“In Botha’s work, geography and soul are charted on the same map. This is the contemplative life as road movie, where details one might consider trivial, the moment-to-moment dislocation of daily existence contain hidden epiphanies.” - Miles Keylock, Mail&Guardian
Padstal outside Keimoes, Northern Cape, South-Africa, September 2012

28° 47′ 46″ S, 21° 01′ 22″ E
4  Ditsong Museum of Natural History IV, Pretoria, South Africa
9  Padstal outside Keimoes, Northern Cape, South Africa
12 Graveyard, Kenhardt, Northern Cape, South Africa
16 Wollie Wolmarans’ lioness, Kleinmond, South Africa
19 Ladismith, South Africa
20 Witdraai I, Kalahari, South Africa
22 Near Kenhardt, Northern Cape, South Africa
24 Round-up, Gordon’s Bay, South Africa
27 Andrew Lamprecht’s Office, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town
28 Witdraai II, Kalahari, South Africa
29 Rysmierbilt, North-West, South Africa
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35 Jessica and Kobus, Heathervale, South Africa
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40 Bamako Senou International Airport II, Bamako, Mali
44 Ditsong Museum of Natural History II & III, Pretoria, South Africa
45 Swimming Pool, Heatherdale, South Africa
46 Proteadorp, Kleinmond, South Africa
49 Rocking Horse in Park, Beaufort West, South Africa
50 Wonderboom, Pretoria, South Africa
52 Panari Hotel II & III, Nairobi, Kenya
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VIRGINIA MACKENNY BEYOND WHAT ONE CAN SEE
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” (Vier Susters, 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 ever more 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. 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) leached 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 whitened 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 was the farm of Botha’s paternal grandfather 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 n 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 1. 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 maybe 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 displaced iconic language permeating this exhibition – everything is important.

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; a connection that may be necessary for our own survival.

References:
Bell, Clive (1914) Art Chatto and Windus, London

1 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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26° 56’ 10” S, 20° 39’ 54” E
Witdraai II, Kalahari, South Africa, September 2012
26° 21´ 03˝ S, 27° 08´ 07˝ E
Rysmierbult, North-West, South-Africa, April 2011
SONJA LOOTS  TRAVELLING WITH BORGES & BAUDELAIRE THROUGH BOTHA’S WORN WORLDS
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*.¹

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 are 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.
Jessica and Kobus, Heatherdale, South Africa, April 2012

25° 40′ 53″ S, 28° 07′ 40″ E

Jessica and Kobus, Heatherdale, South Africa, April 2012
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 21st-century cabinets of wonder and curiosity. By gathering 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 Proteadorp. 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 one 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.
Swimming pool, Heatherdale, South Africa, April 2012

25° 40' 52" S, 28° 07' 40" E

Swimming pool, Heatherdale, South Africa, April 2012
34° 20’ 16” S, 19° 00’ 26” E
Proteadorp, Kleinmond, South-Africa, May 2012
“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.


Sonja Loots is a novelist and a lecturer in the School of Languages at the University of Cape Town (in the Afrikaans section). She is currently writing her PhD about encyclopaedic fiction in the oeuvres of Marlene van Niekerk and Ingrid Winterbach. Her research interests include Afrikaans information novels, science in fiction, Afrikaans ethnographic fiction and freaks and freakery in literature. She lectures on a wide variety of topics, including media ideology, modern Dutch prose and poetry, Afrikaans drama and Afrikaans post-apartheid prose. Her historical novel Sirkusboere was awarded with the M.Net Prize, the Eugéne Marais Prize, the Sello K. Duiker Memorial Prize and the UCT Book Award. Before her appointment at UCT she worked in the publishing industry, in the television industry as a scriptwriter and in media as a newspaper reporter, subeditor and editor of a weekly books page.
32° 21´ 05˝ S, 22° 36´ 12˝ E
Rocking horse in Park, Beaufort West, July 2013
Panari Hotel I, Nairobi, Kenya, November 2011

I° 19′ 43″ S, 36° 51′ 21″ E
Botha is one of the few South African artists who have experimented with the photographic medium beyond its documentary frame. Born in Gauteng, 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 in 1984 where she obtained a BA Fine Arts degree from the Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1988. Her introduction to alternative mediums such as printmaking, painting and sculpture determined the output of her work for the next two decades. To date she has participated in eighty-five South African and forty international group exhibitions and has held nine solo shows.

Her photographic narrative titled Amendment was selected for Towards a Balanced Earth at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2008. In 2009 the portfolio White Stick for the Arctic was exhibited at Reflets d’Afrique: Panafrican Festival at MoMA, Algiers. In 2010 Botha attended an invited residency at Kunst Raum Sylt Quelle in Germany. Her work was included in Crossing Boundaries: Art and Artists from South Africa at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Doha, Qatar in 2011. A selection of images from her Parrot Jungle (2009) series was included in the 9th Bamako Encounters African Photography Biennale entitled Pour un Monde Durable that premiered at the Musee National du Mali in Bamako in November 2011. Botha’s work is represented in pivotal collections throughout South Africa as well as in key private collections locally and abroad.

Botha has curated five exhibitions and served on the curatorial committee of the first Cape Town Month of Photography. In 2005 she collaborated with the French theatre group Compagnie des Limbes and attended a residency at Nouaison, Pujols with exhibitions at l’Ete Photographique de Lectoure and MC2a in Bordeaux, France. During February of 2006 she attended the Ampersand Fellowship in New York.

Besides maintaining a professional photographic practice, she has been invited as a guest lecturer at the Arts Faculties of various tertiary institutions including the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University and Studio Art Centres International, Florence, Italy. She is currently completing an MA in Creative Writing at the Centre for Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town.
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