

CHRIS THURMAN sees dead people (and other things) in the name of science and curiosity

THE Museum for Medical Morphological Sciences is, to say the least, a strange place.

Housed deep inside the monolithic edifice of the Medical Faculty at Stellenbosch University's Tygerberg Campus in the northern suburbs of Cape Town, the museum is not easy to access. In fact, it was only recently that Prof Ben Page opened the museum to the public — first to high school groups (they had 4 000 pupils visit last year), and then to adult visitors in guided tours. In the not-too-distant future, anticipates Page, they hope to make the museum more widely accessible. Until that time, however, those who do make the effort to organise a group visit will find it well worth their while — if, perhaps, a little disturbing. This is not a regular anatomy museum, such as you will find at most med schools. It includes numerous specimens from the campus's defunct pathology museum, from gangrenous feet to cancer-ridden lungs and oversized hearts to deformed bones. The museum's collection is growing all the time: it has also absorbed items belonging to the former zoology, dentistry and forensic science museums. Thus, although there are 1000 specimens on display, there are another 1 000 in storage waiting for the floor space to be expanded. As curator Paul Pretorius walks me through the three-storey building, he explains the gargantuan task he faces. Courtesy of the dentistry museum, there are hundreds of items relating to medical



BODY SHOP: Above, a show of hands; below left, a human torso; below right, the Museum for Medical Morphological Science's interior. Pictures: CHRIS THURMAN

history. We walk past a rudimentary drill operated by a foot-pump, and Pretorius quips: "In those days it was better to go to the dentist in the morning, before his legs got tired ". The forensics collection has skulls smashed open by shotguns or pockmarked with bullet holes. From the zoology museum there are animal skins, stuffed birds and skeletons of all kinds;

one display compares the bone structure of human arms and legs with other mammals' limbs. All of these additions need to be classified, collated and cross-referenced—an ongoing project that is expected to take at least five years. For now, the museum's appeal resides in what may crudely be described as the freak-show element. Certainly, it is driven by an educational imperative: the most frequent visitors to the museum are, of course, the university's medical students, who can compare healthy organs with

unhealthy ones, or study what might go wrong during the complex processes of ontogenetic human development. But Page and Pretorius admit that when they amalgamated the collections (particularly from the pathology museum), they were glad to have found a “wow factor”. This is not to say that the museum aims to be sensationalist; Page is quick to distance it from Gunther von Hagens’ extremely popular and mildly controversial BodyWorlds exhibition. Yet, for those who have seen Von Hagens’ still-life circus of plastinated corpses — even if only as a backdrop to Daniel Craig’s pouting good looks in Casino Royale — a visit to the museum will have a similar effect. Staring into the many perspex boxes containing severed limbs, or heads, or torsos, floating in amber preservative fluid — “The light changes the colour,” complains Pretorius, “we have to refill them all once a year” — one can’t help but be fascinated. At first, this fascination has more than a hint of the macabre, perhaps even the voyeuristic; but morbidity is replaced by a kind of aesthetic enjoyment, and ultimately, as Page points out, an appreciation of “the beauty of the human form”.

MUSEUMPIECE

“Medical friends and family members have regaled me before with the delights of anatomy lessons”

The obstetrics section of the museum demonstrates the stages of foetal growth. Alongside this, however, is a display that cannot in any way be construed as a celebration: rare paediatric

anomalies, showing newborn — most of them, one guesses, stillborn — infants with congenital defects. Conjoined twins that shared all their internal organs; micro- and macrocephalics (with overly small or large heads); and even a bicephalous (two-headed) baby; severe cases of cleft palate (the mouth fusing with the nose); and cyclopes (a single eye in the centre of the forehead). These innocents, appearing trapped inside their perspex prisons, evoke a deep sense of pathos. Each situation — or more specifically, the situation of each set of parents — was, undoubtedly, tragic. One feels a vague outrage at the cosmos: how could this be allowed to happen? Intellectualising my anger, I found myself questioning the ethics of taking a source of private agony and turning it into a public scientific display. Pretorius acknowledges that this is an awkward issue, but notes that in all cases, parents gave their consent. Indeed, most of the museum’s human specimens were donated: some were removed in surgery, others were bequeathed. Page tells me the dissection hall is a big hit with the school kids, and insists I take a look. Medical friends and family have regaled me before with the delights of anatomy lessons: the pervasive smell of embalming fluid, the joke names given to the cadavers. Still, it’s not easy to reconcile these stories with the sight of 30 longdead bodies, covered in blankets and sheeting, lying side by side. Pretorius opens one up and, with the ease of a man well acquainted with dead bodies, peels back layers of tissue to pull out

the organs. The skin is like thick cardboard. So this is where doctors learn to save lives. The dissecting hall, like the museum, is an invigorating and unnerving experience; a place where, as Herman Melville put it, “Life folds Death, and Death trellises Life”. There are only a handful of places in the world like this (the Hunterian Museum in London is the most famous, but Bangkok’s ghoulish Forensic Museum and Museum of Human Anatomy is also popular). Certainly, it is unique in Africa, and especially as ours is a continent where the value of life is often undermined by ignominious death, it is an important, albeit hidden, resource.

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