

# Exploring Botha's Boxes

Daya Coetzee, *CUE*, July 7, 1997

The first thing that strikes you as you walk into Lien Botha's photographic exhibition *Boxing Days* is the minimalist, Zen ambiance created by the perfectly geometric wooden crates, matching frames and use of space.

Her work is immaculate, pays precise attention to detail and explores complex, paradoxical and psychological issues.

"Nothing this artist does is accidental," said Marion Arnold who led the walkabout.

Lien Botha was the first photographer to win the Standard Bank Young Artist award. Her 26-pieces exhibition at the Monument Gallery are linked in an intricate web of meaning which challenges our idea of normality, art, beauty and madness. The walkabout, though a bit long, was invaluable to gaining an understanding of the connection between different elements of Botha's work. Closer inspection reveals subtle repetition in the use of materials and imagery which connect the photographs together. The subject material which Botha transforms into works of art through delicate arrangements and manipulations ranges from archives from the Grahamstown mental hospital to inanimate objects and nature.

Images of hands, birds and fish appear in many of the pieces. Botha says fish and birds represent "a transient space of air and water which refer to states of metamorphosis, rebirth and rejuvenation". She draws inspiration from the surrealists, especially Rene Magritte and uses collage and photomontage techniques first employed by the Dada artists.

Botha's work intimate themes of violence and suffering inherent in the human condition and which society puts in neat boxes then labels. It is interesting to note that the titles of the crates displaying photographic images, *Lost Cases*, are written on post office labels and attached to boxes with the same string that is used to mount the wall pieces, *Bar Codes*, onto their wooden frames and then bind the magnificent catalogue. The latter is almost an artwork in its own right.

The catalogue, written by Arnold, and the walkabout provide a clear and comprehensive access point to engaging with this exhibition which is a "subdued and illusive series of works."