

JANET LAURENCE

Artist Statement – *Fugitive*

Animate / Inanimate, Tarrawarra

*If we could hear ... the call of those who are slipping out of life forever. There we might encounter a narrative emerging from extinctions, a level of blood that connects us ...*¹

For many years my work has explored the poetics of space and materiality through the creation of site-specific works that deal with our experiential and cultural relationship with the natural world. The genesis for *Fugitive* (2013) started with my Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation project *After Eden* (2012). This was a type of Wunderkammer based on the idea of a natural history museum in our time of ecological crisis, paying particular attention to the plight of animals and their loss of habitat.

Fugitive is now part of a broader context within the TarraWarra Museum of Art, which shares a spectacular landscape setting and cultural space with the Healesville Sanctuary – a place of healing, hope, breeding and care for our native animals. On the one hand, material researched at the Sanctuary highlights our concern for and conservation of threatened native species; on the other hand it exposes widespread and ongoing ecological destruction, a blindness leading to the loss of the wild.

Fugitive expresses our relationship to our fragile environment and an awareness that we are within the era of the ‘Anthropocene’.

This ecological crisis demands us to shift our focus from a human-centred perspective to a broader multispecies, environmental approach, for how else are we to live ethically and find our place in this world.

The great majority of Australian plants and animals are found nowhere else on earth. They are precious repositories of unique genes and evolutionary strategies living in unique ecosystems and, as Tim Flannery has said, they provide Australians with the best means of engaging nature and listening to our land. However, although we profess to love our wildlife, political and economic compromise allow it to be traded off.

Australia's first wave of extinctions began with the arrival of the First Fleet and by the 1940s ten per cent of the continent's mammals were gone. There is now a gathering second extinction wave. At the same time, as Liz Grosz observes: '[t]he animal has returned to haunt the conceptual aura of the humanities ... The animal surrounds the human at both ends: it is the origin and the end of humanity'.²

Within the gallery space I want to bring us into contact with the life-world. With a focus on the animals and their loss, I think about the loneliness of the last one of a species. What was their death?

I wonder about their *umwelt*, the unique world in which each species lives. This notion is powerfully articulated by the biologist Jacob von Uexküll, who has enabled rare insight into the worlds animals inhabit: '... worlds they sometimes share with us, worlds

waiting to be invented, worlds that may inform our understanding of our own inhabited worlds'.³

I am attempting to bring these concerns into art, calling upon perception and memory, to create fugitive spaces of immersion and reflection, transparency and translucency, through a language of veiling. The veil in my work takes many forms. It alters what and how we see. It creates ambiguity and takes away certainty. The veil forms enmeshed environments, slowed spaces that enable porosity and fluidity. These are swollen, cellular forms which house various groups of objects and specimens including forensic glass lenses, images in transparent layers and films from both hidden cameras and from my research in wildlife sanctuaries. These film projections are altered and slowed and are juxtaposed with the lighting and shadows. I want to bring us into intimacy with these animals and to reveal our interconnection.

The taxidermy specimens, borrowed from the Melbourne Museum enable us to look into the eyes of the dead. The specimens are transformed from their dark storage invisibility and, as a tangible symbol of what was once there, bring to our attention what has been lost. These specimens exist somewhere between the living and the dead. They have this incredible presence and yet they're long past. I'm intrigued by the tiny space between life and death when the concept is infinite.

These are the days of violent extinctions, of global dimming and moving dust bowls, of habitat fragmentation, ice melt, and plundered lives. Animals are experiencing all this loss, and if we could better hear the waves of their agony, we would know this

and be tormented. We would know that for the rest of our lives we will hear a growing chorus of increasingly diverse voices:

*For the wicked carried us away in captivity,
Required from us a song,
How can we sing King Alfa's song in a strange land?⁴*

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, Virginia, US, p.146.

² Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2011, p. 12.

³ *ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴ Rose, p. 57.