



Lexicons and Labyrinths

South African Museum | Cape Town

Clockwise from top left: Lien Botha, *Brother's Keeper*, 2003, installation view; Sandile Zulu, *Untitled*, 2003, detail; Fritha Langerman, *Model-making*, 2003, installation view; Alan Alborough, *Missing in Action (Spoils)*, 2003, installation view; Willem Boshoff, *(little) matter, (big) time, (small) chance*, 2003, detail; Willem Boshoff, *(little) matter, (big) time, (small) chance*, 2003, detail; Alan Alborough, *Missing in Action (Spoils)*, 2003, installation view; Fritha Langerman, *Model-making*, 2003, installation view; Lien Botha, *Brother's Keeper*, 2003, detail

Lexicons and Labyrinths: Iconography of the Genome, organised to coincide with the Africa Human Genome Conference held in Stellenbosch by the Human Sciences Research Council, was one of several initiatives aimed at opening up the concept and implications of the Human Genome Project to the broader public. Other initiatives included an art competition, *What is Life*, won jointly by Charlotte van Heerden and Chris Slack.

In view of the exhibition's concern to explore the connection between art, science and representation, it is understandable that the curator, Fritha Langerman, chose to mount *Lexicons and Labyrinths* at the South African Museum rather than the National Gallery. Some of the participants nevertheless decided to show their work in an area normally reserved for travelling exhibitions, thereby effectively distancing their "art" from the natural history and other displays located throughout the museum. Because of the dialogical possibilities offered by the museum's permanent exhibits, this decision seems momentarily puzzling. But closer reflection suggests that it is probably not coincidental that the latter group of artists includes Willem Boshoff and Isaac Nkosinathi Khanyile, both of whom seek to bridge complex notions of time and space by using beads and beadwork as a metaphor for Africa and the African experience. By isolating their own work from the permanent displays, these artists draw attention to the highly problematic juxtaposition, elsewhere in the museum, of indigenous people (and their art) with dinosaur dioramas and fossil remains.

In contrast to Khanyile and Boshoff, several other artists chose to blur the visual and conceptual boundaries between art and science by exploring possible connections between aspects of the Human Genome Project and existing displays in the museum. The curator's own installation, which consists of an illuminated strip of units made from pharmaceutical packaging, is particularly interesting in this regard. Evoking 3D laboratory models, it uses the materials and visual language of science to comment on the 50th anniversary of the Watson-Crick DNA model. Like a number of the other installations, its

success can be attributed, most obviously, to the suggestive ways in which it challenges commonly held assumptions regarding differences between art and science. Unable to decide whether to read displays such as these as scientific "texts" or as works of "art", the viewer is encouraged to reflect on both the artifice of human creativity and the visually captivating "art" of nature. In Sandile Zulu's exploration of the psychosocial mapping of the human brain, and Nadja Daehnke's reflections on the ideology of science, this articulation of relationships between science and art is historicised, in Zulu's case through an evocative approximation of scientific drawings of the human brain that serve to underline the delicate fragility of human existence.

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While crossover exhibitions like *Lexicons and Labyrinths* undoubtedly succeed in challenging the values and assumptions of art lovers, it would be interesting to know how the general public, particularly school pupils, responded to this show. What did visitors like these make of the holes Alan Alborough cut into the carpet of one display area, or of Malcolm Payne's *Human Behaviour*, for example? If the theft of an artificial mouse from Lien Botha's *Brother's Keeper* and attempts to eat the icing from her Styrofoam cake are anything to go by, this audience is surprisingly unconcerned to observe commonly accepted boundaries between art and life. Perhaps, therefore, their interventions should be viewed not so much as acts of destruction, but as meaningful (if unintended) tributes to the aims of the exhibition.

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