

# Chilling exhibit shows artist's depth of vision

FABBRIZIO VON GREBNER

WORKS BY DIANA HYSLOP, Sanell Aggenbach and Fritha Langermann, the Association for Visual Arts, 35 Church

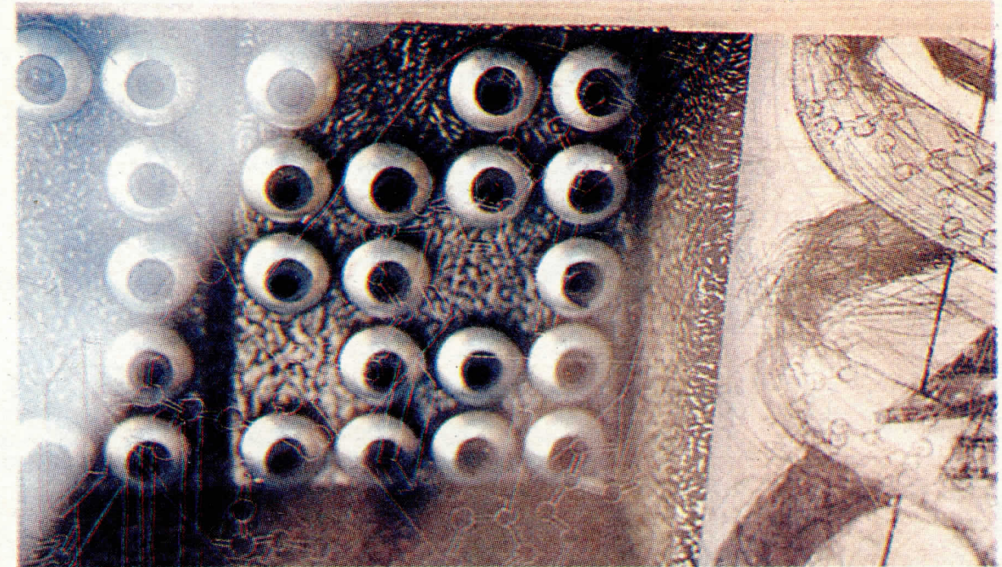
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FRITHA LANGERMANN'S thematic originality, clarity of vision, depth of insight and sheer technical wizardry, indisputably establish her as the star of the exhibition. Diana Hyslop and Sanell Aggenbach merely do what others have done better, whereas Langermann intrepidly ventures into terra incognita.

Langermann's exhibit, dryly entitled *Code*, addresses the artistically intractable subject of genetic engineering and cloning. Anxiety is the keynote of this chilling array of 23 metal boxes arranged in a continuous strip running like unwound ribbons of DNA across Spartan white walls. The arid titles — *a sequence from CTGG # 1 to TTGC # 23* — resemble computerised laboratory labels, and set the tone of clinical frigidity. Although they allude to chromosomes, they appear cryptic and withhold, rather than provide, hints to the meaning of the work. This desiccated sterility and baffling quality characterise the entire exhibit.

The boxes, compartmentalised into cells, and their contents, create a sense of malignant threat and conceal more than they reveal. Helix, grid and molecular patterns; classifications such as ATCCTTACA; tape-measure marks and strict, rigid, geometric configurations of digitally printed "Y"s, "X"s, or "O"s are all engraved in black or white, over the perspex or behind it on semi-opaque acrylic circles. In genetic engineering, these letters signify the deletion or preservation of human characteristics. Their artistic goal is to partially block our vision of the boxes' contents, and function as iconic emblems of the uncertainty of what beings genetic engineering will create — for who will select the criteria and what will they be?

The execution is cold, mechanical, pristine and precise. No irregularities are tolerated. The cells contain etchings, collographs, cast elements and manufactured objects marked by a glacial inhuman perfection.



CLINICAL: Detail from *CTGG # 1 to TTGC # 23* — part of Fritha Langermann's exhibit titled *Code*.

Printing and mechanised reproduction are obvious metaphors for genetic replication which implicitly suggest that future humanity will conform to some standardised prototype over which we have no control. We are merely impotent witnesses to the Frankensteinian experiments the boxes document.

The pessimism of Langermann's vision embodies itself in the morbid, ghoulish quality she imparts to the segmented human body. Colour is replaced by forbidding dark greys, black, or stark blinding white. Our sense of dread is heightened by the use of alien materials and colours which give the boxed body parts an eerie, surreal quality. The hand is truncated from the anatomy, isolated, shattered into fragments, and executed in a repellent semi-transparent resin. Scale is distorted and eyes and ears are displaced from their normal context in order to disorientate us and dislocate our perceptions.

X-rays of skulls; yellowing casts of teeth, microscopically enlarged reproductions of body tissue, sperm and bone and unidentified fingerprints strike a macabre note. Although the goal of

the unrecognisable prongy, sharp-edged metal instruments eludes us, their menacing quality suggest it is sadistic. Obscurely labelled packets, envelopes and boxes; bound scrolls of paper and test-tubes filled with coiled paper data, envelop chromosome experiment in impenetrable secrecy, and prompt memories of clandestine operations in the cabinet of Doctor Caligari.

Superimposition, stacking, wrapping, illegible documentation and unidentifiable objects are all exploited to suggest that genetic engineering and its implications elude our understanding. This is a bleak vision drained of all warmth, colour and vitality. Science is annexing life and detaching reproduction from mankind, the body and emotional attachment. The arid severity suggests that what will result is a robotic race of programmed *ubermenschen* devoid of humanity.

All we can hope is that Langermann's unflinching vision of this sinister future will prove unfounded, but that, only time will tell. What the moment discloses is that a new SA artist of great, if perverse, gifts has arrived.

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