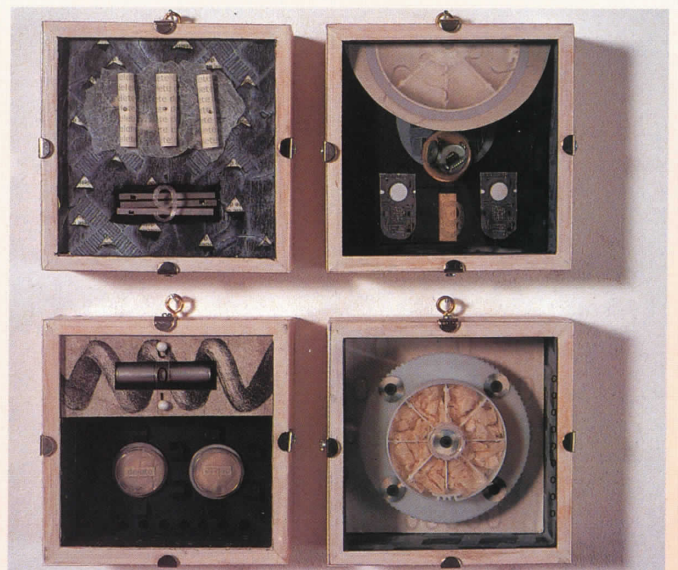
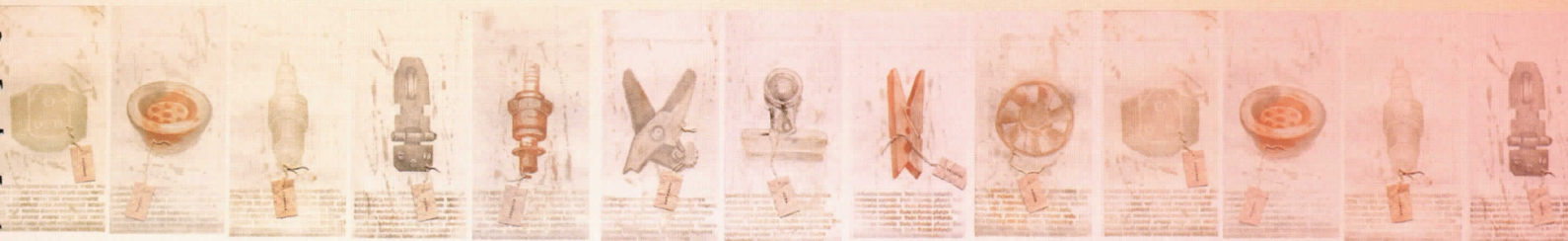


# Pandora's boxes

Fritha Langerman likes to think outside the box. So it's ironic that the artworks she's best known for are hand-made boxes arranged around different themes. By Lauren Shantall.





**T**ypically, the small squares and rectangles are fronted by clear Perspex and their innards lie visible just beneath, beckoning curious viewers to an intimate, close-up exploration of their depths. The contents of Langerman's beautiful boxed structures vary. But they've been known to contain an array of disquieting objects – like surgical scissors – combined with delicate scrolls of printed paper, cut-outs, folded origami shapes, plush velvet or even pearls . . . all depending on the particular subject matter that captures the artist's interest.

In her various exhibitions, Langerman has lifted the lid – a bit like the inquisitive Pandora of classical mythology – on genetic engineering, cloning, heredity, education and anthropological museum displays. Despite the different avenues she traverses, all of her work in the past seven years 'has been about information and the control of information, and coding, different coding systems and information within that,' she says.

Langerman believes we need to question the way in which cultural information is transmitted. Culture is mutable, it changes all the time and yet the 'representation of culture is a rigid, fixed thing' that can only do injustice to what it is trying to express. 'I just think it limits very much the way we understand each other in South Africa. Nothing is fixed . . . I think that in constructing this new South Africa, that's something we have to be aware of, so we don't fix and limit and

project onto other groupings.' Langerman often works as a curator at the South African Museum and this strong interest in museum display carries over into her art.

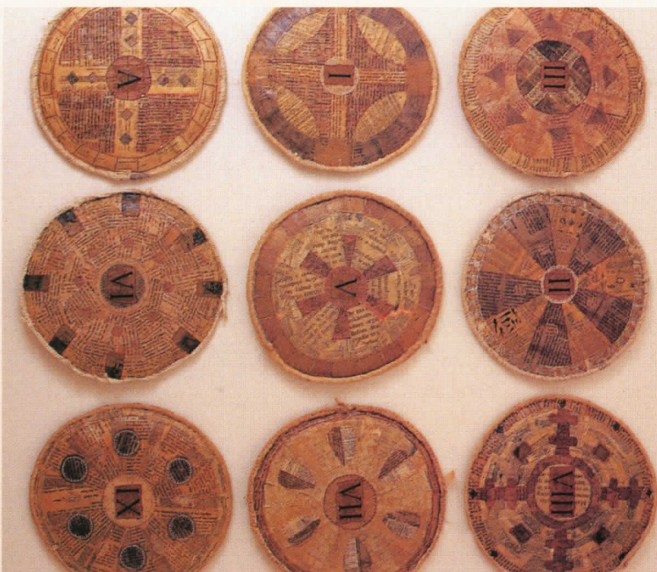
Inherited stereotypes, learnt through biased education or through cultural representations such as the controversial San diorama at the South African Museum, are what drive her to make her artistic point. She believes her artwork should 'generate some form of questioning, else it isn't doing its job at all'.

'Black Boxes', her most recent exhibition, is a case in point. Langerman created a mixed-media floor piece consisting of 99 shoebox-size units. Each was decorated on the exterior and fitted with a paper object folded out of government documents. The boxes were divided into nine series (representing the provinces) of 11 units each (denoting the 11 official languages). The artist's intention was to show that cultural classification is an inorganic and divisive process.

The thought-provoking constructions of 'Black Boxes' are quite sculptural in nature. The artist trained initially as a printmaker and not a sculptor at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art, graduating with distinction. Yet even her Masters exhibition at the Castle in Cape Town in 1996 broke away from traditional printmaking.

Langerman applied printmaking techniques to unusual surfaces and added found objects to the mix. Her innovative,

Opposite page, left: 'Dissect'. Opposite page, right: 'Time Remaining'. Below, left: 'Wisdom Comes With Age'. Below, right: 'Suitably Armed'.





constructed canvases became much larger than the paper available and 'the print' was transformed into an assembled object – 'which was very rare in printmaking at the time'.

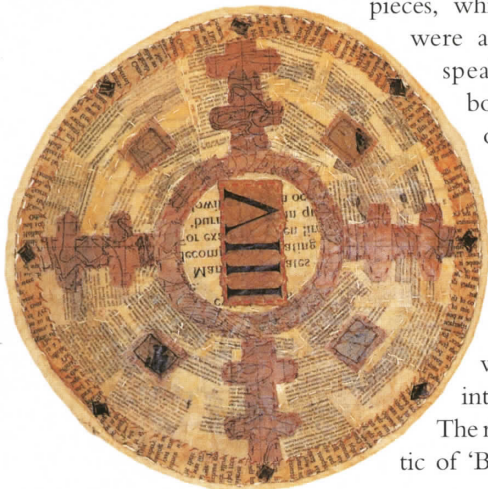
After that, Langerman's work became even more experimental as she geared up towards the 'Paper Armoury' series. For this collection, which was based on medieval weaponry, the artist forged a bodysuit of paper armour. Shredded sections of old school textbooks were stitched into breastplates, shields, visors, helmets and the like. 'A sound education is thought to provide opportunities and offer a defence against the outside world, the irony being that it affords no safeguards against unemployment. The armour has its chinks,' Langerman states. The 'Paper Armoury' is primarily concerned with education, accumulation of knowledge and systems of learning and was created at the time that Curriculum 2005 was being devised.

Langerman started working more directly with boxed units in her highly successful exhibition 'Code', which looked at genetic engineering and cloning. 'In 1998, it was an issue for people – there was a lot of paranoia around it at the time. But the work really wasn't projecting any point of view, negative or positive,' says Langerman.

Because 'Code' was so successful, it dictated to a large extent the pieces that followed. Langerman exhibited boxes in numerous group shows during 1998 and 1999, including 'Bloedlyn' at the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival and 'Project Conflux' in Luxembourg. She received the 1999 ABSA Atelier Merit Award. Langerman's 'Basic Equations' pieces, which looked at genetics,

were a turning point, so to speak. Here, the signature box was twisted into an X or a Y, denoting female or male. These Xs and Ys were filled with nearly white pieces of paper (newspaper snippets, such as male/female classifieds) that were folded or wrapped into packaged units.

The reduced, off-white aesthetic of 'Basic Equations' fed into



Top: 'Basic Equations'. Above: Detail from 'Insights'.

Below: Detail from 'Wisdom Comes With Age'.

the artist's blached, white 'Watch' installation (2001), a site-specific show that explored ideas surrounding surveillance. In between, she also produced a book that was shown at the Macau Museum of Arts's International Exhibition of Prints in 2000. Since that period, Langerman has divided her time between lecturing in the Michaelis Print and Media Department and preparing for the large 'Black Boxes' exhibition, which took a lot of time to produce.

'My work tends to be labour-intensive, but I get pleasure out of that. I pre-plan work so there isn't a great expressive event that happens in the process of making . . . I always make everything from scratch, every little box – no-one does anything for me, which is why they take so long to make. I just don't like other people's involvement. And people laugh at me for that.'

Langerman's meticulously assembled boxes make for striking visual objects that are capable of holding many layers of meaning. Each box acts as a well-defined, self-contained unit that encapsulates an idea, but that very idea constitutes a challenge to the viewer to look beyond the limits of the four walls before him or her. To think, as the artist herself does, outside of the box.

'These days, art is about the idea: you don't need to touch it or do anything – you just come up with the idea and someone else does the rest . . . That's how people produce. But I do it differently – I'm rather old-fashioned that way.'