



ECO CREATIVE

Janet Laurence is known as Australia's finest public artist. From the clear felling of trees in Tasmania to species loss, her works capture the ephemeral and poignant aspects of nature.

Words by Rebecca Whitton, Eco Creative Editor

Images courtesy of the artist and Arc One Gallery

Entering Janet Laurence's studio is like stepping into a Victorian botanical laboratory. Large scale works on acrylic and glass lean against the walls; books are piled on tables and shelves; glass beakers, vials and test tubes, some filled with seedlings, are assembled on cabinet tops. There are miniature works in progress and models of large-scale projects she would love to create. One, produced in various forms over the years, is a model of a giant 'ghost' glasshouse for lost botanical species, designed as a walk-through memorial.

Laurence has spent her career, of over twenty years, exploring themes that focus on the relationship between the made and natural worlds. She explores the link between architecture and nature, particularly focusing on the 'poetics' of space within the organic and inorganic and is known for her collaborations with architects and landscape architects.

Her work evokes a sense of intellectualism and curiosity that encompasses both science and the ethereal. There is a sense of going back to the past, of recording what has been lost and what might have been. Her motifs are veils, shadows, mirrors, viewing panels, the specimen jar and seedlings and plants of all sizes. Glass, oxide, carbon and ash are her elements.



Transforming Carbon:
Landscape and Residues series
2007 - Duraclear, oil pigment,
acrylic, oxide, shellac, wood
100 x 218cm





Greenhouse Vial II
 (Worlds Within) artwork
 Blown glass, burnt
 botanical specimens
 60 x 70 x 15cm

An exquisite tiny tree encapsulates the essence of Laurence's work. It sits on a mirrored shelf, its root system perfectly intact. Inked so as to appear carbonised, it is simultaneously an object of beauty and a trenchant symbol of what has been destroyed.

The notion of the earth's loss of forests and plant life is a recurring theme throughout Laurence's art. For her Selva Veil series, Laurence created an enormous installation in the Amazon rainforest, wrapping a part of the forest in veils of fabric to both protect and preserve it and to create a huge 'ghost house', like a mausoleum. Later in the studio, layers of paint were applied to photographs of the installation, creating images that evoke a deep sense of loss. In a recent installation

for the Adelaide Biennale, a tree reflects its enormous shadow onto the wall.

'It's about loss, the idea of the shadow is loss, the ghost,' Laurence says.

One of her most haunting series, *The Glasshouse*, particularly encapsulates a Victorian sensibility that is both spectral and nostalgic. The series refers to glasshouses in natural history museums and botanical glasshouses. 'I was interested in architecture that frames nature. Today they have become greenhouses. They were places filled with plants by people who had a fascination for the environment. Here, rare species were collected, nurtured and studied. Now they are sort of emptied out. They were once full of the plants of the world and now what? We measure the lost species. The

plants and rare species are now emptied out like ghost houses,' says Laurence.

Laurence has regular solo and group exhibitions around the country and internationally, and is represented in most major Australian public and private collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. She has received numerous awards and fellowships, including a Churchill Scholarship in 2006 and a Rockefeller Scholarship in 2007. Currently an Artist in Residence at Taronga Park Zoo, Laurence is exploring how to represent threatened wildlife species, and is working toward a large museum piece to submit a major work in the Clemenger Award at the National Gallery of Victoria at the end of the year.