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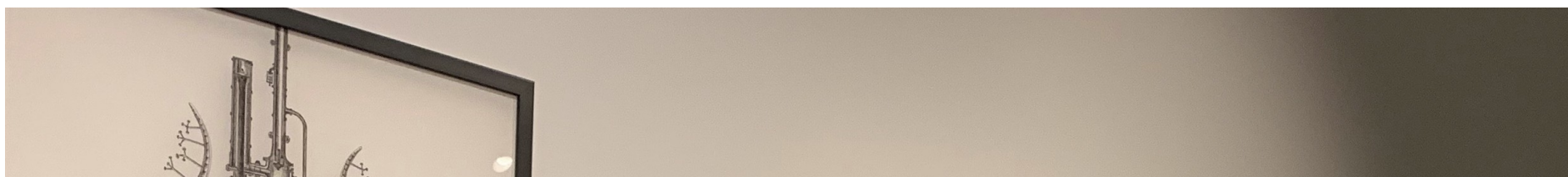
Contagious Cities exhibition in Hong Kong captures fear and paranoia evoked by diseases like Sars

New exhibition at Tai Kwun is part of an international project that examines the relationship between “microbes, migration and the metropolis”

The social and emotional impact of the deadly Sars epidemic was the inspiration for the Hong Kong part of the project

Topic | Art**Simone McCarthy**

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The sanitising hand towels being distributed near the entrance to “Contagious Cities: Far Away, Too Close”, the new art exhibition at JC Contemporary in Hong Kong’s Tai Kwun heritage and arts centre, are not just there for public health.

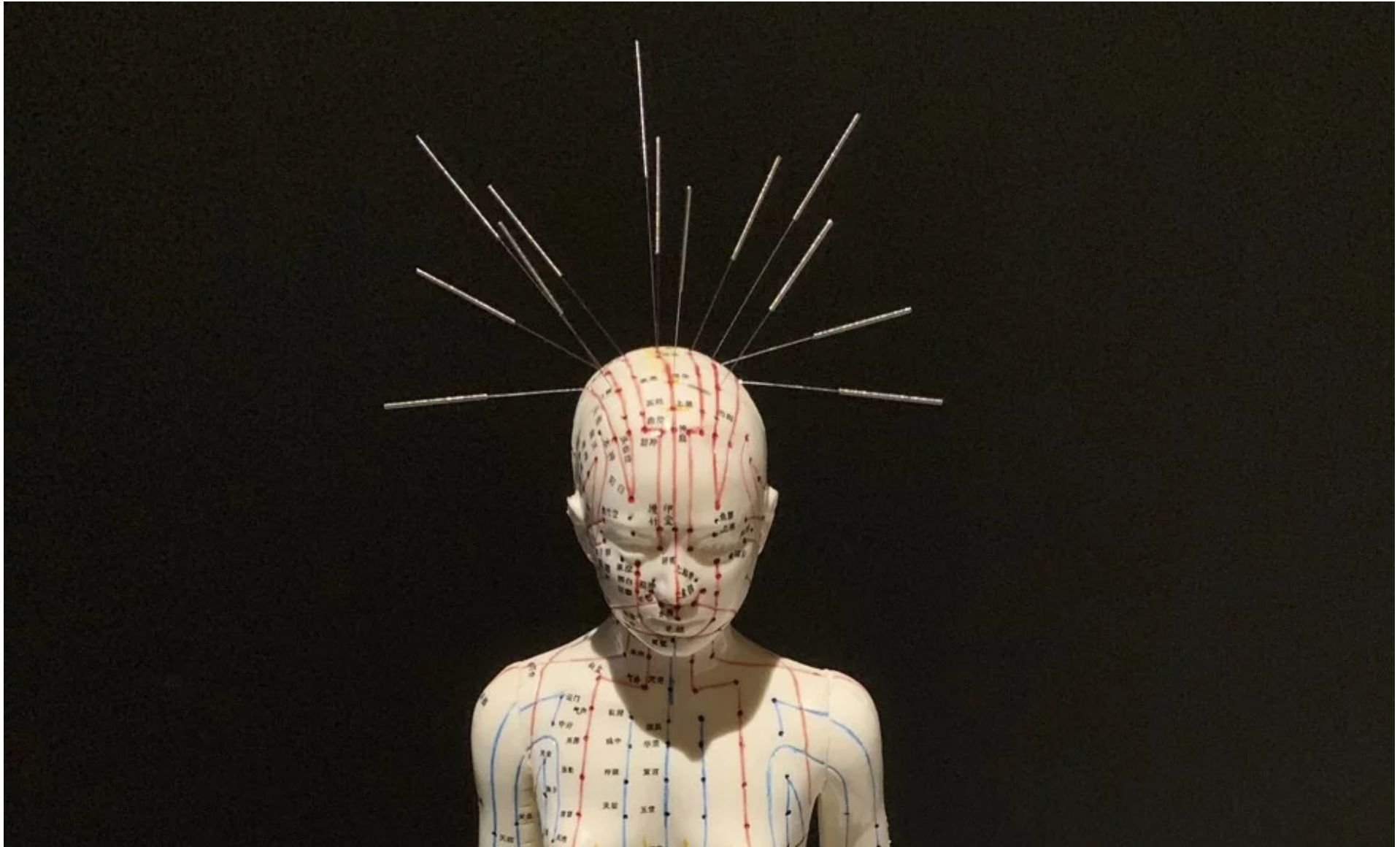
Instead, the lemony scented cloths are a nod to the hygiene habits that are a part of daily life in Hong Kong – habits that exhibition curator Ying Kwok says were adopted after the city became ground zero for the spread of the global Sars epidemic in 2003.

[Hong Kong’s deadly Sars outbreak in pictures](#)

[1]

“It’s the tiny little things that always remind us, such as how people regularly clean lift buttons or how people didn’t wear [face] masks before Sars,” she says. “It had actual impact on life and on work. Even though it’s a distant memory, we still do feel it in many ways.”

The social and emotional impact of the deadly epidemic was the inspiration for the exhibition, which is part of an international “Contagious Cities” project – a series of exhibitions and events in New York, Geneva and Hong Kong – organised by the UK-based Wellcome Trust. The biomedical charity is best known for co-founding the Human Genome Project and for its large museum collection of art and medical artefacts.





An artefact at the exhibition from a collection that references the history of disease control in Hong Kong. Photo: Simone McCarthy

The project examines the relationship between “microbes, migration and the metropolis” through art, science and history. The opening of the Hong Kong art exhibit, and an accompanying heritage exhibit, at Tai Kwun last weekend kicked off six months of events in the city as part of the initiative.

Hong Kong was chosen in part for its “rich history” of contagion propelled both by its hot climate and role as an international crossroads, according to Kwok.

In the art exhibition, the fear and paranoia evoked by diseases such as Sars and the plague outbreak of 1894 loom large in a mural called *Train Compartment* by Hong Kong artist Oscar Chan Yik-long, who used iconography from horror films and manga. A pair of skeleton hands by Cheuk Wing-nam, called *No Sense of Touch*, mounted on a wall in another room buzz loudly when you get too close.





Train Compartment by Oscar Chan Yik-long. Photo: Simone McCarthy

A collection of artefacts references the history of disease control in Hong Kong, from propaganda posters with slogans like “unclean food will take your life” to a “rat bin” for safe rodent disposal.

Science and epidemiology, key themes of the international project, have their place in the exhibition as well.

The trauma experienced by medical professions defending Hong Kong against Sars is explained in a recorded interview with World Health Organisation doctor Mike Ryan, who coordinated the Sars response. A documentary by Hong Kong artist Angela Su Sai-kee, meanwhile, probes Eastern and Western concepts of disease following her residency at the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences.







Ink drawings by Angela Su at the exhibition. Photo: Simone McCarthy

These two faces of contagious disease – its abstract science and personal psychology – play into Hong Kong’s specific “Contagious Cities” theme of “Far Away, Too Close”.

“Disease is something you think doesn’t have anything to do with you or it’s not happening, but when it hits, when we realise, it’s already too close and we are in it already,” Kwok says.

The element of being “too close” factors heavily into the heritage installation, which visitors can make their way through in the halls surrounding Tai Kwun’s Prison Yard. Exhibits track the history of Hong Kong’s plague outbreak at the end of the 19th century from the perspective of sanitation and urban planning in crowded early colonial housing.



Visitors watching a documentary at the exhibition. Photo: Simone McCarthy



The signature logo for “Contagious Cities: Far Away, Too Close”. Photo: Simone McCarthy

Though both the art and heritage exhibits weave a retrospective thread through Hong Kong’s experience of disease, Kwok says that the overall aim is not a look back at the past, but to push audiences to engage with the future.

“When something unfortunate happens we always try to be better prepared for next time, but we can never prepare ourselves enough,” she says.

“The key is to talk about it and to not avoid it, [but] to learn from it.”

Contagious Cities: Far Away, Too Close, until April 21. Art installation opens 11am–7pm daily (11am–9pm every Friday); Heritage installation 11am–8pm

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[1] <https://www.scmp.com/photos/hong-kong/2138765/hong-kongs-deadly-sars-outbreak-pictures>