

Beyond What One Can See.

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Lien Botha's work has gained a reputation for being enigmatic, for provoking questions, and, in the last resort when words fail, for being poetic. Viewers in the South African context, habituated to the strong tradition of socio-political documentary photography that dominates the photographic realm here, are tested by the apparent elusiveness and inscrutability of her work.

However, if one reviews Botha's production over time, there are certain consistencies that reiterate throughout her apparently diverse interests. Certain motifs recur, certain formal considerations are central, and limited colour palettes appear regularly to provide clues to her central concerns.

Scanning her writings on her own work, a persistent project of loss and the capitulation of memory is evident. Phrases such as "women left with trunks, filled with linen, porcelain or family albums" ('VierSusters' 2003); "keepers of lost collections... the stain, the damage to the beloved, pages removed" ('Library Hours' 2004) and "an attempt at binding the distance" ('Moundou' 2008) provide an indication of memory as embedded in, or marked on paper and cloth.

Photography, as indexical of whatever was in front of the camera when the image was taken, traditionally carries the stain of its moment. A purveyor of the disintegrating instant, even in the digital age, it is a medium that Botha, as many commentators have noted, uses to create taxonomic collections of images. She does not often document the publicly significant, but creates a private inventory in which her images/objects do not easily reveal their place in a specific narrative. Rather they seem to act as an index or even co-ordinates of her travels across the country that give a sense of her bearings, rather than fix location.

'Yonder' is no exception. The very title of the exhibition indicates distance. It implies that something is being pointed out, in the direction indicated, but that it is 'over there', beyond our direct reach or view. Botha asks her audience to mentally join the dots, to attempt to make sense of what we see much as we might try to make sense of our own lives which come to us in fragments of encounters, part of a larger whole which we cannot quite discern.

That each encounter or moment has significance is signalled not only by Botha's decision to select the image for photographing and exhibition (exhibitions provide the opportunity for extensive editing out and a distillation of choice) but, more particularly, by her use of a remarkably consistent formal approach. This is evident in the central placing of most of her images and an orientation parallel to the picture plane. This is the formal language of the icon – its use indicating a sacralisation of that which is seen. Though what is framed in the lens may appear inconsequential, the perception of it as such is shifted by this iconic form. The iconic demands our focus, it

endows an object with significance, and it helps to bind Botha's varied subjects together at least in intention if not content.

The twentieth century formalist critic Clive Bell's notion of 'significant form' might come to mind here. Bell used this term to describe the distinctive type of "combination of lines and colours" which makes an object a work of art and made the point, that is anathema to those invested in an artwork's context as primary, that "to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions"(Bell, 27).Botha, unlike David Goldblatt who provides a plethora of information with his images, provides little but the barest of facts in her titles regarding place or individual depicted. The naming of a place on a map, while particular, here brings with it a curious lack of distinction. Most of the towns are too small to carry significance. Too generalised to be really informative, the naming of things or places in Botha's work is coupled with a visual sleight of hand, for, while she apparently focuses our view with the iconic visual vocabulary, she at the same time disperses it.

This diffusion of visual attention occurs consistently throughout her history of exhibiting and has been achieved over time through a number of different methods – doubling, overlays, constructed images and juxtaposition such as in the triptychs exhibited in 'Amendment' (2006), where Botha presented each work as two square images flanking a narrow one.

In 'Yonder' however Botha has dropped all articulated manipulation of the images within the photographic frame and, as in 'Parrot Jungle' (2009), allows the photographs to be present unadulterated. Juxtaposition remains a tool in constructing meaning only in the careful arrangement of one work against another as one follows the works around the gallery walls. The connections are thus more dispersed, spread out, and perhaps even more elusive. Each image, while coherent on its own, is not meant to be read as complete in itself, but rather as part of a greater whole. Meaning, both the photographer's and the viewer's, is constructed in an evermore delicate and personally determined manner.

The juxtaposition of the two images that open our viewing of 'Yonder'signal Botha's concerns, not only in this exhibition, but in much of her work. Comprising a flutter of butterflies across some grasses and a graveyard loosely lined with unmarked graves, they may seem disparate but both are representative of death. The *Graveyard, Kenhardt, Northern Cape 2012* of course signals this more directly, but the butterfly with its remarkable ability to change from caterpillar to delicate flying creature has been long-used emblematically in *vanitas* paintings to embody mortality and transformation.

It is perhaps the butterflies, the very first image of the exhibition, that not only prepares the viewer for what is to follow, but also links this exhibition to others that have come before. Like so many of Botha's images it is found in a Natural History museum. The butterflies, although they appear to be flitting between grasses, are part of a diorama as their title *Ditsong Museum of Natural History IV, Pretoria, South Africa, April 2011* reveals. They are life-like but point, much as photography often does, to that which is absent or once was. Nature is here captured and frozen in the museum space; an exterior scene albeit in an interior space. The diorama is convincing artifice, both real and fake, again much like a photograph in its ability to create a

verisimilitude by producing an apparent proximity to, but eventually a distance from, life – a core concern of Botha's work.

The emphasis on distance and its attendant companion, alienation, is reiterated in images that overtly, or stereotypically, reference Africa. This Botha does through documentation of totemic animals: the taxidermied rhino in *Ditsong Museum of Natural History, Pretoria, South Africa, 2011*; Wollie Wolmarans' stuffed lioness in the lounge of a house in Kleinmond; the stuffed hyena on the sofa, and the cheetah floor rug in the image of *Jessica and Kobus, Heatherdale, South Africa*. The accent is always on the contrived or dead as representative of a larger history of place.

In 'Parrot Jungle' the idea of paradise, another African stereotype, is presented most often through a degraded representative or facsimile of a bird or parrot. Similar motifs occur in 'Yonder' in images such as *Proteadorp, Kleinmond, South-Africa, 2012* where a poster board of parrots and macaws forms part of a wall of a small shack.

Over half the images in 'Yonder' contain references to birds or animals, but virtually none of them represents a living creature. Even if once alive the bird/animal is either dead and/or processed, re/constructed or imagined. If they are not taxidermied they are sculpted or painted. The brightly coloured Disneyfied, 'put-a-penny-in-the-slot-and-ride' cartoon animals that pepper this exhibition, are supplemented by garden ornaments such as the concrete springbok and its baby in the flowerbed next to the topiaried tree in *Ladismith, South-Africa, December 2011* and the white swan at *Witdraai I, Kalahari, South Africa 2012*. These create a wan form of nature as do the living plants constrained in pots and vases or barely visible behind frosted glass or curtains.

While nature was once a touchstone, embedded in the places visited, if the names Heatherdale and Proteadorp are anything to go by, it is now merely a background to a crudely rendered or poorly imagined version of itself. Underlining this element of loss is Botha's predilection for low-key palettes and in particular white, bone-coloured, and bleached hues. While colour is sometimes strong, particularly in the amusement park images in her production, she is more drawn to the faded- what might be described as a desiccated palette. The dry Karoo landscapes are sun bleached and leached of colour, the cloth in Witdraai echoes its place name, the leaves of the Wonderboom (Marvel tree) drained of their magic appear as a grey field on the ground, and butterflies flit across an almost monochromatic world.

The lack of moisture is palpable in this albescent vocabulary. The scarcity of water and its life-giving power is made evident early on in the exhibition with the white swan afloat on a sea of dusty sand. Even Botha's swimming pools, once the emblem of a privileged white population, are empty- their tiles stained and blotted with dead leaves or, losing their original function, filled bizarrely with remnants of trees in the form of wooden furniture.

Rysmierbult, North-West, South-Africa, April 2011 is a particularly dry and monochromatic image. So black and white it is almost without colour. Rysmierbult is the area where the farm of Botha's paternal grandfather was located and to which she returned after many years. While it is hard to determine to what animal the desiccated hide flattened on a dirt-strewn floor belongs, the greying hair of its tail could almost be human. Botha describes seeing this remnant of a life as "evidence of existence" but

not only that, she says, the hide reminded her “entirely of our demise”¹. Her use of the word ‘our’ in this instance indicates a deep sense of connection and interdependence between all things that is key to her work.

In this exhibition that to which one traditionally turns when faced with death; namely religion, suffers the same treatment as the living creatures in its representation. We are given it second-hand, viewed from a distance, with its potential for comfort remote. The *Dutch Reformed Church, Richmond, South Africa, April 2011* is a photograph of a photograph of a church hung on a wall within a church. This double distancing from the place of spiritual succor seems critical here and underscores an aspect of disconnection that runs throughout this exhibition and much of Botha’s oeuvre.

Botha’s collection of images reads a little like those in Ingrid Winterbach’s ‘The Book of Happenstance’². There the main character, Helena Verbloem (whose name in Dutch signals that which has flowered) works to create a lexicon of Afrikaans words that have fallen into disuse. She gains much knowledge about evolution from a colleague in the Natural History Museum and comfort from her collection of shells. The shells are stolen early in the narrative and the order they gave to her life falls away. They were, for Verbloem, a locus of meaning amidst the disarray of the world signifying the “rhythmic and balanced”. Winterbach’s book is more philosophy than action, as while the hunt for the missing shells is central to the story it never resolves itself; the shells are never found. One senses that whatever is lost in Botha’s world is unrecoverable too, that the work is a reflection on the inevitability of loss, the slow violence of time on all things material and hence a reflection on our own mortality – a contemporary *vanitas*.

A singular image in the exhibition, *Round-Up, Gordon’s Bay, South- Africa, July 2013*, contains an amusement park with the words Round-Up lit up on one of the rides. Other exhibitions by Botha have included images of amusement parks but this one, taken at the end of the day, seems a round-up in more ways than one. Round-up is a term normally applied to the herding or collecting of animals or the gathering of scattered things, but it also signals a summation and this image of an almost emptied place of entertainment seems a harbinger of end times. Set in a grey rocky landscape the image is dominated by the bright red, orange and yellow of an artificial sunset inscribed on the sides of a ride. The signs on the left as you enter the image read as a warning for all - ‘Ride At Own Risk’. Next to that the name of the ride indicates: ‘Freefall’. A supplement is attached: ‘Safety First’.

If, as scientists warn, we have gone over the tipping point (and the dramatic shift in weather patterns would seem to support this view), the Western Cape will become even drier than Botha’s recorded images and the human race may well be in for a free-fall without a safety harness. While once Botha seems to have been more involved with a personal, family or Afrikaner history, her scope in this exhibition seems to have widened to create a form of *memento mori* for the natural world and our relationship to it. Both the human and the non-human feature strongly in this dialogue or reflection. It is all inextricably linked and so, to return to the iconic language permeating this exhibition, our relationship to everything is important but our respect for this fact seems to have been lost.

The plea here, if there is one, may be a call to stop, look, and make connections on a deeper level than that to which we are accustomed; connections that may be necessary for our own survival.

References:

Bell, Clive(1914) *Art*Chatto and Windus,London

Winterbach, Ingrid (2011) *The Book of Happenstance* Open Letter, Rochester

¹ Email with artist January 13, 2014

² Originally in Afrikaans the book came out under the title *Die boek van toeval en Toeverlaat* chance acceptance letting things be (2006).

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