

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

Sculpture smelling of breast milk to draw in visitors to new Wellcome gallery

Mark Brown

4 September 2019

London gallery intended as celebration of what it means to be human in 21st century



Refugee Astronaut by Yinka Shonibare is a life-size sculpture of a galactic explorer carrying a ramshackle collection of earthly possessions. Photograph: Steven Pocock/Wellcome Collection

Some say it smells of modelling clay. Others that it has the vague aroma of talcum powder mixed with vanilla. Or perhaps a freshly painted room.

Members of the public will be able to decide for themselves when they rub a scented sculpture designed to evoke the smell of human breast milk. The bronze artwork, which goes on display on Thursday, is a celebration of bifidobacteria and part of a new permanent gallery at the Wellcome Collection in London exploring what it means to be human in the 21st century.



Everything is Okay by Antoine Catala resembles a blank canvas until the words are pumped into it. Photograph: Wellcome Trust/PA

Curator Clare Barlow said the gallery was a celebration of the fact “we are all different, but also all connected. We all have an impact, both on each other and on the world around us. Each of the objects raises questions and brings in different perspectives.”

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She hopes the 50 artworks and objects will encourage visitors “to think more deeply about things, to be surprised by things. We want people to encounter extraordinary research and ideas and art”.

There are a number of interactive artworks, including the breast milk bronze by [Tasha Marks of AVM Curiosities](#). She has titled it 5318008; any bored teenager with a calculator will tell you what that spells upside down.

Elsewhere is an interactive panel called Resurrecting the Sublime, which, when rubbed, produces a floral, herby smell. It is in fact the lost scent of the extinct flower *hibiscadelphus wilderianus*, which grew on Mount Haleakalā in Hawaii before its habitat was destroyed by colonial cattle ranching.

Music on a jukebox controlled by the public plays songs that relate to epidemics, such as [The Streets’ He’s Behind You, He’s Got Swine Flu](#); Tan Tan B and Quincy B’s ebola awareness-raising [State of Emergency](#); and LaTour’s HIV-related [People Are Still Having Sex](#).

The new gallery, designed by the Turner prize-winning collective Assemble, is divided into four sections – genetics, minds and bodies, infection and environmental breakdown.



The bronze sculpture 5318008 by Tasha Marks is a celebration of bifidobacteria . Photograph: Wellcome Trust/PA

It contains a number of artworks commissioned by the [Wellcome Collection](#), including Refugee Astronaut by Yinka Shonibare, a life-size sculpture of a galactic explorer carrying a ramshackle collection of earthly possessions.

“It is an extraordinary commentary on where we are and where we might be in the future,” said Barlow

Barlow hopes every section will have works that prompt “delight and wonder”. There is a tank of zebra fish, shining light on a fish with which humans share 70% of their genes, and a work by Antoine Catala, which looks like a blank canvas until the reassuring message “Everything is Okay” is pumped into it.

These are counterbalanced by less delightful works. Top of the list must be a display that includes eye wash, VapoRub, KY Jelly, a blender and a sieve, which the gallery says “is everything needed for a

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faecal transplant: where poo from a healthy person is swallowed or inserted into the gut to increase the variety of bacteria”.

Barlow said: “It is not something we recommend but at the same time it is a cultural phenomenon. One that says something about the symbiotic relationship we have with our gut bacteria.”