

Janet Laurence brings fragility of the Great Barrier Reef to Paris climate talks



Janet Laurence's artwork *Deep Breathing (Resuscitation for the Reef)* will be shown in Paris during the United Nations climate change conference. Photo: Janie Barrett

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Surrounded by a boneyard of coral and fish skeletons and shelves of laboratory glassware in her studio, Janet Laurence bears a heavy weight on her shoulders as she prepares her latest artwork.

The artist's *Deep Breathing (Resuscitation for the Reef)* will present one of Australia's greatest natural wonders to an international audience gathered in Paris for the United Nations climate change conference.

"I feel quite proud to be able to bring the Barrier Reef to Paris actually and show another way of seeing it, not the glossy tourist idea, she says. "And in fact it is very fragile and very, very threatened."

But she adds: "I feel it's important to have a presence there because our government may not have a positive presence there," she says.

A Wunderkammer of reef parts, Laurence's artwork includes photos, videos and natural material like bleached corals and shells.

"I've also cast a lot of skeletal matter and corals and I've cast coal because you know we can't ignore that factor," she says, alluding to the coal export facilities along the Queensland coast.

It will also feature fish and turtle specimens borrowed from the Australian Museum and Paris's Museum national d'Histoire naturelle, where it will be displayed.

Laurence hopes to tug on viewer's



"I'm creating a kind of resuscitation space for the Barrier Reef": Janet Laurence in her studio in Chippendale. Photo: Janie Barrett



heartstrings by displaying small corals on beds transfused with colour that suggest babies in a hospital.

"I'm really aiming to bring a much more empathetic, emotional side into the work for people to be drawn into it on an intimate level," she says.

Other coral specimens in what Laurence calls her "hospital for the reef" will be wrapped in bags that she says resemble morgue bags.

"I'm creating a kind of resuscitation space for the Barrier Reef," she says.

Deep Breathing (Resuscitation for the Reef) will also include "intimate views" of aquatic life.

"I think people are realising this incredible sentence of marine life," she says. "That was for me a very profound experience of being on Lizard Island."

Laurence's site-specific work will also be displayed during Paris' International Contemporary Art Fair in October. It will then be displayed at the Australian Museum in 2016.

Laurence is one of 30 artists from 23 countries selected to exhibit work in Paris during the climate change talks. Other artists showing work inspired by climate change include Olafur Eliasson, Pedro Reyes and Song Dong.

The world's biggest coral reef system, the Great Barrier Reef has occupied minds at the UN in recent times, with the World Heritage Committee has deciding in July not to declare the Great Barrier Reef "in danger". However, the committee said it would monitor the state of the reef over the next four years.

The Australian Museum's artist-in-residence, Laurence spent six days at the institution's Lizard Island research station on the northern Great Barrier Reef in July, working with scientist Mandy Reid to take underwater photographs and set up what Laurence calls "underwater homeopathic treatments for bleached coral".

The main focus of Laurence's artwork is coral bleaching. But she says: "it's also on the acid waters, the crown of thorns starfish, the fact that shells are getting less robust, thinner, you know, the fragility of so much life there due to the polluted and warming waters".

Laurence says the reef also bears the scars of recent cyclones, which are thought to be intensifying as a result of climate change: "It's the direct effect of man and then of course the climate change over a longer period of time."

The museum's chief executive Kim McKay agrees that the reef had been affected by climate change.

"Climate change is happening," she says. "It is scientific fact. If you want to deny scientific fact, you would be a denier of many other things."

People were entitled to their opinion, but policy should be guided by expert opinion, she says. "In this particular case, world expert opinion and now it seems world political opinion is firmly behind the reduction of carbon emissions because they are a contributor to global warming."

Artists 4 Paris Climate 2015 will be shown during the UN climate change conference from November 30 to December 11. See artists4parisclimate2015.com