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Photos: Patricia Piccinini's creepy and curiously lifelike sculptures make themselves at home in Vancouver

by Lucy Lau on September 11th, 2018 at 2:08 PM



Patricia Piccinini's surrealist figures, like *A Young Family*, are crafted to provoke a range of reactions—from fear to disgust to curiosity—while raising questions about biotechnology and ethics in genetic engineering.

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Intriguingly creepy, faintly terrifying, and freakishly lifelike, Patricia Piccinini's surrealist works have landed in Vancouver—and trust us: they must be seen to be believed.

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Presented by the Vancouver Biennale as part of its 2018–2020 programming, the celebrated Australian artist's human-animal sculptures are part of an exhibit entitled Curious Imaginings at the Downtown Eastside's Patricia Hotel that runs from Friday (September 14) to December 15. There, visitors may explore 18 of the 105-year-old inn's rooms, the majority of which have become home to at least one of Piccinini's wild, life-size figures—each crafted to provoke a range of emotions from the viewer while raising questions about emerging biotechnology and ethics in genetic engineering.

In *A Young Family*, an eerie human-hog hybrid lies on her side on a perfectly made bed, three equally eerie babies sucking at her teats. Next door, a little girl—dressed adorably in a red gingham dress and purple Converse high-tops—stares into the eyes of a hairy, strawberry-blond mutant, its long, pointy claws holding the toddler in an embrace. Not far off, two naked sculptures—not quite human, not quite beast—are snuggled up in bed, their faces and bodies so realistic and the setting so intimate that it feels as though the viewer is intruding on a private moment between the couple.

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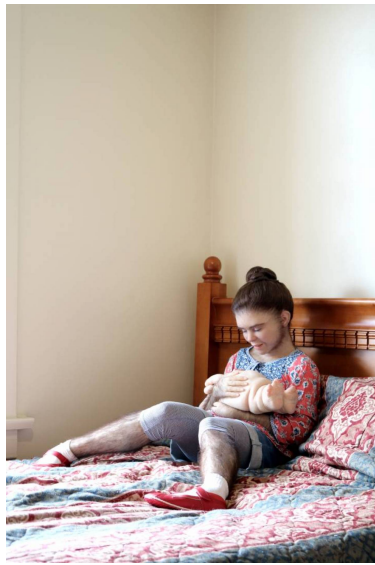
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Patricia Piccinini's *The Comforter*.
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Other rooms feature similarly striking and unusual scenes: a young girl, her arms and legs as bushy as those of a chimpanzee's, cradles a fleshy, faceless being by a window; a wide-eyed child is surrounded by lush, tropical plants as an owl is perched on her shoulder; and a humanoid beaver with ginger tresses and a flat, disturbingly tongue-like tail rests its head on its hands in gentle contemplation. That last sculpture, which sits atop a bed of crumpled-up linen, is dubbed *The Builder*, and was dreamed up by Piccinini specifically for Curious Imaginings.

Like her other pieces, and the three video installations that will accompany the display, *The Builder* is meant to highlight the contributions of a particular animal to its environment—in this case, the beaver's role in water management through the construction of dams. At the same time, they challenge our own prejudices and definitions of "human" in an age where genetic research and engineering, as well as human interference in natural processes, are becoming the norm.

"It was a great example of the way we tend to ignore or sort of belittle the kinds of contributions that animals make to the environment around us," Peter Hennessey, Piccinini's husband and project manager at the artist's Melbourne-based studio, told the *Straight* during an interview at the Patricia Hotel. "We think of them as just being in the land, rather than actually occupying it and managing it to a certain degree."

If Piccinini's curiously horrendous sculptures—with their haunting brown eyes, translucent skin, and real strands of human hair—seem hard to stomach, that's the point. The 53-year-old, who works with a dedicated team to take each sculpture from sketch to three-dimensional being, strives to draw viewers in by showcasing a mix of the familiar and unknown. It's her hope that they'll stay long enough to ask questions about the figures and what they may mean—and maybe inspire a little empathy.



The Builder, which was specially built for the Vancouver Biennale's Curious Imaginings exhibit.
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"It's very easy to make something that's different and horrifying," notes Hennessey. "It's much more interesting, from her point of view, to make something that's different, disturbing, but then also engaging and something that you can warm to."

The sculptures' installation at the Patricia Hotel marks the first time that Piccinini's works will be seen outside a museum or gallery. (It's also the first time in the Biennale's 15-year history that one of its exhibits will take over such an unconventional space.) Their placement at the storied inn adds a layer of intimacy to the show, thanks to careful staging—a used towel hanging over the edge of a sink or an open bottle of sparkling water positioned on a nightstand, for example—that makes it appear as though each hotel room is lived in by the creatures.

According to Paul Schellenberg, director of marketing at the Biennale, the Patricia Hotel was chosen as the venue for Curious Imaginings because it occupies one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Vancouver—one that is, comparable to the evolution of genetics and biotechnology, "always in transition". Like the Downtown Eastside, there's also much beauty to be discovered in Piccinini's pieces—no matter how strange or unsettling they may seem at first glance. "Patricia has never made anything that she finds ugly," states Hennessey.

Scroll through the images below for a preview of Curious Imaginings before you check it out IRL.

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