

A Visual Poem

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Watching Lien Botha conduct a walkabout is like watching a surgeon perform open-heart surgery on herself. Botha's latest body of work, Amendment, is a restrained, evenly paced series of triptych-like photographs, and this quiet balance made the walkabout seem even more excruciating an exposure.

Those hoping for a clearer explanation than that provided by Botha's exhibition notes -- "the work is a metonymic reflection of our genesis: murmurings lost to fractured atonement" -- didn't get it. Botha neatly turned the tables by asking people to choose a "clue" from a box of varied objects, match it to whichever of the 14 Amendments seemed appropriate and then explain to the rest of the audience what thought process led to that choice.

Results varied from the mildly insightful to the embarrassingly inappropriate. I chose a small scrapbook containing restaurant business cards and bills for meals ranging from the simple to the sumptuous. It was less than obvious which of the Amendments to pair this object with, but I chose "Amendment 9: the case of a little white lie".

On the left, a dry field criss-crossed by wheel tracks. On the right, a hanging lace curtain with a red floral motif, or alternatively, if we are to believe the analysis of a nervy-looking woman who could barely look at Botha, splattered with blood. Dividing the two, a torn bit of paper with a French address written on it.

Quite what this had to do with my clue, I wasn't sure, but I made up an inane story, something to do with the lies about landscape that we tell ourselves, and how we end up by curtaining off a view we claimed to want to own. So that's the role of the art critic rather nicely lampooned as well.

The Amendments run from "1: the case of beginning at the end", to "14: the case of ending at the beginning", perhaps an indication of a Finnegans Wake-like circular narrative. On the way you pass through a variety of stations, such as "6: the case of waltzing with the moon", and "13: the case of justice as a poem".

The overt use of clues, the nomenclative constant of the phrase "the case of", and the artist's description of the way the work came to her "hovering as invisible codes on a building site, falling through a fishing net" all point towards an exhibition that demands a semiotic decoding. These works are about changing your mind, by acts of "correction, addition or deletion", as the dictionary defines amendment.

Botha describes Amendment as "a visual poem", and this is a good description. It's more low-key and opaque than some of her more tendentious shows, and the exhibition seduces with a lovely, flowing narrative journey, as much as the individual works exist as signposts over which to puzzle.