

THE ART OF PLANETARY HEALTH

'The Art of Planetary Health' sends a strong message and it's grim.

You would be forgiven for thinking that most of the art world has thrown up its hands and surrendered on the health of the planet. GOOD health, that is, the patient-is-improving type of health, and is focusing instead on its perilously poor health.

It's hard, if not impossible, even for artists who are keepers of much of our record, to keep up with the roller coaster humankind is experiencing in these times of momentous change. There's a lot of *anthropocene* and *pyroscene*, buzzwords being bandied about, not to mention eco-anxiety and climate grief. There are those of us who are doing everything humanly possible to help secure our environment—solar panels, electric cars, saving water, composting, lobbying... and those of

Blue Mountains City Art Gallery Critical Mass installation Janet Laurence (foreground), Fiona Hall and Louis Pratt Photo Silversalt



us who will never get around to changing our habits – ‘what difference can what I do make?’

On the evening news we were relieved to hear that our bee populations which were decimated in the drought and fires (foretelling the total collapse of the natural world without them) have made a massive come-back and are producing honey like we've never known it before. There are bumper crops nationwide after the recent rain—although we are warned that just because one drought has ended doesn't mean we're off the hook in the future.

The trick is not to under-play the crisis in planetary health but not to over-play it to the extent that all credibility is lost.

The 'Art of Planetary Health' exhibition at Blue Mountains City Art Gallery describes in a detailed catalogue essay, how 'the participating artists, social activists and traditional owners provide reflections on eco-anxiety, yet remain hopeful for the future state of the world'. I visited in search of that hope.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is Janet Laurence's wellknown and visually stunning 'The Memory of Nature' 2010 which is on loan from the Art Gallery of NSW. This updated installation includes materials reprised from an earlier work by Laurence, 'Waiting: a medicinal garden for ailing plants', which was first

displayed a decade ago at the Royal Botanical Gardens for the 2010 Biennale of Sydney. Then it looked like a makeshift glasshouse utilised as an intensive care unit for sick plants, evoking a sense of environmental crisis.

Ten years on, 'The Memory of Nature' reveals to viewers the disastrous aftermath of that failure of care, displaying now the desiccated remains of plants, including a small Wollemi pine wrapped in white net, stuffed owls and burnt bones. The remade exhibit is described as a memorial to nature now lost. Laurence spoke at the opening of the exhibition, seemingly ambivalent in her hope for the planet's future but nevertheless referring to her current project working with farmers experimenting with carbon sequestration and the revegetation of land with environmental plantings.

Locust Jones' installation displayed his work at its flamboyant best—in blacks, blues and iridescent greens. He had worked on both sides of a 2 m wide length of heavy drawing paper, possibly 10 m long and instead of displaying it as a 2D work, it stood, slightly coiled so that you could see—even walk inside—and read it in its entirety.

Like a war correspondent, Jones takes the cacophony of messages of war and insurrection and rebellion and murder and mayhem, which he captures from visits to war-torn areas and from streaming Al-Jazeera, and converts this into art. This particular work, he says,

'was made after my return from a research trip to Jerusalem, the occupied West Bank and Beirut in September-October, 2019. I was drawing this work in Katoomba about my experience in the Middle East and the ideas and inspiration that I absorbed from this trip when suddenly the heat and the wild fires and the helicopters whirling overhead started to change the direction of the drawing and it became a drawing of two worlds. The mass of electricity cables overhead in crowded refugee camps in Beirut and Bethlehem morphed with the rotor blades and monster flying machines hovering above my studio, the noise, energy and urgency of the moment manifesting in this work.'

Since completing this work Jones has become addictively immersed in ever more recent 'small' wars with their never-ending human and environmental toll. It would be difficult to be hopeful for the planet's health as long as humans perpetuate this carnage.

Already two of the exhibition's most powerful works have left me quite devoid of hope.

Returning to my earlier reference to the bees which are presently exceeding their pre drought and pre fires numbers, Rachel Peachey and Paul Mosig offer an installation to assist in overcoming climate grief.



Blue Mountains City Art Gallery
Critical Mass installation
Locust Jones (left and foreground),
Leanne Tobin (background)
Photo Silversalt

This is a space to be visited when 'telling the bees'. 'Telling the bees' is an age-old European (and possibly more widely practised) custom where a family member reports to the bees at their hive when a significant member of the family has died. It has been conjectured that the belief is that bees provide a link between our own and other planes of existence.

Peachey and Mosig explain: 'For ultimately hopeful societies brought up believing in the human ability to solve all problems this perspective is hard to countenance. If all human motives are ultimately derived from a biologically based instinct for self-preservation, the culture we create often serves to *minimise the terror of extinction* (my emphasis) by providing shared symbolic contact that gives the universe order, meaning, stability and permanence.'

Blue Mountains City Art Gallery, Critical Mass
'Telling the Bees' Rachel Peachey & Paul Mosig
Photo Silversalt

'Climate grief is recognised by the Australian Psychological Society as a strong psychological response to the current and future loss of habitats, species and ecosystems. Counselling psychologist and researcher in environmental psychology, Tristan Snell comments on the lack of rituals around loss of environment: 'When you lose someone, there's a funeral and all sorts of ways people connect and this helps process that loss. That's just not the case for loss of environment.'

Peachey and Mosig describe their work as 'a small step on the pathway to creating such rituals. Amongst the constant churn of public discord we have made a private space of mourning. By outwardly acknowledging feelings of grief we can begin to accept them, which can help us transition to future possibilities.'

I came away feeling that private meditation would be more likely to help alleviate my climate grief and come to terms to the reality of our predicament



Handwritten signature or mark.

than a contrived ritual in imitation of 'telling the bees'. Nevertheless this installation came closest in the exhibition to acknowledging that magic or ritual might help us cope. Magical energies, spells, chants and ritual are means man has used through the ages to intercede with the unruly forces of our natural world. But in this brave new world of ours our pragmatism and scientific approach to climate change instead make it much harder for us to keep a hold on hope.

Beautiful while concerning was Ona Janzen's self portrait (see right), created over two weeks as she added each day the plastic and other wrappings she had discarded. Jewel-like in the depths of darkness, there is a court jester or harlequinesque aura about this image—let's hope the last laugh is on us.

Other works in the exhibition—the photographs of empty shelves in a supermarket, of Wallerawang power station, of the earth scarred by pit mines, of the terrifying beauty of a landscape engulfed in crimson and orange flames, the life-size figures cast in coal—all confirm to us just how difficult it is to observe the world where we stand today and still cling to hope.

Carolynne Skinner

