

A GRAND, AMBITIOUS PROJECT

# Invisible beauty of sickness probed

Exhibition: FRITHA LANGERMAN'S *Subtle Thresholds* at the Iziko SA Museum. MELVYN MINNAAR reviews

THERE IS something very poignant in wandering around this in-between museum room in a time in which the World Health Organisation warned, a few months ago, that the notorious N1H1 influenza virus would place "all of humanity under threat".

Fears about the invisible killer have been toned down somewhat since, even though several dead, South Africans included, lie in the wake of the deadly virus.

All manner of variations on that nasty little instigator of ill and illness surrounds one in this major installation: a grand, ambitious project that investigates the invisible beauty of sickness.

It brings sharply into focus the fact that, in an effort to cope with the dangers and disasters of disease, we humans insist on codifying and boxing-in as best we can the signals that, actually, scare us no end.

Coincidentally, we recently marked 40 years since the first men on the moon came back to earth and were held in quarantine, before accolades and stardom, until such time as Nasa's medical people were happy that they didn't bring strange, evil contamination from outer space.

In the light of the subtle and not so subtle social politics and propaganda manipulations that played out all over the world as the so-called "swine flu" caused havoc in a world we humans try so hard to control, Langerman's serious, very serious – but awesomely beautiful and challenging – show illustrates, the fine lines that we use to divide knowledge. She reminds us that aesthetics lurks in those dividing lines.

Using illness as a metaphor (not the first time it has been done, of course, and there are strong overtones here of Camus's famous existentialist novel about the human condition, *The Plague*), she revitalises it, and suggests that the "subtle thresholds" of her title are the limits that keep us from a fuller understanding of that which, in some ways, threatens human existence most.

Being "subtle thresholds", the inference is that we should breach those.

For this purpose, she has set out to create a remarkable environment.

Drawing on the holdings of the Iziko, UCT and Wits Adler collections, bringing together biomedical objects, images and artefacts from the zoological, human and microbial spheres, she cre-



AN EYE-OPENER: Installation views of Fritha Langerman's exhibition, *Subtle Thresholds*, at the Iziko SA Museum.

ated crisp interventions. (Everyone is taken by the bandaged, "medicated" stuffed animals. It charmingly trips another vital wire about life and medication.)

Being a skilled and precise graphic artist, Langerman takes up on the curious loveliness in the geometric and other patterns that constitute representations of microscopic organisms like viruses and uses these to visually define the various parts in all their density of texts and objects. All of the latter are, naturally, offered in the highest of curatorial presentation.

At the same time, there is a delicious, even amusing feeling, to a presentation that has all the wacky dramatic flair of an off-beat Madame Tussauds set-up. Curiosity and scary stuff, theatrically-presented, have always had box-office appeal.

Using projections, texts and digital images, as well as those museum objects, *Subtle Thresholds* is, the artists proposes, concerned with the means through which images are seen (or not) and understood (or misunderstood). For this reason, the installation employs "devices that heighten vision: scopes, light, shadows, reflection, projections, etc."

*Subtle Thresholds* is a major,

pioneering art work, which took Langerman two years to research and construct. It literally employs hundreds of bits and pieces. She uses historic medical equipment.

A 68-metre timeline – that includes a biblical concordance of disease – together with a running list of thousands of species, charts the display.

There are light boxes with viral images made from pharmaceutical lab plastics, where we encounter those influenza nasties.

Sign plates with GPS co-ordinates show disease outbreaks, electron microscope images of animal droppings in trefoil and quatrefoil-shaped frames, steel silhouettes of bacteria, and 512 cut-out hands, derived from art-historical images of healing, add to the visual dramatics.

It is not an easy, walk-through exhibition this. It takes time to read, see and figure out the layout and threads that the artist-museum-curator has plotted for the visitor to follow, cross refer to, and come to terms with.

The result is a most enlightening, eye-opening and fulfilling experience. It is simply brilliant.

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