

## REVIEWS / CAPE

**The Lexicons and Labyrinths of the Human Genome**

by Sue Neppen



Fritha Langerman  
*modelmaking*, 2003  
Mixed media installation

You need an inquiring mind, spirit of adventure and plenty of time to view interpretations of the iconography of the human genome currently on display at the South African Museum. Featuring works by the likes of Willem Boshoff, Lien Botha and Alan Alborough, the show was conceived by Lynne Wilson of the Human Sciences Research Council as a way of educating the South African public on issues around the Human Genome Project (HGP) through art.

The SA Museum, with its focus on science, was chosen as an appropriate venue for an exhibition coinciding with an international HGP conference at Spier. The HGP aims to chart detailed sequential maps of the 30 000 genes within human inherited DNA. The objective is mainly the prevention or alleviation of disease. As well as clarifying legal matters, the HGP also addresses the ethical and social issues that arise from genome research.

Fritha Langerman was tasked with the curatorial role of finding artists to contribute to the debate around this advancing science of plotting and reading the body. Art interprets the language and implications of science through visual analogy. Langerman therefore selected artists for their ability to grapple with complex socio-political issues, as well as their concerns with the interaction of language modes, their representation and the sciences.

Each artist chose their own location within the museum according to the individual statement they wished to make. Consequent curatorial challenges included informing members of the public of the exhibition's presence, as well as guiding them to the artworks, which also needed to be distinguished from museum exhibits. A large introductory panel in the foyer would have been useful, although a map is available. Markers as well as artists' text statements identify each installation as art, succeeding to a greater or lesser degree, depending on lighting or where they are placed.

Issues dealt with by participating artists include those relating to power based on knowledge systems, and are translated into visual form in unique ways. In Nadja Daehnke's carefully installed *imaging human / imagining human*, a lit ceiling-height translucent panel depicting the genetic bands of named individuals is hung in front of blackboard walls covered with diagrams and outlines of previous theories and methods of classification. The installation is placed in front of the closed San Diorama and provides a comment on the transience of knowledge systems, as well as their political and economic motives.

Fritha Langerman's installation, *modelmaking*, deals with the scientific endeavour to gain power through the collecting, ordering and displaying of data. It translated the brief in a more material way. Placed behind a lit glass case overlooking the Whale Well, the installation looks like a museum exhibit (intentionally), until you see that the models are made up of plastic pharmaceutical packaging such as syringes. One of the forms is reminiscent of the DNA double-helix spiral; others echo displays of skeletons nearby.

Lien Botha's *Brother's Keeper* and Alan Alborough's *missing, in-action [spoils]* are more enigmatic and challenging of the implications of power. Botha's installation comprises 23 units used for experiments on Norwegian rats, representing scientific power over the vulnerable. Twenty-two of the units are 'dressed up' as ambiguous comments on the relationship between science, knowledge, history and the human condition. Each animal unit has a title: 'pea body' (Mendel's pea plants in soil), 'head or tail' (guillotine-like arrangement). The units are placed along the length of a passage next to a window, like experiments in a laboratory.

Alborough cut up museum carpeting and laid it out to spell S P O I L S on the existing carpet at the bottom of stairs. These lead up to the 'Wonders of Nature' display where two large squares of carpet are missing. Just as the natural items have been transferred from one system to another through the power of colonisation and scientific pursuit, so Alborough's thoughtful work comments on the implications and dangers inherent in removing genetic material from one genome to another (as read in the context of this exhibition).

The challenge of developing a visual language for concepts directly connected to the genetic script result in finely crafted works. In Willem Boshoff's *(little) matter, (big) time, (small) chance*, each of these three constants in evolutionary theory are dealt with in a separate panel, and interpreted texturally through repetition (delicate beads for genes, clocks for our time continuum, dice for chance). The iconography is a clear expression of diversity within an ordered system.

Isaac Nkosinathi Khanyile, with his *So, I am*, interprets the genetic script in the

language of his own culture, using traditional Zulu materials and artefacts (woven beadwork and ancestral totem poles). According to Khanyile's explanatory text, the images seen in *So, I am* also affirm the physical and spiritual connection between all people.

'Lexicons and Labyrinths' is a commendable initiative in developing an iconography on the genome in Southern Africa. In terms of educating the public, however, I suspect that few people have seen the exhibition as a whole, traversing the SA Museum for that purpose. In addition, some works may be too obscure for the average museumgoer to grasp their meaning. Lighting, security measures, as well as the maintenance of artworks and guiding documents, are other teething problems in a valiant collaboration to place artwork amongst science exhibits.

A visit to the concurrent public art competition exhibition, 'What is Life?', on the ground floor, complements the curated exhibition of invited artists. One exhibition space displays the work of 80 artists who have interpreted social and ethical issues connected to the Human Genome Project, with an emphasis on our African context.

March 22 - June 30

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