

“Wonderboom”

Lien Botha

By Melanie Gerlis

London’s 1:54 art fair (October 6-9), dedicated to showing contemporary work from Africa’s 54 countries, has earned a reputation as one of the finest events on the art market circuit in only four years (a New York edition, launched in 2015, has also proved successful.)

Nearly half of this year’s 41 exhibitors in London came from the continent, from Cairo to Cape Town, joining galleries from the UK, Continental Europe and the United States and proving that high quality “African” art is an international phenomenon. The Neoclassical setting of London’s Somerset House, which also houses the esteemed Courtauld Institute and Gallery, gave the art on view a well-deserved institutional context.

Some of the most engaging displays this year yet came from galleries from the region who were showing local artists. A highlight was a solo booth dedicated to the Gauteng-born artist Lien Botha, brought by Cape Town’s Barnard Gallery.

Botha’s work, “Wonderboom” (2015, edition of 5), is a series of 18 photographs in which a collection of objects, pinned or propped on a board, gradually disappear to leave a space whose marks can only hint at any previous content. Items including a map, a fork, a feather or a china dog, demand our attention, only to fade away.

The effect is haunting, as well as beautiful, but Botha is not just a compelling

photographer. Like many of today’s artists, she works across several forms and “Wonderboom” was produced to accompany her first novel, of the same name. In this, the central character, in a post-apocalyptic South Africa, grapples with her own memory loss, and each photograph relates to a chapter from the book.

By investigating memory, additional issues of identity and reality come into play and the accompanying book endows a narrative meaning to the collage objects. Botha says that there are “text echoes to an extent” through the photographs—for an example, when a dog goes missing in the fifth chapter of the book, the dog in the photographed construct also disappears. The fork, Botha says, represents hunger and references to food-related issues—fitting for a book that begins “Today she is eating a starling...” There are also echoes to Botha’s previous works.

During the 1:54 fair, one edition of “Wonderboom” sold to Modern Forms, a collection owned by the London investment manager Hussam Otaibi. Nick Hackworth, a contemporary art curator and the director of Modern Forms, describes the work as “a particularly poignant photographic portrait of loss, at once subtle and direct.

Melanie Gerlis is a Columnist for the London Financial Times and Editor at large for The Art Newspaper. She is also the author of *Art as an Investment? A survey of comparative assets* (Lund Humphries 2014).



Lien Botha, "Wonderboom" at 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London, 2016.

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