



HISTORY IN THE MAKING

One of Cape Town's most prestigious tertiary education institutes, the University of Cape Town, celebrates its 175th anniversary with an exhibition titled *Curiosity CLXXV*, write NOZUKO MBANA and JAMES GARNER

Aptly named *Curiosity*, this intriguing exhibition focusing on the history of UCT is curated by Pippa Skotnes, Gwen van Embden and Fritha Langerman. It took seven months to compile a range of artefacts and artworks, ranging from old medical and scientific equipment to architectural plans, archival photographs, drawings, paintings, relics of natural history, and even a stringless violin that belonged to Andrew Proctor (who won the Victoria Cross in World War I).

This exhibition resembles the Pitt River Museum at Oxford University, only here they are playing with typology in very different ways.

Skotnes explains the rationale behind the exhibition, "Some time, at the beginning of the year, I got the message that the Vice-Chancellor would like something from the performing and creative arts to celebrate the 175th anniversary. At first I thought of putting together 10 cabinets – one for each of the 10 years of democracy – but then once Van Embden and Langerman came on board it suddenly seemed possible to do something more ambitious and now we are curating 175 cabinets."

Also on display are title deeds on parchment, medals, orthopaedic paediatric boots from a collection at Groote Schuur, and a stone that may have been used to beat the ground in a rain-making ritual practised by the !Kun San of North Damaraland.

The exhibition is presented in the form of a museum display, with objects contained in display cases and cabinets. The difference is that, unlike in a conventional museum, the connections between different objects are often not immediately apparent, if at all. Among the cabinets you will find Lucy Lloyd's original display cupboard (Lloyd having worked closely with Wilhelm Bleek on the recording of the stories of the /Xam peo-



ple in the 19th century). The cupboard is Skotnes' personal possession, and she is delighted to be able to return to it some of Lucy's books and skin instruments made for her by the /Xam, including a dancing rattle sewn out of springbok ears. In this way, *Curiosity* recalls similar projects by British artists Eduardo Paolozzi in the mid-1980s. Paolozzi was fascinated by the way categories can be broken down, investing objects and artefacts with new meanings through unusual and unexpected juxtapositions. In a cabinet housing containers, you'll find the butterscotch tin belonging to the Registrar Hugh Amoore which houses his running medals.

Four television sets play interviews with Professor Maarten de Witt talking about the first million years of the earth's creation, Professor John Parkington and Cedric Poggenpoel talking about seasonality, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Thandabantu Nhlapo on, among other things, customary

law, and Dr Helen Moffett and Professor Tim Noakes on cricket. In addition, several people have been asked to write literary pieces to accompany the exhibition.

One of the first people to offer his help was the now retired Professor Deon Knobel, former head of forensic pathology, who contributed items such as the stiletto shoe which was used as a murder weapon, complete with the bit of human skull it once penetrated.

"Objects have an extraordinary mobility of meaning," says Skotnes. We hope that this act of curatorship will generate new ideas about UCT."

The exhibition is on show until the end of March at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, Hiddingh Hall Campus (opposite the Labia cinema) in Orange Street, Cape Town. **31**