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In Lien Botha’s work the photograph – as text, object or trace – intersects and interweaves a collection of recurring concerns which her practice - spanning more than thirty years - has continuously investigated and ruminated upon; memory, meaning, experience, object and place. These concerns do not operate autonomously, but are rather always presented as interdependent and mutually generative. The photograph, then, conceptualized beyond the rigidities of the documentary frame to which post-Apartheid photography in South Africa is so often inclined to, becomes an active site of memory – both personal and collective; a living, generative space that both recalls real places in space and time, and revisits and reimagines them through complex networks of association and narrative. This duality endows them with an undeniable enigma and surrealism – one has the sense that events are occurring, actual and imagined, which cannot fully be seen or expressed. The photograph thus sits somewhere between object and place, between real and unreal, tangible and intangible.

Accompanying text to the I:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London catalogue, Barnard Gallery, October 2016
Revisiting a childhood narrative Boet & Saartjie

For this series, initiated in 2018, I have created digitally constructed photographic images with accompanying inscribed on the actual photographic work and the second titles (in my mother tongue; Afrikaans) serve as a subtext artefact / curio.

Image and text, besides activating a ‘re-reading’ of this particular primary school textbook (familiar to many South-Africans of especially my generation), has prevailed in much of my output over the past two decades.

It is a curious thing to reflect on the ‘static’ content of your youth fifty years after the event. And so, in search of a past / present continuum I have merged the individual characters of the young protagonists Saartjie and her brother Boet, their father, mother and dog Buks, into the recent South-African landscape. Re-framing the past into a comic-style genre allows for playful undertones whilst referencing current issues such as the notion of ‘home’ in a fragile social and natural environment.

The naive figures of Boet and Saartjie, juxtaposed with mostly external landscapes, result in a tension between the seemingly cheerful characters, gradually being usurped by the very landscapes they inhabit – alluding to the futility of reminiscence when grafting the figments of a colonial past.

‘Translation’, besides its literal configuration, implies relocation / shift / movement. This in itself is an activator for the historical stasis.

The Lost in Translation portfolio consists of 12 digitally collated photographic works with an edition of 5 plus 2 AP’s (artist proofs).

Corresponding to the digital collages are the 12 smaller works (A5, edition / 5) consisting of digitally embroidered Afrikaans texts on cotton fabric. This process suggests a cadence of receding ‘greyscale,’ while simultaneously paying homage to analogue photography and a vulnerable language (my mother-tongue Afrikaans and the mot juste for each of the works.)

The embroidered Afrikaans texts also demarcate the black and white outlines of the adapted original Boet & Saartjie drawings by Wendy Jackson (1968) synthesizing my interests as a lens-based artist working with text, layering and alternative materials.

Extending the notion of appropriation, titles of individual works often make reference to literary or film titles such as Portrait of the Artist as a Dog (Tjanktaal) and a pun on Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog by Dylan Thomas; Ø
Lien Botha steps out of the car onto the road. It is a straight, gravel-compact road running from the town of Sutherland - population 2 800 - leading north, north-west to the Knersvlakte, the Valley of Gnashing Teeth. As writer, photographer and visual artist, Lien Botha needn't go as far as the valley, she is surrounded by a palette of colours she favours: loamy grey, sallow yellow, the shy green of squat bush and bleached sky blue. Words will come later. Like the protagonist in Lien Botha's debut novel, Wonderboom, she already sees the sounds: ‘Die klanke om haar is mooi’ / 'The sounds surrounding her are beautiful.'

The Canon EOS slung over her shoulder, Lien Botha crosses the road, carefully scales a jackal-proof fence and walks up the koppie, the Afrikaans word for the small rocky hills so distinct to the Great Karoo. This is far enough. She has found what she wanted, in other words: the landscape has presented her with an image. When I travelled to the Knersvlakte, I sought out focal points for my photographs. I would, for example, pick a butterbush for front of frame, the scattering of koppies as backdrop. Not so with Lien Botha. Her frame (Lost in Translation 1) covers the slope of the koppie showing neither its foot nor its crest, and closes in on the surface textured with slate stone, pale green euphorbia fingers and small bush of ashen pearls. In the distance to the left, white cloud offers reprieve from the harshness of the Great Karoo.

The camera zooms in and, like the landscapes elsewhere in her work (Lost in Translation 3, 7 and 12), intimacy is established between artist and image. The intimacy is affirmed by naming the image twice, in English and Afrikaans.

Lien Botha will not leave the image there. She is, like myself, of a generation that was born in and benefited from apartheid. After 1994 we had to re-assess our positions as great-great grandchildren of the colonisers, as human beings, even if we have already done so in our writing and art. This Schandfleck, the stain of white colonial history, tainted us at home and school; you are superior, you are entitled to more; that was its shame. Of course, as children we played in our beautiful gardens, we cuddled our pets, we loved and were loved. In the Botha's garden in my hometown is all my lost collections, my past.'2 It takes J.M. Coetzee only two sentences to spell out the dilemma that would also taint his boyhood in Worcester: ‘My great-grandparents were criminals (the revised story goes), complicit in an evil project whose fruits I am at present enjoying. Yet at the same time my great-grandparents were courageous, upstanding people who suffered hardship so that their descendants could have a good life.’

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1 Botha, L. Wonderboom. Quillerie, 2015. p. 214
The writer-artist has the benefit of using their art to process their history and present to the world not so much a justification of their past as an attempt to comprehend it, an attempt to live from then onwards with the good and the bad of a past that can never be deleted. And so Lien Botha returns to the primary school text books which were designed to teach white Afrikaans kids spelling and pronunciation.

The aptly named Golden Series features the characters of Boet and Saartjie with cameo appearances by Moeder (mother), Vader (father), Kleinvis (little sister) and Buks the dog. The line drawings place Boet and Saartjie in safe, happy environments: the interior of a tree with a swing tied to a branch. Even when Boet and Saartjie walk home after school, black kids never appear on the sidewalks of the town; black people do not exist in the Golden Series.

The Boet and Saartjie story follows a basic approach to reading, instilling words and sounds into the young reader through repetition and recognition. Lien Botha follows the method too. She overlays every one of her photographs with a line drawing from the Golden Series. There is Vader reading his newspaper against the backdrop of a grey waterscape. There is Saartjie made to stand in the kapok veld of a wintry Karoo. The older white viewer will instantly recognize the reference to the Golden Series; whoever the viewer, it is, through repetition, easy to see that something is going on with these figures.

Moeder is superimposed on a vast Karoo landscape (Lost in Translation 5) and she’s barely hanging in there. The lower part of her body is severed and a piece of sky slices her head and neck (with string of pearls) from her torso. Vader is reading his newspaper on a club lounge chair which is sinking into grey water (Lost in Translation 10), Boet and Saartjie skip down the coarse slope of the koppie on barefeet (Lost in Translation 1) while Saartjie’s happy face has been halved in the cutting room, and evoking the tragic story of Rageltjie de Beer, Saartjie is erected like a lone snowdoll hopelessly underdressed in sub-zero temperatures (Lost in Translation 12).

Gone is the domestic bliss and playfulness of the Golden Series. The viewer is to understand the photographs with their superimposed drawings in an adroit way. To aid the understanding, Lien Botha writes on the photograph, juggling and undermining the images.

The family’s Holden station wagon in the middle of nowhere is titled The Long Goodbye (Lost in Translation 8). In Afrikaans the title is contracted to Trektaal / The Language of Moving; it may well, in the 21st century, suggest forced moving. The chopped-up Moeder in the Karoo landscape becomes O Mother where art thou. In Afrikaans: Moedertaal / Mother Tongue. The viewer has become the reader, and their knowledge of film, poetry, book titles and wordplay is summoned in an attempt to make sense of the work. But this newly established viewer-reader may well ask what exactly is going on here.
The act of writing on a photograph or a photographic drawing has as its predecessor René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist who was born at the turn of the 19th century and died in 1967. He titled his picture of a horse’s head as the door, a clock against the wall: the wind, a white milk jug, the bird and less than a jug, the accompanying title of incongruous space: the jug is simultaneously more with intent. He moves the viewer-reader into an incongruous space: the jug is simultaneously more and less than a jug, the accompanying title of the bird signifies neither bird nor the object in the picture.

Little is known about Magritte’s childhood years, but, according to Wikipedia, his mother was a disturbed human being who had to be locked up in the bedroom against her drive to commit suicide. When Magritte was only 14, his mother drowned herself in a river. His handwritten titles reinforce the perception of things: they never are what they seem.

When Lien Botha photographs the slope of a Karoo koppie, it is with intent. So it is when she super-imposes Boet and Saartjie on that slope and writes the title of Sugar Hill at the bottom. The viewer-reader has to understand that here too things never are what they seem, not in the past, and not now either.

The happy story of Boet and Saartjie is dismantled as a white person’s idyll; every single one of the images in Lien Botha’s exhibition are not what they seem to be. Saartjie swings against a wall of stuffed birds, but the title shatters the fixed presence of the museum display: Birds Fragile like Glass (Lost in Translation 6), what’s more, Saartjie’s dress is ripped in half. If a claim on Karoo farms by the descendants of the white colonisers still exists, it is undermined by both image and title in the relevant work, for example, Biks the dog propped up on a deserted farm yard with the once sturdy homestead in ruins, plaster peeling from its walls (Lost in Translation 7).

Finally there are the Afrikaans titles. To me, as an Afrikaans mother-tongue speaker, these simple compound words ring out more beautiful, more poetic than any of its counterparts in English. There is a coelacanth up there? (Lost in Translation 11). No sooner are the words uttered, or the understanding seems to lose ground: What does the image and its complementing Afrikaans title really mean? What does the writer-artist intend for her work not to mean?

Somewhere in between words and seeing meaning flickers and fades: the viewer-reader has to find comfort in this in-between-world of understanding and non-understanding, more than that the artist is not prepared to offer.

\[\text{1}^{1}\text{Berger, John. Ways of Seeing. BBC and Penguin Books, 1972, p.1.}\]

\[\text{2}^{2}\text{Hardwick, E. Sleepless Nights. Faber and Faber, 2019, p. 39.}\]

\[\text{3}^{3}\text{Barthes, R. A Berthois Reader. Vintage Classics, 1982, p.51.}\]

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Eben Venter is the award-winning author of eleven works of fiction. His most recent novel, Green as the Sky is Blue, was written in English and self-translated into Afrikaans. Venter has recently completed a PhD at the University of Queensland on the Theory of Self-translation and two dogs.
Lost in Translation

Speeltaal: Sugar Hill
Seetaal: A Boat comes in
Droomtaal: Head in the Clouds
Blomtaal: The Perks of being a Wallflower
Moedertaal: O Mother, where art thou?
Voëltaal: Birds Fragile like Glass
Tjanktaal: Portrait of the Artist as a Dog
Trektaal: The Long Goodbye
Braktaal: Dog Day Afternoon
Sinktaal: Loss at Sea
Vistaal: Like a Fish out of Water
Sneuutaal: Out in the Cold
Speeltaal
Seetaal
Droomtaal
Blomtaal
Moedertaal
Voëltaal
Tjanktaal
Trektaal
Braktaal
Sinktaal
Sneuutaal
Lien Botha is one of the few South African artists who has been experimenting with the photographic medium beyond its documentary frame. Born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1961, she initially studied languages at the University of Pretoria and worked as a Press photographer for Beeld before moving to Cape Town where she obtained a BA Fine Arts degree from the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1988.

Botha’s introduction to alternative mediums such as printmaking, painting, sculpture, and text, determined the output of her work over the past three decades. Up to date she has participated in numerous South African and international group shows and has curated eight exhibitions.

In December 2014 she was awarded a Master of Arts (Creative Writing) from the University of Cape Town. Her first novel Wonderboom, with its virtuosic visual companion piece, was published by Quellenic in June 2015. Wonderboom earned critical acclaim, amongst which the Jan Rabie Rapport-prize as well as the Eugène Marais-prize. The subsequent Dutch translation by Robert Dorsman, published by Zirimiri, was very well received in the Netherlands.

Besides maintaining a professional photographic practice, Lien Botha has been invited as guest lecturer in the Arts Faculties of various tertiary institutions such as the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, and Studio Art Centres International, Florence, Italy. Her work is represented in pivotal collections throughout South Africa as well as in key private collections locally and abroad.

Lost in Translation is her fourteenth solo exhibition.
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