



MUTI IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: Left, one of the taxidermied animals that star in Fritha Langerman's exhibition, which 'examines the complex interrelationship between zoological, human and microbial worlds'; right, antiquated medical devices. Pictures: PAUL WEINBERG

Artistically getting under skin

PENNY HAW, a bit squeamish at the best of times, is surprised by how much she enjoyed the visual representation of infectious diseases

HA VE you noticed how some people — though not otherwise involved in medicine at any level, and excluding those who have hypochondriasis or any other disorder that encourages preoccupation with bodily functions — are infinitely fascinated by the inner mechanism of their bodies? Many, using impressively lengthy Latin-sounding medical terms, which may or may not be accurate, can give more detail on the doings, disruptions and would-be diseases and damage to your gross and microscopic anatomy than most general practitioners. When asked why they do not pursue a career in medical science, they generally shrug and say something like, "It is not really my thing" or "I do not have the maths for it". I am not fascinated by the inner workings of my body — or anyone else's, for that matter. To the

contrary, my mind shuts down — I literally pass out — when confronted by the smallest evidence of what might go on beneath my pale and freckled skin. My senses are generally not inspired in a positive way by any level of biomedical detail, which is why I was surprised at how much I enjoyed the hours I spent at Fritha Langerman's *Subtle Thresholds* exhibition at the Iziko South African Museum. The exhibition, which astonished me first because of its incredible proportions and then because of the response it elicited from me, explores infectious diseases and, says the artist, "examines the complex interrelationship between zoological, human and microbial worlds". Langerman, who has exhibited widely both locally and internationally since 1992 and who is a senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town, where she teaches printmaking and drawing at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, spent two years developing *Subtle Thresholds*. That might seem like a long time to devote to one exhibition but, when you see what it involves, it is actually a remarkable achievement. More so when you take into account the demands of her full-time lecturing schedule and that she is the mother of a three-year-old boy. Located in a large L-shaped gallery between the social history and natural history sections of the museum, the exhibition presents

thousands of objects that were either created by Langerman especially for the event or scrounged from the collections of the Iziko South African Museum, the University of Cape Town and the Wits Adler Museum. The huge array of historic medical equipment — some of which forms a large sculpture opposite the entrance of the gallery, although most is interspersed within other displays throughout the exhibition — is fascinating in itself. Did you ever stop to imagine how many millions of weird, wonderful and just plain scary devices, utensils and other pin-you-down, probe-you, slice-you-open and prick-you-silly gadgets have been developed and used over the ages in the quest to understand and treat disease? The plentiful equipment features widely in many of the cabinet pieces, some of which focus on the miscellany of taxidermied animals that also star in the exhibition. Most of the stuffed creatures are pinned down, bandaged and/or masked, and submitted to various forms of medical treatment or laboratory experiments. Other installations include light boxes with splendid viral images made from pharmacological laboratory plastics, sign plates with GPS co-ordinates of disease outbreaks, electron microscope images of animal droppings, steel silhouettes of bacteria and 512 cut-out hands derived from historical

images of healing. The amount of research that has gone into the exhibition is staggering. On one of the walls, a 68m timeline includes a biblical index of disease and a list of thousands of species of illnesses. Words, in fact, are prominent throughout the exhibition. Medical indexing, definitions, journals and quotations draw the displays together, and demonstrate the artist's point that classifications and representations of disease are both culturally and medically coded. In addition to the innumerable artefacts from collections, Langerman uses a range of media in her new work for the exhibition. These include projection, sculptural and drawn elements, texts and digital images. Her artwork is beautiful, complex and yet markedly quiet in contrast to the more disturbing collected items. "Because *Subtle Thresholds* is concerned with the means through which images are seen or not and understood or misunderstood, I made use of devices that heighten vision: scopes, light, shadows, reflection, projections and so on," she says. "As the title suggests, *Subtle Thresholds* investigates the tenuous boundaries that enclose both the physical body and the bodies of knowledge through which disease is understood." The essence of what I understood by the exhibition was sealed for me by a 1986 Dr John

Arnold quotation that is among those borrowed by Langerman for the show. It says, "Cholera, like any other disease, has in itself no meaning: it is only a micro-organism. It acquires meaning and significance from its human context, from the ways in which it infiltrates the lives of people, from the reactions it provokes, and from the manner in which it gives expression to cultural and political views." The artist, however, also draws attention to many other contemporary debates about disease, and our understanding and misunderstanding thereof. The anatomically obsessed are likely to recognise many more representations in the art than my fellow anatomically suppressed. What I think we will agree on, though, is that *Subtle Thresholds* succeeds in presenting potentially fearful items as objects of interest and beauty. Says Langerman, "Infectious diseases are caused by organisms that are as deserving of visual attention as any other species." It is a compelling point and I am, it seems, convinced. After all, I spent almost two hours examining Langerman's visual representation of infectious disease without once nearly passing out. ■ *Subtle Thresholds* runs at the Iziko South African Museum, 25 Queen Victoria St, Gardens, Cape Town, (021) 481-3800 until March next year, www.iziko.org.za

FRIDAY 16 OCTOBER - THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER. BOOK AT NOW 0861 CINEMA/0861 246362. www.nuMetro.co.za. Includes cinema listings for Montecasino, Hyde Park, The Brightwater Commons, Lakeside Mall, Clearwater Mall, Menlyn Park, V&A Waterfront, Canal Walk, and NuMetro Cinemas.