The top floor of the small warehouse in inner-city Sydney where Janet Laurence works has high windows. Long gauzy curtains create irregular spaces, a system of veils cutting and altering the light as the sun tracks across the studio. In summer it is hot. There’s a computer, chairs, a low sofa, many books. When I first visited, in 2002, photographs and images were pinned to the walls: columns of Japanese script, seashells and medicinal plants, holes burned in the ground by tree roots that smoulder for weeks after a bushfire, textures of seaweed and clouds, reflections in water and windows. Set up around the room were models of works in progress: diminutive glasshouses and medicinal glass gardens waiting to be built. On shelves at eye level were bottles and flasks, some thin and sinewy, others round and functional. Minerals and oxides, seeds and salts were collected in glass vitrines. Inside a small round bottle something had dried, leaving a hazy line.

On a day early in 2003, which I’ve come to think of as the beginning of a conversation that stretched over more than a year, she spoke of reading Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* when she was a young woman living in London, cooking by day, painting at night. Spread on the floor around us were drawings and work on paper from more than thirty years before. It was ‘very washy work’ she was doing then, she says, with pigments and paints in fluid states applied layer upon layer, allowing fragments from underneath to show through. She was living in Hampstead, watching the light on the ponds, figuring how to express ambivalent states of water and light. The idea came to her as she painted that the layers could separate, move away from each other, letting the eye move between them, opening a ‘space within’.

Layers, waves, veils. Something had begun.

The first work that gave her scope to extend into installation came in 1981 with a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sydney’s Central Street. *Notes from the Shore*, she said, was a ‘drawing in space’. Photographs show hanging bands of waxy paper holding casuarina needles, sand mapping the floor, and, on the walls, earth drawings, small bags filled with oxide and seeds, large X-rays cut into wave-like shapes. The interplay between the constructed and the organic was, for her, like a musical score, ‘a minimalist structure spilling with substance’ accompanied by the counting numbers from Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*.

Years later when she was working on *The Measure of Light*, 1993, for the Queensland Art Gallery – part of her *Periodic Table* series – she envisaged an installation with quotations from *The Waves* on the wall as you entered. Putting it up, she saw that the words belonged not on the wall but as a substructure of thought,
light both within it and reflected onto it. Closer to, the boxes became exhibits, each containing a material: straw, ash, lead, photographs, X-rays, wood burned to bring up its grain. Move slowly along the rows and each box reveals its own world, with its own slow, disordered life within, small installations echoing Joseph Beuys. Stand back again, and the disparate parts resolve into a whole.

It was the play of paradox — architectural structure and anarchic material, chemistry and art, order and disorder — that Terence Maloon drew attention to in a 1994 article that mapped her on the critical landscape:

Her ingenuity and often extraordinarily beautiful reconciliations of chaos and order have a deliberately contentious edge. Her work compels the viewers to see and think holistically, and to accommodate ‘nature’ and ‘the feminine’ into their consideration.\(^3\)

Here was the astringent feminism. Working with matter that could be ground or granulated, liquefied or crystallized, extended her scope beyond the conundrum of self-representation that had so long impelled the project of women’s art. She moved the idea of embodied time away from the narratives of the self into the material and elemental, interrogative work inviting an encounter with memory, environment and our own material nature. ‘Not working on top of an existing history,’ she wrote in the Frames of Reference catalogue, ‘enables the recovery of a relationship to something radical underlying history, radical in the sense of rootedness — possibly a dissenting engagement.’\(^4\)

On the ground floor of her studio, the windows are shadowed by a line of terraces across the street. In the centre of the space, long tables lit from above are laid with glass and metals onto which she dips and pours; the fluids well out, pool, spread, thin. Upstairs in the light, the studio is a space of concept and imagination, downstairs it’s more akin to a laboratory. ‘A laboratory for the mechanics of fluids and spills,’ she says. She lifts the edge of a small thick sheet of glass to let the pigment run, holds to the light another panel where the pour has dried.


In one factory, I watch as Laurence pours seeds and ash and traces of minerals in fluid resin between sheets of glass. In another we watch together as images for *The Breath We Share*, 2003, are screen-printed onto large glass panels. Two men tilt the table, press the screens, and adjust the angle to print the ghostly bare branches of the oak tree that bear the commemorative genealogy of the Myer family. The panels are cumbersome to move, but the printing is a delicate procedure, requiring skill and a steady hand. A mistake, a small miscalculation, can be disastrous. As the men work in silence, Laurence is springy and contained; when the panels are lifted off the table and carried without leaving a finger mark, she lets out her breath. She knows her materials and she needs this knowing, honed in the droughts studio, because when she leaves for the site much will change. Even if she pours the same fluid onto the same thickness of the same type of glass, the effect achieved in the studio is never reproduced outside. ‘Never,’ she says. Like a fingerprint, the shape of each pour is different. And so is each site: its light, its history, its archaeology and anthropology, its context. ‘Veiling,’ she says, can slow us into this kind of seeing, creating ‘barely enough space to rise in memory of the twenty-nine Eora clans who lived in the Sydney basin. Some of the pillars are made from local sandstone, some from steel, others are wooden beams and poles recycled from the old McWilliams warehouse, which was being demolished at the time of the commission. These great poles, with notches cut out of them, had been hewn from trees that were growing in 1788. There’s a photo of Laurence at the demolition site, sitting on the felled poles. She looks small in her baseball cap, dwarfed by the great lengths of wood. ‘I claimed them for heritage and art,’ she says. ‘It was quite a coup.’ Outside the museum they soar, solid in the ground. Burned or carved into the poles of this now iconic work are Eora and Latin names for plants and places, the signatures of First Fleeters, fragments of text from surveyor William Dawes’s notebook, ash and bone and oyster shells are embedded in the pillars, or contained behind glass. These traces are not offered in an attempt to reconcile the elements of a contested history so much as to let the past lap into the present, mapping the fragmentary residues of matter that live on in the city, as with those painted-out layers of her earliest work, what’s hidden underneath seeps through.

‘Under conditions of modern shock,’ Laurence says, ‘we are so overdosed with images that we’re numbed. We just glance, we don’t look. Or we look but we don’t see.’ She doesn’t want to compete with a torrent of insistently images. She’d rather draw us with a question. What am I looking at? Is the fluid spilling? Is it solid? She wants us to slow, to linger. It’s only as we look, really look, with the full attention of all our senses, and without the tyranny of the clock, that something will come to meet us in that perceptual experience, something unexpected, or mysterious, or new. ‘Veiling,’ she says, can slow us into this kind of seeing, creating barely perceptible shifts that encourage the eye to feel its way through space. What is the veil? Is it: Fluids, skins, text, these, too, are forms of veiling that can make us pause, arrest us into uncertainty and those “moments of being,” as Virginia Woolf called them, that can become lost for want of a medium to bridge the gap between perception and expression. But of the veil, Laurence says, glass is the perfect metaphorical material, ‘as it’s both a solid and a liquid and appears as both.’

As a material, glass is both heavy and fragile. The metaphorical role of her layered and intricate glass works may be to hover as they slow us into questioning
what, and how, we see; glass may appear as veil or gossamer, membrane or fluid— but lift it and you feel the weight of the minerals that leave traces of green. The perfect metaphorical material not only has to be fixed securely but, for her, invisibly, which brings technical problems to tax the best of designers.

In 1998, she and artist-designer Jisuk Han tackled 49 Veils, a technically complex commission for the rebuilt Central Synagogue in Sydney. Forty-nine panels of coloured glass were suspended to create four windows representing the Four Worlds of the Kabala; forty-nine veils arranged in such a way that the colours appear in flux as they change in the light. The textual significance of the Four Worlds and their colours posed one set of questions for Janet Laurence as artist; they posed a very different set for Jisuk Han as designer. The concept was for the glass, in panels of varying size, seemingly to float free. Seen from inside, the windows blaze with colour across the silence. Reflecting the colour and fluidity of the glass, the polished anodised support the huge panels.

In 1999 Laurence again collaborated with Han, this time on Veil of Trees, the installation of tall glass panels between the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Sydney’s harbour. This promontory of land, between the Royal Botanic Gardens on one side and the Woolloomooloo finger wharf on the other, was once covered in forest works art to forest works art to forest works art. In 1979 show a raw settlement with the skeletons of ring-barked trees unsettling the Wyona. A hundred forest red gums saplings are planted for Veil of Trees, as an essential part of a work of retrieval and memory. Amongst the trees, the glass panels rise, tall and elegant. Again, their moorings are invisible to the untutored eye. The glass is smoky in places, speckled with ash, memory traces of minerals and indigenous seeds. Engraved into the glass are lines of Australian poetry and prose, and the names of native trees. Eucalyptus tereticornis, Eucalyptus angillana, Eucalyptus

In the early 1830s, Frank Stainbridge, an architect and geographer by training and a naturalist by inclination, built a magnificent glasshouse in Norfolk, England, to house the botanical specimens he’d collected from the Amazon. When it was destroyed with its contents by the winter storms of 1836, Stainbridge fell into a cataract. Images bled into each other and, with glimpses of our own fugitive images, there was an undertow— an unease at being plunged into all that green. Wherever the oceanographers, botanists— there’s an accumulation of images and research material in her studio. This proliferation and overflow is a rich source for the personal lexicon of architectural gardens becoming more layered, more iconic, more complexly juxtaposed. This was her first exhibition to show gallery works attached to the ground in 1841 by a man who saw this flaunting of ‘man-made nature’ as an insult to God.

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For a contemporary artist working the line of tension between the art object and the lifeworld, between loss and retrieval, it is a powerful story. It speaks both to the nineteenth-century glasshouses that fascinate Laurence as architectural achievements, and to the perils of memorialising. When she encountered Stainbridge in the catalogue to The Greenhouse Effect, 2001, at the Serpentine, she was becoming increasingly interested in working with the environment and its vulnerability to disturbance. She was pondering the question of how to approach our destructiveness, our conceit that we can dominate the world and rescue ourselves from the damage we do. ‘How to get an ecological reading without being didactic,’ is how she put it.

The botanical glasshouses were built to foster plants, but behind that fostering were minds to claim and number them, to fix them in time. Laurence’s photographs of beautiful European glasshouses, printed onto glass, have evolved as small layered gallery pieces. As she prefers commissions that embody themes that interest her and allow the opportunity to work with scientists— meteorologists, oceanographers, botanists— there’s an accumulation of images and research material in her studio. This proliferation and overflow is a rich source for the personal lexicon of smaller works alongside her site-specific commissions, and in dialogue between them.

The effect on entering Verdant, 2003, at Sherman Galleries, was one of fecundity, an immersion into the living world, a blaze of green. The repeated image of a house hedge from Tasmania, its leafy texture redolent of summer, was caught in cool, smooth glass. ‘In mineral lineage appears as the green within,’ she says. And yet there was an undertow— an unease at being plunged into all that green. Wherever the eye settled, the perspective was awry. With one work reflecting another, her gallery exhibitions rarely allow a fixed viewing point; there was acute focus, perfect detail yet, at the same time— with only a slight adjustment of vision— a blur, a skin, a filmy eye. Images bled into each other and, with glimpses of our own fugitive images, we bled into them. There was a sensation, hard to articulate, of being held within a poetic intelligence.

Beyond the green were more sombre colours, with images of architectural gardens becoming more layered, more iconic, more complexly juxtaposed. This was her first exhibition to show gallery works attached to specific places. ‘It must be coming from place-making in my installations,’ she says. Architectural icons from the masters of modernism, framed in ways that reflected the
surrounding landscape into them, spilled into each other, dissolving the solidity of their structures. The fluid pours across the glass were barely apparent, a shadow play of layer and veil over the great masculine achievements of the Barcelona Pavilion, the Kröller-Müller Museum, the Jardin des Plantes. Even Richard Serra’s Corten-steel sculpture in homage to Robert Smithson at the Kröller-Müller Museum melted into a sulphuric veil, a resolution of hard into soft.

‘When you look at something architectural,’ she said of Verdant, ‘you think of it as fixed and solid and you don’t think about its life as matter and its being within the materials, its potential to become fluid and dissolve as we move within it, perceiving it.’

Elixir, 2003, had extended her ideas of fluidity and flux in a major installation, which is housed in a disused rice storage hut outside Matsunoyama village in Japan. The chance to make this brilliant, quirky work was due to a commission from Fram Kitagawa to create a permanent contribution to the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial. Kitagawa’s vision for the Triennial was to extend an international dialogue between art and the natural world into ‘art for the future’ based on the specific environment of a remote and depressed rural area, thereby combining the regeneration of depleted communities with the revival of contemporary art—which he saw as having slowly lost ‘its home and source of inspiration as the cities in which it was born and raised sickened and died’.

Echigo-Tsumari is the Snow Country of Kawabata’s 1948 novel, in which a city intellectual misreads—as if in the reflection from a mirror—both the languid receptivity of an ageing geisha and the allure of a mountain culture that appeared miraculously intact. Fifty years later, the region had become depressed and depopulated, its distinctive culture ‘swallowed up’, Kitagawa said, ‘in global culture’. The textile industry had collapsed, the young had left and the old were poor, houses, sheds, fields lay abandoned.

Kitagawa’s invitation to Janet Laurence, as to all the artists working with the Triennial, was to come to the snow country and make her own imaginative response to the place: its botany, its myths, its food, its cloth, its dyes, its medicines. With no precedent ‘for work installed in mountain villages or terraced rice paddies’, even the art critic Yusuke Nakahara—who describes the Triennial as ‘one of the largest and grandest experiments in the history of contemporary art’—at first feared Kitagawa’s concept was ‘reckless and dangerous’. Yet the artists responded, and for Laurence it was an invitation of a kind that didn’t come in Australia. It did not surprise her that it came from Japan; in 1988 she had spent six months based in Tokyo and experienced for herself the integration of philosophy and aesthetics in the materials of daily living, as well as in the art and architecture she’d previously seen only in reproduction. The minimalism and grace of the Katsura Imperial Villa left an indelible mark on her. The profound experience of seeing the villa in snow, shades of white on white, connected her with the past—all the way back to Basho’s frog and The Tale of Genji—and also forward into modernity, and a living present. She had understood then that the deep core of Japanese aesthetics could have reverberations, even in a settler society like Australia, which so easily stumbles in relating its culture to nature and its environment to art.

When, for the Triennial, she visited the area around Matsunoyama in 2002, read Kawabata, encountered temple food, and went up into the forest with botanist Seichi Oguchi, it was clear that this was the place for the botanical elixir bar she’d long had in mind.

Opposite

Edge of the Trees, 1995
sandstone, wood, steel, steel, shells, honey, bronze, zinc, glass, wood, 24 Pillars, dimensions variable
site-specific installation, Museum of Sydney on the site of the first Government House forecourt, Sydney
Collaboration with Fiona Foley, from the concept by Peter Bonnett, for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales

10 Janet Laurence, unpublished notes on Verdant, October 2003.
13 Matsuo Basho wrote the frog haiku in 1686. The Tale of Genji was written by Murasaki Shikibu in the early eleventh century.
The wooden storage hut she chose to house Elixir belonged to the disused farm where Marina Abramović had created Dream House in 2000. In its raw state, it had a small entry room with three heavy doors that did back to reveal a dark storage space, a ladder going up a platform under the roof and one small, high window. It was built to store the family’s treasures and the rice that would sustain them over a long winter. From inside, the external door framed an expanse of sky, cypress pines, rice fields, and the mountains on the other side of the valley, which, in summer, was rice-green. She drew the valley into the space she was creating by reflecting it in clear glass, so that it is undoubtedly there and yet elusive, moving as one moves inside, or as shadows move outside, impossible to grasp, as easily absent as present.

Gaston Bachelard conceives of a dream house not in terms of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient or desirable by other people, but as an imagined place to house the unconscious and memory. Marina Abramović’s Dream House is a prized work, offering visitors the experience of sleeping boxes and sleeping suites, dream-enhancing magnets and mineral stones. Elixir is a dream house of a different order. Laurence took a dark space and worked it with light; she took rough surfaces and layered them with the smooth reflective finish of glass. She transformed the idea of rice from the inertia of storage to the potency of sheju elixirs. Overlapping panels of glass, printed with images of herbs and medicinal texts that cast shadows on the wall, have created a dynamic space: part apothecary’s shop, part laboratory, part bar. In the centre, flasks of elixir and measuring jars set up strange reverberations from the glass of the alchemist’s bench.

On a previous visit, people from neighbouring farms had taken Janetsan to gather the plants, and in her absence had steeped them in sheju to make the elixirs. When I arrived with her in the summer of 2003, vats of sheju were waiting, each marked with the name of the person who had prepared it. The liquids glowed with the colours of plum-red berries, wintera petails, yellow bark, pale green wasabi roots, silky bulbs, blackened comfrey. On the first morning, people from the hamlet and nearby farms came out to greet her. Later, curators would arrive, an architect was there most days, and so was an interpreter who’d lived in Melbourne – a cosmopolitan influx into a village that exists for most of the year within its own routines and rituals. But with only a wisp of language, something direct happened between Janetsan and the people of the hamlet and the farmers who had collected the herbs with her. ‘Artists work like rice farmers,’ said an old man who came each day to check her progress.

To get time alone with her materials, Laurence went to the shed early in the morning, straight up the mountain path, and stayed on in the evening, crouched on the floor with the vulnerable glass panels balanced on small blocks. She had to pick her way carefully to make the sap-like pours of pigment and fluid. As she worked, intense, intent, there was a nervous edge to her. It was the end of the wet and there were swift squalls of rain; for days the air was heavy with moisture. With a week before the festival opened, the pours were alarmingly slow to dry. There was glass to be replaced, shelves to be moved. And the tandem question of whether the elements would resolve into a unified work. The model in the studio was a long way from the edge of that steep valley. ‘The bigger the trouble,’ the project’s architect Hiroshi Yatsuo said, ‘the better the success.’

In Japan, I came to see this element of risk, combined with her uncanny sensual precision, as essential to her practice. It’s not always comfortable, this ‘essential setting of the artist,’ as Marion Milner puts it, which requires of her and those around her ‘a tolerance of something which may at moments look very like madness’ 14. But it is Laurence’s capacity to push to the edge of possibility and hold her nerve that allows the work conceived in the studio to resolve on site.

Critics and art historians talk of Janet Laurence working the interface between art, architecture and the environment. That the works of slowing us into and out of awareness of our inseparability from the living world, the ebb and flow of transitory states. I could say her work reminds us that we are matter, and that the great structures of art and architecture, seemingly so fixed, are, like us, built of substances that dissolve. But when we pause, when we hesitate and slow, when we are drawn into a space she has created, it is not the lifting of a veil on to a lost past, a threatened environment, or an iconic garden that holds us there. We are held, I think, because the traces of veiling, like mists in the hills of the snow country, let us glimpse something of that hard-to-grasp shore-like zone where the revealed lies close to the obscured, and the open to the closed.

Although she has moved a long way from her first reading of The Waves and those fluid pigments on a flat surface, something about states of memory as an element in the tug between matter and image, ‘fact and vision’, and the way the past does not separate itself from us, has stayed with her over the years, and points, still, to the future.

In the studio in 2003, when I first visited, were models for future work, among them the ghost glasshouses, not yet commissioned, that she envisages as an inversion of the nineteenth-century glasshouse, a museum of transitoriness and loss, reminding us of vanished and threatened species, their names inscribed onto veils of glass.