

# Finding an artful experience in disease

**JEANNE VIAL**

PLAGUES, pandemics and dread diseases look somewhat different after a visit to *Subtle Thresholds*, an exhibition by Fritha Langerman at the Iziko South African Museum.

Creatures sit pickled in jars; a slightly moth-eaten stuffed rabbit wears an oxygen mask. Viruses are objects of beauty; healing hands meet together to form giant wings. Animal droppings become landscapes to marvel at, and the human being dwarfs into insignificance as just one on an endless species list which stretches around the hall.

Confused? The best thing about this exhibition is the many questions it will leave you with. The exhibition is multi-layered and will appeal on many levels in different ways to different people.

The question Langerman asks of us is what we "know" about disease and the ways it is represented.

"Micro-organisms link us, species work in an interlinked way," she says. "We are not separate from disease – there is a microbe and host relationship.

"We share, we have relationships. I'd like people to have a sense of wonder and beauty, a different perception of disease, after seeing the exhibition."

Humans have been understood as a discreet species, with defined boundaries, as a result of cultural and linguistic description and codification, as opposed to acknowledging a continuous interaction with other organisms, says Langerman.

"Until we are able to understand ourselves as a species in a constant relationship to others – both animals and micro-organisms – we will never be able to overcome the prejudice and stereotyping that is endemic within much human interaction."

Langerman is an artist, a printmaker by training and a lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. The exhibition is beautiful to look at, but it's much more than art.

It reminds us of a new way at looking at infectious disease across the artificial boundaries between science, history and art.

There are many entrances to the exhibition, and no right place to start. But a wall at one end catches my attention, with what looks to me like giant white wings.

"For me it starts with the wings," says Langerman. "Religion and disease have held hands – and still do – with condemnation during plagues."

On closer inspection the wings are



**ART MEETS SCIENCE:** Fritha Langerman draws attention to some of the contemporary debates surrounding biomedical images and artefacts on various infectious diseases in *Subtle Threshold* at the Iziko SA Museum.

PICTURE: MXOISI MADELA

made of paper cutouts of 512 hands, taken from paintings and pictures of healers through the ages. There's a cathedral-like quality to this space, and leading up to the wings are intricate mandala-like designs, replicas of 10 viruses made from thousands of specimen jars and miniature funnels, lit from below. They're beautiful.

The viruses are not immediately identified – international codes, symptoms and treatment are given; like much in this exhibition, you must look elsewhere to find names.

The exhibition is primarily visual, and Langerman has used devices which heighten vision to unlock the way we see and understand disease.

There's a playfulness in the exhibition – her plague altar (after the plague altar's built to St Sebastian, the protector against plagues) is enclosed by a metal cage of the healing hands, now in their negative form. Inside are some hapless animals from the museum's dusty mammal stores – a giraffe's head, a husky, a vicuna (llama) and a capabara (giant rodent), all bandaged.

The exhibition evolved in relation to the space, she says. On the high walls there are layers of images – shadow guns, for

example, hint at the colonists who brought diseases like smallpox with them, which devastated indigenous populations who had little resistance to them.

Then there are pictures of animal droppings, magnified by an electron microscope. "That's Kommetjie camel poo," she smiles.

There are texts written out on chalkboard, various writings about disease.

Look for the 70m timeline, with a species list documenting one thousandth of what's available, and consider that we're just one of them.

"I wanted to work with layers of meaning," says Langerman. "The web of life is not hierarchical. There are many connections here, and people may get bits of it, and they may not. But there's an integrity to the system."

There is so much to see in *Subtle Thresholds*, with layer upon layer to contemplate, that a few visits, or a long one, would be a good thing.

● The Iziko South African Museum is open from 10am to 5pm daily. Entrance is R15 per adult and free for children under 16. For more details visit [www.iziko.org.za](http://www.iziko.org.za) or call 021 481 3800.