



Janet Lawrence, *H2O Water Bar*, 2016.

PREVIEW

H2O Water Bar

by [Steve Dow](#) | Posted 12 Feb 2016

In the cloistered Babylonian gardens below street level that were once Paddington Reservoir, Sydney artist [Janet Lawrence](#) is setting up her latest, environmentally focused immersive art installation.

In this space full of “aqua memory”, as she puts it, she is assembling volunteer water bearers to spend their evenings serving visitors test tubes containing samples from 17 different eastern seaboard mineral springs and rainwater catchments, sourced from North Queensland to Tasmania.

The volunteers are required to learn each sample’s components, what the minerals mean for human health and wellbeing and to tell the story of water and its fragility.

“Water tastes very different according to its journey and where its settled,” notes Lawrence, who at last year’s Paris Climate Change Conference exhibition created a wunderkammer of memento mori for the endangered Great Barrier Reef. “Even little micronisms are different in different waters.”

Water is taken for granted “far too much”, she says, although rural areas are much more alert to water shortages. We grow some unsuitable crops in Australia, such as rice, that drain the level of groundwater, she says.

“It’s funny how in Australia we’ve got that reaction, that we’ve got plenty here and we’re OK. Our water is so fragile, and so much of our water has been affected by industrialisation and mining. People don’t realise it’s their drinking water that’s being affected in that way.”

In 2006 Toowoomba residents voted against having recycled wastewater pumped into their homes. “The people objected to it because they thought it was dirty,” she says. “That’s total ignorance. That’s just how we are here. We’re like that with food. We don’t realise things can run short very quickly.”

Laurence’s experiential work has long straddled art and science and dealt with transience and instability. In 2005, at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial in Japan, she created a bar installation that served potions made from plant extracts.

Are the Japanese more attuned to their natural environment than we are in Australia? “Yes, funnily enough, I think the Japanese are, they revere the natural world and nature. They’ve already gone through a stage of losing so much of theirs, of course. They find it sacred.”

In serving water now, Laurence is pushing a message of people reusing water containers. “There’s no way I’m advocating the use of [plastic] bottled water,” she says.

“I hope my long-term project for this place [the reservoir] will be a drinking fountain. A place to fill your glass bottle. I’ve just been to Paris, and there are sources all over the city to replenish your water.”

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Janet Laurence

Paddington Reservoir Gardens

13 February to 28 February 2016.



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