

KROTOA REARRANGES THE CASTLE FURNITURE

Fine Art: James Garner (Mail & Guardian 1995)

Krotoa's Room – in the Grain Cellar at the Castle, Cape Town – will confound anyone with a penchant for reductive categorizations. Consisting of a photographic component by Lien Botha and “utility furniture” by Raymond Smith, the exhibition operates somewhat in the undefined territory between historical display, site-specific installation and commercial presentation.

Botha's circular-framed photographs (mounted in transformed photographic paper boxes) feature images drawn from Cape Town Archives and the William Fehr Collection. Most of the photographs are hung above half-moon shaped shelves (made by Smith) with candles and boxes of matches placed on them.

Making use of carefully considered superimpositions of sourced images, Botha has produced a body of work with the intention of opening history “to other perspectives and meanings”.

The combinations of images Botha arrives at refer both to colonisers and colonised. A clear example is the superimposition of the text of *Riebeeck's Prayer* over a photograph of an African face. While the formal means may be deceptively simple, Botha confronts the viewers with a complex series of cross-associations that subtly challenge dominant models of colonial history. In attempting to highlight the discrepancies between the ways Europeans chose to represent themselves and those they colonised, Botha combines images that sought to portray Europe as the bastion of genteel civility and scientific discovery with images that portrayed the colonised as an exotic species to be studied, named and classified.

Looking at these images, one becomes acutely aware of the way they've previously been used, albeit in very different configurations, to assist in entrenching social, cultural and political inequities.

Where the chameleonesque Umberto Eco challenged these practices through satiric inversions (in *Misreadings* Eco demonstrates what misinterpretations might have resulted had it been colonised “examining” the Europeans), Botha's strategy involves a reordering, or rereading, of established models of colonial history.

Where Eco points to the flaws inherent in the construction of any history as an absolute set of facts, Botha shows how any set of “absolutes” may be reconfigured to offer new perspectives. That may sound terribly dry and academic, and Botha's work probably would be, were it not for the attention paid to the form chosen to convey these ideas.

While loaded with a host of possible, often contradictory meanings, Botha's images play interesting tricks on the eye. The effect is like staring at a stain on a wall and recognising any number of images.

Smith's "utility furniture" (based on a concept formulated in Britain during World War II) offers an interesting counterpoint to Botha's work.

Minimalist in design, his pieces are made using widely available, low-cost materials and "low technology" tools such as saws, drills and screwdrivers. Whereas the intention of the British project was to supply cheap, well-constructed furniture to "newlyweds and people whose furniture had been destroyed by bombing", Smith's proposed South African Furniture Project is directed towards job creation and skills development.

A few of the pieces display the influence of the Bauhaus school, relying on functional, yet understatedly elegant designs. Other pieces, such as *Leaning Bookshelf*, function more as installation pieces. Within *Leaning Bookshelf* there are a number of containers marked with words such as "Werkmaak", "Khoisan X" and "Goedkoop".

At intervals around the floor, tied-up bundles of whitewashed newspapers and the taped outlines of what appear to be animal skin rugs further confound the notion that this is simply a commercial display of furniture.

Considered as a whole, *Krotoa's Room* offers fascinating insights into how ambiguities and contradictions are constantly being denied in the process of constructing histories. If anything, *Krotoa's Room* is a celebration of these ambiguities and contradictions, a way of affirming difference and the importance of multiple perspectives.