

**EDUCATION RESOURCE KIT**  
A CASE STUDY

# JANET LAURENCE

**LM**  
**LAKE**  
**MACQUARIE**  
**CITY**  
**ART**  
**GALLERY**



## INTRODUCTION

*Written by Kate Caddey and published by Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery (LMCAG), this education kit is designed to assist senior secondary Visual Arts teachers and students in the preparation, appreciation and understanding of the case study component of the HSC syllabus. LMCAG is proud to support educators and students in the community with an ongoing series of case studies as they relate to the gallery's exhibition program. This education kit is available in hardcopy directly from the gallery or online at [www.artgallery.lakemac.com.au/learn/schools](http://www.artgallery.lakemac.com.au/learn/schools)*

## A CASE STUDY

*A series of case studies (a minimum of FIVE) should be undertaken with students in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) course.*

*The selection of content for the case study should relate various aspects of critical and historical investigations, taking into account practice, the conceptual framework and the frames. Emphasis may be given to a particular aspect of content although all should remain in play.*

*Case studies should be 4–10 hours in duration in the HSC course.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Cover: Janet Laurence  
*Blood and Chlorophyll*  
(installation detail) 2013  
rescued red gum, acrylic,  
scientific glass, blown glass,  
Innes gatherings, salt, coral,  
bones, wood, oil paint, pigment  
in oil, dried grass, inkjet on  
acrylic, tulle, mushrooms, mirror,  
sulphur, botanical matter  
approx. 860 x 510 x 160cm  
as installed at Hugo Michell  
Gallery, Adelaide  
photo: James Grose  
courtesy the artist

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## THE ARTIST

Left: *STRANDED* (detail) 2012  
glass, acrylic, Duraclear, oil,  
pigments and video  
dimensions variable  
courtesy the artist  
© the artist

Janet Laurence has forged a long and distinguished international career as one of Australia's most thought-provoking and prolific artists.

Although initially trained in painting, her interests have taken her into photography, sculpture, site-specific permanent sculpture, installation, architecture and film. Early studies in Sydney, Australia; Perugia, Italy; and New York City, USA led to both Rockefeller (1997), and Churchill Fellowships (2006). She has been Trustee of the Art Gallery of NSW, on the VAB Board of the Australia Council, and is currently Visiting Fellow at COFA, University of NSW. Last year, Laurence won the John Glover Prize, the richest annual award for landscape painting in Australia, for her work *Plants Eye View (in the Tarkine, Tasmania)* 2012.

Janet Laurence's artworks appear in both public and private collections throughout the world. Locally, she has major public artworks installed: in Sydney at the Museum of Sydney, the Central Synagogue, the Sydney 2000 Olympic site, and the Domain; in Melbourne, at the CH2 Building; and in Canberra at the Australian War Memorial and various government buildings, to name but a few.

Internationally, public commissions feature in Changi Airport, Thailand; the Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland; Hyde Park, London, England; and the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial site, Japan.



Janet Laurence installing her work *Waiting – A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants* for the 17th Biennale of Sydney in 2010.  
Photography Tamara Dean.

Drawing from environmental, chemical and biological sciences, Laurence's recent works explore situations where the balance and codependency underpinning all life on our planet are under threat. The artworks in this case study exhibition examine diverse aspects of this increasingly alarming situation, from

sites like the Tasmanian temperate rainforest known as the Tarkine, to the plight of species like marine turtles and pandas whose habitats are shrinking or being damaged by human action. By dwelling on the great beauty and preciousness of the natural world past and present, her works suggest that humanity has the potential to heal the damage and restore balance before it is too late.

This exhibition comprises a small cross-selection of more recent works to allow senior school students to supplement existing information about Laurence's oeuvre. The earliest of the works is *Ghost* 2009, a permanent sculpture installed in Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery's sculpture park. Other works include *The Other Side of Nature: Panda* 2012, *STRANDED* 2012, and a detail from *Tarkine (For a World in Need of Wilderness)* 2012. The most recent work on display here is the dramatic installation, *Blood and Chlorophyll* 2014. Newly configured by the artist herself for this exhibition, it features locally rescued red gum.

For an extended biography and more information visit [www.janetlaurence.com](http://www.janetlaurence.com)

## PRACTICE

*Students... learn that practice refers to the social structures, positions, actions and sequences that affect choices, perceptions, directions, ways of working and views of those involved in the visual arts. Students learn that the nature of practice involves the inculcation of beliefs, actions and ideas over time.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

### CONCEPTUAL PRACTICE

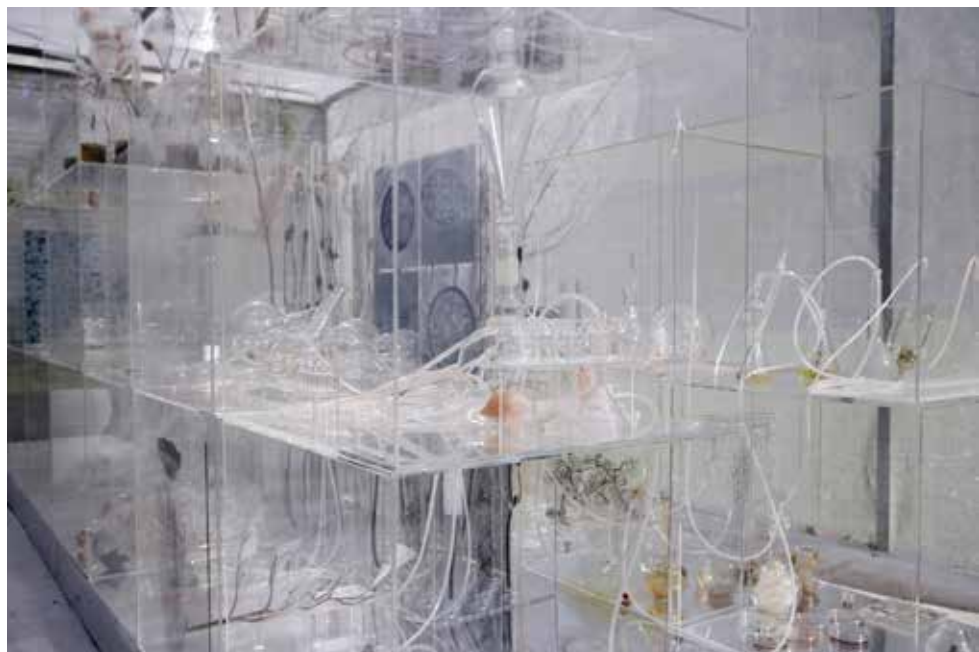
'I'm interested in our interconnection and dependency on the living environment and our own implication in its despoliation and loss. My concern has been the loss of habitat and resultant destruction of ecosystems and tragic decimation of species.'<sup>1</sup>

'Our porous bodies breathe in and spill out into the world. To recognise this interdependence is the ecological undercurrent within my work.'<sup>2</sup>

Very early in her art career Janet Laurence became absorbed with the natural environment and the living organisms (ourselves included) that share it. Over time, her works have become increasingly more involved with ecological issues. Drawing from environmental, chemical and biological sciences, she explores situations where the balance and codependency that underpin all life on our planet are under threat. The artworks in this exhibition examine diverse aspects of this increasingly alarming situation, from sites like the Tasmanian temperate rainforest known as the Tarkine, to the plight of species like marine turtles and pandas whose habitats are shrinking and/or being damaged by human action.

The 'life-world' is a key concept in the artist's recent practice. This term refers to the 'sum total of physical surroundings and everyday experiences that make up an

*Waiting – A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants 2010*  
transparent mesh, mirror, oil, acrylic, scientific glass vessels, plants (living and dried), tulle, blown glass, silicon tubing, minerals, crystals, seeds, water  
500 x 500 x 300cm  
installation in the Sydney Botanic Gardens for 17th Biennale of Sydney  
*The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*  
courtesy the artist



## PRACTICE

individual's world',<sup>3</sup> but in Laurence's holistic worldview it also refers to the flow of life between the natural environment and all other life forms. 'It's so difficult,' she says, 'when we talk about "the environment" and "nature": they are such loaded words. It is a way of suggesting the interconnectedness of all living things.'<sup>4</sup> This concept is underlined by the choice of titles for some of her works for example, *Blood and Chlorophyll* puts the important fluids of human and plant life together, suggesting connection and parity. The artist wants us to see the necessity of abandoning some of our conventional uses of the natural world that put humanity's desires before those of the rest of the planet.

Laurence does not set out to be negative or heavily didactic in her works. Although the issues she explores are grave, her overall intent is positive – suggestive of healing, not dwelling on destruction. In her 2010 work *Waiting: a Medicinal Garden for Plants* she installed a 'plant hospital' in Sydney's Royal Botanical Gardens during the 17th Biennale of Sydney (*The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*), resembling a glasshouse fitted with glass shelves supporting scientific glassware containing real plants. The containers were connected to one another with clear silicon tubing. Similarly, *STRANDED* uses the vocabulary of science and research to indicate a healing process.

Laurence strives to invoke a sense of wonder, empathy and curiosity in her audience: 'art, if it engages, can linger in the mind the way that pure information can't.'<sup>5</sup> Her works showcase the delicate and beautiful, the ephemeral and the lost. They have a reverential, poetic quality.

Memory – the world of the past and the existence of previous life forms is often evoked in Laurence's work. In *Ghost*, for example, a tree that once stood by LMCAG, is remembered – its existence recalled in printed, layered panels of glass, with the back layers only dimly perceived, like memory itself. Laurence's fascination with glasshouses, natural history museums and alchemy brings sciences of the

*Blood and Chlorophyll*  
(installation) 2013  
rescued red gum, acrylic,  
scientific glass, blown glass,  
Innes gatherings, salt, coral,  
bones, wood, oil paint, pigment  
in oil, dried grass, inkjet on  
acrylic, tulle, mushrooms, mirror,  
sulphur, botanical matter  
approx. 860 x 510 x 160cm  
as installed at Hugo Michell  
Gallery, Adelaide  
photo: James Grose  
courtesy the artist



## PRACTICE

past into the present day. Her use of taxidermy confronts us with lives from the past hauntingly preserved for investigation and display in the present, suggesting the flow of time, the relationship between past, present and future and the way cultural/scientific institutions have represented our curiosity and dominance of the natural world.

'I try to create a space somewhere between evidence and imagination. While my practice is based on deeply held convictions about the environment and our relationship to it – and I want the work to have a politically environmental voice – I think it's important that viewers make their own journey and experience it as a space of reflection and interpretation.'<sup>6</sup>

A number of scientists, philosophers and organisations have been influential in developing Laurence's approach to art, including:

- Early 20th century biologist Jacob von Uexkull, whose term 'umwelt' has been used by Laurence in the titles of recent works, studied the perceptual world of animals and theorised that although organisms can share the same environment, they are biologically unique in their perception of that environment and how they behave within it. Like Laurence, contemporary art theorist Liz Grosz has also taken up this term and talks about it as being a 'soap-bubble in which each living being is housed'.<sup>7</sup>
- The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues that the nature of our living bodies is interwoven with every organic body around it.
- The writer W.G. Sebald, whose books explore the nature of memory.
- Voiceless, a Sydney-based organisation that advocates for animal rights, and Kangaloon, a group of eco-humanists engaged in literary and artistic activism. Laurence is an active member of both and is inspired by the writings and speeches of the academic Deborah Bird Rose, who is also part of the Kangaloon group.

1. Laurence quoted from the exhibition catalogue *In the Balance, Art for a Changing World*, MCA, Sydney, August 2010
2. Laurence quoted from the exhibition catalogue *The Alchemical Garden of Desire*, McClelland Sculpture Park + Gallery, November 2012
3. Webster's Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, 2004
4. Laurence quoted from an interview with Kate Caddey, Sydney, March 2014
5. Laurence quoted by Felicity Fenner in 'A hospital for plants: the Healing Art of Janet Laurence', *Art and Australia*, Volume 40, Spring, 2010
6. *ibid.*
7. Liz Grosz quoted from a talk at Damien Minton Gallery, Sydney, 2011



### MATERIAL PRACTICE

#### Materials and Forms

Janet Laurence has used a great range of materials, forms and processes over time. From her original training as a painter, she has expanded into assemblage, installation and the photodigital. Her installations range from large permanent outdoor memorials to commissioned works for public and private spaces as well as temporary works in galleries and gardens. In all of these, site and space are essential considerations for her, informing both her material and conceptual choices.

#### Processes

Laurence's materials are unconventional as is the case with many postmodern artists. She frequently uses specimens of living and preserved plant matter, pollen, minerals, seeds, bones, ash and shells collected from the proposed artwork site or that suggest the site. She also uses photography, and more recently video, as a way of recording the site, and as a basis for later digital imaging. In some recent excursions, for example to the threatened Styx area of Tasmania, she took laboratory and hand-blown glassware and photographed through it. She also uses special lenses and glass filters 'not like straight documentary photos by any means'<sup>1</sup> as part of her photographic practice.

The artist often actively consults with scientists at this stage of her process. Back in the studio, she works with 'the memory of my encounter [so as] to create more of an evocation than a description, working between the scientific and the experimental, between what is known and what is felt',<sup>2</sup> the implication being her response is more intuitive/subjective than scientific/objective. The final works are nuanced and poetic rather than documentary.

#### Transparency and Veils

Laurence also employs a variety of transparent, translucent and reflective surfaces and objects in her material practice, including glass and acrylic sheeting, glass laboratory equipment, silicone tubing, hand-blown glass vessels, Duraclear photographic imagery, seraphic fired glass, fabric netting and mirrors. These materials enable the artist to work with veiled layers of matter and meaning particularly in wall-based works like *Tarkine (For a World in Need of Wilderness)* and *Ghost*.

She sometimes floods the clear and reflective surfaces with spilt washes of pigmented oils, suggesting transience and fluidity. Although these materials are permanent, the overall impression is of delicacy and fragility, of uncertainty and flux. 'The veil,' she says, 'takes many forms. It alters what and how we see. It creates ambiguity and takes away certainty. For me the veil is the space between perception and memory. Still space, slow space – a dissolving membrane, a hesitation – a way of looking within the world rather than at it.'<sup>3</sup>

PRACTICE



*The Green That Was*  
(detail) 2008  
from: *Crimes against the Landscape* series  
Duraclear, polished aluminium,  
pigment on acrylic, mirror,  
burnt wood  
100 x 430cm  
courtesy the artist

### **Glass and Matter**

'I think I was always trying to get transparency into my work, but when I received the commission for the [Central] Synagogue windows I really worked with actual layers of glass and colour and it made me focus on how glass works. It has been quite a sensibility of mine to get transparency into my work and also to use glass panels like scientific slides that reveal the matter between them. My earliest practice was about revealing matter in various ways; glass enabled me to pour matter onto it, to get a sense of it being in process and transformation. The *Alchemical* works, the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* even *Edge of Trees* was about matter.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Science and Art**

In recent interior installations Laurence's use of glass shelving, laboratory glass and the display of organic and non-organic specimens deliberately alludes to scientific/medical methodology and the potential for healing and curing available through science. She has a great respect for scientists, saying, 'I work a lot with scientists, and I want to try to reveal to the public all the wonderful things they know and see.'<sup>5</sup>

These works also echo earlier investigations of botanical glasshouses as a way of displaying and cultivating plants that have been removed from their original environment, for example *Botanical Residues (after the Great Glasshouse)* 2005. Her interdisciplinary approach, layering aspects of science, conservation, history and art, again places her practice in the postmodern.



*Botanical Residues*  
(after the Great Glasshouse)  
(detail) 2005  
colour transparencies  
on transparent synthetic  
polymer resin  
100 x 447 x 7.5cm  
photo: Justin Schooneman  
courtesy the artist

### Taxidermy

Laurence uses examples of taxidermy in some of her work, referencing the natural history museums of the past and the practice of displaying the preserved bodies of animals (some now extinct) for the purpose of scientific investigation, classification and display/entertainment. She has bought some of these at auction, but others are loaned by museums in Sydney and Melbourne for particular projects. 'The specimens are transformed from their dark storage invisibility and, as a tangible symbol of what was once there, bring to our attention what has been lost.'<sup>6</sup>

### Installation and Interaction

Installation, an art form that first came into prominence in the 1970s, is particularly suited to the objects and experiences Laurence offers. Many of her installations require sensory interaction from audiences. She uses devices such as veiled partitions, video, sound and light projections to invite us to experience, slow down and savour what is being offered and suggested. The grouping of objects within these spaces is also important to the way the audience draws connections and infers relationships. The artist refers to this immersive experience as 'slowed space'. *The Other Side of Nature: Panda 2012* was initially used as part of such an experience. She is currently investigating scent as another key to memory and evocation.

*After Eden 2012*  
as installed at  
Sherman Contemporary  
Art Foundation (SCAF)  
photo: Jamie North  
courtesy the artist



### Video

Video is a relatively new area of practice for Laurence. Although displayed singly in this exhibition, *The Other Side of Nature: Panda* was part of the 2012 exhibition/installation *After Eden* at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF) in Paddington, Sydney. This and other videos of endangered animals were used in an installation format that also included taxidermy, Chinese medicinal plants, jars of animal embryos in formalin, laboratory glassware, glass shelving and veils. Laurence travelled to the Chengdu Panda Base in China to record the images for this video. In editing the work, she has mixed slow motion, and negative and positive imagery with footage of the staff caring for a young panda. She has also amplified the slowed sounds of the animal as it moves and feeds on bamboo – the creaks of the bamboo and the cries of the pandas – creating a ghost-like, surreal quality. Other videos from this installation may be viewed on the artist's website.

### Collaboration

Laurence has collaborated with other artists, architects and designers in works such as the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* (with Tonkin Zulaikha Hartford Architects), Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1993; *The Edge of the Trees* (with Fiona Foley), Museum of Sydney 1994; *49 Veils* (with Jisuk Han), award-winning windows for the Central Synagogue, Sydney 1999 and *The Australian War Memorial* (with Tonkin Zulaikha Greer Architects), Hyde Park, London 2003.

The extent of the collaboration depends on the specific requirements of the site and the nature of the commission. Recently she has been working with an exhibition architect who contributes to the structural solutions needed for some of her larger commissions. Laurence also works with artisans to create some of the more technical aspects of her work, for example glass blowers, but maintains a highly 'hands-on' approach. 'I am not a true collaborative artist in the sense that I often have strong ideas on what I want to do, but I do enjoy working with people who can help fulfill those ideas.'

She also cites the technical and creative assistance of Garry Waller in the production of her recent videos as introducing her to the creative possibilities of video.

### The Studio

Laurence's two-storey inner-Sydney studio, occupying a former warehouse, is an airy space with large windows covered by white translucent curtains. The floors, walls and ceiling are white. Light reflects off surfaces of glass and mirror. 'The best aspects of the studio for me are its light and elevation; it's like a retreat, although I do have a "dirty" working space downstairs.'

Transparent perspex-cube shelving runs along one side, housing collections of scientific-looking glassware (vials, beakers, flasks) and natural objects like shells and dried plant specimens. 'My recent practice,' she says, 'draws much more on collections of objects. When I have these things around me they start speaking for me'.<sup>9</sup> Computers and digital equipment occupy a long bench nearby. In one corner two taxidermied birds stare out from their glass museum cases. A storage area, partitioned from the main studio space, contains finished work.

## PRACTICE

At the time of the author's interview with Laurence, she was working on an assemblage hung towards one end of the room, surrounded by samples of plants, transparencies with plant images and gossamer veiling. She is fascinated by the spider webs she has observed at the site she is investigating, and discusses how the light netting she is using might represent this. She talks about the gallery space she has chosen for the finished work and how she wants a small room so the finished work can extend from one end to the other to dominate the space.

Her studio is a cross between a museum, a laboratory, a storeroom and a workshop. It is individual, functional and tailored to the conceptual and material practice of the artist.



Janet Laurence installing her work *Waiting - A Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants* for the 17th Biennale of Sydney in 2010  
photo: Tamara Dean  
courtesy the artist

1. Laurence quoted in *New Scientist*, April 2013
2. Laurence quoted from the exhibition catalogue *Plant's Eye View*, The Cat Street Gallery, Hong Kong, September 2013
3. Laurence quoted from exhibition catalogue *Verdant*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, October 2003
4. Laurence quoted from an interview with Kate Caddley, Sydney, March 2014. All other quotes from this source unless otherwise stated.
5. Laurence quoted by S. Sekar in *New Scientist*, April 2013
6. Laurence quoted from exhibition catalogue, *Animate/Inanimate*, TarraWarra Gallery, Victoria, June 2013

## THE FRAMES

*Students learn about the frames – subjective, cultural, structural and postmodern – that provide different philosophical/theoretical and interpretive frameworks for understanding the layering of meaning, significance, value and belief in and about the visual arts.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

### ARTWORK ANALYSIS USING THE FRAMES

#### Structural Frame

*students... consider how artworks can be read and their meaning understood in terms of how specific symbols refer to the world. Students... study how visual information is transmitted in artworks, how the formal and organisational relationships in a work mean certain things and how the visual arts can operate as a visual language at a certain time and over time.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

*Ghost* is a permanent sculpture by Janet Laurence, located on the external 'blade' wall of the gallery, overlooking Lake Macquarie and nearby Awaba House. It is made from seraphic fired glass and stainless steel and, at five metres high it is monumental, stretching up in a similar manner to the eucalypt tree (*Eucalypt citriodora*) that once occupied the site.

The seraphic process used to embed imagery of the original tree into the toughened glass panels involves screen-printing a ceramic coating onto the glass. Next, a toughening process fuses the ceramic paint to the glass surface to provide a durable finish. The technical part of this process was completed in a factory under the artist's guidance.

Laurence has worked with photographs of the original tree across the three overlapping panels of green-tinted glass, blending ghost-like representations suggesting transience and ephemerality. She chose to use black and white for the image: 'I was dealing with the white, like the ghost of the tree, and the reason I used black was I had to get a tonal backing to the white so it wasn't too graphic.'<sup>1</sup> The work is site-specific: designed for this particular place, acknowledging the natural history of the site and the magnificent eucalypt that once grew here. A sheet of polished stainless steel, reflecting the world of the present, backs the glassy layers.

Mounted on a high white wall, the sculpture casts shadows at different times of the day, extending its dimensions and echoing the shadows created by the original tree, in a sense returning it to life. The artist has used permanent materials to capture the impermanent, the past and the present.

Made in 2009, *Ghost* is part of the continuum of Janet Laurence's body of work. That same year, the artist also had a solo exhibition at the Hugo Michell Gallery in Adelaide, featuring natural and glasshouse imagery on Duroclear film mounted



on clear and mirrored acrylic sheets and illuminated from behind. The title of the exhibition was *Janet Laurence – Things that disappear*.

In the previous year, her work *The Green that Was*, in the group exhibition *Crimes Against the Landscape* (Arc One Gallery, Melbourne), used Duraclear, polished aluminium, pigment on acrylic, mirror and burnt wood. Conceptually, the titles of all three works imply loss and remembrance. Materially, all three use photographic imagery and are wall mounted using varying degrees of layering, transparency and reflection. The layers are real, not digital, and constitute the veils that have been an important part of this artist's symbolic and structural vocabulary since the mid-1990s.

1. Laurence quoted from an interview with Kate Caddey, Sydney, March 2014



*Ghost* 2009  
glass, stainless steel, concrete  
approx. 500 x 140 x 80cm  
collection Lake Macquarie  
City Art Gallery  
supported by Arts NSW  
and  
Lake Macquarie Art  
Gallery Society  
© the artist

### Cultural Frame

.... students ... consider how notions of cultural identity can inform the production of artworks. Students may study differing cultural attitudes towards the visual arts and the effects of scientific and technological innovation, politics and economics. They may study concepts of social and cultural identity (e.g. gender, Indigenous, regional, national, modern, contemporary etc.) on artistic practices in particular places at a certain time and over time.

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Janet Laurence's strong environmentalist convictions support her art. Environmentalism as a philosophy is not new but its expansion in the 1970s, partly due to the counterculture movement and social activism, brought an awareness of the fragility of nature to a broader audience. The world's first political party to campaign on a platform of 'green' issues was the United Tasmania Group in 1972 and it was the start of an international political phenomenon. Tasmania and its unique and threatened wilderness remains the starting point for many of Laurence's works.

Memorials, those objects that serve as a focus for historical and cultural memory, have also long been part of the artist's body of work. Some of her best known public commissions, *Edge of the Trees*, installed at MoS in Sydney 1995, and the *Australian War Memorial*, installed in Hyde Park, London in 2003 commemorate human action, the loss of life or the loss of culture. These days, Laurence increasingly memorialises losses made in the natural world through human action, as evidenced in *Ghost*.

The site of LMCAG has its own cultural resonance – it carries memories of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal habitation and the very different approach of each culture to the natural environment. Aboriginal people used and occupied the site for thousands of years. Traditional Aboriginal landcare practices use resources in such a way that they are renewed, not exhausted.

In 1842, the site became part of a 913-acre land grant to Dr James Mitchell, becoming the property of a single family. Since that time, a number of grand houses have stood on the site. The western Lake Macquarie area was also well known for stands of tall, straight trees and in the late 1800s these were cut and supplied to local sawmills. Ownership changed, then subdivision, townships, railways and coal mining became part of the more recent history of the site. By choosing to memorialise a tree, Laurence has selected a fitting symbol for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attitudes to the land.

### **Subjective Frame**

*... students ...develop personal responses to artists and artworks that are highly significant to them. They can explore artworks as expressive and unique objects, develop notions of individual styles, and interpret the work and the influence of those artists who are of great personal interest to them*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Although Laurence's works have a foundation in historical and scientific research, she wants audiences to be contemplative. She creates a 'slowed space' for us – tranquillity, stillness, yearning, melancholy, empathy, solemnity and reverence are amongst the feelings she wishes to stir in her audience.

There is a strong aesthetic appeal to her work, which often celebrates beautiful details, lush colour, gilded light and velvet shadows, all visually and emotionally seductive. In *Ghost*, the delicacy of layered translucent imagery, fleeting reflections of clouds and changing cast shadows invite us to spend time with the work, to contemplate its beauty and engage with its purpose.

### **Postmodern Frame**

*students ...question practice in art and the generally accepted classifications of artists, artworks, movements and styles. They can identify inconsistencies in what is written. They can re-evaluate notions of the artistic genius and the masterpiece, and study influences and chronologies to reveal power relations, disjunctions and hidden assumptions.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Janet Laurence's environmentalism sees her questioning conventional values about the relationship between humanity and the natural world. The idea that nature will heal itself without a change in mainstream human attitudes and behaviour is quietly challenged. 'Green' politics has a similar outlook but a very different way of acting on these ideas. Laurence uses her art to draw attention to the beauty of a natural world in need of healing and protection. She prefers to work in subtle, not didactic ways.

Her incorporation of non-art disciplines blurs the boundaries of traditional fine art divisions. There is science (in many of its forms), medicine, museology and history. For her audiences, she selects objects that have cultural and environmental resonance. Installations of this nature require audiences to experience the work by moving through it, sampling a number of different levels of sensation...

## THE FRAMES

sounds, lighting, moving and still imagery, objects...putting the pieces together to seek meanings which are not immediately apparent. As such, it challenges more conservative ideas about art and an immediate accessibility to meaning. Laurence deliberately questions certainty and creates doubt. Her use of veils in many forms is a means for her to achieve this.

Janet Laurence makes her artwork with specific sites in mind. The site is often the inspiration and eventual place for her art, for example *Ghost*, but she also uses neutral spaces like galleries and foyers to bring her ideas to the urban world. The original *Tarkine (For a World in Need of Wilderness)* was created for the Macquarie Bank foyer in London. The contrast, between luminous overlapped glass panels of rainforest imagery and the busy central London street only metres away, is powerful.



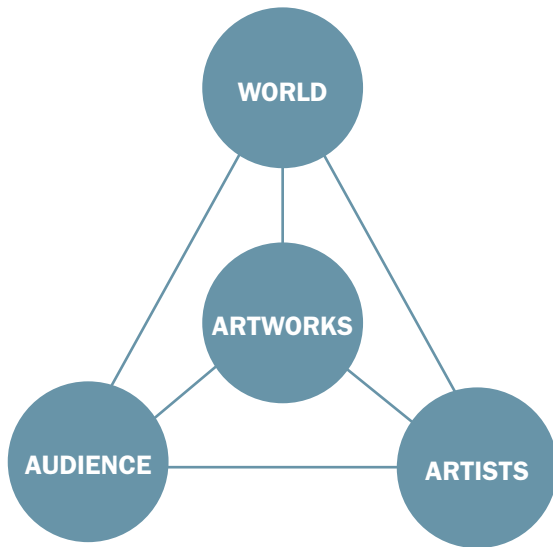
*Tarkine (For a World in Need of Wilderness)* 2011  
Duraclar, acrylic, mirror,  
stainless steel wire  
Macquarie Bank Foyer, London  
courtesy the artist



# THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework provides a model for understanding the agencies in the art world – the artist, artwork, world and audience, and the relationships between them.

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012



## WORLD

(Also refer to the Cultural and Postmodern Frames and Conceptual Practice)

**How interests in the world are represented in art** (art as a representation of experience, class, ideology, age, events of significance).

**Social and natural:** The world of Janet Laurence is a contemporary natural world under threat by the actions of humanity. She identifies strongly with the political, social and

## ARTWORK

(Also refer to the Structural Frame and Material Practice)

**Artworks as real objects**, as material, physical and virtual objects. The concept of artworks includes art, craft and design as two- and three-dimensional works (including architecture), and four-dimensional and time-based works. Artworks also exist as representations of ideas that reflect such things as personal responses, cultural views, symbolic interpretations and critical reinterpretations of other ideas.

## AUDIENCE

(Also refer to the Subjective Frame and Conceptual Practice)

**The role and value of the audience** as a body of critical consumers. The concept of the audience includes art critics and art historians as well as teachers, students, entrepreneurs, patrons and other members of the public. Audiences for works change over time and bring different meanings to artworks, artists and interpretations of the world.

Laurence's works vary from large-scale memorials in public places, to site-specific outdoor works, to interior works in foyers and galleries, often on a more intimate scale. As such, her audience varies from members of the general public to more specifically art-educated individuals. Increasingly her work attracts the interest of environmentalists and people

concerned with the endangered natural world. Her profile as one of Australia's leading public artists means that her work draws attention where it is shown, giving her access to people who might otherwise pass over issues she expresses.

When asked what she would like audiences to take away from their encounter with her work, she says: 'What I would like is for people to be able to take in the content. My works are not meant to be just instant visual images: that's why I create these slowed spaces. That's another reason for the veils: they slow down the process of looking. This enables the possibility to feel, to reach the hearts and minds of audiences, rather than a quick glance. I hope that the work leaves a memory, that it lingers not just for an aesthetic or pleasure end, but because it connects to something. That is why I'm investigating sound and scent at the moment – I want to evoke a sense of the presence of nature.'<sup>1</sup> Within international and national art circles, Laurence's continued success in art prizes, commissions for major works

environmental movement of the last 40 years, and seeks to create a sense of empathy with non-human life forms in her work.

**Artworld:** As part of her postmodern practice, Laurence incorporates non-traditional materials and found objects into her works. Her use of new technologies allows her to explore and present the natural environment in unprecedented ways, often in site-specific and installation sculptures. The temporary nature of some of her works challenges conventional ideas about the permanency of the art object, as does her recent exploration of non-visual sensory experiences such as scent and sound.

Over her long career, Janet Laurence has made artworks encompassing a broad range of materials and forms. This exhibition of recent works focuses on the sculptural, installation and photodigital creations that constitute a major part of her current practice. A number are, or have been, site-specific, including *Ghost*. Some works like *Tarkine* and *The Other Side of Nature: Panda* are taken from larger installations made in the past. Others like *Blood and Chlorophyll* are temporary and reconfigured for particular exhibitions such as this one currently at LMCAG. A similar work with the same title was assembled for the recent *Residue* exhibition (13 February – 22 March 2014) at Hugo Michell Gallery in Adelaide. Laurence has brought objects from this earlier work to LMCAG for this exhibition, but the gallery has sourced the tree component.

Her work showcases real and virtual objects and images from the natural world. These are used to represent ideas about the interconnectivity of life forms and the need to protect and heal nature. Laurence references scientific, medical and natural history methodologies in her presentation techniques, alluding to the practices of the past as well as the present.

and gallery exhibitions is a testament to her achievement. She has attained critical acclaim, although some critics question the emphasis placed on the collections of objects that have featured in her more recent practice. For example, in his article 'Protect and Preserve' in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 2012, critic John McDonald said 'the most powerful and poignant effects come from the intrinsic interest of the objects and, to a lesser extent, the juxtapositions'. McDonald questions the role of the artist as 'collector' and 'arranger', as opposed to the 'maker', indicating a particular position on contemporary practice.

1. Laurence quoted from an interview with Kate Caddey, Sydney, March 2014

## ARTIST

(Also refer to the Cultural Frame and Conceptual Framework)

**The role of the artist:** *the who, what, how, and why.* The concept of the artist encompasses practitioners such as artists, craftspeople, designers and architects. The artist can be thought of as an individual or as a group, school, movement, etc.

Janet Laurence sees her role as an artist as 'making propositions through works by creating spaces of perception that can bring us in contact with the "life-world"'.<sup>1</sup>

Her work has a strong environmentalist message, but her approach is one that encourages viewers to interpret her meaning in their own time. Laurence sees this process of understanding and comprehending the meaning of her work as being a strategy for engaging viewers more deeply in environmental issues. She believes that 'art, if it engages, can linger in the mind the way that pure information can't'.<sup>2</sup> Fundamentally there is a desire to 'bring one into this intimacy (of the natural world) and this, hopefully, can generate empathy and thus continue the necessary care'.<sup>3</sup>

1. Laurence quoted from the exhibition catalogue *The Alchemical Garden of Desire*, McClelland Sculpture Gallery + Gallery, Victoria, November 2012

2. Laurence quoted by Felicity Fenner in 'A hospital for plants: the Healing Art of Janet Laurence', *Art and Australia*, Volume 40, Spring 2010.

3. Laurence quoted from the exhibition catalogue *Life in Your Hands: art from solastalgia*, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, NSW, March, 2012

## PREVIOUS HSC EXAMINATION QUESTIONS RELEVANT TO THIS CASE STUDY

### PRACTICE

**1** How do contemporary artists redefine the boundaries of artmaking practice?

**2** Explain how practices in the visual arts shape and are shaped by significant events. These events may include:

- public/private
- profitable/free
- local/global
- controlled/uncontrolled.

In your answer you may refer to artists, art critics and/or art historians.

**3** How do constraints on the practices of artists/designers/architects influence what they do and make?

Make reference to at least TWO of the following in your response:

- site
- views of art critics and art historians
- historical precedents
- materials and technologies
- time
- audience expectations.

**4** Art critic John McDonald comments that 'The studio is the very centre of an artist's life. It is the place where discoveries are made about oneself and the world.' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 2007)

With reference to this view, assess the significance of working spaces to the practice of artists, designers and/or architects.

### FRAMES

**1** Analyse how emotion is used in artworks to provoke and generate discussion about ideas and issues.

**2** Most artists have critical and productive relationships with their culture.

Explore this statement with reference to a range of examples where these relationships are demonstrated.

**3** Analyse the ways in which artists communicate through the use of particular symbols and organisational relationships in their works.

In your answer, you could consider practitioners including artists, architects, designers and/or filmmakers.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

**1** Art philosopher Maxine Greene states that through art 'people must be empowered to notice what there is to be noticed'.

With reference to this view, explain how artists raise awareness of issues in the world.

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