

A hospital for plants: The healing art of Janet Laurence

Felicity Fenner

RENOWNED AS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S LEADING SITE-SPECIFIC ARTISTS, Janet Laurence's most recent practice has involved the creation of environments that act as sanctuaries for the contemplation and regeneration of natural environments and plant life. During the recent 17th Biennale of Sydney (BoS), where the artist's latest work graced the Royal Botanic Gardens, Laurence spoke with Felicity Fenner about the artistic idea of the greenhouse, and the fragility and fecundity of plants.

Felicity Fenner: Your work in the public arena over the last decade eschews traditional perceptions of public art as inanimate and sculptural. I'm particularly interested in your work with plants. From *In the shadow*, 2000, at Sydney Olympic Park to *Waiting: A medicinal garden for ailing plants*, 2010, at the BoS, there is an imperative to create a space not simply for viewers to ponder site-specific and broader environmental issues, but that functions as a place where plants themselves can regenerate and flourish. In these and other recent works plants are the focus both sculpturally and symbolically.

Janet Laurence: The future of many plants is in danger, yet they are central to the earth and existence of all animal life. We are dependent on them for everything from the air we breathe to the food we eat. Plants are organic, not static, objects. They have life and movement. They will change and grow with time. Working with living plants you become very aware of their being, their needs and internal processes.

FF: *In the shadow* was made in response to the remediation of the Homebush Bay site. The native water plants and forest you planted have over the years created an area of dense vegetation that oxygenates an otherwise quite sterile precinct. When I first saw the work in 2000, it was dominated by the wands that you inserted into the water, emulating the scientific measuring of water chemical levels. The wands are still there as a residual reminder of the detoxification of that site, but it's the plants that are now

visually dominant. So, starting as one thing, the work has evolved into something else. Presumably it will continue to evolve.

JL: That's the challenge and pleasure of working with plants. *In the shadow* was intended to evolve with the growth of the trees and water plants. They brought bird and insect life to the area and enabled a sheltered space to enclose the fog component of the work. This created a living green space that contrasts from the surrounding built-up, open site of Olympic Park. Ironically, the artwork will be preserved as the site evolves. Unlike the work of a landscape architect that is removed or altered as the built environment changes, this planting cannot be removed by park authorities because it's an artwork.

FF: It's not only permanent but is fully integrated into its environment – the epitome of site-specific art.

JL: Yes, and art can bring into public view some confronting environmental issues that without the imprimatur of it being a creative work wouldn't ordinarily be presented, because so often scientific information is not permitted public access. So, as an artist, the Olympic Park commission was a major opportunity for me – not just to install a work, but to *heal* an environment.

FF: Knowing that they will have a life beyond the exhibition, how did you choose which plants to include in *Waiting*?

JL: The decision was for natives, which were sourced from the Forestry Commission of New South Wales. I selected plants with the help of a horticulturalist from Eden Gardens (who supported the biennale project), and a range of both healthy and sick plants hopefully to nurse back to health. I also consulted with Edward Liew, the plant pathologist at the Botanic Gardens. All the plants and soil brought in had to be tested. Those that posed a potential problem were wrapped in the veil-like tulle that plants are covered in to protect them from frost. Fortunately the wrapped plants have a sculptural as well as quarantining purpose. They suggest bandaged limbs, which is appropriate for the 'plant hospital'.