

# LOVING MONSTERS—THE CURIOUS CASE OF PATRICIA PICCININI'S POSTHUMAN OFFSPRING

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**Abstract:** *Patricia Piccinini's work has been described as disquieting, compelling and grotesque. Other adjectives often used include disturbing, visceral, monstrous, chimerical but also cute and beautiful. The reason for the encounter of such descriptions which are typically found in separate realms is precisely that Piccinini seeks to fracture unitarian conceptualisations of humanness as she strives to materially debate issues of posthuman ethics. Her concerns relate to issues of breeding, mutation, biotechnology, motherhood/childhood, eco-philosophy and speciesism. In this paper, I will set off from the works of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to discuss Piccinini's posthuman aesthetics and ethics. I propose to investigate the affirmative posthuman predicament which she has creatively designed for the art gallery space, reflecting the technocultural fabrications of our natureculture continuum. I will focus my attention on three posthuman propositions as they relate to the discourses of motherhood and reproduction: the cyborgian realities of the human and the animal; the organism and the machine; as well as the human, the animal and the vegetable. Piccinini's reconfigurations are created into a world of tenderness and imbued with an ethics of care as she, unlike Victor Frankenstein, aims to love her creatures.*

**Keywords:** *Patricia Piccinini; Donna Haraway; posthumanism; motherhood; reproduction; care.*

## Introduction

The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience [...]. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion (Haraway 1991: 149).

The scene is set at Hosfelt Gallery in San Francisco in the bicentennial year of Mary Shelley's famous work. A birthday party is being thrown for her world-famous monster. It is only fitting that Patricia Piccinini, a modern day Dr Frankenstein of sorts, is among the panoply of international artists. Over the past two decades she has lovingly crafted monsters with a common characteristic: ontological and bodily fluidity. It would have been remiss of Piccinini to come empty-handed and she has not disappointed, bringing two pieces evocative of her creations: *Egg/Head* (2016) is a hairy, fleshy egg, complete with belly and penis-like formations, and *The Struggle* (2018) is her most recent contribution to materialisations of animalised scooters: a predator and its prey, both shiny and mechanised, engaged in a struggle for survival.

Since the 1990s, Patricia Piccinini has steadily established herself as one of Australia's most celebrated artists. Her participation in the 2003 Venice Biennale with the exhibition *We Are Family*, of which *The Young Family* was the centrepiece, brought her definitively into the international limelight. Piccinini's exhibition *ComCiência* (both

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*Consciousness and With Science*), staged at Cultural Banco do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro during 2016, was attended by more than 1.4 million people, making it one of the most visited contemporary art exhibitions worldwide that year. In 2018 Piccinini held *Curious Affection* in Brisbane, her biggest solo exhibition in Australia to date, where old and new wondrous monsters mesmerised a myriad of curious onlookers.

This artist's work brings valuable insight into the present and the future of human bodies, suggesting a bio-transformation into more animal-like selves and connections based on relations established at profound levels. Her posthuman animal-like families invite reflections on the origins of their unexplained transformation: whether it was achieved by an evolutionary process towards an animal state or was the product of genetic manipulation.

### **Loving Monsters—The Curious Case of Patricia Piccinini's Posthuman Offspring**

In this paper, I propose to focus on the artist's treatment of posthuman aesthetics and ethics, critical posthumanism as well as posthuman feminist affects. I will focus my attention on three posthuman propositions: (i) the cyborgian realities of the human and the animal; (ii) the organism and the machine; (iii) as well as the human, the animal and the vegetable. In doing so, I will study the evolutionary process of the artist's construction of posthuman beings as they realise Piccinini's vision: an obligation to care for those that are created. In sum, an ethics of caring for the monster, a mission Piccinini has been pursuing in exhibitions such as *Tender Creatures*; *Fairy Tales, Monsters and Genetic Imaginations*; *The Future is Not What It Used To Be*; *Nature of the Beast*; *Call of the Wild*; *Post-Humanist Desire: Sexuality and Digitality in Contemporary Art*; *Like Us: Patricia Piccinini*; *Menagerie*; *Beautiful Beast*, as well as more recently in *ComCiência*; *Patricia Piccinini: 'We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep'*; and *Curious Affection*. I propose to investigate the affirmative posthuman predicament which she has creatively designed for the art gallery space, reflecting the technocultural fabrications of our natureculture continuum, to use Donna Haraway's concept, and the place of the monster in it.

Beyond shame, disgust and fear, Piccinini proposes the construction of an affirmative posthuman predicament through affect; though some might find her work 'disturbing' and 'visceral', she claims "[c]onnection and empathy are at the heart of my practice. [...] I like to think my work is 'sanguine', an interesting word meaning cheerful or hopeful" (Piccinini/Johnson 2014: online; without page). Indeed, her work engages with Rosi Braidotti's "social horizons of hope" and represents posthuman femininities as liberating impulses from negative contemporary biopractices such as intensive farming and animal slaughter (Braidotti 2013: 122). Piccinini explores the manifestations of an economy of death through themes such as breeding, mutation, genetics, motherhood, and childhood. I will discuss instances of Piccinini's work that are related to motherhood and reproduction and which materially and creatively provoke our perceptions of the posthuman and of the monster.

Donna Haraway's (1991) formulation of the ironic myth of the cyborg is central to Piccinini's art. Dismantling a unitary conceptualisation of humanness referred to as fractured identity (Haraway 1991: 155–161), Haraway defends our cyborgian fluidity against a construction of identity based on taxonomies and naturalism. Indeed, she proposes resistance to the temptation towards unitary essentialism through affinity, not

through identity (Haraway 1991: 155). Cyborgs exist in the shared space (*a*) between animals and humans, (*b*) organisms and machines, (*c*) physical and non-physical (technological). Thus, while a cyborg dwells in the realm of fiction, it is also a social and bodily reality. Likewise, Piccinini argues that in her work she, in fact, purposefully exerts containment because what science and technology can create today is stranger than the marvellous creatures of her imagination (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007). Still, these are not creatures of tomorrow; these are creatures of the present, a world where alternatives of subjectivity abound and binarisms have been dismantled. Just as Haraway's cyborg, Piccinini's beings could be described as condensed images of both imagination and material reality.

Materiality has also been at the heart of Rosi Braidotti's (2011 [1994]; 2013) concept of embodied subjectivity, namely when linked to feminism and technoscience. Additionally, Braidotti sees critical engagement with the present as a necessary move towards an affirmative vision of the world. In this respect, critique must be combined with creativity so as to generate positive healing and connect generations. As she argues in the chapter 'Mothers, Monsters and Machines' in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Braidotti 2011 [1994]), she is compelled to appeal to "passionate engagement in recognition of the theoretical and discursive implications of nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 213). Braidotti proposes a move towards post-anthropocentrism and posthuman ethics. This is what she says in *The Posthuman*:

A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism. [...] The posthuman recomposition of human interaction that I propose is not the same as the reactive bond of vulnerability, but it is an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others (Braidotti 2013: 49).

Along the lines of both Haraway and Braidotti, Piccinini does not recognise in her work "a distinction based on the usual organic/inorganic or natural/artificial distinctions" (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). The chief differentiation for her is between caring and being indifferent. Piccinini's ultimate aim is to visually critique "the conceptual or the ethical issues [as they are] transformed by emotional realities" (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). Again, this connects directly with Haraway's stance that the argument underlying 'A Cyborg Manifesto' is one of "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* for their construction" (Haraway 1991: 150; italics in original). Piccinini does not assume her position to be anti-progress and prefers instead to talk about customisation as a positive force; just as industrial customisation (mass-produced commodities) can be turned into something personal (as it happens with cars), genetic or organic customisation, as she conceives and materialises it, can be positive whilst necessarily carrying a high level of ambiguity. Failures are equally positive, but above all Piccinini emphasises responsibility towards the outcomes (including failures): "My main interest is between the creations, their creators and the world. I believe that with creation—be it parenthood, genetic engineering or invention—comes an obligation to care for the

result” (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). Piccinini intently becomes the new Victor Frankenstein who, unlike Mary Shelley’s doctor, is an engaged parent with an acute sense of responsibility towards her offspring.



**Figure 1.** *The Young Family* (2002). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, human hair, plywood. 85cm × 150cm × 120cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll.

*The Young Family* is compositionally conventional, a Madonna and her children (Goriss-Hunter 2004: 550), a mother fatigued by labour and children being fed and playing. However, despite her status as a new mother, she is old (Michael 2003). Her body language and countenance convey a profound sense of sadness which is recreated in *Big Mother* (2005). Indeed, she has an air of “fatalism” (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007: online; without page). Science does, in fact, allow women in their sixties to become mothers. It has also allowed animal industry to force the non-human animal body to reproduce repeatedly, wearing it out to the point of misery.

In this piece, the family lies not on a cosy bed, but on a vinyl type viewing platform. Their human traits are multiple: eyes, hair, eyebrows, mouths, folds of flesh, nipples, hands, fingers and toes. But beyond mere anatomy there are hints of humanness in the creation of tenderness, playfulness as well as a sense of modesty the mother displays at her own nakedness before our eyes. The hands and especially the feet suggest a more extreme emotion which makes her cringe.

Besides having been described as sow-like, the family has also been called dugongesque, a combination of ape and human (Goriss-Hunter 2004: 543) and even platypus-like (Michael 2003). Michael has also referred to it as “the unclassifiable”

(Michael 2003: online; without page). The pig and the dugong references seem particularly apt, pointing in complementary directions: on the one hand, the question of extinction and, on the other, of bio-engineering. In fact, the suggestion is that the long-eared, fleshy transgenics could be bred to replace sick human organs (McDonald 2012: 13). The already existing proliferation of transplants and implants is, in Rosi Braidotti's opinion, a "Frankensteinian fantasy" (Braidotti 2002: 223). Complicating matters, Piccinini admits that, were her own children's lives at risk, she would sacrifice the duty of love and affection she feels towards the porcine mother of *The Young Family* (McDonald 2012: 13; Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007). This too reinforces Braidotti's reading of the discourse on monstrosity:

We all have bodies, but not all bodies are equal: some matter more than others, some are quite frankly disposable. The monstrous body, which makes a spectacle of itself, is eminently disposable. The monster is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm: it is a deviant, an a-no(r)maly; it is abnormal (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 215–216).

In 'Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generation', Donna Haraway writes that *The Young Family* "provoke[s] the onto-ethical question of care for the intra and inter-species generations that is not asked often enough in technoculture, especially not about its own progenitors and offspring. The important question is not found in the false opposition of nature and technology. Rather what matters is who and what lives or dies, where, when, and how? [...] What is the heritage for which technocultural beings are both accountable and indebted? What must the practices of love look like [...]?" (Haraway 2007a: without page). Piccinini herself draws attention to the question of care when she writes in 'In Another Life': "I am particularly fascinated by the unexpected consequences, the stuff we don't want but must somehow accommodate. There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes; my interest is whether we'll be able to love them" (Piccinini 2006: online; without page). There is no way of telling what this young family has become, or better yet, is still becoming. The installation is a speculative fabulation<sup>1</sup> of natureculture, a natureculture continuum, where frontiers between technology and culture are not sought. We are invited to "dedifferentiate in

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<sup>1</sup> I am adopting here Haraway's terminology in relation to Piccinini's work. Haraway approaches Piccinini's creatures from the speculative science fiction tradition. She sees these creatures as visual and sculptural narratives coming out of naturetechnical worlds which need to be addressed through care and are populated by critters that simultaneously disturb us and strike us as familiar (2007a). Speculative fiction promotes genre hybridisation and, equally important, the creation of worlds of wonder and awe. In this context, speculative fiction is a "mode of thought-experimenting" at a time when our sense of humanity is changing in the face of globalising trends (Oziewicz). It thus aligns with other modes of resistance to imperialistic, androcentric Western thought such as those elaborated by feminists and postcolonialists. Indeed, if one was to identify a purposeful moment when speculative fiction started to be produced, it would be the 1960s and 1970s by the hand of New Wave feminist authors. In relation to the concept of speculative fabulation, it recovers the crucial study by Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future* (1975). Finally, a useful distinction between Critical Posthumanism and Speculative Posthumanism should be made as it is relevant to this discussion on Piccinini. Critical Posthumanists debate the topic in terms of cultural and political conditions whereas Speculative Posthumanists focus their attention on the technological processes and beings. This is referred to as "wide descent", that is, posthumans deriving from biological evolution and/or technological advancements (Roden 2018: 398–399).

order to risk bio-engineered redifferentiating as part of a queer family whose members require us to rethink what taking care of this country, taking care of these generations might mean” (Haraway 2007a: online; without page). Their ‘naturalness’, their humanity or animality is beyond the point. As Piccinini has said, once created you have a duty to love them.

If we consider the dugong as a possible source of Piccinini’s inspiration, its endangered status becomes relevant, now that the dugong has been mostly restricted to the Australian waters of the Torres Strait and the Great Barrier Reef. The use of the dugong would then be a manifestation of Piccinini’s environmental and animal preoccupations. The dugong, a fish-shaped marine mammal, is used as inspiration again in *The Long Awaited* (2008), where a little human boy embraces a mermaid-like creature, possibly waiting for her to expire (McDonald 2012: 115). This is a powerful installation in terms of eco-philosophy and posthumanism, but also in its comment on age and gender relations. It conveys an affectionate embrace between the unclassified species and the human, and even though, as Donna Haraway has theorised, we have never been human (Haraway 2007b), the embrace carries Braidotti’s point of transgenerational responsibility. A sophisticated approach allows an interpretation regarding the boy’s accountability towards the old, dying creature, and not a mere representation of an affectionate moment between the grandmother and her grandson. In other words, of accountability of humans towards non-humans.

Consider as well *The Leather Landscape* (2003), a family of eco-guardians (the meerkat mutants), and *Bodyguard (for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater)* (2004), the imagined helper species of the real-life Victorian bird. Honeyeaters have a symbiotic relationship with possums; as the latter’s numbers decrease so do the numbers of the former. This bodyguard is created to serve a possum’s function. These examples reveal Piccinini’s preoccupations regarding human interference in the environment, the interaction between the human animals and the non-human animals in it, and transgenerational accountability. Though her reflection on ecology can be specifically Australian, the focus is a gateway to more general issues to do with ecology (for instance, species and habitat loss) and subjectivity (such as the source and consequences of good intentions) (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007). Piccinini’s anti-humanist and environmentally inclusive views coalesce with Rosi Braidotti’s critical posthumanist project with an explicit environmental concern:

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is, a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building (Braidotti 2013: 49).



**Figure 2a.** *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (2005). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, plywood, human hair. 103cm × 180cm × 306cm approx. Photos: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll. See also figure 2b on next page.

Patricia Piccinini also introduces the concept of surrogacy in the context of ecological conflict. *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (2005) is a critter created to protect and nurture the endangered wombat, an iconic and much-loved Australian marsupial. In her 'Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations' (published in a shortened form in *When Species Meet*), Haraway openly admits that the series *Nature's Little Helpers* (*Surrogate* is a part of this series) created her favourite Piccinini critters and that she had fallen in love with Piccinini's "speculative fabulated progeny" (Haraway 2007a: online; without page). One witnesses 'multi-species' reconciliation: wombat joeys peeking out from pouches spread across the shell-like back of the creature genetically engineered to host and nurture one of Australia's most endangered species. The critter's body is both shelter and womb to the animal which human activity has endangered.

Though some of the features of Piccinini's creatures are recognisable, it is hard to definitively classify them. The mother-sow is some sort of a surrogate, but to what end? Surrogacy, as used by Linda Michael in this context, is the location of replacement and displacement, of our own fear, but also of desire. We actually do not know how this creature, whose vulnerability invokes cultural constructions of generous motherhood (Michael 2003: 10), was able to reproduce. She was created to serve a medical purpose by humans (a body under control) and yet, once created, her body developed an ability which is beyond human interests and knowledge (a body out of control). Anxiously (for the human spectator), she is located beyond 'natural' reproduction and towards

Haraway's cyborgian ability of replication. But nurture is as intensely represented as grotesqueness and monstrosity. The questions are ominously there. Where do babies come from? What happens to them next? Is it death? Who are 'we'? What is a family? What is a posthuman? What is a monster? Rosi Braidotti attempts an answer:

The monster is a process without a stable object: it makes knowledge happen by circulating [...]. As such, it persists in haunting not only our imagination but also our scientific knowledge claims. Difference will not just go away. And because this embodied slab of difference moves, flows, changes, [...] because it evades us in the very process of puzzling us, you will never know what the next monster will look like, nor can you guess where it will come from (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 243).



**Figure 2b.** *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* (2005). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, plywood, human hair. 103cm × 180cm × 306cm approx. Photos: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll—left. See also figure 2a on previous page.

**Figure 3.** *Big Mother* (2005). Silicone, fibreglass, leather, human hair. 175cm × 90cm × 85cm approx. (including satchels; dimensions variable). Photo: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

In tune with the concept of natureculture, a “theoretical construct of cultural theory that attempts to circumvent the conventional duality of the two terms that make it up [...] suggesting continual interpenetration and mutual constitution of the human and non-human worlds” (Garrard 2012: 208), Piccinini points out the interconnectedness of all life on Earth. Nonetheless, our understanding of the world is premised on the idea of the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. ‘Like us’ is a statement about the continuum, interconnectedness and dedifferentiation.

*Big Mother* is based on Piccinini’s own experience. When she worked on this installation, Piccinini had recently given birth to her son, Hector, whom she used as the inspiration for the baby. Born in Sierra Leone, Piccinini then lived in South Africa. At the time, one of her South African friends reported how her sister had been abducted by a grieving baboon mother once. Female baboons are known for carrying their dead babies and snatching living babies (non-human and, according to the story, human) from other mothers. The long arms, hunched posture and apish outlook give the *Big Mother* an unmistakably simian appearance. This is, however, also a composite of Piccinini’s own features and, in a way, a self-portrait of her empathy with the baboon mother. The mother looks into the distance, though engaged in feeding the human baby. Dwelling where empathy and loss meet, where (and when) species meet, Piccinini introduces the idea of surrogacy, an affective place of healing:

Surrogacy, which is the subject of *The Surrogate...* 2004, as well as *Big Mother* 2005, *Library*, 8.45 2011 and others, is a process whereby the ‘necessary’ relationship between mother and child is disrupted. For me it doesn’t diminish the idea of motherhood, it expands it. It suggests that motherhood is about the relationship that is created rather than biology; a choice or a process, rather than a status (Piccinini/Johnson 2014: online; without page).

Whereas Piccinini’s earlier works such as *Surrogate (For the Northern Hairy Nosed Wombat)* created a critter from a speculative world to protect the endangered wombat, in 2014 she advanced the stance of surrogacy with *Tender* (directed by Peter Hennessey) where a human family (and, specifically, the body of a white, non-Aboriginal woman linked to the endangerment of the species) became a surrogate to the speculative creature fashioned by humans. The video is approximately five minutes long and its pace is quite slow, even sluggish. It is a reflection of suburban Australia, where a young couple displays the contained joy and nervousness typical of any young parents. This mood is set from the moment they meet, and they kiss rather clumsily. They happily cross the small inner yard, immersed in each other’s presence, and seemingly unaware of a vaginal, menacing-looking flower blooming in one of their flower pots. It is *Metaflora (Stone Mountain)* which Piccinini has also created in 2015. For a brief moment, the outline of this fleshy flower is mirrored by the Rorschach-like stain on the man’s T-shirt (which appears to be a human skull). Chickens roam around, adding a very lively, conventionally natural element to the oddly banal scene.



**Figure 4.** *Tender* (2014). Five-minute long video. Screenshot taken by the author—left.



**Figure 5.** *Metaflora (Stone Mountain)* (2015). Silicone, bronze, fiberglass, human hair. 120cm × 60cm × 60cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

At first, the viewer assumes that the woman is ill. She has bags under her eyes; she is dressed casually, wearing a robe and comfortable Ugg boots; she drinks a hot beverage; the young man brings her some medicine and what seem like containers of vitamins. But a large pack of baby wipes is also retrieved from his backpack. One wonders if the containers were pregnancy supplements after all. He puts the shopping away and washes the dishes. Then they head towards the bedroom. Are they going to have sex? Are they going to take a sneak peek at their baby? As the woman sits on the bed, the conversation suggests pregnancy. She lifts up her top to show a slit on her stomach where their baby is going to be born from. Finally, the viewer is shown three babies wriggling on the side of the bed, roast piglet-like but lacking the cuteness of the long-eared pups in *The Young Family*, or of the smiley pig and seal-like creature in *The Listener* (2012) and of the hairy babies in *Litter* (2010). They are, in a way, more monstrous because the evocation of consumption is more visible. *Tender* is, obviously, a revisit of *The Young Family* but now the human body is penetrated (symbolised by the man's finger touching the woman's vaginal-like stomach slit) and opened up for the benefit of posthuman forms. Throughout, there is a feeling of secrecy and the need to hide these naturally artificial monsters. It is as if interspecies intimacy and tenderness are wrong. Though the baby creatures are something other than human, interspecies technocultural, posthuman even, they are the family's creation and there is undeniable tenderness and affection for the critters and serene anticipation for the one(s) to come. Is she a mother or a surrogate? The natureculture practice is heightened in this instance where the viewer does not know whether maternity is biological or surrogate. This is an anti-anthropocentric posthuman experience which Linda Michael had already identified in *The Young Family*: "The oddness of these creatures, the knowledge that humans have played a part in their creation and the conflict in us between sympathy and self-interest combine to create unease" (Michael 2003: 13). I would suggest that beyond oddness there is monstrosity in the cyborgian sense: the babies have escaped the oedipal curse of humanity and do not pertain to any idea of original unity or wholeness (Haraway 1991: 150–151). Because "[c]yborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate", they are supreme

myths of resistance (Haraway 1991: 154). But where there is tenderness, there is its haunting affect. Fear, for instance, of being consumed or exploited. Notice how in other languages ‘surrogacy’ is translated into: ‘barriga de aluguer’ or ‘maternidad de alquiler’ (‘rentable belly’ and ‘rentable maternity’).

Piccinini has replicated the subject matter of surrogacy in different forms following *Big Mother*. Each instance conveys different speculations of bodies in transit between human, animal and also machine. In *The Comforter* (2010) she tackles the discourse and representation of disability. A young girl with hypertrichosis holds in her arms an uncategorised round, chubby baby. Its smoothness bears a sharp contrast with the girl’s skin. For a split second, the furry girl appears more animal-like and the baby more human. But quickly one realises that this is not a human baby. It has no legs, no head and, in fact, not even a face. Fingers come out of its torso, feet and toes from its bottom. Nonetheless, this glossy creature has a welcoming mouth which it extends outwards. The girl’s head is lowered towards it. They seem to have been captured in the moment before a tender kiss. The nature of their relationship is obscure, but undoubtedly marked by affection. Likewise, the origin of this illegitimate cyborg remains hidden. It could be that it was created in the process of looking for a cure for the girl’s condition. Whatever the case, they are now bonded together and the girl loves him like a child.



**Figure 6.** *The Comforter* (2010). Silicone, fibreglass, steel, fox fur, human hair, clothing. 60cm × 80cm × 80cm approx. Photo: Graham Baring. Courtesy of Roger Moll—left.

**Figure 7.** *The Bond* (2016). Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, clothing. 162cm × 56cm × 50cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

In *The Bond* (2016), Patricia Piccinini makes her own body a part of the installation. She pertains to her more human self than in *Big Mother* and now it is the baby who is less human. This time, despite its human face, the transgenic baby is an illegitimate offspring revealing human, animal and mechanical features. The mother holds it tenderly whilst the baby snuggles in her arms, curled up in a ball. It is only when the viewer looks closer at its back it becomes clear that its spinal column has the

indentations of a sandshoe. The baby embodies a natureculture continuum as it was able to develop characteristics revealing deep connections between animals and, in this case, the human environment. Walking with Piccinini through *Curious Affection*, she identifies four elements of her work which can be found in *The Bond*: wonder, ambiguity, relationships and fertility (videos available via *Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art 2018a*; *Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art 2018b*). This creature's wondrous trait lies in that s/he must be the first of its kind. There are familiar elements but there is also a newness to it. The baby is ambiguous because its origins remain hidden, unknown. The human onlooker cannot grasp why it has this appearance or what its purpose is. The relationship in question is that of mother and child which thrives in a world where bodies are understood as not evolved or presented in a finished form, but instead continuously metamorphose in specific manners nurtured in a specific relationship. Made possible because of biotechnological advancements, bodies are now more protean than ever.



**Figure 8.** *Kindred* (2018). Silicone, fibreglass, hair. 103cm × 95cm × 128cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—left.

**Figure 9.** *Nest* (2006). Fibreglass, automotive paint, leather, plastic, metal, rubber, mirror. 197cm × 186cm × 104cm approx. (variable). Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll—right.

A different stance is taken in *Kindred*. This particular installation approaches the notion of motherhood beyond any essentialist human construction. But as the name indicates, humans are represented: this is still our family. Like orangutan and human mothers, this mother protects and educates her children. This family blissfully exists in a “continuum of greater or lesser animalness” and, by the same token, of greater or lesser humanity (*Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art 2018a*). However, this mother, unlike the *Big Mother*, seems to be looking confidently ahead, possibly into a future she controls. The reason must be that differences are disavowed in favour of a powerful affective sense of connectedness:

The force of Piccinini's work lies in its ability to register the emotional power of ambivalence as it occurs in a multitude of dynamic situations and moving encounters. In doing so it records the tensions and affects of *being* in time and place. Since being involves a potent conflict between reason and emotion, Piccinini conveys this [...] through evocation and allusion to a multitude of interpermeating affects and meanings. [...] Caring and responsibility involve drawing emotions towards the well-being of others (McDonald 2012: 13).

If in *Big Mother* the viewer's response might be along the lines of the abject and the visceral, the mother also strikes a chord in terms of grief and surrogate motherhood. The artist takes the natureculture non-division further in *The Lovers* (2011), *The Stags* (2008) (which reintroduces the species element), *Nest* (2006) and *Thicker Than Water* (2007). *Nest*, which invokes Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'meta(1)morphosis', depicts yet another Madonna and child scene, but in this work human and even non-human animality appears *materially* absent (Braidotti 2002: 212–263). These are two beautifully shiny scooter-like creatures, mechanical creations for human use. However, they have agency and they exclude the viewer (the human) from their intimate relationship. Human and non-human animals only haunt the scene as far as emotion, on the one hand, and body expression on the other, are concerned. The mother's eyes (the speedometers) look at her child as lovingly as a machine can, lowering her head; the child looks lovingly back. The mother's mirrors and handles (antlers and ears) are attuned to the child's movements (the back light is the tail, the seat is the hump and the wheels are the arms and legs). The mother lies as most mammals would, protecting her child. The child rests on its own body, in full recognition of the protection and love her/his mother bestows. Piccinini does not want to necessarily associate organic or even mechanical motherhood to female bodies, also in line with Haraway's conception of a post-genderised, post-oedipal cyborgian subjectivity (Haraway 1991: 150): "illegitimate cyborgs, not of Woman born" (Haraway 1991: 177). Piccinini taps into the ideas of anthropomorphisation and animalisation, marked by function and exploitation (McDonald 2003: 19). In this human–animal–technology intertwining, or as Başak Doğa Temür has put it "nature rendered in mechanical form", by "extend[ing] the concept of artificial intelligence to artificial emotion", healing occurs through affective machine intimacy (Temür 2011: online; without page).

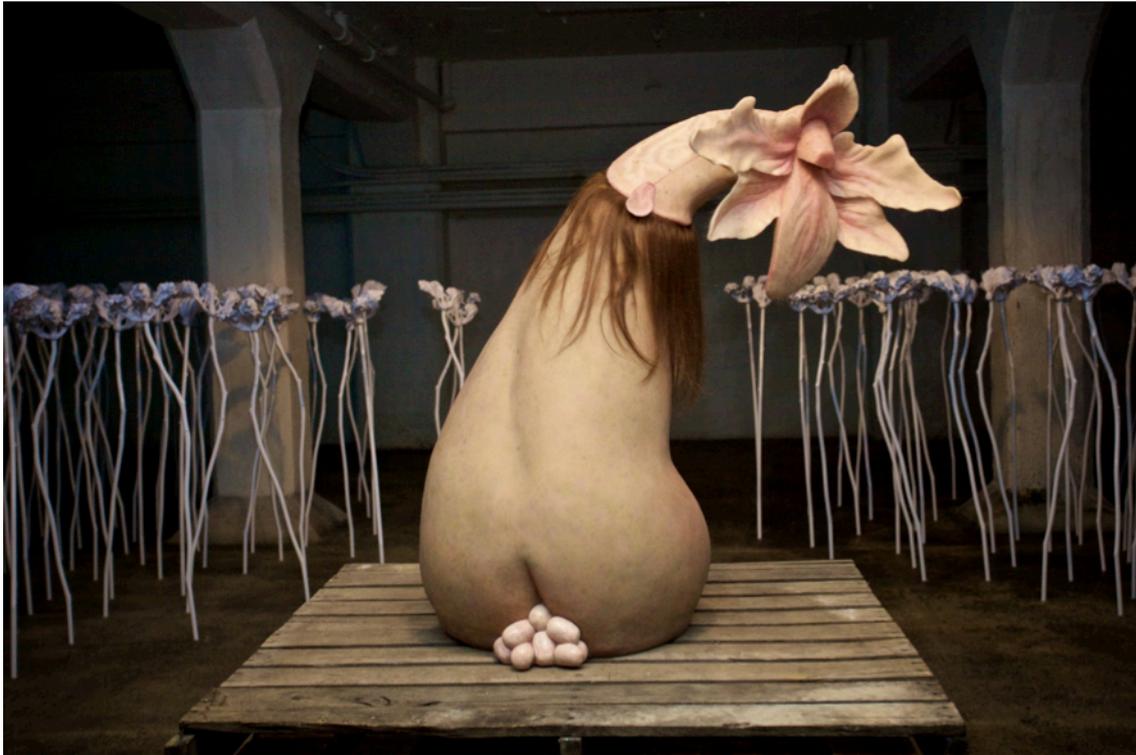
*Thicker Than Water* (2007) re-enacts the same principles with the family lying closer, as if threatened (by humans?), mother and child brought closer together by fear. The following year (2008), *The Stags* heightens the idea of conflict as two stag-scooters engage in aggressive interaction characteristic of male deer but, also in a broader (allegoric) sense, of human relations (Michael 2003: 19). As Piccinini has said herself, maybe a cow is not just a machine to produce milk and meat, and maybe these scooters are not merely usable vehicles (Temür 2011). As Donna Haraway aptly writes:

A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end [...]. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped or dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an

aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they (Haraway 1991: 180; italics in the text).

*The Stags* is just one example of how Piccinini expands the concept of eco-customisation towards the reinvented realm of automobile customisation and car culture. What she has called mechanical fauna can also draw on hegemonic ideas of Australian masculinity. An example would be *Waiting for Jennifer* (2000), a photomontage showing a suburban white male wearing a singlet (popularly known as ‘wife-beater’), whilst waiting for his girlfriend or child to come out of school. Next to him lies a pinkish, unclassifiable pet. S/he is clearly also family. The creature makes several appearances that year. In *Social Studies* and *Kick Flip Ollie*, s/he is in a car park playing with children. There is no aggressiveness among them and curiosity is shared by all. But in 2001, s/he is shown in her/his infancy in some science lab. The several photographs constituting *Science Story* show her/him as a baby. Was s/he a lab creation? *Cyclepups*, for instance, are hybrids, customised bodies between tadpoles and possibly cars. They embody tenderness, but also organic customisation which has been made possible by biotechnology. As Braidotti has remarked, the “manipulation of life through genetic engineering has allowed for the creation of new artificial monsters in the high-tech labs of our biochemists, in human, animal and vegetable realms” (Braidotti 2011 [1994]: 214).

I shall refer to two other examples of digital photography, *Thunderdome* (2005) and *Roadkill* (2005) as cases in point. In the first case, we are in a universe where genetic diversity has been fully developed and accepted. Genetically modified simians share the same environment as human beings; the hybrids do not seem to cause any feeling of strangeness in the humans. However, this reading is changed when *Thunderdome* is considered alongside *Roadkill*. The hybrid simian is run over by a car (one assumes being driven by a human) but s/he only gets help from a member of her/his own species. In this instance, human-simian hybrid interaction results in death and very clearly in indifference. Despite what *Thunderdome* suggests, speciesism is prevalent and these two photographs as well as others that constitute the series, heed a warning: “The ambivalent sentiment that prevails in these works points to the fact that we can never really know, any more than Frankenstein knew, how the monsters we create will develop” (McDonald 2012: 63). I believe that Piccinini’s recent work, such as *ComCiência*, reinforces this point. There is no doubt that Piccinini is appealing to one’s sense of responsibility (‘conscience’/‘be conscientious’) when one deals with science (‘com ciência’). It is from this exhibition that I will take my final example: *Boofflower*.



**Figure 10.** *Bootflower* (2015). Silicone, fibreglass, human hair. 103cm × 100cm × 60cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll.

Piccinini has been working on the human–animal–plant construct in a meaningful form since 2012. In 2015 alone she produced *Car Fungus*, *Fruiting Bodies*, *Metaflora*, *Meadow*, *Seedling* and *Bootflower*. However, *Curious Affection* announces a shift in her work where plant-like forms receive more emphasis. In this exhibition, Piccinini combines *Meadow* and *Bootflower* with original pieces, including *Kindred* and the magnetising *The Pollinator* (2017). The setting is *Meadow*, a field of pale, ovary-shaped flowers from which the other installations emerge. Together, all the installations form *The Field* (2018). In *The Pollinator*, a hybrid child seems to have encountered an utterly new form of being which displays animal and plant traits covered by a pink, human evoking, skin. The child stands on her/his toes to peek inside a hairy pouch, curiously investigating its potential. The pouch exudes the possibility of reproducing either by being pollinised or by cocooning an egg. But it is *Bootflower* which stands out in the field. This flower is made of leather, symbolising the transformation of an animal into an object which is simultaneously a plant. It is a laying egg-flower which displays the inherent desire to reproduce and, therefore, to survive. This assertive flower seems to be an evolutionary step-up from *Metaflora* (*Stone Mountain*) which is also included elsewhere in the exhibition. How has it been able to travel from a flowerbed in suburban Australia to this space? *Bootflower* is bigger, more terrifying and more magnificent as well. The flower looks defiantly at the viewer. How have the “hybrid uterine-crab-flowers” around it multiplied so that they now act as a protective army for this bigger, more magnificent flower form (Monteith 2018: online; without page)? As in *The Young Family* and *Tender*, how can reproduction take place so successfully and autonomously?

As Helen McDonald has remarked, humans cannot know “how the monsters we create will develop. We do not know how they will feel or whether they will continue to be hostile, friendly, useful, or destructive, once they become independent agents in the world” (McDonald 2012: 63). This boot flower clearly seems to be rebellious whilst menacingly taking over your territory (your body even, as possibly in *Tender?*). Or is it human resistance to affirmative posthumanness? After all, the *Bodyguard* (hence the name) is a protector; the monster in *The Welcome Guest* (2011) is not attacking the child (she is welcoming her/his beauty), the meerkat creatures look after the unafraid baby in *The Leatherscape* and in *Embrace* (2005), despite appearances, an embrace is just that (the woman is Piccinini/any woman who was once surprised by an overexcited child leaping towards her). Stephanie Monteith emphasises the need in Piccinini’s art to make “[t]he connections between the maker and the monsters. Where are aberrant bodies allowed to live? Where should they be seen? What will we allow ‘inside the house?’” (Monteith 2018: online; without page). These are key questions because as the cyborg determines our ontology, therefore it determines our politics (Haraway 1991: 150). In Piccinini’s work otherness, vulnerability and affection (both proffered and expected) require a reformulation of the politics of gender, the body, reproduction, the animal, home, ugliness, and monstrosity.

## **Conclusion**

On the other side of the world, another party is being thrown. At Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, Patricia Piccinini holds a film festival in parallel with her *Curious Affection* exhibition. Monsters, both old and new, are in attendance. Among films such as *The Shape of Water* (2017) and *Okja* (2017), she has also included *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (2015). Patricia Piccinini has been described by Donna Haraway as her sister in technoculture (Haraway 2007a). It seems that by creating critters that only exist in the creative space of an art gallery, Piccinini is giving life to the cyborg which, Haraway and by now undoubtedly all of us know, exists in natureculture, in the continuum between art spaces, culture, technology and nature. Piccinini extracts the cyborg from the realm of science labs, those remote domains alien to most us, in order to intervene affirmatively by, for instance, problematising motherhood not in terms of reproduction, but of replication and surrogacy. Her message, unlike Victor Frankenstein’s, is that the creator must be aware of the duty to care; hence the title of the exhibition *Like Us*. ‘Us’ does not have to be human-centred nor does it even have to be human; *Like Us* is also a reminder to those human animals of their responsibility to like, and to care for non-humans. Her “naturally artificial world” is a “technological bestiary” where progress is not fought against but is throughout permeated by tenderness (Piccinini/Fernandez Orgaz 2007).



**Figure 11.** *The Couple* (2018) in *Curious Affection*. Linen, silicone, hair, fiberglass. 42cm × 168cm × 65cm approx. Photo: Drome Studio. Courtesy of Roger Moll.

One of the stars of the *Curious Affection* show is *The Couple* (2018). Piccinini observes what a bad parent Victor Frankenstein was (Jefferson 2018). In this installation she aims at telling an anti-Frankenstein story, a visual narrative which circumvents tragedy. Being a better parent, one assumes, Piccinini gives the monster a partner and maybe they are the last of their kind. They lie affectionately in bed, sheltered but also isolated from the rest of the world. Their home is a caravan, a temporary, nomadic home. They also carry with them the possibility of reproduction and, therefore, of a future outside human control. In spite of their manufactured origins, their destiny is now theirs alone. The age of the monster has well and truly arrived.

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### **Biographical Note**

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