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The Vanishing

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Abstract

The plight of the tiger's survival in the wild has been widely reported, particularly the efforts of conservation groups in India, where it is estimated that half of the world's population of wild tigers live. Prior to colonisation by the British, India's aristocracy had engaged in the practice of hunting. However, the escalating slaughter of tigers during the British occupation was phenomenal. The consequence of this colonial legacy is a species hovering on the brink of extinction. While conservation projects operate across a number of countries including India, their population remains at risk from poaching and deforestation. In the exhibition the vanishing, the tiger past and present is the protagonist, its tale told through the interweaving of material and process, memory and narrative. Hanging sheaths embroidered with words, a reflective pool of glass bullets, the tigers shrouded in white, in red velvet, sit like ghosts, a haunting presence that echoes the violence of the past.

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***Keywords:** tiger, poaching, conservation, British, colonisation, exhibition*



In the late 1800s, an Englishwoman wrote in her journal that during the course of a British Officer's posting to India, he could expect to shoot and kill an average of one thousand Royal Bengal Tigers.¹

Figure 1: *the vanishing*. 2010. Embroidery detail. Collection of the artist.

The first time I visited Kolkata was with my mother in 2004. She was returning to the city of her birth after an absence of fifty-two years. There, with her, I experienced a strange familiarity, an entangledness that was hard to fathom. I felt compelled to go back, though not through my childhood imaginings of Calcutta², a city past, a family fiction. I wanted to find another way, one that would help me unravel this entangledness, of memory, violence, displacement, absence, belonging, and what I felt to be a curious relationship to this city.

I had been invited to participate in an exhibition in Kolkata on the theme of postcolonialism. As an Australian-born descendent of Scottish, Australian, Armenian, and Anglo-Indian-Burmese great-grandparents, all with roots in Calcutta, it seemed that the space of the personal might be a useful place to begin.

And then I remembered the tiger cub.

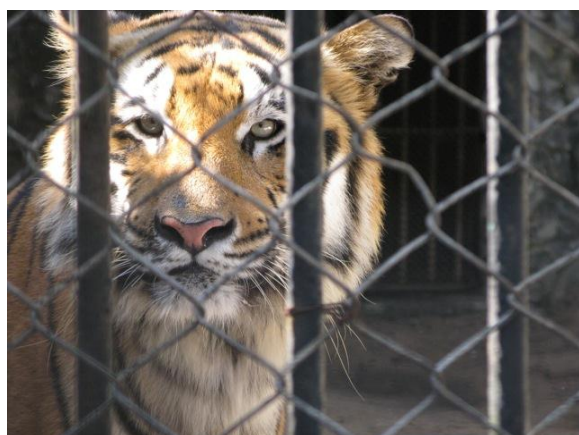


Figure 2: Bengal tiger, Alipore Zoo, Kolkata. 2008. Collection of the artist.

Monday, November 2, 2009: the gift

My father was the eldest of four children and his family lived in Barrackpore, about 20 kms out of Calcutta. My grandfather was a racehorse trainer. When his horses won, it wasn't unusual for their owners to present him with all kinds of gifts. Sweets, fabrics, jewellery, even cars.

When my father was about seven or eight years old, they were given a tiger cub. This was in the 1920s and tiger shooting was rife. A friend of my grandfather's had been out hunting, shot a tiger, and then found that she had two cubs. I've read since that it was not uncommon for the cubs to be shot as well. In this case, they were brought back to the city and domesticated. My grandfather raised the cub and it became his constant companion around the house. My father told me that he and his brothers would ride their bicycles to school every day and they would return around the same time. The tiger had an afternoon ritual where it would wait in ambush in the long grass near the gates, and, as they raced in towards the house, it would pounce and knock one of them off their bike to wrestle and play.

When the tiger was around two years old, it became clear that a domestic home, even with large gardens, was not the place to keep this creature. It would certainly have been an intimidating size. My grandfather had been getting complaints from various people, and finally decided that the tiger could not stay there. He donated the tiger to the Calcutta Zoological Gardens in Alipore. My father said that my grandfather would go to the Zoo at the same time every day and that the tiger would call out to greet him.

As a child, I insisted my father tell me this story over and over repeatedly. It seemed so incredulous to me that anyone could own a tiger as you would a dog or cat. I always felt so sad and worried for this tiger's fate. Taken from its dead mother, deposited in a family home where it lived with only relative freedom for two years, and finally imprisoned in a concrete cage for the remainder of its life in a zoo.

In 2007, I met with the Assistant Director of Alipore Zoo with the hope of finding some shred of information about this tiger. He told me that most of the records held in the Zoo were lost around World War II, and that, during this time, the animals were evacuated to private estates outside of the city. I'm not even sure what I was looking for. Its name perhaps, or how long it lived. Last week, I did in fact find some references to Zoological Reports held at the National Library from this period. I may discover something yet.

This is one of the threads to my project, and although I'm not making a narrative work about this tiger, it has certainly been in the background of much of my thinking. There is also something very tangible about being here in Kolkata that makes another strange kind of connection. Visiting the Zoo, seeing those tigers living in perhaps the very same cages where my grandfather's one lived. I am aware that this now is a different time, a different place and that what I am looking for no longer exists. It is simply another fiction. I suppose I just want some trace of that history, some physical evidence, even just a word.³



Figure 3: *the vanishing*. 2010. Fibreglass, cotton, velvet, glass, thread, wax. Variable dimensions. Installation at Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery, University of Wollongong, 2011. Photo: Bernie Fischer.

the vanishing considers the concepts of borders, dislocation and postcolonialism. It was a slow build, gathered from local research during a residency in Kolkata, from family stories, chance encounters, and a desire to question entrenched narratives within cultural and personal histories.

It focuses on the notion of the tiger as a vulnerable site of contention across geographies, history, culture, and race. In particular the tiger skin as trophy, a desirable and terrible ‘souvenir’, evokes a range of issues from imperialism and violence, power and control to fear and reverence. The tiger’s decimation that began at the peak of British rule in the 1870s is a reminder of a dark history, the repercussions of which impacted upon both human and animal over decades of colonisation.



Figures 4 and 5: *the vanishing*. 2010. Detail. Installation at Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery, University of Wollongong, 2011. Photos: Bernie Fischer

The three life-size tigers were made in collaboration with a Bengali idol-maker, using traditional methods of construction for the tigers using bamboo, straw, and clay, and then cast in fibreglass. Two were sewn into calico sleeves in the manner of India's parcel post and stand in the exhibition space as stitched and shrouded 'blanks', an embodied absence. Stripped of their distinctive skin, the tigers become metaphoric screens of loss.

The third tiger is encased in hand-stitched blood-red velvet that is both visceral and seductive, and speaks of the abject plight of the animal in the face of its rapidly diminishing numbers.



Figure 6: *the vanishing*. 2010. Detail. Installation at Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery, University of Wollongong, 2011. Photo: Bernie Fischer

There is a floor installation comprising six thousand hand-made glass forms that resemble bullets or spent cartridges. These ghost bullets distort and shift in a small sea of uncertainty. Glass was a specific choice for its transparency, its fragility, and to elucidate the way in which traces of history surround us, paradoxically everywhere, visible and invisible, depending on where one stands.

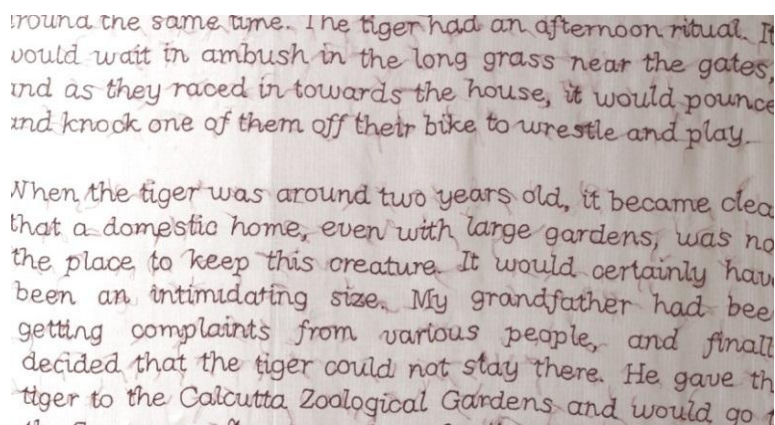


Figure 7: *the vanishing*. 2010. Embroidery detail. Installation at Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery, University of Wollongong, 2011. Photo: Bernie Fischer

The final components are three floating veils of hand-embroidered white Bengali cotton. One records that troubling journal entry on tiger shooting in colonial Bengal, another tells of a glimpse of tiger prints on a riverbank in the Sundarbans. The third recounts 'the gift', my grandfather's story of Calcutta in the 1920s and the tiger cub.

Wednesday 2 December, 2009: tiger trace and time to go

One morning in the Sundarbans we came across some tiger pug marks. Sambhu said they were very fresh, probably from early that morning. They emerged out of the water, across the mud and disappeared into the mangrove forest. This tiger had swum across from one island to the other, most likely in search of food, a distance of about one kilometre. Just a trace.⁴



Figure 8: Sundarbans, West Bengal. 2009. Collection of the artist

Acknowledgements

the vanishing was exhibited in 2010 at Harrington Street Arts Centre, Kolkata in the exhibition *Stains on My Chintz*, curated by Dr. Paula Sengupta and at the Australian High Commission, Singapore. In 2011, the installation was exhibited in the Faculty of Creative Arts Gallery, University of Wollongong, NSW, as part of the *Global Animal* conference.

Tiger modelling and casting: Achintya Bhattacharya, Mandirtala, West Bengal

Glass manufacturing: Art Glass Solutions, Singapore

Parcel post: Mr Azad, Park Street Post Office, Kolkata

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Notes

¹ Artist's journal, 2009. While undertaking research at the National Library of India, I noted this entry from a journal without taking the reference.

² I choose to use the word 'Calcutta' for historical connotations. 'Kolkata' is used here for the present day.

³ <http://micheleelliot.blogspot.com.au/2009/11/>

⁴ <http://micheleelliot.blogspot.com.au/2009/12/>

