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In Curious Imaginings, Patricia Piccinini's beautiful mutants engage unexpected empathy

by Janet Smith on September 12th, 2018 at 2:07 PM



Melbourne artist Patricia Piccinini has formed a special bond with the sculpture *Kindred*.

HILARY WALKER

She's a mutant and a mistake. She is an aberration—a creature who falls somewhere between orangutan and human, a misguided DNA experiment. And yet you can see the beauty in her. You're drawn to this orange-haired creature, with her gentle brown eyes. There is love in the way she reaches one pink-skinned, opposable-thumbed hand up to a pale human baby climbing up the back of her shoulder, the other clutching an apelike infant to her chest.

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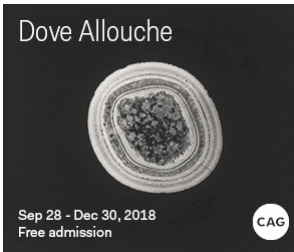
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The sculpture is called *Kindred*, one of the hyperreal creations Patricia Piccinini is bringing here as part of the upcoming exhibit *Curious Imaginings*, [spread over 18 rooms of the Patricia Hotel](#). Using silicone, fibreglass, and real hair, the Australian art star and her team conjure human-animal hybrids that both attract and repel. With them, Piccinini seeks to tap viewers' "empathetic imagination", she tells the *Straight* in an interview from her Melbourne studio as she gets ready to head here for [her Vancouver Biennale showing](#).



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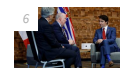
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“That’s an incredibly powerful thing to engage,” the acutely articulate artist says with palpable passion. “To do that is a delicate balance. If you look at my work, there’s always an element of beauty that draws you in—for example the human eyes. There’s even a sense of sentience, and that brings you in. But it also pushes you away because it’s an aberration, a monster, not something you know. And we’re kind of hard-wired to be that wary of difference.

“So that push-pull opens up a space in the viewer to ask ‘What do I feel here? What do I think here?’ ”

Your first reaction to seeing her strange mammals, with their eerily lifelike hair follicles, wrinkles, and faint blue veins, might be a mix of alarm and empathy. But the sculptures carry deeper political and environmental meaning as well.

The most obvious issue Piccinini explores is our fiddling with genetics and biotechnology. One sculpture, *The Young Family*, depicts human-hog hybrids, a mother with curled pink toes instead of hooves, her babies suckling at her teats. Piccinini has said it’s inspired by the idea of genetically modified pigs being bred to provide organs to humans.

“It’s obviously changed—it’s not human, it’s not animal, it’s something in between,” she explains. “And we ask ourselves, ‘Is this natural? Is this part of evolution, and how do I feel about it? Should it serve us or does it deserve our love?’ ”



A Young Family.

Piccinini is fascinated by the natural world, and by the ever-growing threats against it. But she is still working out her own feelings on how much we should be able to alter nature for human needs.

Her work *Kindred* refers to endangered orangutans, whose habitat is disappearing, purposely asking us to relate to them. “When we look at this work, we’re in her presence and she looks at us back,” Piccinini explains. “She’s allowing us to experience her vulnerability while we experience her strength and beauty. We say, ‘Oh, she has one child more human than her and another that is completely human.’ But the work is not about that difference. It’s about their connection and that’s what gives her strength. That’s what gives life sometimes to a moment of elucidation and you go, ‘Oh yeah, they are a lot like us.’

“All of my work is about our duty of care to the nature we have around us,” she stresses. “So I ask the question, ‘When we create new life—and it’s not science fiction anymore, it actually is happening—what will that life be and what place in our lives will it take and what will our relationship be to it?’ ”

For her Vancouver show, Piccinini has created a new merged being called *The Builder*—this time a humanoid beaver, in a nod to the important environmental tasks Canada’s national animal handles. As ever, the deep research the artist has done into her subject shows.

“I’m absolutely enamoured by the idea that they’re land caretakers,” Piccinini enthuses. “The dams they build are very important to how the land is nurtured and, in fact, the way they retain water in different spaces can even help in times of drought.”

She hopes mutants like *The Builder* will prompt people to move beyond a sense of doom about our planet.

“I read a lot of literature around the environment and I find this literature really, really overwhelming. And I do feel quite despondent,” Piccinini admits. “I’m not optimistic. I don’t think everything is going to be all right. But I’m hopeful. Even though things are dark, I am hopeful we can get through all this together—and it has to be born out of a kind of feeling of being able to value other creatures and needing to relate to them. I don’t think my works embody the solutions; I don’t think we’re going to make these specific creatures and I don’t think we should.”

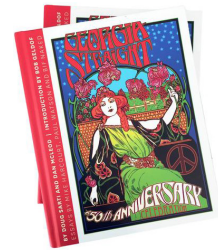


It can take Patricia Piccinini and her team many months to finish creating one of her lifelike sculptures.

HILARY WALKER

Piccinini is even more intrigued by the new layers of meaning *Curious Imaginings*’ unexpected, nonmuseum setting here—East Hastings Street’s Patricia Hotel—will bring to her sculptures. She is installing them in noticeably lived-in rooms. The setting will feel intimate, private, and domestic, with a chance for audiences to gaze at her creatures close up.

Again, Piccinini turns to *Kindred* to illustrate. “What does this mean for her to be in this particular hotel? Is she a refugee? Is she homeless? So I think there’s a sort of rich space for that,” she observes. “It’s like the creatures have just inhabited the rooms naturally. And what do hotels mean? Sometimes they mean a holiday, sometimes luxury, sometimes a place to be when you don’t have a home. Sometimes they’re a place you’re moving



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through when you don't have a space of your own. So there's this narrative built between the artwork and the viewer and me. And the viewer's background will affect the meaning."

Curious Imaginings, in fact, marks the first time Piccinini's sculptures will be seen outside of a museum or gallery, where Piccinini builds full installations with environments for the figures.

The artist works across photography, drawing, and video, but made her big name internationally when she showed her lifelike sculptures in the Australian pavilion's exhibition *We Are Family* at the 50th Venice Biennale, in 2003. (*The Young Family* was its centrepiece.)

Since then, she's caused a buzz with whatever she's done. Recent projects include 2013's giant Sky Whale, a 100-foot-long, orange hot-air balloon in the shape of a mammalian turtle with 10 dangling teats, floated above Canberra to mark its centenary. And in 2016, an exhibit of her sculptures in São Paulo, Brazil, became the world's best-attended contemporary-art event of the year, drawing 1.4 million visitors.



Patricia Piccinini's *Kindred*.

For at least two decades, Piccinini, who was born in Sierra Leone but grew up in Canberra, has been pursuing these themes. In her studio, she's been developing an evermore sophisticated process to bring her human-animal hybrids to breathtakingly realistic life.

"*Kindred* took 18 months of work—and that's with a whole team of people," she relates. "My studio in Australia—we've been working together for 15 years and we've perfected the way of making them over time."

Their biggest challenge, and biggest success, has been creating realistic skin. "Initially, we would pour the silicone in and we would paint on top. Then we realized it didn't act like skin," she explains. "Skin is quite translucent and we wanted to replicate that in the work. What we do now is different layers, different levels of translucency. What happens is light travels through the first few layers of silicone and it bounces back when it hits the opaque layers. We can do it well with paler skin....But how do we get the beautiful glowing dark skin? We're working on that now."



Patricia Piccinini researches her subjects deeply before starting one of her detailed creations.

HILARY WALKER

Meticulous care and love get poured into every step of the process, and somehow that warmth emanates from her sculptures. But in the end, she admits, some people will still want to turn away. Her work has, after all, been called "grotesque" by those who are perhaps unable to see the larger picture.

"I don't make anything out there for people to hate and despise and pity. You could say it's a very maternal relationship," says Piccinini, who is a mother of two. "There's a lot of love in this work. But sometimes people don't see that. They see it as a freak show. And that happens if you're very invested in the idea of nature as it is now and the idea of normalcy and you're not open to difference."

For a few viewers, the mother in *Kindred* will remain a monster, but Piccinini, who so clearly cares for her, has come to terms with that: "I have to accept," she says simply, "this work isn't for everyone."

The Vancouver Biennale presents Curious Imaginings at the Patricia Hotel from Friday (September 14) to December 15. Find tickets [here](#).

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