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Abstract
Michele Elliot ' s exhibition the vanishing formed part of the creative component of the Global Animal conference held at the University of Wollongong in Australia in 2011. Michele"s evocative and powerful body of work, which considers the tiger in what she has called „a light of liminality", was a compelling complement to the presentations and discussions which took place during the conference

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Introduction to Michele Elliot's the vanishing

Sarah Miller
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Michele Elliot's exhibition *the vanishing* formed part of the creative component of the *Global Animal* conference held at the University of Wollongong in Australia in 2011. Michele's evocative and powerful body of work, which considers the tiger in what she has called 'a light of liminality', was a compelling complement to the presentations and discussions which took place during the conference.

Some weeks before the conference, Michele and I sat in my living room and discussed her work and briefly her family history. Living in Wollongong, a city just south of Sydney situated on the coastal plain under the shadow of the escarpment, tigers seem both impossibly remote – mythical – and yet living in the remnant shadow of Gondwanaland – infinitely possible.

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry? [1]

On a recent trip to Singapore, I read *Diary of a Girl in Changi* [2]. In her diary, Sheila Bruhn, née Allan, remembers the holidays she spent with her father in Thailand, or Siam as it was then. She describes how, at twilight, the family would withdraw into the house and close the shutters. Each night a tiger would pad out of the jungle, up the steps – pace the length of the verandah – before disappearing silently back into the jungle. This was the mid- to late 1930s – less than a century ago.

> In what distant deeps or skies
> Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand dare seize the fire?

In Australia of course, we have already vanished the thylacine or Tasmanian tiger. Internationally, the Siberian, the Bengal, the Indo-Chinese or Corbett's tiger, the Sumatran, and the Amur tigers are all considered critically endangered, with numbers in the wild as low as four hundred in the case

of the Amur and Sumatran tigers. The catastrophic effects of habitat destruction and poaching are well documented – yet nothing seems to stop humankind's relentless devastation of wildlife populations and the environment.

I love *the vanishing* for the beauty of its constituent elements – the shrouded tigers, the embroidered texts, and the glass bullets– but it is as confronting as it is evocative, challenging my passivity in the face of wholesale species destruction. *the vanishing* seems to me an elegy, a lament for disappearing tigers, yet nevertheless celebratory in its evocation of the tiger.

> And what shoulder and what art
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> And when thy heart began to beat,
> What dread hand and what dread feet?

There are three key elements to the work.

The pool of glittering glass objects, which represent the bitter legacy of bullets or spent cartridges expended by trophy hunters who so relentlessly, yet so casually, so cruelly, and so unthinkingly killed thousands of tigers and their cubs.

> What the hammer? what the chain?
> In what furnace was thy brain?
> What the anvil? What dread grasp
> Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

The embroidered texts, which connect Michele's family history to tigers, not only commemorate the tiger cub given to Michele's dad as a young boy, but suggest the threads that connect past and present, the personal and the familial to the public and civil sphere, all embedded within a world of complex entanglements. Stitching is key to this work, fulfilling a role that is simultaneously functional, communicative, and decorative.

> When the stars threw down their spears,
> And water'd heaven with their tears,
> Did He smile His work to see?
> Did He who made the lamb make thee?

Finally the tigers themselves, two of which have been stitched into linen shrouds by India Parcel Post in Kolkata, and sealed with wax. The third tiger is – to again quote Michele – 'a tightly worked

surface of hand stitched red velvet'. Appallingly visceral, yet richly seductive, I think of the flayed bodies of tigers – their skins hanging on walls and before fireplaces. It is terrifying.

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Michele created *the vanishing* in response to histories and events of great horror. A body of work such as this has complex intensities and may be read multifariously – laterally – not literally. The transformation of these ugly and casually brutal acts in *the vanishing* cannot undo the devastation done in the name of empire, whose impact continues to resonate so terribly today. Whereas poet William Blake stood in awe of all God's works – from the tiger to the lamb – wonder and awe are not constituent elements of 'the bottom line' on the development spreadsheet, making it difficult to see *the vanishing* as anything other than an elegy.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that, in creating this work, Michele Elliot has undertaken a transformative act of witness, providing us with not just an elegy but also a form of testimonial. If any change is to take place then it can only occur through a significant striving, an ability to witness, and a capacity for empathy, so that no matter how painful the experience, and how uncomfortable those truths may be, the potential for change is understood as possible.

Notes

[1] William Blake's 'The Tyger' (1794) from *Songs of Experience*, is quoted verse by verse throughout.

[2] Allan, Sheila, *Diary of a Girl in Changi: 1941-1945*, Kenthurst NSW: Kangaroo Press 1994.