

# Flight of time, flight of fancy

Melvyn Minnaar , Cape Times

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Birds feature in many of the photographs that Lien Botha lined up in this intriguing show.

There are red-wing starlings flying above Betty's Bay, stuffed sea birds and an entire social weaver's nest installed at the SA Museum. There is Kleinmond inhabitant Elmine Boonzaaier and her African Grey called Popeye, and colourful Macaws in a cage at Monkey Town. Birds also feature on signs photographed: an orchid nursery marker and an embroidered peacock, on Helene Lambert's sitting-room wall.

Yet the ornithic presence is kind of by and by. There are also pictures of bullet holes, walls and fences, a plastic container, a parking lot, a ball of plastic string and, yes, people. It signals that the title of this remarkably dense, cohesive and beautiful visual essay is somewhat of a curved ball chucked at the viewer: Parrot Jungle.

Of course, both words carry their own strong metaphoric load; together the insinuations are powerful..

In her elegant catalogue introduction, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen cleverly embraces what most visitors will do (despite whether or not Botha intended it) by alluding to Julian Barnes' poetic postmodernist novel Flaubert's Parrot. Law-Viljoen writes that the stuffed parrot represents "the impulse to collect, the desire for the exotic and the illusion that one owns the things that one loves".

All these threads and themes run through the images that Botha 'collected' for this show, suggesting - although it is not obvious - that there is an oblique narrative to the set of mostly soft-coloured photographs. Precisely because it is so personal, because the pictures are so handsome, viewers are swept along in the telling. What it means, we find out when we think about it afterwards. Decoding the instant of beauty captured, is left to the viewers.

Like in Barnes' novel, meaning and significance shift, or simply evaporate. But it doesn't let the viewer's close-up gaze off the hook.

Much of what Botha offers in these autobiographic photographs make us aware of how that moment of consequence slips away. Of course, all photography holds that the moment can be recorded, but here, with these poetic images Botha reminds us, that if we don't look out for it, the extraordinary

allure embedded even in the ordinary, will pass. In the same way, we are made aware of the passing of personal time and history.

And so Botha presents this essay as a collection of images of 'fugitive sites' revisited - places, people, views, spaces and objects one would briefly note, even get accustomed to, but pass by in the imperative of time.

For an artist who has sometimes worked in multiple and complicated visual composition (at times including text), these pictures are, on the face of it, simple and straightforward. Yet, there is a cunning visual load to the significance of each. Poignancy is underscored by washed-out tones and gentle shadows. The mystery lingers in tight cropping, as we trace the connections.

It certainly is thrilling to venture into a jungle inhabited by parrots (whatever the significance), but finding one's way in that exotic environment is still also a good challenge. Botha's offer a cunning adventure.

*Lien Botha at the Erdmann Contemporary, until October 31. The Erdmann Contemporary: Tel 021-4222762.*