

Music of silence - the art of lien botha

by Ashraf Jamal

I

Giorgio de Chirico detested music. He recommended that the hours a music lover spent in a concert hall be devoted to studying a great painting with the aid of opera glasses. The provocation is all the more fitting when we remember that de Chirico is the painter of silences. Caught between dream and waking, his work "describes the moment ... where everything holds its breath and is transfixed before the arrival of some portent or some apparition. His universe stands on the threshold of the event. Its calm and harmonious lines conceal the alarm and curiosity aroused by what is to come." Sarane Alexandriane's interpretation also serves as a reading of the art of Lien Botha. The shudder her work impels chastens the seeming calm and harmony of line that gives it its surface allure. Echoing Alexandriane, Marion Arnold writes: "Lien Botha possesses an ability to evoke the awesome in the mundane. Her subjects are often uncomfortable but never sensational; they speak of human pain, distress and violence but they are exquisitely rendered with a meticulous attention to visual detail and nuance. They require us to deal simultaneously with the terrible and the beautiful. This is the realm of the unspeakable." The parity between these observations is not merely fortuitous. If Lien Botha acknowledges a debt to surrealism then it is, in part to Giorgio de Chirico. In both it is the realm of the unspeakable that matters most. In both enigma would be insufficient if it did not possess the depth-charge of silence; the knowledge that the visible world harbours a ghost; that that which is seen conceals as much, if not more, than it reveals.

Here we arrive at a paradox: If pictures were meant to be seen then why insist upon mystery? Is it not because pictures are not only a gift to the eye but, in a more subtle and allusive sense, a gift to sensory perception? When Marion Arnold invokes the unspeakable, when she speaks of "the visual imagination [that] triumphs over life," it is to this paradox that she turns. Sight is not only the handmaiden of the visible world. Indeed, when we remember, with Bruce Chatwin, that "the patriarchs of Ancient Israel ... believed that pictures separated man from God," that even in this day and age a distrust of the fetish of the image persists, we will go some way to understanding the unsettled and unsettling place Lien Botha occupies in the domain of art making. Like Giorgio de Chirico, Botha chooses to evoke suspension and uncertainty. She compels the viewer to linger, wait. For her knowledge is not given; knowledge dawns.

In a series of photographic works entitled *Memorabilia* (1992) there is one which depicts a group of children seated before a school. To the left we see the serried rows of kneeling children, their expressions solemn; to the right the torn diagonal detail of a wreath of flowers.

Perspective, like the composition, is torn. It is the charged interface, the frayed white line that marks the boundary between the images, that impels. This, in Roland Barthes' sense is the "punctum." At once soft yet jagged, the composition begs a reading that could excavate the silence and solemnity that permeates the ravaged whole. Botha affixes a passage by Karen Press that could also serve as a cipher for her art in a broader sense. We read:

In time their industry produced new vertical ladders between a bed and a suitcase and their horizontals became the mass of them stretching back and forward their road through the world the sum of their own displacement, so wide and long all the continents are joined again.

Here Press cross-sects the vertical and horizontal planes, the mystical moment that exists within and beyond duration, the linear sequencing of time. As we will discover, it is this doubled instant that defines Botha's distinctive signature. Her Memorabilia traces the boundary line between memory and loss, the privations that are the sum of history of a displaced people and the dreams invoked in the ladder that unites the bed - the sedentary / confined world - and the suitcase - the shiftless / transient world. What is most striking in the passage is the manner in which Press reconciles the oppressive fact of displacement and the dream of unity. It is this reconciliation, by no means fluent or easily accessed, that defines Botha's approach to life and art. Here the surreal unease evoked in the works of Giorgio de Chirico finds its echo in the prevailing unease and latent will to unity that characterizes the art of Lien Botha. She is not indebted to surrealism as a movement but, rather, to the unease that artists such as de Chirico and Max Ernst project; an unease that is the direct result of an unresolved tension, a psychic unease, the root of which, for the surrealists, lay in the catastrophe and aftermath of the First World War. As the American ethnographer, James Clifford, would say: After the war the world had become permanently surreal. For the surrealists salvation lay in the faith in the imagination. By the imagination I do not mean the fantastical, a gratuitous laterality glamorized in the lesser works that fall under surrealism. Rather, the imagination as I understand it is the saving and maddeningly elusive instant which, in rendering a work strange, draws it all the more closer. This process is never quite an aim or strategy. While it may call upon the mind, it begs a world that is not automatically accessible to the cognitive faculty. Rather, in the words of Max Ernst, the fraught processes of the imagination allows for "the alchemy of the visual image." This, I believe, is the key to why Lien Botha works in the way she does. For her an artwork is modified and informed at every turn by an abiding sense of unease and displacement which, in turn, underscores a longing for unity. The two moments - the one a sense of brokenness, the other a hankering for wholeness - coexist and shape each other. If unity is given primacy over displacement it is because Botha well understands that the very process of art-making is intrinsically disruptive - a violation. Wholeness can never be forged, it can only be intimated. Wholeness, then, is never the sum of a work but that which inhabits and traverses the work. When Marion Arnold speaks of the "distress and violence ... exquisitely rendered with a meticulous attention to visual detail and nuance" she astutely locates the paradox at the root of Lien Botha's artistic process. The allure of beauty, characteristic of much though by no means all of Lien Botha's work, is therefore not merely the sign of aesthetic resolution but, more compellingly, the clue to a deep unease

which shapes the bid to cohere a given work. In the end the resolution of a work will bear the scarring that dictated the process. This, however, is not all: The scarring that dictates both the process and the given theme of a work will, in turn, evoke the artist's deepest and greatest longing - a longing which is not hers to control - which is the longing for a deeper synthesis or wholeness. Here the graven image, the art work, becomes the threshold or aperture through which to glimpse the mystery.

Without this governing belief or hope Lien Botha could never have become the artist she is. It is important to remember that this belief is not an edict but, rather, a belief that is discovered piece-meal through a process of trial and error. For Lien Botha the very process is, necessarily, fraught. If this is so it is because of her inherent distrust of the material with which an artwork is made. Like Max Ernst, the surrealist whose process and medium most closely resembles that of Botha, it is the "alchemy" forged in the instant of creation that matters. Ernst went on to eloquently define this alchemy as "the exploitation of the chance meeting of two remote realities on a plane unsuitable to them." More wittily he added: "If plumes make plumage, it is not glue (colle) that makes collage." In unraveling the two dictums we will move a step further in grasping the ineffable and compelling instant that characterizes Lien Botha's work. Firstly, then, is how and to what end the artist exploits the elements at her disposal. Secondly, it is how she synthesizes the elements on a plane unsuitable to them. This last phrase is not only canny but immensely instructive. Indeed, in this paper it will prove the key to an understanding of Botha's art. For here Ernst points to the core of art-making; that is, that for art to become what it must be it must not only render strange the elements that form its composition but do so within an environment that ceaselessly resists its very composition. The resulting disturbance is not merely one that affects the eye but one that - potentially - disturbs and instructs the processes of sensory perception. The best art, then, not only destabilizes art's received conventions and founding premises but, in and through this process of destabilization discovers what it must be. It is this precarious and inspiring road that Lien Botha has chosen to travel. The first and greatest lesson she has learnt is derived from two of the surrealist school's finest agent provocateurs, Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst. The question we must now ask is: What has Lien Botha, in her own right, made of this lesson? For, of course, the best lessons are not learnt but unlearned. One forgets, the better to remember. In moving on I suggest that we take Giorgio de Chirico at his word and fix the opera glass closely to Lien Botha's work, the better to learn the nature of its unease, the charged conflation therein of "the terrible and the beautiful", the music that is its silence.

II

Within the garish and declamatory culture of art-making in South Africa, Lien Botha has consistently proved to be a quiet, gnomic, and deeply recessive voice. Her visual expressions which, in this collection date back to *Rites of Faith* (1990), have always consecrated a charged

stillness. Her artistic expression, even when it has drawn upon the details of urban life, remains fuelled by the country's heartland with its wide open spaces and its darkened shuttered rooms. The images from *Rites of Faith* - details of Florentian interiors - echo the shadowed interiors of the heat-struck homes in the Karroo. The link is further forged in the caption: "To live in the place where your grandfathers live. Imagine." What is telling, here, is the nurturing of the past within the present. Here the past is not a foreign country but a rich texture within the present. While another image bears the caption - "The house of Frederico Farlacci" - it is not the owner that Botha elects to depict but the sparse contents of his home. Hers is not the honorific and narcissistic world of Holbein, in which we will find a burger depicted with all his riches, but the humble world in which human occupancy is nothing more than an inference, a ghosting. Here the aforementioned surreality is registered as the extraordinary that is the ordinary. At first glance we may see nothing; that is, nothing that seemingly warrants attention. And yet, the more one looks - in the...tracted sense of looking without consciously seeing - we begin to understand what it is that moved Botha - the sacramental hearth; the locus of a daily nuptial. It is the very seeming nothingness - nothing happens, nothing is theatrically shown - which slowly and ineffably releases the numinous and auratic in that which is seen. The compositions are awkward, all symmetry distended. The resultant unease is derived from the refusal, on the part of the photographer, to offer a focal point. And so the eye, rendered bereft, is compelled to wander, alight on this, then that, drift. In Jean Francois Lyotard's sense, the images are "drift-works"; quiet sacraments to faith in a world that neither cares for nor values such a fundament.

Here Lien Botha does not modify or rearrange the original photograph. Implacable, utterly singular, the visions are palpably stripped of the processes that distinguish so much of her work. If this is so, it is because it is faith, denuded, shorn of all ornament; a faith both disclosed and suggested, that is the driving vocation of the works. Given that they are drawn from a Catholic environment, the austerity the works capture is all the more arresting. It is here that Botha has factored in her own Calvinist biography. Here the house of Frederico Farlacci also becomes her house; here it is also her own forefathers who, in a strange transplantation, emerge as ghosts in a foreign land. A curious admixture of the nostalgic and the exilic, the *Rites of Faith* draw us to a keen understanding of the condition of displacement and the rider of memory; conditions which, as we will see, form the prevailing seam of Lien Botha's work.

Turning to *Africana Collectanea* (1994), we find that the past is not only ghosted within the present but directly appropriated and factored into a series of works that are directly concerned with a tactile and physical layering of contrapuntal elements. If the theme of *Rites of Faith* is austerity and drift; the sustenance of being within settings that are distinctively shorn of ornament, of an imposed perspective; then the works that comprise this later series, produced in the year that would mark the flowering of South Africa's new democracy, possess

a lavish elegance and a consecration of texture and place that borders on the baroque. Here the artist is very much in situ. Displacement, while it may persist, is tempered. Here the artist is not the voyeur, adrift, caught between a sense of place and placelessness, but deeply involved in the dual consecration of the present and the historical moment. The histories that emblematically figure in the works are both personal and subject to a socio-political and cultural inheritance. What Lien Botha has collected is her past; a past which having reigned sovereign for so long was, then, in 1994, in the agonistic process of its collapse. In *Seedlings I* and *II*, the historical coda is presented as a series of printed backdrops - the *mise en scene* of a gone world - against which Botha foregrounds a resurgent flowering. A mix of the inorganic and the organic, the marmoreal and the germinal, the works present an interface which, however, is curiously static. Unlike the frayed borderline, distorted perspective, and charged solemnity that distinguishes the image in *Memorabilia*, *Seedlings I* and *II* are funereal in a fetishistic and deadly sense. Void of movement, utterly posed, the works all the more reinforce a torpor at odds with the vitalism of the "new" which defined the historically momentous year of 1994. Here it is Lien Botha's resistance to the ascendant jingoism which, while it registered a new found positivity would also, in retrospect, prove to be utterly ephemeral. Botha could not have known this, of course. However, her instinctive desire to construct two works that would cryogenize the past and suspend the historically charged present moment - by letting the germinal ciphers float on the surface of the works - suggests an attenuated equivocation; a refusal to be carried by the winds of change. The very titling of the works suggests a nascent and vulnerable growth; a growth which she by no means unleashes but, rather, tellingly contains. Here, in the most subtle and deft of ways, Lien Botha reminds us of Max Ernst's conception of the vocation of art, which is not merely to record the visible ephemera of change, but to exploit the chance meeting of two remote realities on a plane unsuitable to them. Here, it is the very stillness of the works which underscores a strategy which, in producing a deadening effect, all the more reinforces the artist's fundamental resistance to, and negation of, the righteous liberatory claims ascendant at the time. In the context of so much art that emerged at the time, Botha's *Seedlings* harbour a will which, through its nullifying aesthetic expression, begs the question: What in fact is new in the New South Africa? How and to what end will history be rewritten? Who, truly, will be the benefactors of this change? And, indeed, will it, can it, truly last? These are not cynical questions. They reveal no inherited allegiance. Rather, these are the heartfelt questions of an artist who understands that art making at its best not only possesses the scars that are the consequence of its being, but, more importantly, that art worthy of the name must resist the very fabric and "plane" of its construction.

That the works are aesthetically resolved - indeed beautiful - in no way diminishes their latent force. The very pathos that moves the works, the very balance that seems to stabilize them, appears all the more extra-ordinary given the hour of their construction. At no point is the viewer's sightline either broken or disturbed. Rather, the calm that prevails is a calm before a

storm. The beauty that Lien Botha yields to the viewer is a beauty that contains its own destruction. The passage appended to *Seedlings I* - by Karen Press - reads:

Are the secrets of the house the same as the secrets of the city?

Things lose their meaning the more you touch them.

I remember exactly what it felt like to touch your skin, your photograph

falls into my hands and I find myself smiling as if it were possible.

This city is full of pillars of salt.

The opening question sows the first critical seed of doubt. The public domain is not necessarily that of the private. South Africa in 1994 remains a place of secrets, feigned smiles and double-talk. Meanings wither in the instant of a touch. Truth is fraught; hope as much a matter of rhetoric and wish-fulfillment. Between the action and the image of an action lies an unbreachable chasm. What is left is a sliver of a smile tintured with hope, redolent with loss. Substance is nothing more than a pillar of salt.

Buried even deeper within Lien Botha's moving critique is the knowledge that the very fetish objects she has made and scorchingly called *seedlings* is the germ of thanatos, of death. The very title for Botha's thanaturgical series, *Africana Collectanea*, suggests the lifelessness intrinsic to the art of collecting. If the patriarchs of Ancient Israel well knew that pictures separate man from God, then this knowledge has been carried through and reprised in Botha's project. As Bruce Chatwin notes in his essay *The Morality of Things*: "... do we not all long to throw down our altars and rid ourselves of our possessions? Do we not gaze coldly at our clutter and say, 'If these objects express my personality, then I hate my personality.' For what, on the face of it, enhances life less than a work of art? One tires of it. One cannot eat it. It makes an uncomfortable bedfellow. ... We sacrifice our freedom of action to become its privileged guardian, and we end its imprisoned slave." A collector for Sotheby's, Chatwin would renounce this world and roam the earth. Similarly, Botha the artist would turn against the deadly beauty she so compellingly constructs in her series, *Africana Collectanea*. Like Chatwin, her fundamental journey has been in the pursuit of the miraculous; the alchemy in

the visual image. Her greatest work would cherish this miracle. For her, however, the "miracle" was not South Africa's new cultural, socio-economic, and political dispensation. For her, the words bartered in 1994 were mere "things [that] lose their meaning the more you touch them." In the creation of her 1994 series she must surely have felt the sting of Chatwin's words: "If these objects express my personality, then I hate my personality." It is telling that, in time, once she had weaned herself from the tyranny of symmetry and closure - a tyranny which, irrespective of the unbannings and the ascendant liberatory consciousness would persist - that she would, finally, break the mould of the fetish object, and explore the greener pastures of installation and assemblage art. This would not mean that the cherished frame or box formation would fall away. On the contrary, having consecrated its death in the *Africana Collectanea* series, she would all the more issue forth its efficacy in the service of a life affirming art. For her, the whole was not, finally, the asphyxiating closure which is the trait of beauty, but the suspension, the "waiting, where everything holds its breath and is transfixed before the arrival of some portent or some apparition." It is this latter quality in an art work that she would restore to the highest power. If, with Giorgio de Chirico, Lien Botha understands the artwork to be the charged locus of an unsettled, unresolved, and compelling event; if, with Max Ernst, she understands that in the highest art one negates not only oneself but the very ground upon which an artwork subsists; then, with Henri Bergson, the philosopher of flows and movement, Lien Botha understands that the whole she seeks - a whole that is always the product of a yearning - is always open.

It is, then, the aperture - lesion or lacuna - which will become the focus of the next series, *Portrette* (1995). These works are anticipated in *Helena's garden* (1994). If the *Seedling* series possesses a deathly closure, then *Helena's garden* manifests the seeds and the tools that would guarantee its supercession. We see the lopped image of a young woman; she is smiling. Decoratively coiffed and attired, she possesses a wholesomeness and vitality. All about her lie the tools which will not bind but un-make her. A tape measure, scissors, thread. The image, tawdrily arranged, is framed by a dress pattern. The work is caught between stages, under construction. The "garden" possesses no blades of grass, no roots and seedlings; rather, *Helena's garden* is the simulacral duplication of a verdant bloom. We are in the effervescent and perfumed domain of the constructed woman. *Helena's* smile, structured in relation to the jeering diagonal of the scissors' mouth - diagonal's in Botha's works always illicit unease - suggests that the figure's smile will be wiped off her pretty face. Strikingly wrathful and untender, the work serves as a telling counterpoint to the preceding work, *Telegram*. While this work echoes the deadly force of *Seedlings*, its effect is prettified, softened. It is, however, extremely difficult to believe that the flowering that enshrines the paired women is truly germinal. To me, flowers, when figured in Botha's work, say as much, if not more, about a consecrated and past glory. Wreath-like, they mock the central joyous apparition. Even the joy, captured in the centre-piece, seems to me memorial. I should, however, add that I recently saw *Telegram* - part of a limited series - on the wall of a friend's home. The dark Lutheran frame was circled with a garland of plastic orange flowers. Stuck to the glass, to the right, were

the scanned images of a baby in utero. My friend had recently given birth. Botha's Telegram is her pride and joy, a testimony to women's pleasure, and, no less, a temporary altar upon which to honour a birth. Clearly, for my friend, then, the work in no way alludes to the pathos of memory or the sting of loss. However, when juxtaposed against Helena's garden, as I have done, it is clear that an impending mutilation prevails. Botha, I think, knows that a souvenir is never innocent; that a smile is also a ghosting; that life comes and goes, and lives at the last as a trace. In Portrette she will render eerie a boy's smile, displace the figure-head that is the source of the smile; in another a woman's head will emerge in shreds; in the third a gothic Rasputin-like figure will peer through a torn veil. Entitled History portrait, Gender portrait, and Religious portrait, the force of these works lie in their refusal to console the viewer's gaze. Remarkably balanced and yet remorselessly dark compositions, Botha's Portrette series invoke and attack the trinity of power: The master narratives of history, gender politics, and religion. In each she transforms vandalism into an art form. For while the import of the works is distinctly polemical, Botha does not, however, forego her abiding concern for an aesthetic resolution. If the Portrette series is more compelling than Africana Collectanea, this is because, despite their apparent didacticism, they hover at the threshold that separates beauty and sublimity. Though Marion Arnold is speaking of a later series - Boxing days - when she notes Lien Botha's ability to "evoke the awesome in the mundane," and attests that "her subjects are often uncomfortable but never sensational," that "they speak of human pain, distress and violence but that they are exquisitely rendered," she may also be speaking, here, of the Portrette Series. The first, History portrait, is especially compelling. Against the backdrop of grassland, a sacred cipher for the Volk, Botha constructs her aberrant family portrait. A set-piece of classic portraiture, the paternal figure embraces the son and heir. In his left hand he holds a book. Not only a figure of power, the figure is also the dispenser of knowledge. Words further frame the bottom edge of the composition, drawing a telling link between the ownership of land and the rhetoric necessary to maintain the ownership. The neat resolution, however, is disrupted by the mask that volumetrically breaks the implacable veneer and introduces the black male, the ascendant figure in South Africa's emergent history. The bogeyman of white South African consciousness, the black figure - less a discernible face than an apparition or figure of dark foreboding - eerily tilts and sets the whole out of kilter. Gender portrait, though differently executed, is also constructed under erasure. The figure, though visible, is recessed, largely obliterated, rendered unalluring, the mere trace of an absence. This Derridean figuration-and-cancellation further exacerbates women's supplementary status. Not even apparent on the periphery of male power, here the woman becomes the phantom that exists at the blurred edge of sensory perception. If in History portrait the male figure is supplanted, effaced, then in Gender portrait the female figure remains nothing more than an originary trace, a spoor imprinted upon a barren landscape. The third in the series, Religious portrait, is perhaps the most disturbing of all. Iconic in construction, it reworks Botha's theme of nurture versus nature, the metaphysical and the germinal. The figure, though palpably human also inhabits the liminal space between an ominous mortality and a reified and fanatical sphere of deification. The figure peers through a lesion, as though from a hither world. In the foreground lies a clutch of seeds. Here, however, it is the background that

dominates; a power that emanates through darkness. In each of the three portraits one senses the artist's psychic distress. Each in its own way is ominous.

By tracing the series from 1990 to 1995 one can sense a brooding unease. As the country purportedly moves into light, the artist further deepens the darkness that, if we are to believe Botha, remains the truest touchstone of South Africa's psychic condition. Botha, of course, is not alone in recording this prevailing unease. In 1987 J.M. Coetzee would state that "the deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life." Clearly, as Botha's work progresses, it at no point weans itself from this stuntedness and deformity. If sometimes beautiful, if on other occasions beatific, its abiding register remains a tonal darkness and visceral unease. Clearly, then, the miraculous - always latent - which Botha courts, cannot be gained cheaply. Like Coetzee, Botha has always sensed that South Africa's oppressive history predates the apartheid regime. It is, perhaps, this knowledge which fuelled her resistance during the height of the liberation movement. An archeologist and an archivist, Botha has consistently sought to uncover those stories and traces of stories, sometimes monumental, sometimes incidental, often both, which reigns in any gratuitous wish-fulfillment and serves as a proviso or question mark in the face of opportunism or jingoism. As Coetzee bracingly observed: "The crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, make it as irresistible as it is unlovable." It is this very double-bind which has determined Lien Botha's ethic and aesthetic. She well understands her own pathological attachment to the country that spawned her. Unlike Coetzee, however, Botha does not believe that the oppressiveness of truth has overwhelmed and swamped every act of the imagination. Not a social realist or a pathologist, but a surrealist, Botha has repeatedly sought the power of the imagination. This process has, of course, been by no means and easy one. But, then, ease has never been her forte or inclination. Caught in a country that is at once irresistible as it is unlovable, Botha has never ceased to value "the alchemy of the image." Her abiding principle, despite the darkness that threatens to engulf her, a darkness so hauntingly captured in Religious portrait, has been to exploit "the chance meeting of two remote realities on a plane unsuitable to them." One might ask, what country could be more suitably unsuitable in which to activate this ambitious and brilliant surrealist principle?

III

In 1995, having lacerated and vandalized the framing structure which, until then, had come to define her major output, Lien Botha embarked on what would prove to be an ongoing romance with works in space. The heightened drama within her psychic life, the need to tear

down all that she had held sacred, had forced her not so much to abandon the notion of art as fetish object, but to expose the very processes of fetishization, to theatricalize the question that plagued her; a question which, as Chatwin had also pointed out, concerned the "morality of things." "Things have a way of insinuating themselves into all human lives," Chatwin remarked. "Some people attract more things than others, but no people, however mobile, is thingless." Chatwin then went on to ask the crucial existential question: "Why are man's real treasures useless?" Faced with a nagging sense of the uselessness of things, the redundancy of the art object, Botha would plunge into a search for the utility of art. If art could not be abandoned, then to what ends could art be put? How could art be made not only to reflect the world, but actively engage in it? For Botha the answer, in part, lay in the performative power of a work, its charged impact when placed in situ. Now it was not the work alone that mattered, but the environment that framed and informed it. The first location she chose - a location which symbiotically also chose her - was the Cape Town Castle. Once an imperial fort and victualling station, the Castle was steeped in history. It is not surprising, therefore, that Botha, in turn, would echo and engage with that history. The work she exhibited there was Krotoa's Room. A collaboration with her partner, the designer Raymond Smith, the project would directly address the Castle's colonial history. An historiographic and ethnographic venture, Krotoa's Room would tell the story of the Hottentot woman who gave the project its title. An informant and mediator in the cultural and socio-economic exchange between the country's indigenous people's and the Dutch, Krotoa was the archetypal subaltern and agent who both served and threatened Dutch authority. Herself married to a Dutchman, she could speak both from within and outside the economy of imperial power. The dialogue would, necessarily be fraught, the exchange - despite her efforts - one sided. While never abused in the grotesque fashion that would be Saartje Baartman's fate, Krotoa too was destined to have her mind stolen, her body appropriated, her psyche fractured. Largely forgotten by history, until the poet Karen Press introduced her story to the literary world, Krotoa would come to embody the charged locus of a dark colonial history. Today she is a part of South African folk lore. Botha's project has, in part, contributed to the resuscitation of Krotoa within the cultural imagination.

Botha's circular portrait - which emblematically suggests a history that has come full circle - overlays the image of Krotoa with an iconic depiction of European feminine beauty. Here, in the tracing and overlay, Botha situates her own story. Botha's strategy, while historiographic and ethnographic, is, however, first and foremost, enigmatic. It is Krotoa's allure - her representation as a sign taken for wonder - that matters to the artist. Krotoa forms the centre of a nexus of relations; between white and black women; male and female power; African oppression and European sovereignty. These themes were, of course, not uniquely pertinent to Krotoa's Room. As we have seen, they form a seam throughout Botha's work and are most virulently foregrounded in the Portrette series. What distinguishes Krotoa's Room, then, is not so much the theme, but its execution. If the "room" signals a woman's fraught struggle for a sense of place, it also contextualizes the unfolding drama. The drama has two sides. The first,

eloquently expressed by J.M. Coetzee as a drama in which one is "no longer European, not yet African," has its second and hither side: No longer African, not yet European. The latter is Krotoa's drama; the former Botha's. Both positions are imperiled. So while the work is an historical excavation, it is also a compellingly contemporary response to the on-going pathos and trauma that dogs the mimic; the one who belongs neither here or there; the one caught between, who is denied a sense of sovereignty, of place, of agency. In answer to the fraught space the subaltern or mimic occupies - and here we can speak of Krotoa and Botha, indeed, of South African's in general - Botha pictorially breaks the divide and, through a process of layering and ghosting, attempts to fuse the separate aspects of a nation's single tortured self. If in *Memorabilia*, Botha - after Press - spoke of "vertical ladders between a bed and a suitcase," of forging a unity that passes through displacement, then in *Krotoa's Room* she speaks of

Parts of a story superimposed on other parts.

Force them to look at each other in the same room.

There is no skin separating them.

By fragmenting the sentences, the plea is intensified. Furthermore, she refutes the balkanized notion that people can be separated, kept apart. Rather, the history of *Krotoa's Room*, which is also the history of this country, compels a superimposition of part upon part. Importantly, this is no glib anthem to multiculturalism. If in the disturbingly repressed and contained series, *Africana Collectanea*, Botha asks: "are the secrets of the house the same as the secrets of the city?" then here she wills a fusion of skins, a merger that forces each to look at the other "in the same room."

Clearly, in *Botha*, any latent scepticism has fallen away. She wills a unity, all the while knowing that this is only possible once we admit an a priori displacement. We are all fragmented, shut up, shut out, gazing one upon the other across a yawning chasm. If this desolation produced a hunger that was violently executed in the *Portrette* series, then in *Krotoa's Room* Botha recovers the elegance and pathos that is her distinctive signature. In a curious anomaly, however, Botha breaks the elegance of composition and line, the patina of history, with a series of tilting bookshelves. Strikingly modern, suggestive of the hard lines of rectitude one associates with the Bauhaus, the bookshelves - designed by Raymond Smith - suggest the tilting of knowledge and history. Once again, the diagonal is instructive. I am reminded here of Michel Serres' formulation that the advance of life, the will to change, is not the sum of nomination, of forced and overdetermined statements but, rather, that change in the best sense is an inclination, a vision that is best defined the adjectival. In other words, it is through a word or phrase that names an attribute, which modifies and describes a noun, that the change that is willed is given depth and meaning. It is through such a process of inflection that

understanding becomes possible. This has always been Botha's intuition and her aesthetic gift, which is precisely why her work possesses the resilience and subtlety exemplified in a project such as Krotoa's Room.

In 1996 Botha would return to the Castle. The project, however, would be markedly different. Here her project, *The Washing Line*, approaches South Africa's historical record in a manner more chilling and harder upon the eye. A washing line, with three cords, runs between two square rooms. On the lines randomly sized sheets are pegged. On closer inspection one discovers that images have been printed on the sheets. One is reminded of photographs hanging in the red glare of a dark-room, except that here the glare is white, the images cruelly exposed. Their theme is South Africa's brutalized body-politic. The images are not consistent; they neither resolve the theme nor shut it off. Rather, random details depicting objects, body parts, cryptic signs, follow pell-mell. The mind of the viewer is distended, wrenched hither and thither. But what prevails is the salient and bracingly obvious fact that the country's dirty laundry has been hung out in public. The idea is a simple and forceful one; a psychic x-ray. In a technological culture in which signs are found everywhere, in which labels are found on the outside of clothing, and images and text are rendered increasingly meaningless by virtue of their glut, Botha's chosen field of signage is not only fitting; it also challenges both the disposability of the image and the sign. If the installation suggests the inverted, glaring double of a dark-room, it also, more forcefully, suggests a chapter in a forensic investigation. The seemingly random signs are the clues to a hidden and, as yet, unsolved event. The viewer hovers, caught between an intuitive understanding - and inner yes! - and an overwhelming sense of bafflement - an outer no! It is this very tension that *The Washing Line* dramatizes; a tension felt by all who must both accept a truth and yet, in order to endure, negate that which must and yet cannot quite be seen. If the installation is glaring, it also occludes. Here, in the manner of an exposure, light blinds and withers. There is no depth of field, no vantage point from which the whole work can be appraised. Rather, in its very serialization and fragmentation, *The Washing Line* reinforces the partiality of perspective. One remembers, and then forgets. One holds onto a moment of truth, supplants it with another. At once shattering, and shattered, the work - like life - leaves one with nothing more than a glimmer.

The very prosaic nature of its execution, the omnipresence of the banality of the object that holds the works - two poles, three cords - both reinforces and belies the ordinariness of the scene. These are not Moshekwa Langa's mock-skins on a circular dryer, but the flanked traces of our daily lives. Here, more than at any other point in her artistic life, Lien Botha has jettisoned, or rather, threatened the aesthetic values that have both unsettled and compelled her. Here she has not only challenged the innate value and meaning of an image, but challenged the very surface upon which an image can - rightfully - be shown. Like the photographs in the series *Rites of Faith*, the images revealed here are non-sequiturs; dead ends in a dead time. And yet, like the images in *Rites of Faith*, they also reinforce the numinous

and extra-ordinary within the ordinary. And here, once again, Botha explores the flip-side of beauty; that is, that which is as unlovable as it is irresistible. Here, horror is commonplace; the viewer's revulsion part and parcel of the desire to negate that which cannot - and must not - be negated: The degraded and soiled truth of living here which no one and nothing can wash away. However, it is important to also note that the images depicted are not the abridged ciphers for a socially accepted pain. The images, though grouped, remain desolate. Each one of us factors in the story in our own way; and the story - if and when it is ever told in its entirety - will reveal itself for what it always was; a tale made up of fragments which each of us must shore up against our ruin.

Having ventured outward, embraced the counter-aesthetic of degradation, ruin, and exposure, Lien Botha retreats back into the familiar home of the framed image, the boxed narrative. Remembering that this "home" was always already threatened; that Botha has consistently sought to reinvent the very strategy of containment, it is always illuminating, then, to see how she approaches the burden and challenge of the frame. In the 1996 work, Rhodes Memorial - another collaborative work with Raymond Smith - the frame is, literally, the tent. Regimented and monotonously repeated, suggesting an army encampment, the work suggests the oppressive presence of an alien force of occupation, but, when peering into the perfectly symmetrical gaps in the roofs, one finds the source of an aroma, at odds with the regimented arrangement: rooibos tea. Smith's tents are not the bedhouin encampments which Chatwin so dearly cherished - and which Botha evokes in the later series Radio Maria (2002) - but the mobile homes of an oppressive and divisive force. As an aesthetic construct, the work is a memorial to Empire. The scale of the work, however, suggests a boy's play thing and play area. The historical import that fuels the work, however, is by no means as minor. Again, here, we find the ghosting of the past. The very immaculate appearance of the tents - with their peaked, pyramidal, and hierarchic shape - suggests a compulsive and vaunted cleanliness in a time of rapine and blood and squalor. The sweet smell of rooibos tea, a distinctly un-English brew, softens the impact of the work and returns us to the land that has been occupied. Sight is not smell. Appearance is not truth.

In *Boxing Days*, an altogether more ambitious work - Botha's contribution on receiving the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for 1997- we find a constellation of all the artist's previous aesthetic forays and experiments. To date, perhaps the high-point of her artistic expression, *Boxing Days* is at once the most nuanced and varied of Botha's works. Once again a journey into experimental narrative expression, the catalogue to *Boxing Days* locates the work in present day South Africa. This present, this day, is framed by three contrapuntal and mutual informing definitions:

normal, adj. conforming to the standard or common type; regular, natural, sane.

madness, n. state of being mentally disturbed, deranged or irrational; insane.

art, n. objects to make meaning from what is seen, felt, and thought in life; Ômaterial structured in such a way that it moves the imagination.'

From the outset, this series of definitions situates the reader and viewer within the explosive nexus of contesting terms. These are supplemented with three "acts", a mere sampling of "a thousand other illogical stories of our time and place." Written by Marion Arnold, they read:

Act 1

A car drives through quiet suburban streets to the electronic gate of a walled house and stops. Gunshots shatter the evening tranquility. The driver slumps forward, gushing blood over his young daughter in the passenger seat. Another car appears unexpectedly and the gunman disappears. A man dies.

Act 2

The cloudy night sky masks a sickle moon as a rural family settles down to sleep in a thatched hut. Men move silently to the kraal. Red flashes from automatic rifles punctuate the blackness, penetrate mud walls, and a baby's soft skull disintegrates. Many people die.

Act 3

A man in drab clothing stands next to a man in drab clothing in a bathroom with barred windows. One washes his hands, and washes his hands, and washes his hands. The other runs a tap, stares at his immobile face in the mirror and turns away, leaving the tap running. Nothing happens.

These unsettling words by Arnold, serve as a prefix to her essay on Botha. The very illogicality of the sequence underscores how devastatingly normal these scenes are in South Africa. What then, given the continuum between madness and normality, must art do? Once again, it is in Max Ernst's driving principle that Botha finds succour. It is the meeting of madness and normality that must be exploited; this day, this country, that must serve as the unsuitable plane where two realities, never remote, must converge. The drama is set. The challenge, now,

lies in the imaginative visual articulation of this dark and brutal alchemy. The images Botha creates do not merely reproduce or imitate Arnold's prologue. Rather, the derangement and mock normality is conjured through a series of images that range from the surreal to the banalized and normal. The composition of the surreal images owe a debt to Magritte's *The Man in the Bowler Hat* (1964) and, more compellingly, to Roland Penrose's *Portrait of Valentine* (1937) The difference, however, is that Botha's imagery is more unsettling. The derangement she conjures is not forced, but suggested. The represented figures, we discover, were the inmates at a mental hospital. The eye of a fish replaces the eye of a man; an inverted bird echoes the tilted head of a woman whose eyes have been scratched away; a bird sits on a wire, its song - the song of madness? - is flecked against the backdrop; a fish gasps in an element that is not its own. While the symbolism may be familiar, it is the execution that distinguishes the works; the economy of form and line; the subtle unease that permeates their austere composition. In another we see a row of printed daggers or machetes; they do not gleam but exude the stained memory of recent use. In her catalogue essay to *Boxing Days*, Marion Arnold arrives at the core of Botha's alchemical imagery:

Although they are inherently poetic in their elusiveness, Botha's photographs are sharply realist in their references to the dark social patterns of South African history. Her speculations on our violent past, the nature of reality, and the unreality of nature, create startling images of the world we know and do not know, and glimpse darkly in memory, nightmare, and recorded testimony. Her imagery is neither didactic nor moralistic. It suggests rather than dictates, relying on sensual presence and defamiliarization to stimulate awareness.

While the works are deeply informed by South Africa's bloody history, their focus is upon the personal histories of anonymous people.

Botha has raided history, locating small moments and private tragedies from the past which, placed in the present, speak of suffering as a continuous condition of humankind. Although painful circumstances are examined, in their transformation into art they speak of the resilience of the human spirit and humankind's ability to work with experience creatively. And thus the condition of sadness is infused with lyrical beauty, and paradox creates art redolent with presence.

Few artists, given the content and theme, would have approached the project in the manner which Arnold so eloquently describes. Not only has Arnold pin-pointed the signature of Botha's artistic process, she has also clarified the ethical basis of her work. The one cannot thrive without the other. This, then, is another convergence. Without an abiding ethic and a searching vision any psychic representation of South Africa, in and through art, would be

nothing more than the summation of its horror and its saccharine wish-fulfilment. The question remains: Is Botha's art too subtle for an audience pathologically attached to a society which, despite its will to dream itself otherwise, remains snarled in its "callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies"? Coetzee's point, I believe, remains an intractable one; one which each and every artist must address. It is evident, as we have moved through Botha's varied incursions, that this dark truth has remained at the forefront of the challenges she has set herself. However, she has refused to yield to the oppressiveness of this truth. Rather, in confronting the inextricable link between our "madness" and our "normality", she has, as relentlessly, factored in the saving vocation of art whose gift is the imagination. At no point has this gift served as an idle dalliance. If art has been rendered mute by a crude and barbarous culture, then Botha has worked to make art speak through its silence. To ask for more than this in these times would be to betray what it means to be an artist.

IV

Between the years, 1997 - 2002, Lien Botha has proven Ralph Waldo Emerson's dictum that consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. Rather, she has shown a heightened courage to vary the medium - or the usage of the medium - with which she works. In *The Home That You Built* (1997) she reprises and modifies the usage and principle of the box. Here they stand desolate upon a wasteland, the ground zero that was once District Six. The boxes are shut, printed text mark their sides. One thinks of evacuation, one knows that the boxes speak of a forced removal. Given the all too familiar history of the loss of District Six, Botha needs only to find the slightest foothold for the work to have its maximum impact. Here there is no room for sensuous evocation. History hurts. To project this pain one needs the most brutal, most intensively minimalist effect. In the manner of Joseph Beuys, *The Home That You Built* is "social sculpture" in the most hard-hitting and direct sense. The work, however, not only addresses the past but also the immanent reality of continued displacement today. This is no anthemic, moody, or nostalgic hankering to right a past wrong. Here all sentiment has been purged. The effect, akin in temperament though not in form, recalls the austerity of *Rites of Faith* and *The Washing Line*.

Postscript (1998), by way of contrast, both distils and imaginatively develops Botha's central preoccupation with the framed or boxed fetish object. Here a heightened aesthetic sense and a keen mind converge to produce a work that surprises and delights. *Postscript* does not seek to chasten the viewer; neither does it set of to provoke unease. It refutes the centrality of the human figure. The figure is neither the present or absent locus of pain. What is omnipresent is a striking elegance of execution and a notable focus on the elements: land, sea, and air. These have always figured as aspects in Botha's work, but, till now, they have not been the works

central focus. Here, in the most sophisticated of ways, Botha joins the two strands of her aesthetic: beauty and sublimity. Again the aphoristic force of written word is factored in: "You know exactly how beautiful is the place you are not in." The human figure - as viewer - is here interpellated as a peripheral voyeur who looks upon that which is not theirs. By isolating and reinforcing the absent figure's sense of displacement and distance - wonderfully resolved through the usage of banked letter boxes - Botha addresses the viewer's increased none involvement in art, nature, the elemental, and the country which, increasingly, many have chosen to desert and disavow. The immensity of the distance - between the viewer and the object, the South African citizen and their country - is further reinforced by the elemental subject matter of the photographs. Cropped and fitted into the prescribed frame, the images are not so much portals upon a lost immensity, but the fragmented details of a vanquished memory. The very title, *Postscript*, reinforces the belated nature of the moment of insight. Significantly - unlike in the series *Africana Collectanea* - Botha attaches no nostalgia, no odour of melancholy, to the works. Pared down, dispassionate and utterly resolved, *Postscript* marks a vital imaginative and ethical resolution and development.

In *Voelhuis: Die Sirkelstrokie van Maria Blou* (1999) Botha reprises her fascination with interiors. In *Ten Trees Growing Nowhere* (1999) she returns to a fascination with cutting and tearing down. If *Voelhuis* draws us inward into a private and hidden world, then *Ten Trees* takes us into the glare. The tools that modify - a scissors, hacksaw, hatchet - form the centrepieces in a series of circular compositions. It is striking that it is the very tool need to cut a tree which, in turn, becomes the fetish object. Could this possibly mean that Botha is downing tools? If *Ten Trees Growing Nowhere* suggests a loss, then, surely, by rendering the tools passive, by centralising and fixing them, she hopes that other trees, now, will grow? If I persist in speculating in this manner, it is because I believe that Botha has here projected not only the loss of nature but, as importantly, her frustration with the denatured, reified, and thing-fixated nature of art. This intuited exhaustion could, potentially, lead to the artist's very own disappearance. I mean by this, not Botha's physical absence from the world but, rather, her exhaustion with her own obsessions and her own biography which, consistently, has found its way into her work. Indeed, when many artists turned themselves into the tools of a culture of resistance, Botha made biography - the project of self discovery - the centre of her work. Now it seems, increasingly, that Botha senses the insufficiency of this project. More troublingly, she can find no way out. In honing her aesthetic and her ethic she has effectively, and literally, chosen to hang up her gloves. When one reaches a heightened sense of aesthetic and ethical resolution, action ceases. This, of course, could also be a passing phase, a time of seeming drought that is also a time of greatest insight. How else explain the *Book of Gloves* (2001), objects that sheath and protect, that speak of another era, which, in this book, have been foregrounded so largely? An act of perversity? A singular refutation? Or, to repeat, an artist's decision to hang up her gloves?

Or, how explain the tellingly titled *Ten Degrees of Separation* (2000)? We see a parallel series of images. To the left the same woman. To the right an evocative series of land and waterscapes. It is a work that conjures the eloquence and depth of pain one associates with Virginia Woolf. The mood of the work is brooding and ominous. From the outset one senses the artist's unease. In the first pairing, a boat, floating on still water, points to a dead end. The very trajectory of the series is summarised in the split focus of the two images which, in fact, is the same focus. The woman too points to a dead. The "degrees of separation" reveal the gasp that separates the living from the dead, the desolation of a single life when flanked by the mute, eternal and terrible beauty of the natural world. Here, Henri Bergson's realisation that the whole is always open, reinforces Botha's perception that totality and fixity is death; that nothing endures that is not also lost; that separation is inescapable; that the cross-section of white space that separates the adjoining images, and forms a series of crosses that link the series, mark both a focus and a cancellation. The woman, who subtly alters, will eventually disappear, become the ghost that she always was. The very ephemera of her presence is echoed in the changing vistas. A tree, plucked from its mooring, hangs suspended above water; a jetty, with its diagonal sliver, is a vulnerable plinth; a twig drifts upon a still mute stream; a building tilts on the edge of the frame, as though it were about to topple upon a landscape of jagged rock; and then the last, the woman cut out, barely a trace, void of feature, of depth, of life; alongside her an empty sea....

And so we come to the end of this journey with Botha's most recent work, *Radio Maria - A tale of Two Cities* (2002). Once again Botha appends a written story, one which I regard as the most fluent summation of the artist's life and art. Therein she acknowledges her split focus, the "two parts" that make up the fractured whole that is her life's work. There, too, Botha acknowledges the shift from the interior world to the exterior; from the beleaguered locus of the inner self to the self that moves in the world; a twig adrift upon a stream. In the appended passage we read: "I gradually became intrigued by the exterior of the stalls, rather than the cluttered interiors with their rows of David snowstorms and Botticelli ties." Here we find Botha's renunciation of so much which, throughout her artistic life, she has held dear. What has come more and more to matter to her is the depth lodged in the surfaces of things. Like Chatwin, she too has given up the ghost that is the fetishistic nature of things - a David snowstorm, a Botticelli tie. Truth and beauty does not reside there. Truth and beauty is a thing written on the air, captured in a passing scene, a quality of air. "The light filtering through the sheets of canvas, implied a world of transience," Botha writes. "It also reminded me of sacred rituals, of seclusion and of cryptic messages written by candlelight." She speaks of the visibility of things - Brunelleschi's dome - in the lyrical and infinitesimal shifting of light. She speaks of "traversing" the Piazza, a flaneur in a city of angels, who, in an epiphanic moment finds herself holding "a red radio the size of a human heart." It is with this heart that, today, Botha walks through life. Both its sounds and its silence beats within her.

On returning "home," the transmission concluded, she discovers that "an heirloom had been destroyed by clothes moths." Here, once again, it is the fetish object - which is also the past - that Botha must now forego. Nature's beneficence lies in its unthinking capacity to destroy all that one holds dear, and, in doing so, liberate one. She stands in a room. In her hands she holds "the burgundy fragments of what was once my grandmother's treasured evening dress." Because Botha must cling and cling to a gone world she can never resurrect except in a memory as fragmented as the dress? Do we travel in order to lose; and in this losing, is that how we remember, how we illicit a "sense of wonder"? With the shredded dress in her arms, Botha thinks of "nightfall over [her] grandfather's cottonfields ... and [realises] that this was signifying closure for radio maria." Out of loss and darkness comes memory; out of memory the ending of a work. On returning back to South Africa, Botha makes a photographic record of indigenous moths; distant cousins to those who destroyed her heirloom. The photographic record is strikingly different to the series that serves as an anthem to wind and transience and God. Here it is the deathly thanaturgical process that, once again, returns. Now, it seems, we are back in Botha's realm of boxes, confined spaces, clutter, and lifeless beauty. However, this is not quite the case. In Italy a shift occurred; a shift which had been stirring for years, rendering her restless, frustrated, sometimes fraught. But now, the red radio still in her heart, she yearns. If you listen with your eyes you will hear the artist's tremulous song. The links between the moths and the floating sheets - both still, both drifting - is "subtle," says Botha. Perhaps the link is "even fractured."

The silk route a disjecta between strained vowels, while at night the basilica still waits for the moths who are still waiting to fly.

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