

Heartbreaker 2002
fibreglass and automotive paint
95.0 x 70.0 x 70.0cm
Purchased 2002
Newcastle Art Gallery collection



FOREWORD

Newcastle Art Gallery is proud to present the exhibition *Like Us: Patricia Piccinini* from 29 November 2014 to 22 February 2015. Featuring works from the Newcastle Art Gallery collection, the Art Gallery of South Australia and Patricia Piccinini's own personal collection, this exhibition also premieres newly created drawings and a video work.

Piccinini's works both excite and unnerve. They cause us to question our place in a universe where biology and technology migrate closer together, and ask us, 'Where does the human begin and end?'

The title of the exhibition *Like Us* references the smallest of difference between the human and not quite human. Visceral sculptures invoke familial-like connection between the human and these creations. Piccinini is deliberate in her use of materials that literally fuse the human (hair), animal (leather) and synthetic materials such as auto paint, fibreglass, polyurethane and silicone. In the process of making these works, Piccinini undertakes a form of 'cloning' and genetic fusion of disparate elements to create uncanny and alluring works of art.

Newcastle Art Gallery has had a long-standing relationship with Piccinini and the exhibition features two works from the collection from important periods in the artist's career; *Heartbreaker* 2002 and *Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (Nature's little helper series) 2004.

Heartbreaker 2002, part of Piccinini's 2002 'car nuggets' series, explores the luscious and tactile allure of the car exterior and the eternal appeal of car culture to younger generations. Of these works, Piccinini said, '...car nuggets are to cars what chicken nuggets are to chickens...when you look at them, they have no purpose... they're just 'essence of car' or 'car flavoured!'. These works fetishize cars in contemporary culture. They question conspicuous consumption of the automotive as a signifier of identity, class, fashion and taste.

Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat) 2004 is part of the *Nature's little helper* series. These surrogate creatures are intended to help propagate an endangered species. With false pouches on her back gestating wombat young, she wears armadillo like scales as armour to repel any looming threat. Where currently human surrogacy is an ethically problematic and internationally debated issue, so too is this surrogacy of one of Australia's most endangered species.

Love and motherhood is another common theme in Piccinini's practice. One of the most emotive works that embodies this primal connection of the maternal figure is *Big Mother* 2005 suckling her 'human' offspring. Here emotion and empathy coalesce. We as viewers might be initially repelled by the foreign, abject and visceral nature of these 'creatures' but they have within them a latent emotional resonance we also connect to. *The Lovers* 2011 is

the fusing of two mopeds, intertwined in a tender embrace between sensual and mechanical bodies. Both these works of art are from the Art Gallery of South Australia collection.

Between the nexus of the natural and unnatural worlds, Piccinini's creations have an anthropomorphic sensibility. We witness emotional connection between characters in works such as *The Welcome Guest* 2011. *Nature's little helpers* are small warriors protecting dying species; and video works embody companionship and empathy between human and non-human. Even the auto works have a sensual facility that lends itself to human contact through touch and caress.

Patricia Piccinini's works of art invite inquiry and interrogation. They repel and enthrall. Ultimately, they force us to question our relationships to each other as humans, to technology and the contemporary world.

Sarah Johnson
Curator
Newcastle Art Gallery



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Nature's little helpers - Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat) 2004 (detail)
silicone, polyurethane, leather, hair, wood
120.0 x 350.0 x 350.0cm
Purchased by Newcastle Region Art Gallery Foundation 2006
Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Cover image
Tender 2014 (detail)
HD 1080p stereo
Production still from video
Artist collection



LIKE US PATRICIA PICCININI

29 NOVEMBER 2014 – 22 FEBRUARY 2015

NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY

¹ Piccinini interviewed in Michael Hutak, 'Patricia Piccinini's Perfect Planet, Professionally Produced' in *Australian Art Collector*, Issue 18, October – December 2001, p 65.



Connection and empathy are at the heart of my practice, and at the heart of this exhibition. I use the word 'heart' deliberately, firstly because my work is heartfelt and also because, like a heart, it is composed of a tangle of pathways and chambers that connect together. At first glance perhaps, the squeamish might find both an actual heart and my work a little disturbing, a bit visceral. However, as you get to know my world you will see that its heart is in the right place. I like to think that my work is 'sanguine'; an interesting word meaning cheerful or hopeful, but derived from the Latin word for blood. Blood animates the body, if we are afraid of the sight of it it is because we know how precious it is. I love these sorts of paradoxes and connections, the way things can be more than one thing at once - wonderful and disturbing and vulnerable and dangerous - and all of it coming to us through the medium of our experience and our emotions.

Many of the works are beings of one sort or another - creatures. The word *creature* is another interesting one; it comes from Middle English and means literally 'something created'. My creatures are just that; things that I created, imaginary beings that are almost possible.

They are not always traditionally handsome, but they always have a beauty and honesty within them. They are more vulnerable than threatening. People sometimes find their strangeness off-putting at first, but they usually learn to see past this. The creatures literally appeal to the audience's empathy, they entreat the viewer to look beyond their strangeness and see the connections. This is the double meaning of the exhibition's title. '*Like us*', the creatures implore, 'because, deep down, you are just *like us*.'

Modern understanding of genetics and biology has shown us how deeply interconnected all life on earth is. There is more similarity between creatures than there is difference. Yet much of how we understand the world and its creatures is based on the idea of a fundamental difference between us and them. Every new thing we learn - whether it is about language, behaviour or biology - points to the basic wrongness of this presumption. The other creatures in the world are more 'like us' than not. This is also an obvious metaphor for all our relationships, whether creatures, the environment or other people.

The world I have tried to create in *Like Us* is clearly different from the one we live in, but it is not actually so far removed from it. It is a world that plays out the implications of the processes and ideas that animate much of contemporary life. It is a reflection of our world, but reshaped by my own personal perceptions. Many of the works reflect on what might come from contemporary research, but it is more ambiguous than didactic. I am inspired by the implications of the science that shows how closely related all earthly life is. I am intrigued by the possibilities and compromises that are tied together when research is put into practice. I am aware of what happens in the space between certainty and reality, where people do the wrong things for all the right reasons. I am not trying to tell people what to think, I am more interested in how they feel, and in offering them a space to reflect for themselves or just to wonder.

This process of connection is led to a certain degree by the other inhabitants of the exhibition, who tend to be children. Many of my works contain different representations of children and infants, who I feel embody a number of the key issues. Obviously children directly express the idea of genetics - both natural and artificial - but beyond that they also imply the responsibilities that a creator has to their creations. In my work, even machines have children as evidenced by *Cyclepups series* 2005 - 2007

and *The Lovers* 2011. The innocence and vulnerability of children is powerfully emotive and evokes empathy - their presence softens the hardness of some of the more difficult ideas. The children in my works are young enough to accept the strangeness and difference of my world without difficulty, and they hint at the speed at which the extraordinary becomes commonplace in contemporary society. For me, the

clear emotional bonds that connect the children and the creatures in my work are simultaneously optimistic and disturbing. Their closeness is both moving and unsettling.

Getting the people who view my work to understand connections is something that I'm really interested in. With my work, for example, people will often divide it into 'segments' based on how the work is made. There are the silicone creatures, the automotive works, the photographs and videos for example. I don't see it that way. I see all these works as deeply connected, as different ways of talking about the same ideas. Often the connections are formal, in the sense that I keep coming back to a certain shape or form or colour. Sometimes the same characters appear as both a sculpture and in a photograph. I have always been very interested in hair, and it appears time and again in my works in different ways. The way the two scooters look at each other in *The Lovers* 2011 is echoed in *The Welcome Guest* 2011; the embryonic forms of the *Cyclepups* 2005 - 2007 and glimpses of the babies carried on the back of *The Surrogate...* 2004; the shared voluptuousness of *Heartbreaker* 2002 and *A Deeply Held Breath* 2009.

These conceptual connections are important, but the real connections are between beings; between the creatures and people in the works and between the creatures and people and viewers who see the works. This can be seen clearly in the newest work in the show, the video titled *Tender* 2014. This work appears to revolve around a very normal sort of relationship between a young man and woman. From the beginning there are signs that things are not quite as normal as they seem. As the two young people walk through their inner city backyard they are focused on each other and do not give a second glance to the strange fleshy orchid that is growing amongst the celery. Clearly there is nothing strange about it to them. The viewer might also wonder

about the groceries, the bulk-sized protein powder, vitamin supplements and moisturiser, sugar and salt. The boy's eagerness, the girl's preoccupation, the couple's somewhat awkward intimacy as they make their way to the bedroom are all familiar. The couple share something intense, but it is not what we might expect. They share a secret; there is the unexpected orifice that the girl reveals to the boy, with a combination of pride and embarrassment; there is the litter of pups that slumber at the end of her bed.

The connections in this are somewhat ambiguous. The connection between the orifice and the pups is that the girl is a surrogate. She is breeding these little creatures in her bedroom. The boy is helping her, as awestruck and excited by the process as a new father. Quite why they are doing this is more difficult to say. This might be a hobby, some intense fad that they are participating in, or perhaps it is some sort of biotech testing that they have been paid to do. It could be something nefarious or dangerous, illegal or ill-advised, or possibly just something a bit fringe or embarrassing. Whatever is going on, it isn't something either of them finds weird. It is private and amazing but it is not shocking. This is a reflection of

the way that extraordinary technologies and social changes quickly become commonplace. This is the process that has transformed IVF from 'miracle test-tube baby!' to unremarkably ordinary.

There are a couple of motifs in this work that recur through my practice; surrogacy and orifices. When you think about it, both of these things are about the permeability of boundaries. Surrogacy, which is the subject of *The Surrogate...* 2004, as well as *Big Mother* 2005, *Library, 8.45pm* 2011 and others, is a process whereby the 'necessary' relationship between mother and child is disrupted. For me, this does not diminish the idea of motherhood, it expands it. It suggests that motherhood is about the relationship that is created rather than the biology; a choice or a process, rather than a status.

Orifices interest me because they are places where the inside and outside of the body meet. They are the point where we allow what we want of the outside world in, and where we expel what we no longer want or need, where new life emerges. It is perhaps because of this that we have such strong feelings about them. They include our most 'private' parts, and we have strong rules about

which direction things should go into or out of them. Stuff should go in through the mouth and out through the bottom, the other way around is not so acceptable. I play on this 'rule' in another video in the exhibition, *From Within* 2012, where a woman builds an entire, marvellous world out of regurgitated honey.

I think I find orifices so fascinating because I am not so interested in boundaries and rules, but I am interested in getting to people emotionally. Orifices are hard to 'like' and I enjoy seeing viewers rise to the challenge of liking something they didn't think they could. They are part of the 'ambergris' in my work, the stinky Sperm Whale intestinal secretion that gives perfume its depth and complexity.

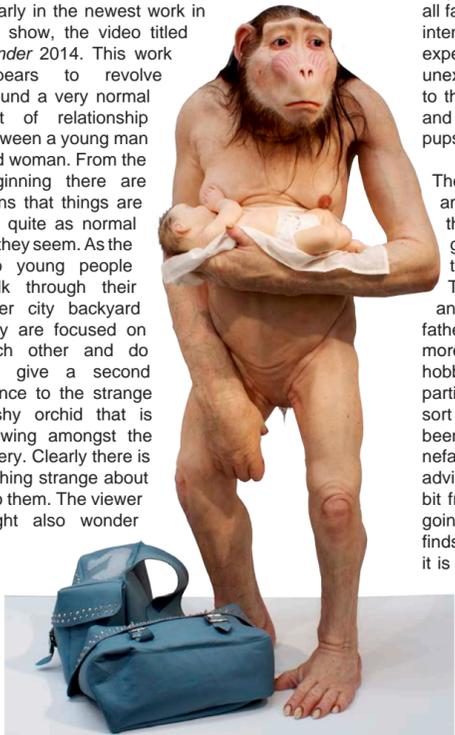
**Patricia Piccinini
October 2014**

Above left and right
Patricia Piccinini in her Melbourne studio
Photography: Ali Oughtre

Right
The Lovers 2011
fibreglass, automotive paint, leather, scooter parts
202.0 x 205.0 x 130.0 cm
Roy and Marjory Edwards Bequest Fund with the assistance of Colin and Robyn Cowan through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2011
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



Right
Big Mother 2005 silicone, fibreglass, leather, human hair 173.0 x 103.0 x 78.0 cm
Gift of S. Angelakis, John Ayers, Candy Bennett, Cherise Conrick, James Darling AM and Lesley Forwood, Riek Frolich, Frances Gerard, Patricia Grattan French, Stephanie Grose, Gryphon Partners Advisory, Janet Hayes, Klein Family Foundation, Edwina Lehmann, Ian Little, David and Pam McKee, Dr Peter McEvoy, Hugo and Brooke Michell, Jane Michell, Paul Taliangis, Michael and Tracey Whiting and anonymous donors 2010 through the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collectors 2010
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



Above centre
The Welcome Guest 2011
silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing, taxidermied peacocks
dimensions variable
Artist collection

Above
From Within 2012
HD 1080p, stereo
12.06 min loop
Production still from video
Artist collection