. In *The Botany of Desire*:

*A Plant’s Eye View of the World*, Michael Pollan suggested that the domestication of the apple, the tulip, tobacco and the potato, driven by the human desire for sweetness, beauty, intoxication and control was not a one-way process determined by man. The lengthy transformation effected by domestication served the plants’ purposes as well, giving them an evolutionary advantage. Pollan calls this process a ‘co-evolution’, one that effectively transformed human appetites as much as it did the species concerned. In this way he would have us re-imagine agriculture “as something the grasses did to people,” rather than vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Pollan goes further. “I don’t think we can begin to understand beauty’s gravitational pull,” he writes, “without first understanding the flower, since it was the flower that first ushered the idea of beauty into the world the moment, long ago, when floral attraction emerged as an evolutionary strategy.”<sup>3</sup> Beauty begins then with the flower soliciting a pollinator and because this beauty serves evolution’s purpose, we are effectively powerless against it. Perhaps this accounts for the momentary explosion of joy we feel in watching time-lapse photography of a blossom unfolding. That opening of the petal, the tilting phototropism, the gentle waving of pistils—yes we delight

OPPOSITE AND FOLLOWING  
Waiting – A medicinal garden for plants 2010 (detail)  
transparent mesh, Duraclear, mirror, oil, acrylic, glass vessels, plants  
dimensions variable  
Installation view, *The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*  
17th Biennale of Sydney, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, 2010





*“I don’t think we can begin to understand beauty’s gravitational pull,” he writes, “without first understanding the flower, since it was the flower that first ushered the idea of beauty into the world the moment, long ago, when floral attraction emerged as an evolutionary strategy.”*

in seeing these movements that are usually invisible to us, but the real pleasure lies in seeing something we recognise in a primordial way. Our delight and that of the flower’s spring from the same source.

This dizzying engagement of what we think of as pleasure — our own “transport” as well as that of flowers — is not the typical mode of contemporary art exhibitions driven, as this one is, by ecological concerns. Laurence avoids the term ‘environmental artist’ — her work is informed by more sources than this term indicates — but concurrent with this exhibition she is showing work elsewhere based on the Tasmanian Tarkine forests, a Gondwanan rainforest ecosystem under threat from logging and mining. A similar sense of potential loss was a feature of *Waiting—A medicinal garden for plants*, her work in the 2010 Sydney Biennale which was installed at the Royal Botanical Gardens in a white mesh transparent pavilion made by the artist. This work was imagined loosely as a medicinal garden, but one where the combined living, ailing and dead specimens of Australian native plants no longer offered the possibility of human healing. Instead they were themselves in need of care. *Waiting* sounded a warning note about environmental fragility in light of a warming climate, water shortages and species loss; other work has been distinctly melancholy in tone. *Crimes against the landscape series* 2008, for instance, exploited photography’s pathos, showing tree

ferns bound behind glass walls and botanical specimens forensically imaged through laboratory glass.

Elements of this earlier work recur here as Laurence retains her use of scientific instruments while combining living and dead botanical material. In addition, her photographically-derived images continue to use veiling, transparency and translucency, hallmarks of her early work which frequently hinted at processes of material transformation. Formally, the central vitrine from this exhibition recalls *The memory of nature* 2010–2012, an installation comprising a succession of transparent, perfunctorily minimalist acrylic cubes creating an almost invisible museological system. This houses an assortment of biological material — charred, stuffed, shrouded, poured — that includes the normally discarded residues of distillation and other processes, gathered here to suggest both the cycle of transformation that underpins the natural world as well as its ongoing depletion. Installed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where it is part of the permanent collection, *The memory of nature* is flanked by nineteenth century landscapes, a juxtaposition that casts the older paintings in a sombre light: sublimity is now the site of loss, recalled in the reverential gathering of *mementos mori*.

*The Alchemical Garden of Desire* strikes a different tone. Instead of the sense of loss and quiet elegy that was so palpable







...her work aims to create what she has called “spaces of perception that can bring us into contact with the lifeworld.”

in Laurence’s *After Eden* installation earlier this year which focused more specifically on threatened animal species, here she appeals to viewers’ sense of pleasure and wonder. Laurence would have us return to the intensity of our first childhood encounter with flowers, its combination of scent, delight and quiet awe. And when she notes that “gardens are spaces where life is cultivated” she would have us remember that human life and, through the long practice of constructing gardens for remembrance, human memory are cultivated there as well.

Flowering plants have long been relocated, consciously and unconsciously, by their human custodians in a process that continues to transform the globe; a garden, by contrast, always belongs to a particular place. *The Alchemical Garden of Desire* acknowledges its location by incorporating images from the nearby gardens of Dame Elisabeth Murdoch’s Cruden Farm; these gardens are also the source of much of the plant material on view.

Laurence emphasizes that in making the images here she is not depicting flowers or making botanical pictures so much as attempting to capture the memory of an encounter with plants. Her goal is evocative rather than descriptive. This distinction is important for Laurence. By choosing to pitch her work between the realms of the scientific and the experiential, between what is known and what is felt, her work aims to create

what she has called “spaces of perception that can bring us into contact with the lifeworld.” The usual term used to describe the settings in which this kind of perception is possible is ‘immersive’ and it’s frequently applied to Laurence’s installations. The word can also be used to describe the state of consciousness produced by such a setting, a state where one’s physical self-awareness is diminished by virtue of engrossment in the surrounding environment. What Laurence wants from immersiveness is profoundly different to the term’s usual meaning which, when applied to the experience of video games and virtual reality, suggests a viewer’s disengagement from their physical surroundings in favour of immersion in a simulated reality. Laurence would have us lose ourselves in the “slowed spaces” of her installations in order to touch — to make contact with — the natural world.

What makes up this lifeworld of plants? All the components of climate — precipitation and temperature, humidity, atmospheric pressure — as well as soil composition and geological change, wind, disease, pests, pollinators, browsers, fire, and humans play a part. The annual cycle of day length and the presence of other plants also have a role. While we can enumerate the conditions of life, it is as difficult to imagine the being of a tree — an organism of wood and leaf and root hairs, managing wind and rain and sun over an acre of leaf surface —



OPPOSITE AND PREVIOUS  
*After Eden* 2012  
multimedia  
dimensions variable  
Installation view, Sherman Contemporary  
Art Foundation, Sydney, 2012

FOLLOWING  
*The memory of nature* 2010–2012  
acrylic, scientific glass, dried plants, seeds sulphur, salt, amethyst, taxidermied owls, shellac tulle,  
wood, burnt bones, hand bones, hand-blown glass, oil paint, mirrors  
180.5 x 300.5 x 170.3 cm  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales Contempo Group  
and the Contemporary Collection Benefactors with the generous assistance of Geoff Ainsworth AM,  
Peter Braithwaite, Sally Breen, Andrew & Cathy Cameron, Ginny & Leslie Green, Michael Hobbs,  
Ray Wilson OAM 2012



*What makes up this lifeworld of plants? All the components of climate—precipitation and temperature, humidity, atmospheric pressure—as well as soil composition and geological change, wind, disease, pests, pollinators, browsers, fire, and humans play a part.*



ABOVE  
*Life of the Umavali (The Takine, Tasmania) 2012*  
 acrylic, glass, oil pigment, wood, crystal,  
 Duraclear, Dibond mirror  
 2 parts: 90.0 x 100.0 cm; 35.0 x 36.0 x 33.0 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne

as it is the being of an annual ‘weed’ like the common European Thale cress, which can complete its lifespan in a mere six weeks. So too the different temporalities of plant life, whether the millenia-long lifespan of Bristlecone pine (*Pinus longaeva*), the weeks of the cress, or the daylong, or shorter, bloom time of individual flowers like Daylily (*Hemerocallis*) and Morning glory (*Ipomoea*).

In his compendium of human encounters with the class Insecta, Hugh Raffles invites us to imagine the lifeworld of an insect in spite of its profound otherness. Raffles writes of this difference, “We simply cannot find ourselves in these creatures. The more we look, the less we know. They are not like us.”<sup>4</sup> And plants? The Lemon-scented gum (*Corymbia citriodora*), synonymous with the famed drive in Cruden Farm which was designed by Edna Walling, extends its trunk by withdrawing nutrients from its lower branches which die and drop off. This deciduous process is not confined to trees; insect molting and the loss of human milk teeth are similar.<sup>5</sup> In the garden, young children can sometimes feel a kinship with plants that many adults would refuse. A sunflower’s nod toward the sun or a pea shoot tendril’s upward climb are responses they can, and will happily, copy. Still developing the capacity to categorise the things of this world according to the trinity animal/vegetable/mineral, the child recognizes that the plant’s task, like its own, is to grow.

OPPOSITE  
*Possibilities for a garden 2010*  
 laboratory and handblown glass, plants, acrylic, silicon tubes  
 dimensions variable  
 Installation view, BREENSPACE, Sydney, 2010





*In the garden, young children can sometimes feel a kinship with plants that many adults would refuse... the child recognizes that the plant's task, like its own, is to grow.*

Plants of course are less like us than insects. It's their conditions of life that are similar to our own; indeed, through respiration and photosynthesis plants help create the conditions for human life. Gardens are where we keep plants and in keeping them, we help keep ourselves. In *Waiting* Laurence conjured up a 'garden' of plants in need, an analogue for overarching environmental crises. Does the desiring garden here need us? Plants' alchemical desire co-evolved with human desire; according to Pollan plant 'desire' helped engender human appetites and pleasures. This has not changed. What has changed is the scale of the human footprint. Early in the twentieth century the earth shifted from mostly wild to mostly anthropogenic—human-altered—ecosystems, to the point where, in Pollan's words, "it has become much harder... to tell where the garden... leaves off and pure nature begins."<sup>6</sup> Laurence, and others, note that one of the consequences of this is the loss of plant species, but the expanded global garden may yet offer hope. In her account of

international efforts to re-think ways of saving nature in a world that's lost most of its wild places and some of the plants they contain, Emma Marris would have us accept the salutary potential of anthropogenic ecosystems and re-imagine nature, less as a wilderness apart from man, than a constantly changing half-wild place, watched and tended by us.<sup>7</sup> It's an image familiar to any gardener and, through its solicitation of our co-evolved pleasure, one that Laurence's installation invites.

1. Emily Dickinson to Louise and Frances Norcross, ca. April 1873, in Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 505; cited Molly Peacock, *The Paper Garden: An Artist Begins Her Life Work at 72* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2012) p. 81.  
 2. Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye-View of the World*, (New York: Random House, 2001), p. xxi.  
 3. Pollan, p. xviii.  
 4. Hugh Raffles, *Insectopedia* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), p. 44.  
 5. George Seddon, *The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 174.  
 6. Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 114; Pollan, p. xxii.  
 7. Marris, p. 2.

OPPOSITE  
*The memory of nature* 2010–2012 (detail)  
 FOLLOWING  
*Cellular gardens (Where breathing begins)* 2005  
 stainless steel, mild steel, acrylic, blown glass, rainforest plants  
 dimensions variable  
 Collection: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
 Purchased 2005







I am making propositions through works by creating spaces of perception that can bring us into contact with the ‘life-world.’

*“In my depth I’m indistinguishable from the world.”* MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

Our porous bodies breathe in and spill out into the world. To recognise this interdependence is the ecological undercurrent within my work.

**Janet Laurence**  
October 2012

FOLLOWING  
*The alchemical garden of desire* 2012  
fragments of plants, laboratory and hand blown glass, photographs, acrylic, silicon tubes, resin, pigments, mirror, tulle, frost cloth  
dimensions variable  
Project installation, McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery, 2012  
Courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne

FOLLOWING  
*Resuscitation garden (For an ailing plant)* 2011  
DVD, duration 5:36 mins  
Commission for the Hong Kong Art Fair, Artist Project  
Courtesy of The Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong  
Media: Faena Abdolcarim











ABOVE  
*Conversations with plants*  
*(The Tarkine, Tasmania) 2012*  
 Duraclear on acrylic, Dibond mirror,  
 oil glaze  
 120.0 x 650.5 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and  
 ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne



## BIOGRAPHY

Janet Laurence is based in Sydney and exhibits widely nationally and internationally.

Her work has been included in recent major biennales and group exhibitions including, *In the balance: Art for a changing world*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2010); *Janet Laurence: Waiting—A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants—17th Biennale of Sydney* (2010); *2009 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award*, Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and *Handle With Care*, Adelaide Biennale, Art Gallery of South Australia (2009).

Her recent solo exhibitions include *After Eden*, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney (2012); *Birdsong*, Object Gallery, Sydney (2006); *Janet Laurence: A Survey Exhibition*, ANU, Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra (2005) and *Muses*, Ian Potter Museum, University of Melbourne, Victoria (2000). In 2010, *The Memory of Nature* was installed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Laurence has completed many site specific public works and installations recently including *Waterveil*, CH2 Building for Melbourne City Council; *Elixir*, a permanent installation for Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, Japan; *The Australian War Memorial* (in collaboration with Tonkin Zulaikha Greer architects), Hyde Park, London and *In the Shadow*, Sydney Olympic Park, Homebush Bay.

Since 2008 Janet Laurence has been a visiting Fellow at COFA, University of New South Wales. She was a Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1996–2005) and was on the board of the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council (2007–2009). She has been awarded the Australia Council Fellowship, Rockefeller Fellowship and the Churchill Fellowship for her environmental work and research.

Her work is represented in major Australian and international public, university, corporate and private collections and was the subject of the film *The Life World*, by Richard Mordaunt, Coolamon Films for ABC television.

Janet Laurence lives and works in Sydney, Australia.

[www.janetlaurence.com](http://www.janetlaurence.com)





JANET LAURENCE  
*The Alchemical Garden of Desire*  
18 November 2012–3 March 2013

**McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery**  
390 McClelland Drive  
Langwarrin Victoria 3910 Australia  
Tel: +61 3 9789 1671  
Fax: +61 3 9789 1610  
www.mcclellandgallery.com  
info@mcclellandgallery.com  
Open Tuesday–Sunday 10am–5pm

**Exhibition Curator:** Penny Teale  
**Design:** David Lancashire Design  
**Printing:** Mercedes Waratah  
**Stock:** K.W.Doggett Fine Paper,  
HannoArt Silk 170gsm (text)

**Published by**  
McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery

**ISBN** 978-0-9874010-0-7

**Copyright**

© 2012 McClelland Sculpture Park+Gallery, authors, artist, photographer and designers. All rights reserved. This book is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any process, electronic or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher. Neither may any information be stored electronically in any form whatsoever without such permission. All views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the publisher.

All works of art © the artist.

**Photography**

National Gallery of Victoria,  
Justin Schooneman: pp 6–7  
ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne: pp 10–11, 26  
Jamie North: pp 12, 14–15, 17–21, 23, 27–28, 46  
Felicity Jenkins: pp 24–25, 44  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney: 30–31  
Tamara Dean: p 32  
John Gollings: Cover, Title page, pp 34–43

**Government partners**

**ARTS  
VICTORIA**



**Principle partners**



**AIDAN J GRAHAM TRADING TRUST**

**WHITECLELAND**  
LAWYERS, CONSULTANTS & NOTARIES



**MERCEDES  
WARATAH**

**K.W.DOGGETT** Fine Paper



OPPOSITE  
Waiting – A medicinal garden for plants 2010 (detail)  
FOLLOWING  
Anne ZAHALKA  
Janet Laurence's studio, October 2012



