

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S
geography



Artist Lien Botha's world is a 'fascinating place filled with order and disaster', and doorways leading to vistas both unusual and unfamiliar...

MORAEA

“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.”



Moraea (left) and The Branch
(above), *Garden of Plague* (2020)

Originally acting as an introduction to Lien Botha’s 1995 exhibition “Krotoa’s Room”, these three lines by poet Karen Press have since served to encapsulate much of Lien’s work – a golden thread running through this storied South-African artist and photographer’s creations since her early days.

Lien’s artistic practice merges both film and digital photography with alternative mediums such as printmaking, painting, and sculpture, resulting in a vast body of work as diverse as ‘traditional’ photography, art, installation pieces, and two novels: *Wonderboom* (2015) and *Vin* (2021), both as much ‘theatre of the mind’ as they are bound words on paper. Her eye lingers on landscape, excavating the potentiality of stories gone by and yet to be told, and coaxing discrete, even opposite narratives and ideas together, ‘forcing them to look at each other in the same room’, often leaving the observer feeling observed. Lien’s is not a documentary approach, but a celebration of the bigger picture, and all the seemingly unrelated elements that weave our lives. Or, as a reviewer once described her work: ‘where geography and soul is chartered on the same map.’

As most artists who’ve wended their way through the landscape of the

pandemic, Lien’s work and thinking hasn’t been left untouched. Her experience of our changed reality lead to *Garden of Plague* – a series of 10 photographic/collage images created during lockdown in May 2020. The first layer of each image was sourced from an old publication, *Gardening in Southern Africa*, by Una van der Spuy, published in 1953. This book was tied to a keurboom tree in Lien’s garden three years before the pandemic, and lockdown was the trigger to finally use the weathered results – nature thus instrumental in directing the impetus for the series, both in the title and in the process. As Lien describes: “Pages worn and moulded by seasons and garden activity alike, were selected and merged with archival anatomical, zoological, and botanical images via photocopying, lightbox collage and re-photographing”.

In the case of the piece ‘The Branch’, Lien explains that it alludes to the “dichotomy evident in this post-pandemic epoch in our history”.

“On one hand, the planet (and nature) has a chance to pause and regenerate, but on the other hand there is the resultant socio-economic misery and mortality rate affecting homo sapiens. We are in mid-air, suspended. Will we fall or will we survive, and which guidebook do we follow to steer us through this turbulent time?”



From top: The Kiss and Tigridis, *Garden of Plague* (2020)

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**We are in mid-air, suspended.
Will we fall or will we survive?”**

Landscape plays a central role in much of your work – when and why did this sense of ‘place’ (be it literal or metaphorical) become so important to you?

Perhaps what it alludes to is the fact that living and working [in South Africa] is really all I know, and that knowing connects everything. The South-African poet Karen Press recently sent me some poems from a new collection called *Atlas Sonnets*. It is such a world that one seems to be traversing – with a sense of considerable love and considerable dread.

Photography is central to what you do, but you transcend the medium by using aspects of collage and installation. It gives your work an organic, ever-evolving feeling, something alive and changeable as opposed to a static moment captured in time. What prompted you to start experimenting beyond the purely ‘documentary’ borders of photography?

When I studied Fine Art at the Michaelis [School of Fine Art in Cape Town, South Africa] some thirty years ago, I was introduced to other mediums such as painting, sculpture and printmaking. These were all exciting and tactile processes, which opened new possibilities for experimentation. I am certainly not a documentary photographer in the traditional sense of the word.

Can you describe your process?

We all work in unique ways and for me it has been particularly necessary to explore the possibilities of lens-based work in terms of the configuration of the outcome, and this is usually determined by the content. I believe my work gradually evolved in order to establish a balance between text and image as this is something with which I have often grappled. In *Safari* (2003), *Amendment* (2006), and especially *Wonderboom*, the two disciplines were grafted quite successfully.

Do you find certain themes or situations recurring in your work?

Periodically I have worked with an aspect of the ‘memorable’, but in the last few years I would say that I have moved further away from this subject as a matter of necessity and development of process and content. Besides, photography (by instinct) implies memory. One works with what engages your days and nights at a given moment in time, you toil in order to make sense of past and present.

I have always worked primarily from my environment – the physical landscape as well as the internal landscape, and from this wide space comes small moments and events that can trigger an idea or concept. It is usually the ordinary that informs my work: love, loss, the memory of an ancestor, the life-cycle of an insect. The world is a fascinating place filled with order and disaster.



From left: The End and Carnations,
Garden of Plague, 2020

Garden of Plague used a book that you had tied to a tree years ago – why did you do this originally, and when did you know the time was right to incorporate it into a work?

It is not the first time I have utilised elemental intervention with regards to materiality and outcome, i.e. Nature as collaborator. This book ‘waited’ for this series, which in turn was set in motion by the emergence of Covid. I remember working almost instinctively and enjoying the process immensely.

Another recurring motif in your work is the idea of ‘losing your grip’ – be it on memory, the ability to create, relationships, the longevity of nature... Why is this?

As sentient beings we are mostly in a state of peril, but it should not debilitate us. On the contrary.

At the end of your first novel, *Wonderboom*, the protagonist is left in a situation almost bereft of hope... Is the idea of ‘hope’ something that you address in your work generally, be it debunking it or embracing it?

In *Garden of Plague*, are you backing the ‘fall’ or the ‘survive’?

Survive. Fall. Survive. Look at the sea. Look at *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai.

Your affinity for the natural world shines through in everything you do – what has being so in tune with nature and really seeing what’s around you taught you?

Most of what I know and trust is embedded in the natural world. It contains all the solace and wisdom required to survive. I am aghast at

how we have (mis)construed the Anthropocene era with such a disregard for the Mothership. Now, world leaders are scrambling to try and ‘rewrite the next chapter’. Good luck to them.

Do you ever stop working, seeing and recording what goes on around you?

Sometimes I just sit and look at the way the wind moves through the leaves of the trees in our garden, and then I think of how fortunate I was to have been here for a while.

DONNAY TORR

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