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Weekend Australian, Australia

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SECOND NATURE

Janet Laurence's work joins the dots between the physical world, art, science and philosophy, writes **Miriam Cosic**

There is a book waiting to be written about Janet Laurence's life. Since the Sydney artist first became an independent adult, she has roamed the world. In her youth, she did youthful things: working as a waitress, a dog walker, you name it, across Europe; fixing up an old mill with a boyfriend in Italy; being rescued by Turkic nomads in the Hindu Kush when her car hit a rock on an 18-month overland trip, London to Singapore, with another boyfriend; studying Italian in Perugia and art in Perugia, Sydney and New York. That only skims the surface.

As a mature artist, she is still roaming the world. Now she is driven by the infrastructure of the international art world: a commission here, a fellowship there, participation in an exhibition somewhere else, a solo show on occasion. "It's not a madly commercial practice," she says wryly as we discuss the income of freelancers in a money-mad world. "And I only do commissions that work with the particular interests and concerns that I have. They often enable you to carry some of those ideas into a space." This kind of serendipity has taken her right across Australia and from Germany to Mexico, from



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Japan to Ecuador.

Now a gamine and spirited 71-year-old, Laurence's motivations endure. She is boundlessly curious and, since childhood, has revered the

natural world. Her practice makes use of zoological, botanical and mineral specimens in collages and installations. She paints. She is in constant conversation with scientists and philosophers. Natural history museums trust her with loans for artworks. She loves and advocates for animals.

On March 1, the Museum of Contemporary Art will open *After Nature*, a large-scale retrospective of her installations from all over. In some, the originals had been saved; some have been exhaustively reconstructed. And a massive new installation, standing more than 5m tall, has been commissioned by the MCA. Called *Theatre of Trees*, it is the culmination of a decade's research into the medicinal and psychologically healing powers of plants. The viewer can walk among metres of translucent veils imprinted with botanical images to reach three subsidiary, self-contained environments that examine Knowledge (a library), Wonder (a herbarium) and Desire (an "elixir lab" from which visitors will be invited to drink).

Laurence grew up in Wahroonga, in the days when it was still quite rural. She was one of four children. Their father was director of the Royal Blind Society, their mother a writer manque.

She attended Abbotsleigh private school, which was nearby (motto *Tempus celerius radio fugit* is roughly "time flies faster than a weaver's shuttle"), under the famously feminist headmistress Betty Archdale. "I had a horse and my horse took me for beautiful adventures into nature," she recalls.

"In those days there were incredible little bush trails everywhere, linking suburbs before huge freeways were built." One day a week the girls were even allowed to ride their horses to school. Other days, Laurence's faithful dog would walk to school and be waiting at the gate to collect her when the final bell rang.

She had no specific interest in art or botany in the early days — and no one in her family had, either — but that connection with nature was seminal. "I was interested in a more holistic experience of it rather than specifically plants," she says now. "I couldn't wait to ride through certain pathways because they were deep in leaves, things like that. It was very much the experience of being in it."

Eventually, art beckoned, but she was discouraged. Her parents thought it was the kind of thing you did as a hobby. Archdale was a crusader for women getting the professional qualifications that would allow them to be financially

independent and have choices in life. "When I went to see her, she said, 'So you want to be a basket weaver, do you?'" Laurence says. She took art as a subject nonetheless.

"There were no role models of women artists," she says. That, despite the wonderful roll call of artists who also happened to be women in this country? "I know," she replies, "but it wasn't visible then. I went into other things, then wandered the world. I spent a long time travelling." She lived in Italy for a few years, in the Chianti countryside near Siena, after studying in Perugia. It reinforced strong memories of visiting her mothers' relatives on a farm in central Queensland as a child.

"I'd been very disturbed by being there during drought, seeing the cattle dying and the whole thing. It really disturbed me deeply." She knew things were getting worse from overhearing the adults talking. "Living there was such a battle. They started off as extremely well-off landowners but now they are struggling. There were huge sheep stations there, and horses and cattle, but in my lifetime it's become a desert.

"They cleared land, had sheep on it. And there's climate change. It was like a little picture of how we colonised Australia." Living in the countryside in Italy, such memories of home began to haunt her. "I became really conscious of that in my early 20s and realised I needed to come back to Australia and really look at our country," she says.

For her undergraduate degree at what is now UNSW Art & Design, she researched the concept of the sublime: the 18th-century concept

and the 20th-century practice engaging with the awe evoked by the beauty and power of the natural world. Think David Caspar Friedrich's famous 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, except Laurence was studying artists such as Mark Rothko. She had also been taken with members of the Arte Povera movement in Italy who sought to link the individual back to nature. Afterwards, she moved to New York for postgraduate study. There she encountered the Earthworks artists.

Some young artists are in a hurry for fame and fortune, but Laurence took her time. She was in her mid-30s when she exhibited her first installation in Sydney in 1981, returning briefly from New York to install it. *Notes from the Shore* was both physical and aural. It drew on Philip Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach* and used minimalist music in tandem with natural elements such as sand and casuarina needles to meditate on nature of tide lines.

Fast forward, and by 2017-18 the Art Gallery of NSW was showing her in conversation with greats of art history. When it showed *Rem-*



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brandt and the Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum, it reserved a space upstairs for a cabinet of curiosities that Laurence built, based on the research on paintings of the era by Dutch conservateurs. Her aim was to explore the intersection between art, science and nature in the 17th century.

Her segue through art qualifications was relatively conventional, but Laurence's engagement with the natural world was more offbeat. "I was so curious about all those things and developed those interests myself," she says. "I worked for a herbalist in London. And the people you come across, the profound education they can give you. I had that with a couple of people. There was one who was a writer called Stuart Legge, who'd give me books and talk to me so much about literature. And we'd go riding on the Downs and he'd explain everything. I was trying to explore our relationship to land — and I still am!" Mentors, she agrees, is too superficial a term.

Laurence is bustling around her studio in Sydney's inner west when we meet to discuss the exhibition. People come and go: deliverymen, co-tenants of the airy industrial space. Her labradoodle, Muddy, prowls the place. Her space is Dickensian: wooden floors and high dusty windows, cluttered with tables, boxes,

vitrines, specimens of plants and shells and minerals, and small preserved parts of animals. Books are everywhere: some bookmarked, some open at a spread. Many are about botany and about natural history. But there are other books, too.

She has had productive engagements with a huge variety of writers, from the indefinable WG Sebald to the French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard, to the biology professor David George Haskell to Barbara Bird Rose, an American transplant to the University of NSW who specialised in "environmental humanities": the interfaces between science and art, nature and culture, and the politics that inform, and are informed by them. These writers have provided epigraphs for Laurence's works and edifying reading and personal conversations. The title of the MCA exhibition is taken from Sebald's elegiac 2002 prose poem *After Nature*.

Given her cosmopolitan life, it's not surprising perhaps that when Laurence settled down, it wasn't with an ordinary Australian. The richness of the wider world has always beckoned. Her husband, Brian Zulaikha, is an architect who came to Australia when he was five. His family had fled Iraq after World War II, when things were getting dicey for the Sephardic Jews who lived there and, like many of them, they fetched up as refugees in South India.

The two of them have a light-filled contemporary house overlooking Sydney Harbour from the west, with a magnificent natural garden. Her Instagram feed is filled with the snaps and videos she takes when walking Muddy by the water or through wild spots. And yet Laurence and Zulaikha are also very urban. Wearing arty black most of the time, they are fixtures on Sydney's intellectual scene, constantly out and about at art exhibitions, lectures, concerts, the theatre.

In her studio, she is taking me on a tour. All the "stuff" she has in the rooms instils a sense of wonder. Laurence's work is filled with enchantment; indeed she calls on the ancient study of alchemy, which dealt with processes of creation and transformation.

It is also, inevitably, pervaded by ephemerality, the knowledge that everything changes and death beckons the mortal. She is as preoccupied with environmental degradation as she was during those frightening visits to her relatives'

drought-stricken farms. She reads and travels and thinks in order to reach for an understanding of the dangers threatening the natural world in the Anthropocene era and to convey what she finds to viewers of her art. Her politics have never waned.

In 2012, she presented a show for the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation called *After Eden*. It was another of those serendipitous projects. Gene Sherman has been a force in the Australian art world but is also a committed activist for animal rights and a vegan. She was chair of the group Voiceless for a number of years. *After Eden* was a startling voyage through photography, video, taxidermy and paint, past wolves and pandas and owls, exploring the destruction of habitats even while holding out hope for healing.

Her work *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef*, now held by the Australian Museum in Canberra, was first shown in Paris for the 2016 Climate Talks. It will be on show at the MCA. In his essay for the beautifully produced *After Nature* catalogue, Iain McCalman, the ANU historian whose books have included the profound and profoundly readable *The Reef: A Passionate History — The Great Barrier Reef from Captain Cook to Climate Change*, wrote: "Laurence's blend of artistic talent and scientific understanding enables her to dramatise the complex calculations, formulae and data that are usually contained in scientific papers." And further on: "Janet Laurence is never didactic; she offers no glib answers or facile solutions. Instead, she is a magus of art who simultaneously engages our minds and hearts in a quest to save the greatest marine this planet has ever known."

At the moment, she is riffing through the



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workbooks she has kept for decades. She shows me pictures and dried plants and other memorabilia that fall out of them. Her memory is triggered and she talks of places and the revelations she has had in them. She is a chatterbox once she gets started, and one thing leads to another. The books will go into the Library section of the MCA commission.

I tell her I'd like to stow away here, hide out in a corner to read her books. She laughs out loud, delighted to find someone who is as gripped as she is by the things that consume her.

After Nature is at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art from March 1 to June 10.

WEARING ARTY BLACK MOST OF THE TIME, LAURENCE AND ZULAIKHA ARE FIXTURES ON SYDNEY'S INTELLECTUAL SCENE



Janet Laurence
preparing for her
2019 exhibition at
the MCA