

## Interview with Lien Botha

Sean O'Toole, POST: Contemporary South African Photography (catalogue), June 13, 2004

**There is quite a lot of anxiety at the moment in SA photographic circles concerning the prefixes used to define photography. Photographers in the documentary tradition often use the words fine art and conceptual to describe 'other' modes emerging on the scene. Last year's DaimlerChrysler Art Award even added a new category, creative photography. Where do you position yourself in this debate? Do you even use a prefix to describe your particular output?**

Creative photography? Would this include the "day by day chronicles of madness that is hopefully transient"? \* I find the term hyperbolic, futile. What is this year's category? Creative painting? This debate is claustrophobic. I don't care for this. I am an artist specializing in lens-based work. As it is, this issue has been waged in Britain, for instance, since the early sixties: Bill Brandt at the Hayward Gallery, Don McCullun and Tony Ray-Jones at the ICA, Walker Evans and August Sander in last year's Cruel and Tender exhibition at the Tate Modern. The matter of contention here is that documentary work was not created with the gallery viewer in mind. But then again, Post-history will negate this argument. Here I refer to Michael Foucault's reasoning against an imposition of a logic and teleology on history. In circular time, as opposed to linear time, distinction becomes obsolete.

**How do you respond then to comments that newer modes of South African photography are difficult?**

It is possibly difficult because in South Africa there are very few practitioners of 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.

**I recently had an opportunity to review your 'Safari' works that you will be showing on Post. Commenting on your work 'Bekendes word onbekendes' [The familiar becomes strange], I wrote: "Undeniably melancholic, this individual piece offered a complex portrait of the land, a contested place subject to competing claims of emotional and physical ownership." Am I correct here?**

To a certain extent. The 'Safari' series is an accumulative body of work, an attempt to graft most of the previous concerns in my work: the document (photograph), the trace or spoor (drawing), the word. "Grapho is writing, drawing, recording. Geography, topography and indeed, cinematography are forms of ecriture obsessed with sites, even the site itself of topophilia. Their common terrain is mapping, and graphing room (the room of one's own)." \*\*

So, in this work you will find a clue by Paul Klee, which leads you to the place where poet Ingrid Jonker committed suicide by walking into the sea. There is a tale of a family scandal but the clue has been erased (only their hearts are left). There is an ode to Marey's gun camera with tiny pictures of a bird in flight. But at first glance it is just a gun. You must look again. In a sense it is Tin Tin's last trip: the demise of the coloniser. Think also of Niepce, the origin of photographic invention, French colonies and the role of photography in these countries.

Similarly, the imaginary 'places' it gives rise to are nothing more (or less) than material homologies of pre-reflective, imaginatively displaced memory and expectation; they come into existence in terms of possibilities and histories. Place, in effect, is lived experience reworked through association, metaphor and narrative - a rhetorical re-composition of a circumstantial terrain into the typical, exemplary, anomalous, analogous, rare, accidental and illegitimate.

### **Where will you take this idea in the future?**

To be frank with you, I have felt as if this will be my last body of work for a while but I have already started with 'Not Riefenstall'. This is still a nascent project so I cannot say much but there are references to an earlier project where I collaborated with Raymond Smith ('1991 not December'), where the opening speaker became the event and ended up being wrapped up and carried out of the gallery space. This parody will extend into video with new fictitious characters using the German language as a structure. Somehow it started as a web search with the misspelling of Riefenstahl when I discovered the absurd travelogue of Mark Leeper. Suffice to say it will be the Erlebnis of an identity card.

**Personally, I find the output of South African female photographers (Jo Ractliffe, Angela Buckland, Jill Lochner, Jean Brundrit even Tracey Rose and Jane Alexander) to be more challenging. Partly this challenge stems from the fact that women photographers seem to have a better capacity for using photography to evoke/ describe something more than factual circumstance, i.e. pure document. In my own mind it appears that women photographers have proven themselves more skilful, or maybe better adapted to using photography in the post-apartheid period where the imperatives of photographs as evidence has slightly waned, allowing photographers more scope to portray issues of identity and self. I am curious to hear what you think.**

I tend to agree with you, and if you add Liza May Post, Mari Mahr, Ana Mendieta, Annette Lemieux, Sophie Calle a female twist does emerge. In fact, with the 'Lines of Sight' exhibition at the South African National Gallery in 1999, Marilyn Martin curated a section 'Securing Shadows: The role of Women in South African Photography'. In the catalogue Martin writes: "Since 1994 women photographers applied the skills honed during the 1980s to interrogate and expose the contradictions and social inequalities that characterise this country. They have taken the lead in exploring different aesthetic and theoretical concerns and in experimenting with radically new

techniques and methods of installation and presentation, thereby altering ideas and perceptions of what photography is and what it means."

**Could you briefly elaborate on your choice of photographic equipment and preference in terms of printing/ presentation? How have these choices assisted/aided you in formulating your particular aesthetic?**

In the early 1980s, as a press photographer, I gathered highveld [geographical region surrounding Johannesburg] dusks with a Nikon, Ilford HP5, ruthless processing and a growling editor who couldn't give a damn about grain. Many years later now I use a Canon 35mm for drawing, a Mamyia RZ medium format for precision and a very old Yashicaflex for the unseen. The latter was used for my 'Safari' series, primarily because I needed the contrast between nebulous landscape and the sharp line of the contour drawing, further underscored by the text. I love using this camera because the focal plane is so out of sync. It is like trying to find your way home. As a rule I tend to use low grain film, often 50asa. It is fine with optimum colour density and in a lot of my early work such as my series 'Africana Collectanea' this mattered.

The material is very important. I will use what I need for the particular body of work, be it wood, fabric, glass. At times there is hardly any evidence of the lens, it could be small such as was the case in my work 'Dead Pillows' (1997), when the search for the right pillows became all encompassing. Usually this is the point when the process becomes intravenous, the point of no return, the matter of it. This is why one can never stop. The conversation is in your head, the signs are out, the tactile miraculous world returns. Each and every time. You find it in libraries, on the streets, a small article about the myrmicoleon, it is codex witsenii, a death perhaps, Ulysses Gaze, WG Sebald's use of image with text, the colour of the sea 365 days a year.

## References

\* from the conclusion to an essay on Cote d'Ivoire by Amadou Chab Toure and Simon Njami in 'Memoires intimes d'un nouveau Millenaire' (Bamako: 2001).

\*\* from 'Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film' by Giuliana Bruno (New York: Verso, 2002).