

# Botha's insightful technique, Mary Corrigan

Mary Corrigan, *The Sunday Independent*

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In writing about Lien Botha's art, writers have tended to characterise her work as mysterious, impenetrable and cryptic. Her art is often compared to a layered poem shrouded in off-beat metaphors.

Photography is her chief medium. Traditionally viewed as an instrument that faithfully records reality, it is rarely perceived as a medium that facilitates enigmatic expression, so this is a coup for the artist. Certainly this exhibition, which is defined by three distinctive series from Botha's oeuvre, provides some insight into her practice and how she manipulates and exploits photography to create these supposed puzzling art products.

Parading a clean and regimented façade, compositionally her Amendment series doesn't appear obscure. In each work, images of objects and landscapes are compartmentalised into three segments separated by a white border. Such an arrangement exudes order and control, recalling the glossy decor magazine spread with its array of idealised images of collectable objects that are cropped into neat squares and grouped in trendy themes. As with the other two series on exhibit, it seems that once Botha has developed an idiosyncratic form of expression, she applies it quite strictly to each artwork in the series. This means that each artwork's composition is already set, freeing her up to experiment within the confines of the formula. In this way she directs attention towards the content rather than the form.

In the Amendment series, each artwork consists of a trio of images: one of a natural environment, a close-up of an object, and sandwiched in between is a photo of a textural, man-made product. They are all idealised renderings; the landscape shots are hazy and soft, highlighting the natural environment as inviting and picturesque. These are juxtaposed with objects removed from their context and shot in a studio with a clinical white background and precise lighting. It is this kind of execution that mirrors the advertising/magazine image, referencing an imagined, hyper-real reality.

But Botha isn't alluding to popular culture; rather she assumes this familiar vocabulary to forge a fantasy or abstract-driven mode of expression. It's also a way of denying the documentary function of photography. Botha clearly wishes to create transcendental statements that operate above the level of empirical knowledge. This might explain claims that Botha's art is "poetic".

In terms of the formal structure of these artworks; there is a sense that the three images in each artwork allude to statements that are loosely interconnected. By separating out the objects and

textures from their original contexts, Botha implores viewers not only to reflect on them independently but on how they relate to each other. The subtitle of each image, referring to a "case", also furthers this aim by suggesting that clues are embedded in each assemblage that refer to a larger transgression or anomaly that demands close study. Her art is often compared to a layered poem shrouded in off-beat metaphor.

Often there are formal "clues" that unite the works. Such as in Amendment 1: the case of beginning at the end (2006), which features a photograph of a patch of veld dominated by long brown grasses, a photograph of a curtain or bolt of fabric embellished with a plant motif and a book on gardening.

All three stylised images relate to nature, and a compulsion to re-engineer nature so as to conform to a calculated and entrenched social aesthetic. But beyond this prosaic connection, Botha is interested in exploring the manner in which we create simulations of experiences as a way not only of making sense of time but in distinguishing between sameness and difference.

Each image repeats this experience in different ways as one is presented with three objects that have obvious or ambiguous connections. Botha suggests that our experience of the material world is mediated through objects - she also recasts the landscape as an object. She hasn't offered any direct explanations for her work, but undoubtedly this series doesn't feel heavily encoded. Besides, these are contexts that she too is deciphering.

In her White Stick for the Arctic series (2008), Botha doesn't separate objects and settings out into separate photographs; rather they are seamlessly grafted into a cohesive visual plane.

She does overlay two or three photographs to create these surreal images, but they are carefully integrated. She matches textures and tones to create harmonious fusions. In one work, the grey soil of a barren landscape is fused with the stony wall of a building. In this way, relationships between objects and landscapes are created, but there is still a point of disjuncture where there is friction between two contrasting images; you can see where one image begins and another one starts. This creates the sense that a negotiation between two places is taking place. It is not necessarily a temporal exercise but a psychological one in which the residue of one place lingers or overshadows one's experience of another.

In all three series Botha tries to visually demonstrate the complex layers or filters through which we experience the world, and perhaps it is this characteristic that makes her work "cryptic".

*Anthology runs at the Thompson Gallery in Johannesburg until March 28*