

## Travelling with Borges and Baudelaire through Botha's worn worlds

The unclassifiable, incongruous, misplaced objects and experiences gathered together here by Lien Botha remind us of the bizarre taxonomy of the Chinese encyclopaedia dreamt up by Jorge Luis Borges: a work in which it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies”.

Our laughter when we read this passage does not diminish its uncanny power to “break up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things”, explains Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*.<sup>1</sup>

Botha has the accumulative, all-embracing spirit of the encyclopaedist, librarian or curator. However, she collects without an effort at containing and puts on display without labelling or classifying. What she has amassed is to cataloguing systems and alphabetic indexes what origami is to paper.

Like Borges, Botha confronts us with strange juxtapositions and idiosyncratic groupings. We are faced with a “wild profusion of existing things” which seem to be in complete disarray.

Why has furniture been piled into and around an empty swimming pool? What is a swan doing stranded on sandy soil in an arid landscape? Why, if it is made of concrete, does it look more lifelike than the real birds huddling next to it?

Nothing seems to be what and where it should be. It is matter out of place and it puts us out of sorts. A stuffed lioness, looking as if she might belong in a museum diorama, reclines in the reception room of one Wollie Wolmarans. Delicate butterflies, exhibited as specimens in a display cabinet of the Ditsong Museum of Natural History, seem frozen in mid-flight but look strangely buoyant and free, as if they were fluttering over a bed of flowers in fading sunlight.

We are perplexed. We frown, we lean in closer, we sit back, we are none the wiser. What do we make of these objects, people and places? How do we place them? We are aware of strange shifts of perception. What is this strange structure in the Kalahari landscape? Is it our imagination or can we discern a face of sorts, and is it looking back at us? Uneasily, our gaze shifts. Here is another image of an empty swimming pool: bizarrely, it looks strange with no furniture in it.

We have grown daft, disorientated, dumbstruck. Is it our imagination, or are some of these mute objects and spaces taking on a menacing air? What sort of thing is that plant in the sterile airport space? Is it alive? We are slightly alarmed. Is it hatching a plan? We are not fooled by its attempts to be inconspicuous. Why else did the photographer's gaze linger here and become transfixed by it?

It is not only taxonomy that confounds us. There is also the issue of provenance. The artist did not deliberately seek out these objects. They were stumbled upon, found in a process of chance encounters, always *en route* to somewhere else. "They are short instalments of the experiences you collect when you move between destinations," says Botha of her work.

The image of the artist as collector crops up consistently. She is the creator of 21<sup>st</sup>-century cabinets of wonder and curiosity. By gatherings her subjects from far-flung corners of obscurity and by placing them visually and experientially central, we are urged to consider them and yes, perhaps to marvel at them. Her gaze has salvaged them from obsolescence, disintegration or decomposition.

The pre-modern European practise of collecting exotic objects from newly discovered territories in the Americas and storing them in display cases known as cabinets of wonder, or in entire rooms known as *Wunderkammern*, contained the beginnings of modern-day museums, which we know to be spaces of resonance and layered meaning in Botha's oeuvre.

In their thwarted ambition to catalogue or capture some essence of the worlds of arts and science, we find in Botha's menagerie, museum, game park, graveyard and *padstal* traces of a tradition hailing back to those very first visual encyclopaedias, created to showcase the miniscule next to the monstrous, foetuses on the same shelf as feathers, shells together with intricately carved silver jewellery.

But unlike the prized specimens of those frenzied collectors of pre-Enlightenment, the experiences and objects captured by Botha and gathered together by her imagination, did not arrive in the holds of heavy-laden ships returning from distant shores. They are of our time and place and they've been here all along. As collector of the quotidian and sometimes mundane, she is concerned not with new worlds, but with the worn worlds of what is weathered, dilapidated, discarded, moth-eaten, mottled, unnoticed, neglected and scattered.

It is these strange presences that concern her and that she presents to us. It is rather vexing for us to try and render them coherent. We half-heartedly hope they will tumble together and

create some sort of kaleidoscopic meaning, but we are left with only shards of understanding which will resolutely not be reconfigured into anything resembling sense.

Contextual understanding is impossible because we are looking at displaced objects which have become detached from the spaces and memories to which they were meant to be anchored. There are no children in the playground with its battered rocking horse standing solitary guard against who-knows-what, and no festivities on the forlorn-looking fairground. Not even the Kenhardt graveyard, where the makeshift tombstones resemble builders' rubble, seems to have a memory-anchoring function. But though context and meaning might have bled away, like colour from the bleak landscapes in some of these images, material things persist, sometimes anachronistically, with only the power or whimsy to sustain them. They are unacknowledged and unused altars to threadbare memories.

We are left with unstable meanings, drifting anchors and the distinct sense that we are seeing an aftermath. Of what, we know not. But look: Mickey and Minnie Mouse have been expunged from Disneyland and are living out their last years in exile on the faded wall of a *padstal*. They have the air of a postlapsarian Adam and Eve about them. And indeed, the artist seems finely attuned to echoes of a dystopian discord. "Between the various images and connecting them, is the underlying reference to paradise lost," she writes in a short introduction. "In this *Yonderland* the animals are all either stuffed or synthetic or a placid participant on an ice skating rink (in a hotel outside Nairobi for instance)."

Once we see it, we see it everywhere. The birds of paradise are faded illustrations on a pet shop poster, now used as building material for a rickety shack in Protea dorp. A carpet of leaves photographed in Wonderboom, Pretoria, are perhaps the decaying remains of a tree descended from one that once grew in the Garden of Eden. Animals have been relegated to living out their last days as garden statuary or coin-operated funfair rides. A rhinoceros, its species threatened with extinction but this specimen preserved by the labours of a taxidermist, stands pensively in a museum: its horns intact but everything else irredeemably and utterly lost.

We return to the swan. It seems to have been placed here with utopian intent, but somewhere, at some critical juncture in the past, this creature witnessed and outlasted a sea change, we intuit. We could venture guesses about droughts, hopes that have been dashed, cultures left marginalized in the wake of political change. Or we could simply surmise that this poor, sad is a distant relative of the swan in Charles Baudelaire's famous poem *Le Cygne*. Of that lonely

and desperate bird, presumably left behind by a travelling menagerie and stranded amongst débris and heaps of bricks in fast-changing Paris, Baudelaire writes:

*“Sometimes yet  
I see the hapless bird – strange, fatal myth –  
Like him that Ovid writes of, lifting up  
Unto the cruelly blue, ironic heavens,  
With stretched, convulsive neck a thirsty face,  
As though he sent reproaches up to God!”*

We started with Botha and Borges; we end with Botha and Baudelaire. We seem to be in a valley of echoes. The more we look at Botha’s swan, the more it reminds us of Baudelaire’s. It too seems hopelessly lost, displaced and dreaming of impossible possibilities.

*“And near a waterless stream the piteous swan  
Opened its beak, and bathing in the dust  
His nervous wings, he cried (his heart the while  
Filled with a vision of his own fair lake):  
“O water, when then wilt thou come in rain?  
Lightning, when wilt thou glitter?”*

For Baudelaire, the swan is both foolish and sublime. So too Botha’s swan seems mad and majestic in equal measures. It is an image of exile but also of folly. It teeters on the brink between trash and treasure. The only way out of the melancholy mood it puts us in, is to believe in the restorative gaze of the artist-collector.

Some of the objects, people, places and experiences that exist in the battered, banal and worn worlds outside the gates of paradise will not revert back to obscurity and obsolescence because it has been noticed and recorded. It has been placed carefully in a curiosity cabinet. These things are still lost and displaced, as are we, but they are no longer denied provenance. They have been found, first by the artist and now by us.

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (London: Tavistock, 1970), xv-xxiv. He quotes from Borges' *In praise of Darkness* (New York: EP Dutton and Co, 1974).

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