

Armed with traditional indigenous and Western myths of fertility, the land, and the balance of nature, as well as references to her Jewish heritage, Lauren Berkowitz is an artist whose works gently remind us of our responsibilities. She transforms discarded materials like plastic bags and bottles into overwhelmingly beautiful installations that involve all the senses, and utilises indigenous plants and seeds to create intricate carpets of colour and movement, mostly site specific – she is always conscious of where her pieces are shown. They are comments on where we are as well as where we are heading. She lives in Melbourne with her young family. Jenny Lyon spoke to her recently about her work.



Inspired by Waste



Q. I love this idea of TikkunOlam. Tell me about what this means to you.

A. Two years ago I became quite interested in Kabbalah, a mystical Jewish tradition that dates back to medieval times. Initially, I was drawn to the abstract imagery and symbolism of the Kabbalah, which has inspired 20th century painters such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, and architects Louis Kahn and Daniel Libeskind. I did some studying with a rabbi who illuminated many of the important teachings of the Kabbalah including the idea of TikkunOlam. This was the most resonant idea, something I could apply to my artwork. It is an idea that talks about practical steps to heal and repair the world. Often it is a term that refers to doing good deeds within the community, but it could also be just as relevant to taking practical steps to rehabilitate and sustain our planet. When I received the commission to create "Manna" at La Trobe Museum of Art, in 2009, I wanted to translate the concept of TikkunOlam into the creation of an artwork that was fully sustainable and recyclable on every level. In "Manna", all the pots and plastic containers were retrieved and re-used. Many of the plants used were cuttings or on loan from KeelBundora, the local indigenous nursery at La Trobe which has a focus on bush tucker. Furthermore all the plants were returned to vegetable patches all around Melbourne at the conclusion of the exhibition. Many of the seeds used within the work were planted by school kids, recycled from an earlier work called "Cornucopia".

top left "Drift", 2008 (detail) photo: John Gollings, courtesy Utopian Slumps. **right** "Karakarook's Garden", 2005-06 photo: John Gollings, courtesy Utopian Slumps. **opposite page** Lauren with a recent work, "Spinning Webs", photo: Tamsin O'Neill.

Q. There are lots of references to mythology in your work; do you think there are lessons to be learned from stories? Especially in regard to the fragility of nature and the loss of traditional knowledge of plants?

A. Many of my artworks make references to nature through biblical narratives and ancient mythology. These stories often recall the dependence of ancient people on the landscape for sustenance and their awe of gods who represented the forces of nature. These gods could be both life-giving, or destructive if disobeyed. Although I am not a believer in God, these stories are still relevant today as a warning; as people continue to disrespect the environment, nature will turn on us with increasing ferocity.

In my early works I used salt, which is both essential to life but is also destructive of it. Works such as "Drift", 2008 reference the existence of salt within the Australian environment and its potential to harm the soil and our staple foods, whilst others like "Salt and Honey", 2003 relate the importance of salt in Jewish ritual and God's ability to wreak havoc on the environment, using salt, rendering it sterile if dishonoured. Particular works from 2007 make reference to deities from ancient mythology. Works such as "Demeter's" and "Karakarook's Garden" were created out at Heide Museum of Modern Art. Ancient Western and Aboriginal cultures from which these deities evolved were in awe of nature and subject to its powers of destruction and regeneration. They both worshipped and honoured nature in the form of female deities who often embodied the seasons and the fertility of the landscape on which their livelihoods and sustenance depended; these gods demanded great respect and honour. In an age where nature is so devalued, these myths are still relevant, as a reminder of the need to protect and nurture our landscape. Karakarook was an important Aboriginal deity who taught the women and children about the edible and medicinal qualities of plants, as well as how to collect edible tubers with their digging sticks in a sustainable manner, so that there would be a plentiful crop for the following season. This story illuminates the farming habits of the local Aborigines prior to colonisation. The Greek goddess Demeter represented bountiful harvest, the changing of the seasons and the fertility of the earth; however, the myth recounts that when she is crossed she blights the earth with barrenness. →



"Manna" 2009 photo: Kali Karvelas,
courtesy La Trobe University Museum of Art.





Q. There seems to be a heartening return to people being more self-sufficient, with lots more backyard veggie patches, water harvesting and considered garden design. Do you think we are heading in the right direction?

A. Yes, I do. I recall that my grandparents had a huge vegetable patch and they were part of a generation of the depression and war where people were encouraged to be self-sufficient as resources were scarce. I remember my grandmother had a large collection of glass bottles, paper bags and fabric off-cuts that she stockpiled for reuse. I think we are now returning to that mentality of recycling and regeneration. Individuals, councils and communities are now creating vegetable gardens and most primary schools are educating young children on the importance of growing foods, promoting self-sufficiency, the recycling of waste, water and food scraps. Many gardens are embracing indigenous plants and succulents as a matter of necessity.

Q. Do you think we use traditional (indigenous) plants enough? Is it too late to learn about their healing/medicinal properties, and has the knowledge been lost?

A. This knowledge has not been lost. Beth Gott and many others have documented the indigenous plants of Australia for their edible healing and medicinal qualities. Much of this information was recorded by some of the first settlers who came to Australia, who documented their observations of Aboriginal customs, foods and behaviour as they believed the Aborigines were a dying race and they wished to record this information for posterity. Most of the information from Beth Gott's book, *Koorie plants, Koorie people*, was gathered from these historical records. Even at the Koorie Heritage Trust, where I did some research and spoke to an Aboriginal storyteller, he used these records to clarify details. I think there is a growing awareness and interest in indigenous plants as people realise that they are far more suited to our climate than introduced species and they are drought tolerant.

left "Demeter's Garden", 2007 photo: John Gollings, courtesy Utopian Slumps. **right** "Twig Cluster", 1989 photo: Ross Hipwell, courtesy Utopian Slumps.



Q. The nature of your work stimulates all the senses; is this something that you set out to do?

A. I think that in a very intuitive way I am drawn to materials that are physically engaging, in their form, colour, texture, smell and touch. I wish to use materials that are pleasurable to manipulate and sculpt. So the end artwork becomes an immersive work that indulges all the senses.



Q. What role do you think art has in making people more aware of their immediate environment and their responsibility to protect it?

A. I think my artworks are multilayered and open ended in their interpretation.

Many materials have a poetry and richness when manipulated into large scale environments. "Installation #4" was made from abandoned telephone books collected in New York City. En masse this work was like an ephemeral memorial of a time and place in history. The work also spoke of its own in-built obsolescence.

In works such as "Bags", 1994 a huge passageway 6 x 4 m made up of thousands of inflated white shopping bags, the viewer has the experience of walking through a gigantic pair of lungs that struggle to breathe, suggesting that all this accumulated waste is choking the planet. Other works such as "Recyclable", 1993 reflected the physically dense and claustrophobic spatial qualities of New York City (I lived there between 1991 and 1993) as well as the excessive waste and consumption that the city produced. In "Recyclable" the work appears as a miniaturised cityscape or an organic growth of waste that mutates and threatens to overwhelm the space. In a subtle and poetic way through the physical immersion of the viewer within these environments people had a heightened experience of consumer culture and excess that mutates endlessly. As a consequence perhaps people will reconsider next time they go shopping, and will reduce, re-use and recycle their waste.

In a work like "Manna" the use of plants makes the viewer aware of the foods we rely on to nourish and sustain us and how dependent they are on water, through the use of discarded drink bottles. All the plants in "Manna" are supported by plastic containers and bottles from fast foods and drinks, reminding us of the vast wastage from the foods we consume.

left "Recyclable", 1993 photo Steven Bates, courtesy Utopian Slumps. **right** "Bags", 1994 photo: John Gollings, courtesy Utopian Slumps.



Q. Waste is another theme in your work, ridiculous over-packaging of bought goods and the resulting rubbish; do you think the tide is turning?

A. It still frightens me to see the amount of waste generated through the over-packaging of food. After stockpiling all the plastic bottles and containers from my family's consumption for a month, I made a concerted effort to reduce my use of plastics. I think things are improving in Australia and schools encourage parents to avoid packaging in the school lunchbox by having nude food days.

Yet I was recently in Japan where I purchased three small bread rolls, and to my despair each one was packaged in a separate bag and there were no recycling bins in sight.

Lauren is currently exhibiting as part of *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World* at the MCA in Sydney.
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