

The Big Picture

Sunday Times, October 2006

Botha's experimentation tends towards mysterious outcomes

Lien Botha's photographs resist easy interpretation. Take this picture, which cryptically juxtaposes an abandoned paddle steamer, found lying in an open veld on the road between Sir Lowry's Pass and Gordon's Bay, with a strand of hair and a black dress.

If you're expecting a tidy explanation, something that ties all the disparate elements together, forget it the photographer doesn't speak about her work that way.

"I am an artist specialising in lens-based work," she coolly told me two years ago. Note the sequence: artist, then camera.

In that same interview she remarked on the unwillingness of South Africans to experiment with alternative photographic methods: "Locally, we have only been reinventing for a decade, and it appears as if the weight of political content cannot be cured by the proliferation of option."

While Botha's experimentation tends towards mysterious outcomes, it is possible to connect some of the dots in her work. For starters, landscape is a recurring subject.

In the early '80s, Botha, the youngest daughter of retired politico Pik Botha, photographed highveld dusks.

Two decades on and she is still compelled by the land.

This picture is from her latest body of work. Titled *Amendment*, it consists of 14 grid-like collages, each comprising three images.

"The narrow central piece serves as binding agent between landscape and remnant," is all she offers by way of explanation.

Started while on an artists' residency in Pujols, France, the project gained momentum in New York, particularly after a visit to a snowy Bronx Botanical Gardens earlier this year.

In her typically elusive manner, Botha describes the final product as both "personal chronicle" and "visual poem ... alluding to our circuit on the brink of a deranged paradise".

Asked to clarify the latter phrase, she responds by quoting a list of recent media headlines: "Gypsy moths attack the milkwoods of Noordhoek/Goldin, Bloom found naked under tree." The former is

from *Veld & Flora*, the *Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa*, the latter needs little explanation.

While her words might not make any sense of her picture, they do reveal the emotional intensity of a photographer whose art is an oblique, almost surreal, comment on modern life.



Amendment 8: the case of a drowning river

THE PHOTOGRAPH: *Of a Drowning River*, 2006

THE PHOTOGRAPHER: Lien Botha

Biography: Born in Pretoria (1961), Botha worked as a press photographer before studying fine art at the University of Cape Town. The recipient of the 1997 Standard Bank Young Artist Award, she has held numerous exhibitions both locally and abroad.