Previous
Janet Laurence working on *After Eden* in her Sydney studio, 2012

Janet Laurence Sydney Studio, 2012

The Green in Glass
Drusilla Modjeska

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 horizon 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,

a conceptual underpinning to the sea floor of abutting metals (zinc, stainless steel, aluminium) lit by tiny islands of humming fluorescent tubes. Salt, poured over this 'seabed', crusted onto laboratory crucibles and flasks, corroded the metals like the slow erosion of wave against rock. By the time the installation was dismantled, the salt had etched the metal plates, creating drawings that she used in her later *Salt Works*, one work growing from another in a wave-like process of lap and overlap.

In alchemy, which became for her an extended metaphor, salt is the feminine principle, the *acqua permanens* of Jung.

Ask about her art and she is likely to talk about philosophy or fiction or natural science. In the studio she moved along her bookshelves and pulled out Gaston Bachelard or W. G. Sebald. Like them, she's an investigator of space and place. Travelling with her, moving through space – even walking to the café up the street from her studio – it's the materiality of things she responds to. The quality of mind she brings to phenomena in the world is spacious and pliable. She takes in what she sees, works the metaphors, takes in the details. When I remark on this to her, she's surprised. She says she's more interested in the invisible inside the visible; if she's taken up with the details of appearance, it's because she wants to find what can be drawn out through senses other than the eye. When she goes onto a site, it's the hidden she's alert to – scent, sound, the traces of memory: qualities that might reveal a link between a place, its history and symbolic resonances. 'Aesthetics,' she says, 'began as a language of the body'; she translates the Greek aesthetikos as 'perceptive by feeling'.

In her studio, panels of glass and metal lean against the wall, printed or etched with types of cloud – *translucida*, *nebulosa*, *radiata* – or of herbs and medicinal plants – *birdsfoot*, *black elder*, *butterbur*, *creeping cinque-foil*. It's as if the words themselves are a kind of material, provoking half-remembered stories, body memory, forgotten ground. Quotations from fiction, philosophy and scientific writings slope across the pages of her sketchbooks in a looping hand, colliding with diagrams, edging up to drawings, disrupting tables of scientific terms. And lists of thoughts for titles.

'People underestimate titles,' she says. During the 1980s many of hers came from books: *Life is Probably Round*, 1985, from Bachelard; *From the Shadow*, 1988, from T. S. Eliot; *Elsewhere*, 1988, from Milan Kundera; and *Blindspot*, 1989, from Luce Irigaray. These titles tell a story about a moment in her formation as an artist when liminality, half-openness, the betwixt and between, had a literary nuance. And they tell another about a contiguous moment in Australian feminism when the literary and the European were in the ascendant.

Running alongside was the close attention that came from working with metals and minerals and oxides, producing the blunter, science-derived titles of the 1990s – *Memory Matter*, *Periodic Table*, *Trace Elements*, *Second Exposure*.

Following the literary clues, one can grasp how her reading of French feminists and medieval alchemists might coalesce in thinking *about* matter. But it is by watching her at work, and watching the work take shape, that the extent to which she thinks *with* matter becomes clear – and what it might mean when she quotes Bachelard on 'the movements of opening and closing' being so 'frequently inverted' that we could conclude 'man (sic) is a half-open being'.[1]

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, US, 1969, p. 222.

She marks the beginning of her contemporary work – her 'real work', she says – with *Forensic*, which was shown in *Frames of Reference*, a survey of contemporary women's art in Sydney in 1991. In keeping with the warehouse architecture of the Wharf Theatre, a grid of boxes was installed in three rows of six along a wooden wall. From a distance it appeared a complete work of texture, with

p. 46

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 revealed its own world, with its own slow, disordered life within, small installations echoing Joseph Beuys. Stand back again, and the disparate parts resolved 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 ingenious 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.*[2]

Here was the astringent feminine. Working with matter that could be ground or granulated, liquefied or crystallised, 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.'[3]

2. Terence Maloon, 'The alchemy of Janet Laurence', *Art and Australia*, vol. 31, no. 4, winter 1994, p. 505.
3. Janet Laurence, artist statement, *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art*, exhibition catalogue, Artspace, Sydney, Australia, 1991.

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 drips 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.

Breathing, 1991
straw bales, sound, light
5 x 5 x 3 m
installation view, *Steam*, Artists' Projects for Australian Perspecta, The Coach House, The Rocks, Sydney, 1991

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,[4] 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 bears 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 misjudgement, 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.

p. 64

She knows her materials and she needs this knowing, honed in the downstairs 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 topography, its scale, its architecture. Her site research needs to be as sure as the knowledge of the materials she brings to it. Even so, there's always an element of risk, a fine edge of tension when she's installing a piece. Will it work in that place, in that light? Something that looks large in a studio model can shrink to insignificance. 'It's not possible to measure the height of the sky,' she says.

Upstairs she talks of pliable and ambiguous spaces that can hold the memory of a place and give expression to ambiguity. Downstairs she talks of the mechanics of work that has taken her from that first installation of sand and seeds to the site-specific sculptural work that isn't a singular object dropped into a pre-existing space, or confined to a museum, but integral to the creation of space and atmosphere: work that can stretch between art and architecture, between interior and landscape, responding to changing season and mood.

When bushfires raged through Kuring-gai Chase on the northern edge of Sydney in the summer of 1993–94, Laurence was close by at Pittwater. She was working on the concept for *Edge of the Trees*, commissioned for the forecourt of the Museum of Sydney, and executed in collaboration with Fiona Foley. Contemplating a large architectural sculpture on the site of the first Government House had her working with the idea of 'memory held in matter' as a way of remembering the uncertain histories of a place. 'Just as memory participates in everything,' she wrote, 'everything participates in memory, drawing the world together, endorsing it with connectiveness.'[5]

p. 49

The project came during the *Memory Matter* series, which included *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, 1993, for the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, the first commission that gave her a chance to work on an architectural scale, and with materials crafted outside the studio: glass, marble, wood and nickel silver. It was a turning point, she says, not only for her, but for the installation of art in Australian public architecture.

So there she was the following summer, still in that series, with smoke billowing over the ridge, reading early accounts of Sydney. The title, *Edge of the Trees*, comes from pre-historian Rhys Jones's evocation of first contact when the 'discoverers', struggling through the surf towards a strange land, were 'met on the beaches by other people looking at them from the edges of the trees' – the Eora, for whom it was known land.[6]

At the Museum of Sydney she was working with historians, archaeologists and anthropologists who, with curator Peter Emmett, were devising a museum for post-colonial Sydney. It was easy enough to agree that such a museum

4. The Sidney Myer commemorative sculpture, Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria.
5. Janet Laurence, *Element/Elemental*, MA thesis, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 1993, p. 32.
6. The title *Edge of the Trees* comes from Rhys Jones, 'Ordering the landscape', in I. & T. Donaldson (eds), *Seeing the First Australians*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Australia, 1985, p. 185.

should break with the old conventions of collecting, and that the context of an object and its meaning were inseparable. But in a culture of forgetting, what shape would a memorial take if it were to create a 'poetical space' for the layered memory of a city? How could absence be made visible?

In the forecourt of the museum, the twenty-nine pillars that make up *Edge of the Trees* 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 insistent images. She'd rather draw us with a question. What am I looking at? Is the fluid spilling? Is it stable? 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
Still space?
Slow space?
A membrane?
The resistance?
The hesitation?
The dissolving boundary?
The connection between sensation and thought?
A way of looking within the world rather than at it?[7]

7. Janet Laurence, unpublished notes on *Veiling space*, unpublished notes, 2002.

Fluids, *skins*, *texts*: 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 veils, Laurence says, glass is the perfect metaphorical material, 'as it's between 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 finish of the aluminium grid that holds all in place seems invisible. It's only when you look inside the self-effacing frames that you see the racks or slots going back to support the huge panels.

pp. 52–53

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 red gums. Even before Mrs Macquarie waited at her famous 'chair' for the ships that would bring news from England, the gums were being cut down. Paintings from 1795 show a raw settlement with the skeletons of ring-barked trees unsettling the skyline. A hundred forest red gum saplings and native grasses were 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 argillacea*, *Eucalyptus intermedia*, *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa*, *Acacia cowleana*, *Casuarina glauca* … Lines from James McAuley read:

> *It is your land of similes: the wattle*
> *Scatters its pollen on the doubting heart*.[8]

Forensic, 1991
wood, photographs, straw, laboratory glass, lead, ash, fluorescent lights, x-rays, perspex, installation dimensions variable
installation view, *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism in Art*, The Wharf, Sydney, 1991
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Purchased with funds provided by the Young Friends of the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 1994

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 profound melancholy, which was dispersed only by the idea of building a replica. This next glasshouse was to be for *replica* plants: two thousand glass specimens so realistically crafted 'the humble hand's cunning craft might deceive the eye'.[9] Stainbridge had already 'tricked the eye' with a few glass specimens in the first glasshouse, and it was said that there were some that were real in the second. It, too, was destroyed – burned to the ground in 1841 by a man who saw this flaunting of 'man-made nature' as an insult to God.

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*, 2003, an exhibition at London's Serpentine Gallery, 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 old 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. 'Its 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 cataract. 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

8. James McAuley, 'Terra Australis', *Collected Poems, 1936–1970*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, Australia, 1971.
9. Frank Stainbridge quoted in Ralph Rugoff, 'Signs and Wonders', in *The Greenhouse Effect*, exhibition catalogue, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK, 2003.

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.'[10]

pp. 66, 67

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 Director 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'.[11]

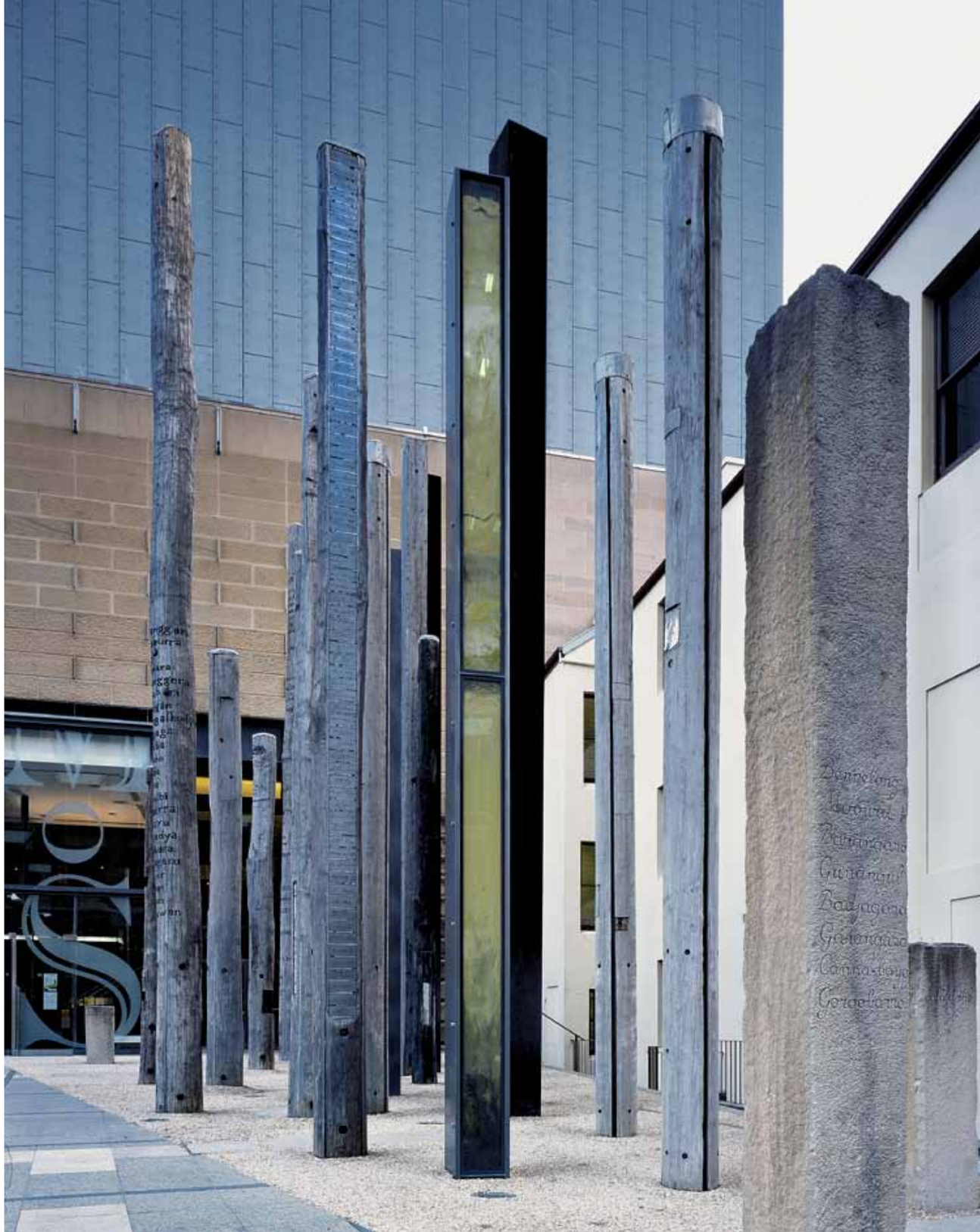
Echigo-Tsumari is the *Snow Country* of Kawabata's 1948 novel, in which a city intellectual misreads – as if in the reflection from a mirror – both the languid receptivity of an ageing geisha and the allure of a mountain culture that appeared miraculously intact. Fifty years later, the region had become 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'.[12] 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*[13] – 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.

10. Janet Laurence, unpublished notes on *Verdant*, October 2003.
11. Fram Kitagawa, 'Next, let's set the spirit alight', in *Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial 2000*, exhibition catalogue, Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial 2000 Executive Committee, Tokamachi City, Japan, 2000, p. 21.
12. Yusuke Nakahara, 'Leaving the city behind: artistic energy', in ibid, pp. 12, 13.
13. Matsuo Basho wrote the frog haiku in 1686. *The Tale of Genji* was written by Murasaki Shikibu in the early eleventh century.

Opposite
Edge of the Trees, 1995
sandstone, wood, steel, oxides, shells, honey, bones, zinc, glass, sound, 29 pillars, dimensions variable
site-specific installation, Museum of Sydney *on the site of first Government House* forecourt, Sydney
Collaboration with Fiona Foley, from the concept by Peter Emmett, for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales



The wooden storage hut she chose to house *Elixir* belonged to the disused farm where Marina Abramovíc had created *Dream House* in 2000. In its raw state, it had a small entry room with three heavy doors that slid 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 Abramovi´c's *Dream House* is a prized work, offering visitors the experience of sleeping boxes and sleeping suits, 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 *shoju* 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 Janet-san to gather the plants, and in her absence had steeped them in *shoju* to make the elixirs. When I arrived with her in the summer of 2003, vats of *shoju* were waiting, each marked with the name of the person who had prepared it. The liquids glowed with the colours of plum-red berries, wisteria petals, yellow bark, pale green wasabi roots, silty 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 Janet-san 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 fluids. As she watched, silent, intent, there was a nervy 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 taut 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 Yatsua 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 'mental 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.

14. Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Heinemann, London, UK, 1950, p. 164.

Critics and art historians talk of Janet Laurence working the interface between art, architecture and the environment. She talks of slowing us into an 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.

This is a revised version of an essay written in 2004 following a series of meetings between Drusilla Modjeska and Janet Laurence in Australia and Japan.

Unfold, 1997
Duraclear, photographs, glass, oil, pigments
4.5 x 12 x 2 m
installation view, Project Space, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1997

Overleaf
Veil of Trees, 1999
100 *Eucalyptus terreticornis*, glass panels, corten steel panels, seeds, ash, LED lighting
site-specific installation, City of Sydney Sculpture Walk, Art Gallery Road, The Domain, Sydney
Collaboration with Jisuk Han