

The Unhistorical History of Lien Botha's Parrot Jungle

By Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

Parrot Jungle is perhaps one of the most purely *photographic* of Lien Botha's many bodies of work, though of course she has exploited the medium since early works such as *Memorabilia* (1992) and *Africana Collectanea* (1994), as well as in recent works such as *Amendment* (2006). But here there are several differences, not least Botha's employment of a digital camera, which gives her a new flexibility that is reflected in the images. Confronted with what at first glance is a loose, fragmented narrative of sorts, one wonders three things about *Parrot Jungle*: why are these people, places and objects significant to the artist? What conceptual and aesthetic decisions has Botha made in order to come to the point of making and organising these images? And what, in the history of the medium with which she uncompromisingly throws in her lot here-without, that is, the insertion or addition of other materials or other kinds of non-photographic images-has opened a space for this body of work in its particular form?

In answer to the first question, it is enough to know simply that the pictures here *are* personal. The people in the photographs are known to Botha and have played more or less important roles in her life. The objects she has collected, resonating with nostalgia or poignancy reflected in the way they have been photographed, are significant to her perhaps for their mnemonic power, or for the train of associations or allusions that they set in motion.

On one level, then, these photographs perform the rather modest task of recording things, taking their place in an archive of images that make up the visual records of memory and personal history. In this sense, they are compelling for their exploitation of the mnemonic potential of the photograph itself. The apparently random signs, buildings and objects in *Parrot Jungle* are thus meaningful because the photographer has gone back to find them in places passed or visited en route to somewhere else-'always something else,' she says, '*in lieu* of the thing you actually want to do'-and in so doing has imbued them with a significance that has something to do with not wanting to forget and with the photographer's impulse to keep things alive, in the moment, beyond the reach of decay and death. And thus in a quiet and ordinary, even mundane, way, *Parrot Jungle* is a record of things almost missed and almost forgotten.

The images are a cumulative document, a collection of details whose purpose is partly to remind of places and things that called attention to themselves when the photographer was making other works, things she has gone back to in order not to forget, because she thought they may represent some kind of 'deliverance, an undesignated destination.'

But on another level, the images 'think' of themselves in relation to Botha's other work; they call attention to the moments that fit between bodies of work, moments that almost go unnoticed but are not for that reason insignificant. They are, suggests Botha in a short statement about *Parrot Jungle*, *strategic*, which signals an aesthetic and conceptual intent that precedes the making of the work. This is only a partial answer to the second question, but the balance of the answer is, I think, to be found in an exploration of the third question, and this has to do with how this kind of photographic project has been made possible in the history of photography and in its relationship to other mediums. *Parrot Jungle*, in its

arrangement of the ordinary and in its aesthetic strategies, points to several moments in this history. But

I don't want to reprise the history of photography here. On the contrary, the approach is rather unhistorical, seizing on moments in photography that have bearing on this work without paying too much attention to the way that these moments fit into the larger story-though art historians will insist that this *is* history.

To try to understand *Parrot Jungle*, beyond its purely private impulses, then, I want to consider three modes 'remembered' by this body of work that, on the surface of it, seem to have very little to do with the private documenting that Botha has undertaken here but that, on consideration, transform the private in important ways. I use the word 'modes' because 'movements' seems too strong and organised a term and, though I have already used it, 'moments' is too historiographic, suggesting a trajectory from one point in time to the next, with Botha coming in somewhere at the end.

One has to be reminded that Botha has often included in her work three-dimensional objects and installations, for example in *The Washing Line* (1996), *Boxing Days* (1997), *Postscript* (1998) and *Radio Maria* (2002). This lends the objects in *Parrot Jungle* extra significance, even if it is only to draw attention to the photographic 'translation' of the three-dimensional into the two-dimensional. In this photographic work-in a process quite different to sculpture-the artist has chosen objects for their 'objectness', to be sure, but also for other reasons: to serve as records of the ways in which humans mark their presence in the world-through signs, through structure, through the rearrangement of nature.

The treatment of objects by photographers reflects how artists in general have tried to understand the relationship of objects to art. Perhaps the most cited instance of the photographic recording of objects is Eugène Atget's obsessive and exhaustive photographing of the architectural details of the city of Paris in the early 1900s. Before Atget, nineteenth-century photographers seemed to take pictures of things almost as though they had to keep photographing things to prove to themselves that photographs could do this extraordinary, alchemical thing, but also because, very soon, photographs replaced other forms of visual documents for recording everything from faces of criminals to museum collections of animals or insects or treasures - **and Botha's shots of the installations in the South African Museum allude to and reinterpret that museological function.** Atget exploited this ability to record or document by amassing an enormous archive of thousands of images that were concerned, primarily, with what was interesting, odd or distinctive about the city and its buildings, railways, roads, signs and monuments. In his concern to capture the minutiae of Paris for posterity, Atget consistently decontextualised things so that bits of ironwork or masonry, or parts of staircases and walls were severed from the larger objects to which they belonged. To what extent Atget thought of himself not simply as a documenter but as an artist has been much debated, but he certainly contributed to the sacralisation of the object so evident in the photography of the modernists who were his contemporaries or who followed soon after. (One thinks of Imogen Cunningham's exquisite abstractions or Paul Strand's still lifes in this regard.) But the point to be extracted from this, and in relation to Botha's work, is that much early photography starts out as a way to record the world of objects. It does not, to begin with, need to decipher these objects (except in formal or scientific terms) but places them before the viewer-in interesting arrangements to be sure-as things of interest in and of themselves. There were of course photographers who understood almost immediately

the aesthetic potential of photography, incorporating into their work the same formal elements of landscape and portrait painting - Daguerre was himself a painter. This impulse simply to show lies at the heart of *Parrot Jungle*: here is a book about the history of gardens, here is a coil of blue string, here is an empty plastic container, an N2 site hut, an abandoned dovecote. (I can't resist pointing out that the very first photographic image, made by Joseph Niépce around 1827, was of a dovecote.) These are simple, even beautiful, things, but of what interest are they to us beyond this mundane objectness? Of what do they speak, if not of themselves?

To understand what happens to these random things and places in the process of recording-in the process of their incorporation into documents testifying to the presence of humans in the world, documents that, over time and with sufficient quantity, form an archive of presence-to make sense of their relationship to each other, let us consider two other photographic modes. The first looks, to begin with, like social documentary but, on closer inspection, appears to take itself seriously as image-making quite apart from its relationship to the real world. In other words, it thinks of itself as *art*.

Starting in the 1970s, photographers like the American Stephen Shore recorded apparently random objects: plates of bland food, hotel rooms, parking lots, road signs, and often in relation to that most American of pastimes, the road trip-and this is certainly true of Shore. The 'American surfaces'-the title of Shore's work from his travels in 1972, and later of a book of the same work-contained in these images bear witness not simply to an historical moment but to the photographer's relationship to that moment as he moves across the surfaces of the American landscape. The photographs are about that movement, in all of its goal-driven randomness. Several images in *Parrot Jungle* are particularly reminiscent of a similar impulse to record *along the way, en route*: picture 12 of the 'Pet shop, Access Park, Kuilsriver'; picture 26 of the 'Staff parking, Company Gardens, Cape Town'; picture 27 of 'Oasis Auto, Broadlands Road, Strand'-and this one is particularly reminiscent of Shore and of his contemporary Ed Ruscha, who photographed hundreds of gas stations; picture 28 of 'Voortrekker Caravan Park, Strand'; and picture 29 of the 'Parking basement, St Martini Gardens, Cape Town'. Like Shore and others, Botha collects the random and the unremarkable, things noteworthy for their unnoteworthiness.

In work like Shore's - **and we could include David Goldblatt and a number of *his* emulators here** - the recording of objects has moved from pure documentation to images with intent as regards their own place in the world of images. Objects, places and people pictured in the photographs speak to ideas beyond the photograph. The writer and photographer Jeff Wall traces this mode all the way back to the 1920s - after late - Victorian Pictorialism - and describes it as 'an exploration of the border-territories of the utilitarian picture' and, most importantly, a 'moment in which the art-concept of photojournalism appears, the notion that art can be created by imitating photojournalism.'*

But in Botha, this process of recording random objects is undercut by a clear attempt to join things together in a quasi-narrative, to link images by means of a series of visual, textual and thematic refrains.

The road with its endings in parking lots and service stations, and its signs along the way, holds the narrative together by functioning as a loose but extended metaphor for time and movement, and it is no accident that the Cymbiflora sign with its perched parrot pointing us in the direction of an orchid nursery appears exactly halfway in the sequence of images that make up *Parrot Jungle*. Then, three images

that are an overt allusion to the relationship between painting and photography anchor the work in a larger dialogue about art history: in picture 3, 'Maggie Laubser Street, Strand' is little more than the shadow of leaves on a wall, as though Laubser is a haunting presence for the photographer; picture 5, 'Liza in Irma Stern's studio' reprises the usurpation by photography of painting's reclining nude; and picture 41 of 'Heidi Erdmann, Tamboerskloof, Cape Town' humorously casts the photography curator as Tretchikoff's blue-headed *Chinese Girl*. These are all photographic gestures - **the 'strategic' that Botha points to** - that situate the work in a host of conversations about personal memory, about photography's status as art, about time and history.

Parrot Jungle is Botha's own *Histoire des jardins*, suspended between the strange, surreal garden of the South African Museum and St Martini Gardens. Both the museum and St Martini are reminders of the traditions of collecting, naming and organising to which Botha, in her own practice, is so clearly drawn. Gardens, museums and family photo albums are all born out of the Enlightenment project to organise the teeming world of man and nature into a coherent whole. The Museum with its stuffed birds and lions, birds' nests and dead elephants, and the place called St Martini Gardens, mark two extremes of this impulse: the one is the attempt to understand, record and preserve the natural world; the other is an attempt to bring the apparent gentility of Europe to Africa. Botha's inclusion of both of these in the same 'narrative' is a way of inserting personal history-the places one has lived in, for example-into a once-grand but now almost quaint, natural history, which is, of course, entirely man-made. The stuffing of elephants, as important as it was to the historians working away to understand the great beasts, seems now as silly and poignant as St Martini Gardens, with its scruffy swimming pool fence and unkempt lawn. Both gesture towards grandeur but both are in rather reduced straits.

Perhaps the most **personal and, to my mind, the bravest pairing of images**, comes about a third of the way through *Parrot Jungle*. The picture of Gemma and Kirsty, shyly posing in front of a small shed, or perhaps one of those Wendy Houses that we loved as children because they gave us a sense of ownership and allowed us to explore our fantasies of adulthood, is followed by an image of fallen and scattered hibiscus flowers, their pink petals matching almost exactly the pink in Kirsty's top. Ten images later the pink is echoed in the stripes of Elmine Boonzaaier's blouse as she poses in front of three sepia-tinted portraits - no doubt part of a family album - with Popeye.

Which brings me to the parrot. I have resisted, all the way through the writing of this essay, a reference to Julian Barnes's novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, and I have no idea whether Botha ever intended the literary allusion, but now I can hardly avoid it. The novel and Botha's *Parrot Jungle* share a fascination not so much with the bird, but with what the parrot represents: the impulse to collect, the desire for the exotic and the illusion that one owns the things that one loves. Barnes's narrator, a writer-manqué, spends his time trying to find the real parrot that was Flaubert's inspiration for Loulou in his story *Un coeur simple*, in which a simple woman, Felicité, loses the people she loves, one by one, until she has only Loulou the parrot for company. So much does Felicité love Loulou, that when he dies, she has him stuffed and keeps him beside her until she dies. Barnes's narrator considers the possible *meanings* of the parrot as he meanders about France on a quest to find the original Loulou. Two museums claim to be the owners of the 'correct' bird that Flaubert borrowed from the Museum of Natural History around the time he wrote

the story, and both are able to produce documents that prove the provenance of their particular parrot. After various mental and actual side trips - through Flaubert's life and the menagerie of animals that surfaced in his writing, into the mind of Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary, through the history of museums of natural history, through the history of the novel itself - Barnes's narrator finally finds himself in the home of an eminent Flaubert scholar who patiently reminds him that over time, parrots, particularly stuffed ones, decay and fall apart. He also points out that when the Flaubert museum in Croisset was established in 1905 the curator went to the Museum of Natural History to find Flaubert's parrot to include in his collection. He was shown the Museum's collection of fifty stuffed and dusty parrots, from which he selected the one most closely matching the description of Loulou in *Un coeur simple*. But Flaubert 'was an artist,' says the scholar, 'He was a writer of the imagination. And he would alter a fact for the sake of a cadence ... just because he borrowed a parrot, why should he describe it as it was? Why shouldn't he change the colours round if it sounded better?' ** Satisfied that he will not find the answer to his question, Barnes's narrator, himself a 'writer of the imagination', does his last rounds as though to say farewell to his quest for Loulou, which is of course a quest for Flaubert himself. He pays a visit to the Museum of Natural History - the same one visited by Flaubert-and is shown a room in which there are hundreds of stuffed birds, shelf after shelf of them. Then he is directed to the parrots and, of the original fifty, there are three remaining, staring out at him from under a sprinkling of insecticide and with all of the lessons of their long history showing in their cranky faces.

When Botha speaks of the images of *Parrot Jungle* as being strategic, she is speaking of them *before* they were *Parrot Jungle*, when they were just what they were: birds, swimming pools, water gauges, benches in parks. They are strategic for the artist because she knows - sometimes right away because she has stored something in her memory for later use, sometimes in process as she arranges images in a sequence and their relationship to each other begins to emerge, and sometimes in hindsight when she can look back at what her memory and her aesthetic instincts have produced-that they tell a story of sorts, broken, imperfect and many-layered but nonetheless meaningful. And the story is not simply a story of her journeys and relationships and predilections, but the story of photography as a tool for the recording of things in the world. She asks the same question as the narrator of *Flaubert's Parrot*: 'How do we seize the world? How do we seize the foreign past? We read, we learn, we ask, we are humble; and then a casual detail shifts everything.' ***

* Jeff Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008, pp. 144-45.

** Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*. London: Picador, 1984, p. 188.

*** *Flaubert's Parrot*, p. 90.