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VOL 03 ISSUE 03 AUTUMN 2005









# SEX, LIES AND SIMULACRA

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THIS YEAR'S STANDARD BANK YOUNG ARTIST AWARD RECIPIENT, WIM BOTHA. CURIOUS TO GLEAN HER OWN FIRST-HAND INSIGHTS, **HAZEL FRIEDMAN** ENTERED INTO A DIALOGUE WITH THIS MEASURED AND SUGGESTIVE ARTIST

Conducting an art interview, courtesy of Telkom, is not unlike engaging in a tentative phone-sex session. The stage is set by the sound, the voice and the spaces between: the suggestive layers, the innuendoes, and the simulated imagery. It's about having the license to fake it.

Not in the 'whopping lie' sense of the term, but rather in terms of those little fibs that provide the prettifying nips and tucks to more mundane realities. In a sense, this is some of the turf covered with Wim Botha during our telephone interview: sex, lies and simulacra. The sex refers to the psycho-sexuality infusing much of Botha's work, from the *Motherland* and *Fatherland* sculptures in his *Speculum* show to his *Mieliepap Pieta* (2004). The lies, of course, are those devices utilised – whether in the name of religion, world peace, or law and order – to exert control in one guise or another. And both of the above often exist in a state of simulation, in a hyper-real world wherein the map precedes and supersedes the territory, and the boundaries between real and representation disintegrate.

Botha's words, much like his work, are measured and suggestive. Products, in equal parts, of scientific exploration and instinct, they are clearly considered, astutely navigated, yet open-ended. And the dot, dot, dots after most of his sentences are not that easy to connect...

A lot has been written about this year's Standard Bank Young Artist award recipient since the critically rapturous response to his *commune: suspension of disbelief* installation, displayed at the 2001 Klein Karoo Arts Festival (KKNK). Subsequent critiques of his work have been equally alacritous and earnest; some, particularly those by Frikkie Eksteen, have been extraordinarily insightful; while others have compensated breadth-wise for what they avoid in terms of down-'n-dirty depth. Sure, they pick up on Botha's propensity for binary oppositions, such as communal versus individual existence, faith and knowledge, perception and reality. And the fact that to date, much of his imagery has been rooted in the fiction-factions of South African history and identity makes his iconography almost deceptively easy to read.

In other words, the critics, overall, have tended to treat Botha's work a bit like an aerial map; locating the important sites, flashpointing them but never truly getting down to ground zero and traversing the layered terrain below. Reading some of the reviews is akin to browsing through a brochure compiled by a cul-

tural tour-guide; authentic engagement requires negotiating the marshlands beneath the pristine, seemingly accessible surfaces.

Which is what this critic hopes to do: traverse the sex, lies and simulacra (not necessarily in that order) of his forthcoming exhibition at the Michael Stevenson Contemporary in Cape Town (March 16 – April 30). This quest entails flying to Johannesburg and getting up close and almost personal with his virtual works-in-progress. At the time of our meeting, some of the work is still very much in the conceptual stages; and Botha himself is in that betwixt and between place; on track but not quite at that eleventh-hour adrenalin-inspired stage, when all suddenly, magically comes together.

An unashamed classicist who isn't really into new media, Botha's traditional style – to paraphrase Kathryn Smith – does not quite camouflage radical, often caustic content. Born and bred in Pretoria, he could quite easily fit the profile of the rebel without a pause, discarding the protective, smothering coat of Calvinism and subverting those omnipresent, suffocating representations of power in South Africa's administrative capital. But he regards the role of rebel as limited and, ultimately, futile. He's not out to change the world, or even the way we think. What he trips on, he explains, is "looking at the ways in which people control the things that we do, need, and construct to make sense of things, be they grandiose and religious, or decorative and facile in a not so innocent fashion".

He's also a consummate wit, choreographing his wordplay in much the same way that he stages his exhibitions, with droll irony and subtle subversion. Sometimes his stages seem almost to sag with the plethora of suspended artefacts and fictions. But whereas the 'props' of previous shows – trophy mounts, government gazettes, heraldic objects, officious busts, and religious bric-a-brac – contain comfortably parochial associations, in his upcoming show, Botha has definitely gone global and trans-historical.

Titled *Cold Fusion: Gods, Heroes and Martyrs*, it promises a deluxe-combo of meta-realities inhabited by biblical and pagan icons, super heroes and scapegoats derived from popular movies and anime comics. As anyone who has ever dabbled in weird science or anomalous physics will confirm, Cold Fusion is the name given to Low Energy Nuclear Reactions. It is the 'philosopher's stone' of the alternate scientist, the theory of a potentially limitless source of cheap, non-polluting energy, com-

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Portrait of Wim

Botha by Suzy

Bernstein.

Courtesy:

Standard Bank

**AN UNASHAMED CLASSICIST  
WHO ISN'T REALLY INTO  
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TRADITIONAL STYLE DOESN'T  
QUITE CAMOUFLAGE  
RADICAL, OFTEN CAUSTIC  
CONTENT**







prised of different components that could, if utilised, revolutionise the way we live. The bitch of it is that that cold fusion has largely been dismissed by the multinational oil companies and petrol barons as a chimera – a golden goose that can never be. Consequently the extraordinary potential source of energy has been relegated by mainstream ideology to the margins.

So what has this to do with a show about superheroes and martyrs? Botha keeps his cards close to his chest, but he does acknowledge that his concerns in *Cold Fusion* are an extension of those characterising his work to date in terms of "altering traditional associations in order to trigger other associations".

Like its predecessors, *Cold Fusion* functions more as a multimedia installation than as a conventional body of individual works. It aims to provoke a chain reaction – not dissimilar to that of low energy nuclear reactions – whose whole amounts to more than the sum of the component parts.

*Cold Fusion* has also largely eschewed the cluttered, mothballs 'n' mausoleum quasi-grandeur of its predecessors. It is smaller in scale, more intimate and precious in execution, and more personalised, in a depersonalised sort of way. And therein lies another Botha paradox. Debunking the notion that ultimately the subject of all art is the self, Botha insists there is little of himself in these works. He said much the same of those icons he displayed that were inextricably entwined with the psyche of Afrikanerdom. His position is that of the detached observer and commentator on the big issues of history and faith – the battles between good and evil, as well as acts of heroism and individual folly.

In fact, the epic associations of *Cold Fusion* have been rendered in an avowedly anti-epic fashion. Small, sensuously modelled clay sculpture form part of the installation, and depict battles between Judeo-Christian and Greek classical icons: Abraham and Isaac, Bacchus and the Satyr. At first sight the former seems a representation of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac. But Botha has subverted the conflict, for it is Isaac who holds the fate of his father in his hands – an act of self-defence, attempted patricide or a revolt against a capricious deity who demands unconditional obeisance from his flock.

Similarly Bacchus – son of Zeus and god of the vine and all those good things in civilised life – is decidedly at the receiving end of the Satyr's wrath. Half man, half goat, the Satyr has been depicted through history as the embodiment of depraved hedonism and unbridled sexuality. He is the scapegoat for all the chaos that ensues when 'civilised' order disintegrates. Because he cannot easily be tucked into human or animal camp, he is the

perfect 'other'. In classical mythology, he symbolises the beast within – the concrete form given to suppressed fears and desires. In Judeo-Christian scripture he is represented as the devil himself. Or herself. After all, the term devil derives from evil, which itself is rooted in the name Eve. The 'cause' of mankind's disgrace, Eve has been represented throughout western history as the antithesis of the Virgin Mary. She is the archetypal traitor, whore and outsider, the prototype of the unknown, the unknowable, the uncontrollable, the liminal and therefore the dangerous.

This brings us to another of Botha's recurring motifs: that of the hyena. At his 2003 KKNK show, this beast made more than a guest appearance; he was depicted in glass windows, and etchings, not to mention a suspended ceiling ornament leaking onto a table with hyena cornices. Exploited since ancient times as a symbol of those who thrive on the filthy corpse of false doctrine, the hyena has become a metaphor for man's instability. As

such, along with other misshapen beasts it has been pretty much relegated to the fringes of the Judeo-Christian moral order of things. Like the Satyr and the goat (the term scapegoat; of course, refers to vicarious atonement), the hyena is a marginalised creature. Yet in a recent charcoal drawing by Botha, titled *Lock-step* (2005), the hyena is represented as the ying-yang of the Tao symbol. Intersexed (the hyena is supposedly able to change its sex), tranquil and at one with duality, Botha's hyena-Tao therefore becomes the very antithesis of conventional associations with this scavenger.

*Cold Fusion* seems therefore to be subverting the conventional moral order of the universe. In the sculptures, the battles between father and son, God and subject, and culture and nature, no longer represents the archetypal battle between absolute good and absolute evil. The victims become victors and symbols of insurrection. The amorality of this story, then, seems to be that notions of absolutes depend on angle of vision.

The fact that Botha regularly employs religious iconography could quite easily lead one to interpret his work as the manifestation of an internal religious struggle. But his eye is not that of the disillusioned believer. Rather, he is the agnostic – displaying a healthy cynicism towards notions of absolute truth in matters such as God and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned. He acknowledges the need for those lies that maintain a semblance of structure, and without which there might be chaos. But he subscribes to the notion of an internal, individual truth that is the product, not of propaganda, but, rather, self-discovery.

To access this contentious terrain, we need to revisit Botha's breakthrough work, his 2001 installation *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* installation, sometimes colloquially referred to as the crucifix or Christ work. Although this work was extensively reviewed, it was done so with a surprising lack of irony. (After all, one doesn't have to peel the subcutaneous layers to glean the potential offensiveness of this work for orthodox sensibilities.) Like the follow-up work *Carbon Copy (Madonna del Parto col Bambino)* (exhibited on the show *Grime*, Bell-Roberts Gallery,

2002), *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* plays on the dialectic between curios and authentic works. Both works explore the shifting semantics between indigenous and appropriated icons.

The use of bibles strategically positioned by Christ's 'stigmata' and the wound on his side, resurrect controversial debates around mortality, redemption and sacrifice. The presence of CCTV cameras 're-capturing' the Christ form, point to the appropriation of abstract concepts into the Word (scripture), which are then

given visual, modified representation and imbued with simulated reality that often supersedes actual lived, breathed knowledge of the 'real'. Botha's *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* installation, then, seems to be poking its tongue at the pagan subtexts of organised religion. After all, imbuing a belief with concrete form is tantamount to praying to a golden calf.

The clay sculptures earmarked for *Cold Fusion* are cast in bronze, which elevates them to a reverential realm. But the forms are immediately downgraded from sacred to profane status through their gestures of aggression – emulated from the martial arts simulations in anime comics or films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix*. (These will be presented as part of a tableau, with a vanitas painting and an anthropological/culture study drawing.) Epic tragedies, then, almost become comical, whimsical. But the underlying gravitas of Botha's iconography is not entirely nullified. Furthermore, in these forms Botha's delight in the flesh and bones construction of his

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Mieliepap Pietà, (Maize Meal Pietà), 2004, maize meal, epoxy resin, height 174cm (mirrored replica: dimensions correspond to Michelangelo's 1499 Pietà).

Photo: Mario Todeschini.

Courtesy: Season South Africa

**bottom left**  
Generic Self-Portrait as a Common

Ancestor, 2003, carved Afrikaans-English dictionary paper, 67 x 44 x 29cm. Courtesy: Michael

Stevenson

Contemporary

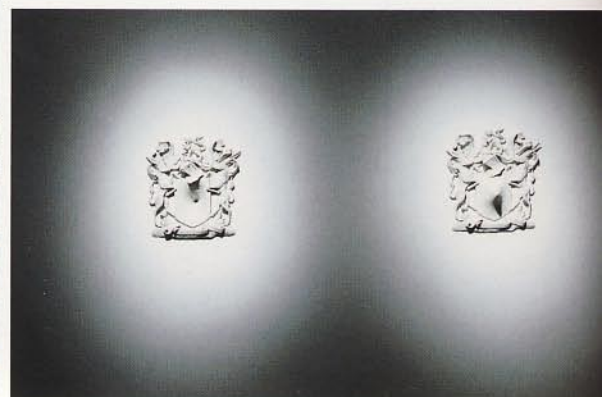
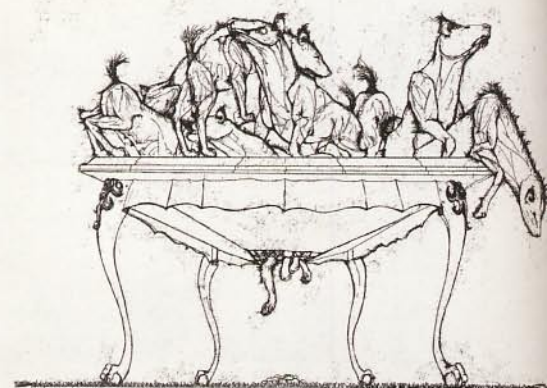
**bottom right**  
*Lock Step*, 2005,

charcoal on paper, 80 x 64cm.

Courtesy: Michael Stevenson

Contemporary





#### top left

*Commune*:  
*Suspension of Disbelief*, 2001, carved bibles and biblical text, surveillance equipment, vinyl screens, installation view.

Photo: Wim Botha

**top right** *Untitled*  
(*Table II, Line*),

2003, etching, aquatint and mezzotint on paper, 24,5 x 20cm, edition of 20.

Courtesy: Michael Stevenson

Contemporary

**bottom right**

*Motherland*,  
*Fatherland*, 2003, artificial marble, bronze with white patina, 27,5 x 23 x 7,5cm each.

Courtesy: Michael Stevenson

Contemporary

subjects is evident. He adopts an almost forensic approach to his work; one can almost imagine the forms being diligently constructed from skeleton to skin. Their almost baroque sensuousness, vitality and sheer physicality all but distract one from the deathly pageants they perform.

This brings us to two central, as-yet under-explored concerns in Botha's oeuvre: sex and death – the alpha and omega of existence, and the fulcrum around which all faith revolves. In exhibitions such as *Speculum*, Botha's take on sexuality is quite literal, in terms of its Freudian juxtaposition of hard penetrating, invasive objects and cavernous, implicitly passive receptacles. In this sense his work reminds one slightly of the early psycho-sexual peregrinations of surrealist Alberto Giacometti, in his *Couples* series and *Objets mobiles et muets*. But in his more recent work, Botha's play on sexuality has transcended simple dualities into a more metaphysical realm. He describes his *Mieliepap Pieta* as his most erotic work.

Like Michelangelo's 'original', Botha's *Pieta* revolves around, sorrow and loss. It is depicted as a human tragedy, a love story even. And if one follows the gaze of the youthful Madonna to the prostrate body of a nubile Christ, her eyes are clearly not focussing merely on his wounds. Sex and death: the first and final frontiers. Therein lays another of those pagan-Christian cross-fertilisations that Botha seems to relish. According to scripture, Mary was impregnated by the Holy Ghost. Her virginity nonetheless remained intact. In classical mythology, Leda was seduced by Zeus disguised as a swan. Leonardo da Vinci saw the analogy and attempted to depict it – unsuccessfully – in one of his more pallid drawings. Artists ranging from

Michelangelo to Francois Boucher have provided exquisite interpretations of the theme in terms of its unabashed sensuality.

The notion of a deity impregnating a mortal is not unique therefore to Christian lore, but has its origins in the nether regions of erotic mythology. Like the Black Madonna's of the Middle Ages – destroyed by iconoclasts, or remodelled into a Caucasian Mary – the myth of Leda and the Swan has been appropriated, and 'remixed' into a parable of salvation. The fact that the story is ultimately about Leda being duped into having sex with Zeus, only to be discarded after the seduction, is obviously ignored in the Christian appropriation of the myth.

So Leda will also be included on Botha's banquet table, alongside subject matter that simultaneously subverts and celebrates; and works made from a plethora of semantically layered materials. In its final pre-preview stages, *Cold Fusion* seems extraordinarily ambitious in its desire to evoke foibles and follies, past, present and future.

In a sense, like the chandeliers he is planning for his Standard Bank touring exhibition and the title of his groundbreaking show at the 2001 KKNK festival, Botha himself seems to exist in an ongoing state of suspended disbelief. Yet beneath the cynical exterior beats an idealist's heart. His obsessive focus on fakery – be it moral, religious or political – suggests an unrelenting quest for an existential honesty, even if, like the myth of Sisyphus, it yields yet another paradox.

Wim Botha will show at Michael Stevenson Contemporary, March 16 – April 30

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