

Lauren Berkowitz's fragile structures

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Lauren Berkowitz is a master of the interactive forest. For over 25 years the artist has been exhibiting in Australia and overseas, and in the coming months audiences will see the plastic jungles that Berkowitz has been exploring in her home city of Melbourne, and in residencies in New York and Sydney, in their full capacity. A new site-specific installation created for Monash University's Monash MPavilion in May, *Ecosphere* will use the science department to examine the recording of smell through visual imagery. In the meantime 'Fragile Ecologies', Berkowitz's summer show at Sydney's KronenbergMaisWright, has immersed the gallery with plastic recycled containers and evergreens, with ivy and air plants creeping through the towering installation and colonising the bodies of synthetic objects in the white cube space.

Sustainability is at the core of the artist's work as she sees herself as a caretaker, cleaning the streets of discarded plastic lids and accumulating post-consumer waste from the sites where she is exhibiting. Collecting becomes a communal endeavour involving communities, friends and family. Using the recycled plastics, which are organised by colour, shape and size, Berkowitz then balances them with plants to form large hanging sculptures, suspended from ceilings and sprawling across gallery floors.

Berkowitz's installations remind us that we are all witness to the blaring consumerism that exists in modern times. In particular, and most pertinently, her work points to the pervasiveness of microplastics in our environment, which are dispersed through water in microscopic particles and ingested by plants, animals and humans. Her work can be contradictory and complex, comprising both plants that create oxygen, and plastics that suffocate and bring destruction. As we consume plastic, it causes death and generates hybrid forms of

composite nature, mutating and regenerating into new life forms.

In replicating macro and micro environments, Berkowitz presents the circle as a recurring motif, reflected in the plastic rings and lids from drink bottles that she meticulously collects, cleans and repurposes, but also suggestive of more general ideas of renewal and other cycles of life. At KronenbergMaisWright, 'Fragile Ecologies' is further revealed by light falling in through windows and skylights, illuminating the clear plastic bottles and sparks of green that peek out of openings. Some parts of the exhibition are subtle, others dominate, with plastic tendrils dropping floor to ceiling and extending out onto the floor. Berkowitz's rarely-shown drawings continue the forest into two-dimensional space. Here the carefully rendered rings meet and conjoin, as they do in the installations. With these drawings, a haunting atmosphere is created, appearing as though they are X-rays of the air plants or dragon beads.

For Monash University's Monash MPavilion in May, *Ecosphere* will fuse site-specific elements with some of Berkowitz's more recent work in Sydney, drawn from her 2018 residency at Artspace, along with the installation *Subterranean* which was presented at Alaska Projects in 2016. She is drawing on the biology department and a vast array of indigenous plants growing on campus to create an immersive forest for the audience to meander through. Berkowitz will gather plant debris from the Monash grounds and incorporate it into the artwork, accentuating and heightening smells, with the aim of creating a sensory exposure of the site and its past.

This concept has been conflated with the artist's recent experience of loss and grief to further explore ideas of life, death and renewal. In *Subterranean*, Berkowitz drew from Kabbalah, a mystical form of Judaism, to conceptualise *Tikkun olam* (Hebrew for 'repair of the



Lauren Berkowitz, *Subterranean*, 2016, installation view, Alaska Projects, Sydney, 2016; rose petals, eggshells and salt, dimensions variable; image courtesy the artist; photo: Sean Burns

Lauren Berkowitz, *Weeds and Wildflowers*, 2014, installation view, Magdalen Laundries, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne, 2014; medicinal and edible wild cabbage, fennel and blackberry nightshade, 120 x 176 x 67cm; image courtesy the artist; photo: Concettina Inserra

Opposite:
Lauren Berkowitz, *Plastic Topographies*, 2018, installation view, Ideas Platform, Artspace, Sydney, 2018; plastic and plants, 300 x 200 x 200cm; image courtesy the artist; photo: Jessica Maurer



world'), here reflected in fragile strings of rose petals hung from the ceiling alongside clusters of eggshells. The artwork reveals the philosophies of small gestures towards healing and regeneration, while also tying in with the artist's installations that empower individuals to be proactive in the struggle against climate change. The imagery of Kabbalah, both poetic and dark, has a rich legacy that uses vessels, colour, food and the senses. All of which Berkowitz brings into her installations, thereby creating a therapeutic space that extends to the plants featured within the protective circles of her work.

In this way, Berkowitz explores many diverse theories – not only sustainability and consumerism, but also feminism and softer philosophies that relate to the individual. Her thoughtful considerations on

ideas of renewal and Kabbalah enable us to think about ways to improve our lives and draw on the fulfilment of our planet. The stillness and light streaming through the plastics create a meditative state to contemplate the implications of our interventions into nature, attempting to unravel the complexities of the new synthetic ecology that is invading our world. The greenery engages within its plastic home, yet looks ready to take over the installation – a reminder of the power of nature to restore what was. In witnessing this, audiences are encouraged to inspire others to be conscious and present.

'Fragile Ecologies' is on show at KronenbergMaisWright, Sydney, until 9 March 2019; 'Ecosphere' will be exhibited at Monash University's Monash MPavilion, Melbourne, from 27 May until 14 June 2019.

