

Janet Laurence: The Pharmacy of Plants

By Prudence Gibson

NewSouth Books, 192pp, A\$49.99, 2015

ISBN 9781742234557

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IN THE EARLY PART OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY THE INDIAN BIOPHYSICIST Sir Jagadish Bose invented an instrument for measuring plant growth. Called the ‘magnetic crescograph’, it enabled Bose to detect extremely tiny movements in the plant. So delicate was the apparatus, it compressed plant growth to a series of pulses. Picked up by the crescograph’s magnetic forces, the plant’s notoriously slow growth could be magnified tens of millions of times, enabling Bose to record its movement within a time-frame of mere seconds. The pulses showed how, far from insensate, plants are affected by the slightest of touches, and that it takes time to recover from such contact. Under such extreme magnification, plants were found to grow at a normal rate at the equivalent of 36 inches per second but as soon as they were exposed to or ‘made to imbibe’ soda water, the growth immediately ‘exalted’ by an order of ten. In contrast, ‘a puff of tobacco smoke’ was shown to instantly retard the rate (Bose 156). The crescograph demonstrated that plants are profoundly attuned to changes in the world around them, responding to passing clouds, to the sounds of crickets and even to music. Bose called the recordings of the crescograph the ‘automatic writing’ of the plant. In a lecture delivered in 1918 at Bombay University, he addressed the idea of a ‘hidden history’ of the life of the plant. Do plants write their own autographs, he wondered, and can these be made legible to the human eye?

In *Janet Laurence: The Pharmacy of Plants*, Prudence Gibson and Janet Laurence have created a sort of ‘aesthetic crescograph’ that would measure the effect of art’s contact with plants. This collaboration between an artist and a philosopher documents Laurence’s life-long artistic engagements with vegetal elements in their capacities as tonic and tinctures, structures and systems, and as mediations and connections between the Earth and the atmosphere. However, *The Pharmacy of Plants* is much more than a work of art criticism. It is an extended reflection on the intersection of writing, art and the ‘nature’ of thought itself.

Following on from *The Rapture of Death* (2010), Gibson emerges in her second book as one of Australia's leading voices in the developing field of plant philosophy. Seemingly a mere *off-shoot* from contemporary animal studies, plant studies would in fact fundamentally reframe the way we think about 'nature'. The Moscow-born philosopher, Michael Marder, a leading exponent of what he calls 'plant-thinking', proposes we consider plants not merely as representatives of certain species within a biological kingdom that subsists alongside (or underneath) the animal world. Rather, they act as a synecdoche for what we call 'nature' itself. This synecdochal relation requires a sort of perspectival shift in which a part, coming to stand for the whole, forces a radical rethinking of the entire order of things, including the place of humanity in the natural world. It has been a long time since we thought we could occupy a position as its centre. But plant-thinking also disabuses us of the idea we inhabit a sort of parallel or sister kingdom for which the plant world acts as the life-support. As Marder remarks in his own artist/philosopher collaboration with Anaïs Tondeur, *The Chernobyl Herbarium*, 'Plants [...] break through concrete, growing in its cracks and upturning massive slabs with their roots. They open everything and everyone to the outside' (50). From the perspective of plant-thinking, one must therefore begin from a more disturbing proposition, an ancestral heritage of a vegetal life engaged in very different processes of 'thought' and perception.

Marder's conceptualization of plant-thinking is clearly in the background of Gibson's sensitive and descriptive accounts of Laurence's plant art. Gibson's lambent prose lights our way through a number of Laurence's key exhibitions such as *Waiting* (17th Biennale of Sydney, 2010); *Elixir* (Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, Japan, 2003); *Treelines Track* (site-specific walking track, Bundanon Homestead, NSW, 2015-2016); *Fugitive* (Animate/Inanimate, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2012) among many others. Laurence's breathtakingly beautiful work is depicted in a central spread of colour photographs in this elegantly designed book. Each of Laurence's artworks acts as an invitation for Gibson's extended reflections on how one might 'be' in a world in a way that is as responsive to its environment as the plant. Along with Marder, Gibson solicits other contemporary thinkers of what can be loosely called the 'new materialism'—Timothy Morton, Ben Woodard, Karen Barad, Levi Bryant, Isabelle Stengers—whose work acts as sounding chambers for her reflections on what she calls 'green thinking'. 'Green thinking', Gibson explains, 'is a means of politicizing aesthetics, including art. This politicization is also a writing method [...] as I write about Laurence's work' (16).

It transpires that what 'green thinking' addresses is precisely the shock the environment is experiencing from the human *touch* called climate change. If art in Laurence's sensitive and surgically skilled hands emerges as a precise instrument for registering this shock, Gibson's writing submits these results to an acute analysis. This takes in the overlapping registers of care and cure, of capture and

culture, drawing inspiration from Jacques Derrida's play on the word *pharmakon* as both remedial drug and poison. Woven through Gibson's discussion of the paradoxes and potential dangers of eco-centrism is a reflexive attention to the work of writing itself. If Laurence's art is implicated in a kind of 'performance' that contains magical or alchemical powers, if it constantly asks after the politics of visibility as she wraps, enshrouds, catalogues or displays under glass a plant world in a state of what Alain Badiou would call 'inappearing', so do Gibson's words. Both artist and writer engage the power of representation as a means for making perceptible something unseen. As Gibson writes of Laurence (but also implicitly of her own words), 'she works to create a tension between life and afterlife, past and future, being and non-being. Her shrouds or veils [or words] became the slender spaces between' (54).

Plant-thinking, in Gibson's perceptive intelligence, ultimately becomes a model for how one might *materially* engage cognitive processes. Gibson comments, 'Where philosophers "think" through their experiences of nature, artists "think" through their materials. For Janet Laurence, it is a complementary process of the two'. Gibson goes on to cite Laurence as saying, 'I used to be obsessed with painting, with mixing different colours for my palette to represent nature. Now nature has become my materials' (98). In similar fashion, nature becomes the materials for Gibson as a model for thought itself. The book wanders across the terrain it covers as a series of shoots and tendrils that constantly circle back around to her fundamental questions: how to live ethically, what we might learn from the vegetal world in order to do so, what role art might play in developing and expanding our perception of the world, and how writing and thinking are actively implicated in this project.

Janet Laurence: The Pharmacy of Plants is, then, a form of plant autography that jointly documents a 'hidden history' of the life of the plant and its own relation to us. Sir Jagadish Bose discovered that, instinct with sensibility, plants are in fact in constant communication with the world around them. Through their philosophical/aesthetic collaboration, Laurence and Gibson have created an exquisitely sensitive receptor for seeing and reading that answering signal.

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