

Portrait of the Young Artists

Jeff Chandler, *Sunday Tribune*, December 21, 1997

The terrain of the artistic landscape has undergone a radical shift in the past decade, with traditional mediums being increasingly supplanted by installations and video presentations.

This change is manifestly apparent in the field of photography. With the advent of the digital camera, old-style photography, with its darkroom and other trappings, will soon become an anachronism. It will, no doubt, join other fine art disciplines, such as etching and lithography, which use techniques that have become commercially antiquated.

Lien Botha, a gifted young Capetonian, makes art which extends the conventional boundaries of the photographic image by combining it with other mediums, surfaces and sculptural forms.

She draws and paints on the negatives and prints the images on traditional as well as non-traditional surfaces, such as wood and cloth, creating a medley of textures.

Botha is the recipient of this year's Standard Bank Young Artist award and her work can currently be seen at the Durban Art Gallery. The criteria determining the allocation of this prestigious award will always be a point of contention, and bound to bring out the bitch and scratch brigade. However, the choice of Lien Botha is thoughtful and perspicacious. At a time when so much contemporary art is one-dimensional, dispassionate and parasitical, Botha's interpretation is humanistic, expressing the complexity of our frequently aberrant society and its collective experience.

The metaphor of the box and all its connotations is the formal basis of Botha's exhibition. It provides the framework for the wall pieces and the sculptural shape for the floor objects. Her images are stark and minimalist. A solitary bird, a boot, bound arms, a boy's catapult. However, through Botha's vision they attain a gravity that is poignant, sometimes menacing and always evocative.

On the boxed sculptural pieces, both closed and open, Botha has printed or suspended photographic images, some of which are 'borrowed' images, such as those derived from archival documentation of an early mental asylum. Others she has recorded herself.

Death is the implied and ominous presence which suffuses the work. This is brought home forcefully in the image of an ATM, where, contradictorily, a site intended for consumer convenience is also one associated with violence and crime.

However, the artist's subtle sensibility informs this work. Although deceptive and even initially difficult to converse with, it allows one to experience it in a pre-verbal way.