

VANCOUVER
BIENNALE PRESENTS

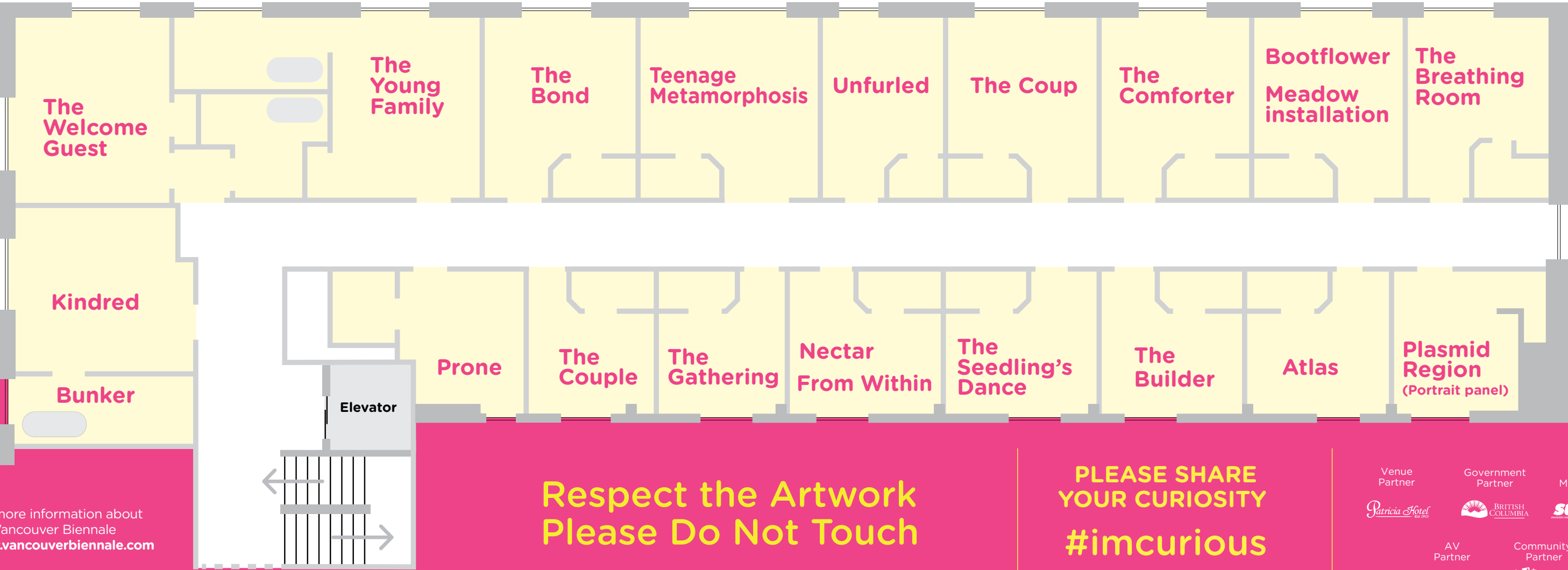
PATRICIA
PICCININI

Curious Imaginings



Patricia Piccinini uses a range of different media to explore concepts such as empathy, responsibility and acceptance. The contexts of her works, whether they be real-world relationships or fantastic stories and fables, focus on human thoughts and responses to change and difference. By drawing on our past and present relationships, Piccinini constructs scenarios to encourage us to engage with the grey areas of life and humanity, areas which are often complex and confronting, particularly as we move into the future. She is interested in relationships: the relationship between the artificial and the natural, between humans and the environment, between beings within families, between strangers, and finally, the relationship between the audience and the artwork.

Over the years Piccinini has built up a type of alternative world that exists just beyond the real world we live in. Strange but familiar at the same time, it exists as moments, objects and images that overlap with the 'real world' of the gallery space. For Piccinini, the art-making process begins with research and drawing. She then works with a team of fabricators and technicians who use a range of specialist techniques to create the incredibly lifelike appearance of her creatures.



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The Couple (2018)

Linen, silicone, fireglass, hair

42 x 168 x 65cm

Locked in a lover’s embrace, *The Couple* represent the life-energy of youth. They carry the possibility of reproduction, and the possibility for a future outside of our control; their destiny is their hands. Piccinini imagines them to be, ‘the only two creatures of their kind, and somehow they have found each other, and escaped.’ Perhaps they are outsiders on the run, cocooned for a short while in the safety and anonymity of a hotel room. Their disconnection from the outside world is plain and allows them the privacy their depth of intimacy craves.

The Couple could be seen as an anti-Frankenstein story. In Mary Shelley’s book the monster’s sense of isolation and rejection leads him to beg his creator for a partner - someone he can connect with. Victor Frankenstein’s refusal to do this sets off the storm of rage and despair in the creature that ultimately leads to the tragedy of the novel. In *The Couple* we see a more sanguine outcome, although not without a sense of melancholy inherent in their self-contained separation from the rest of the world. Ironically, they are perhaps like every other teenager in the world; they feel alone, unprecedented and unique in their experience of life.

The Bond (2016)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing

162 x 56 x 50cm

The Bond portrays an intense and ambiguous relationship between mother and transgenic child. The child has a strange physiognomy; the back is essentially the sole of a running shoe. On one level this refers to the common evolutionary trait where animals, stick insects and chameleons for example, disguise themselves as part of their environment. This highlights the deeply specific connections between species and their particular environments and the ingenuity and extreme focus of evolution. In this case the animal’s mimicry of a piece of consumer sportswear locates it totally as a product of our world.

On another level the work evokes ideas around the protean amorphousness of the body. In the age of biotechnology bodies are thought of as never final or even particularly specific. The universality of DNA means that organisms can be changed and manipulated, crossed and hybridized with elements from completely outside their genetic realms. And so the crossing of an animal with a shoe doesn’t seem so surreal anymore.

Kindred (2018)

Silicone, fibreglass, hair

103 x 95 x 128cm

The idea that we, as humans, are uniquely and fundamentally different from other animals is at the cornerstone of how humans have traditionally thought of themselves. This belief of ‘specialness’ allows us to exploit the environment and other beings around us so completely. However, both genetic analysis and scientific observation is showing how small those differences actually are. Like humans, Orangutan mothers keep their children close, educating and nurturing them for many years. The mother and the two children are all different from each other, the mother being most animal-like, with one very human child and one somewhere between the two. Here unique individuals are each set at a different point on a continuum of greater or lesser animal-like behavior. The focus shifts from their differences to their connection.

The Young Family (2002)

Silicone, polyurethane, leather, plywood, human hair

80 x 150 x 110cm

The seminal sculpture, *The Young Family*, encapsulates many of the key issues dealt with in Piccinini’s practice: difference, empathy, maternity and technology. Inspired by science, specifically the use of other animals such as pigs to generate human replacement organs, the work is underpinned by a singular emotion, the love of a mother for her children. It is worth noting that this sculpture was made when the idea of pig-human chimera’s was still a hypothetical; 2017 saw the first such chimera successfully created in a lab. However, is it possible to view the work without mulling over the dark dilemma: Would you choose to end her child’s life to save your own child?

The Welcome Guest (2011)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing, taxidermied peacock

Dimensions variable

The title for this work references a quote by Goethe; “Beauty is everywhere a welcome guest.” It is a reflection on the beauty and strangeness of nature: who would have thought beauty would be so important to nature that it would produce a creature as ineffectual as the peacock? The peacock’s beauty does not provide any protection, or ability to find food; it is, so to speak, beauty for beauty’s sake. In this regard, although Piccinini’s creatures might seem strange, is the peacock not stranger? This notion is at odds with our own ideas about engineered creatures that would likely see utility and usefulness as their primary consideration.

Atlas (2012)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, auto paint

84 x 54 x 50cm

Atlas is one of a number of works that were created from drawing rather than from a definite conceptual thematic. The work plays with materials and anatomy, it is not quite creature or being, but is certainly fleshy in nature. The figure is a body folded in on itself, standing atop a pair of glossy, helmet-like boots. Trudging along, its careworn body is certainly not a traditionally ‘beautiful’ form; it’s more irksome than cuddly, fleshy and sweaty rather than cute. *Atlas* is ambiguously sexual, and neither living nor dead. It is about potential, suggesting perhaps that it could unfold into something else. Conceptually, the work responds to the increasing understanding of bodies as changeable: from plastic surgery to The Biggest Loser and stem cell therapy, the body has become something that can - and should - be changeable. Humans are also becoming increasingly comfortable with the concept that organisms can be engineered to suit our needs, whims and desires.

Nectar (2012)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, refrigerator

83 x 48 x 51cm

Nectar represents the idea of the endless, productive capacity of the organic world. A beautiful honey-like nectar pours ceaselessly from a small and amorphous organism. The abundance of this viscous liquid is both amazing and also disturbing. Where is it coming from? Is it safe? Will it ever stop? Is it delicious? Would we risk a taste? The organism sits on top of an old refrigerator (an object that is designed to contain, to hold things in stasis or stop the natural process of decay) and appears certain to overwhelm it with its unstoppable abundance. This small work encapsulates the combination of anxiety and wonder that motivates many Piccinini sculptures.

Unfurled (2017)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, masked owl, found objects

108 x 89 x 80cm

Unfurled attempts to imagine a different sort of relationship between people and nature: one with a shared vision that is more equitable. At the same time it is a work that refuses to accept the impossible naivety of such optimism. There are a few shades to this work: it could be seen as a portrait of two predators, the human and the owl, both ostensibly wise but undeniably dangerous. On the other hand the viewer might see this as a portrait of two beings whose homes are endangered. The girl is drawn from images of Indigenous Amazonians Piccinini was introduced to in Brazil, who live in a precarious balance between a threatened environment and an inconstant and paternalistic dominant culture. A closer look at the work reveals not pathos but strength in the faces of its protagonists. Perhaps this is what we should focus on, the images of two figures with a shared viewpoint, both strong and vulnerable, but not intimidated.

Teenage Metamorphosis (2017)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, found objects

137 x 25 x 75cm

Teenage Metamorphosis pushes the possibilities of hybridity beyond transgenics to suggest a more surreal admixture of living matter and mundane objects. The work references the successful creation of human-pig chimeras to address the shortage of donor organs, bringing to mind the long-term implications of such a scientific advancement. It is uncertain whether this creature is part shoe, or if he merely affects a shoe-sole carapace for more effective camouflage in the modern world.

The Coup (2012)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing, taxidermied parrot

116 x 60 x 55cm

The Coup captures the uncertain moment between a boy and a parrot that has just settled on his hand. Does he hope to catch the parrot gently, or does he intend to strike it violently? This transitional moment investigates the often-uncertain outcome of action, even when the result may seem obvious in retrospect. The boy represents the transitional moment of any adolescent, just as he might personify the technological adolescence that genetic engineering is currently undergoing. In other words, we are uncertain of the outcome of the boy’s gesture like we are uncertain of the outcome of genetic engineering. There is an expectation that artificial nature is ‘good’, even though real nature is sometimes not. This boy is not quite as easy to love as some of Piccinini’s figures, but does he deserve it less?

The Gathering (video) (2007)

DVD 16:9 PAL, Stereo

3 minute loop

The Gathering is a video work that focuses on one of Piccinini’s enduring fascinations. Time and again her work returns to children, and their ambiguous relationships with the uncanny animals that she creates. Children embody a number of the key issues, they directly express the idea of genetics - both natural and artificial - but also imply the responsibilities that a creator has to their creations. Their innocence and vulnerability is also powerfully emotive and evokes empathy, while their presence softens the hardness of some of the more difficult ideas, but can also elevate the level of anxiety. The children in Piccinini’s work evoke the idea of vulnerability, however, it is often difficult to work out who is the most vulnerable, the creatures or the children? Humans are ‘the most fearsome predator on the planet’, yet in *The Gathering* it is the little girl, the human, that is vulnerable. The situation is uncomfortable, the creatures are too close and ambiguous in intent. Soon we realise that it is not about the girl at all, as we might expect, the creatures have ‘gathered’ out of curiosity, to examine her.

The Breathing Room (video) (2000)

3 channel video installation with sound

The Breathing Room is a screen-based installation that looks at the idea of panic within contemporary society. The work reflects a very contemporary state of anxiety that occurs as new technologies (electronic, biochemical, biotechnological, agricultural) begin to de-stabilise the ‘fundamentals’ of life; the specificity of species, the physicality of space, the continuity of cultural or political institutions. Like the bodies in *The Breathing Room*, most humans live within a space both expanded and contained by technology, such a fast-paced and fragmented reality often leads to feelings of anxiety, stress and panic. It is little wonder that we panic: we are anxious about cloned farm animals, terrified into denial by climate change, concerned about genetically modified canola seeds, apprehensive about technologies set to stop or reverse the aging process, perplexed by why scientists would engineer luminous transgenic mice, and then alarmed by the news that it was just because they could (and deep down, glad that they did)! *The Breathing Room*, transforms these worries into a visceral, corporeal experience that is both disturbing and fascinating.

Plasmid Region (2003)

DVD 16:9 PAL, 5,1 Sound

20 Minute loop

Plasmid Region creates a pivotal point to the exhibition. Here biological reproduction and mechanical production are brought together in a production line that continuously pumps out strange organic ‘things’. These odd fleshy blobs are the link between Piccinini’s more abstract pieces and her more figurative works. *Plasmid Region* shows a type of birth: To me, the work is very beautiful because it is like birth asking anxiety provoking questions such as: What are these things? Where are they going to go and how on earth will we have enough room for all of them?

The Builder (2018)

Silicone, fibreglass, hair

54 x 39 x 72 cm

Humans prefer to imagine that they are intrinsically different from all other animals. However, when we look for ways to validate this difference, our behaviour appears to be more similar than dissimilar to that of other animals; whether it be tool use, language or empathy, we can now point to other animals that behave much as we do. *The Builder* was inspired from researching the beaver, an animal native to the Vancouver area. Beavers cut down trees to build dams and dens, much as humans do. People have long looked at the beavers’ activities as thoughtless and inconvenient, but recently research has shown that bear dams play an important role in water management. Beaver dams keep ground water high and protect rivers and land from the effects of drought. This is an interesting story because it illustrates both human hubris and animal intelligence; and the many ways that humans and animals are connected through both genetics and the environment.

The Comforter (2010)

Silicone, fibreglass, steel, fox fur, human hair, clothing

60 x 80 x 80 cm

The Comforter is a optimistic work that portrays a moment of mutual comfort and empathy. A pre-teen girl gently cradles a strange amorphous being showing the type of interspecies communication that Piccini likes so much. There is no animosity here, or reference to the long history of human cruelty and exploitation of animals. The girl has hypertrichosis, a genetic condition that leads to an abnormal amount of hair growth on the body, her condition seeks to blur the boundaries between animal, human and genetic form.

Meadow (2015-2018)

300 Plastic flower stems and heads

Piccinini’s practice has largely been focused on creating a world that exists just beyond the world that we live in. To a large extent, she has focused on creating the inhabitants of that world, however, in *Meadow* we see a shift towards creating the environment on a grand scale. What does it look like? How does it feel to be inside it? *Meadow* is a response to these questions, offering up a protean environment where boundaries are dissolved and categories are fluid. Each plant is different: size, orientation and physiognomy varies from stem to stem. The viewer is left with a sense of the extraordinary variety and complexity of even the simplest ecosystem. Flowers are the sexual organs of plants and are a recurrent form in Piccinini’s work in reference to vfecundity, a way of finding a language to discuss sexuality and fertility that is sensual but not salacious. *Meadow* is a proposal for an idea of ‘nature’ in contemporary times. It suggests that we adapt our ideas of what ‘nature’ is so we can both save what is left of primordial nature and understand the constantly transforming reality of contemporary nature.

Bootfower (2015)

Silicone, fibreglass, human hair

103 x 100 x 60cm

Bootflower is simultaneously an animal in its fleshiness, a plant in its rooted floweriness and a cowboy boot in its form. Both flowerlike and fungal in nature, this flower is first and foremost a sexual organ and sits atop a clutch of eggs, an act seemingly at odds with her mammalian hairiness. By utilizing a figurative sculptural approach, Piccinini somehow makes all these disparate and contradictory elements into a form that seems to make sense. *Bootflower* is a more recent work than some of the other works included in *Curious Imaginings*, and as such displays her move towards the formless as she finds her inspiration in drawings and dreams. However, her interest in creating things/ beings/ creatures/ objects/ subjects that expand the list of things that exist and collapse the boundaries between fields remains.