

Patricia Piccinini EVOLUTION

interpretive resource



Interpretive resource

This interpretive resource is designed for teachers and others to use in conjunction with exhibition visits.

It is intended for use across all levels.

Piccinini's work has inspired writers, and commentators to engage with the ideas raised in her artmaking. A number of valuable reference sources are listed below. In particular, Piccinini's website contains a comprehensive collection of images, essays, details of recent exhibitions and biographical details.

To optimise visits with students, it is recommended that teachers make a pre-visit to the exhibition and read the suggested references. Teachers are invited to contact AccessArt to discuss the programs they are developing in response to the exhibition, and to jointly plan their school visits.

A pre-visit will enable teachers to consider ways that they can shape their visit to their particular students' interests and development. For example, at certain periods in their development, as they seek to clarify their understanding of 'normal', young children can be uneasy about physical difference. Being sensitive to this could enable teachers to listen and observe children's responses and discuss notions of 'real' and 'imagined' with them. A pre-visit will also enable teachers to consider conceptual ideas and language they could engage students with during their visits. To assist with this, a brief glossary is included below.

The exhibition catalogue, a valuable resource, is available for sale from the museum shop.

Arranging your visits

All school visits must be booked in advance. This is to ensure overcrowding in the galleries is avoided and students are given the best access to the artworks and program material possible. Two weeks notice is generally needed if a guide is required.

AccessArt offers teachers a range of options for visits and workshops associated with the Evolution exhibition.

Guided Visits: By specialist art educators and available throughout the period of exhibition

(see below for booking information)

Self Guided Visits

(see below for booking information)

Workshops are available 6–9 April, 18–22 May 2009

Workshops will take place in the Commissariat and will use art making as a means of responding to the exhibition. Teachers are encouraged to liaise with AccessArt staff to discuss a specific focus for their workshop. A limited number of workshops with TMAG Senior Preparator Brian Looker who built the diorama are available between 6–9 April.

Please advise us if your students will have visited the exhibition prior to a workshop. If this is not the case, we will include a visit to the exhibition prior to the workshop.

Bookings can be made through the TMAG booking line

phone: (03) 6211 4189 or email: tmag.bookings@tmag.tas.gov.au

Exhibition background

In the exhibition *Evolution*, international artist Patricia Piccinini takes viewers on an evolutionary journey to encounter fantastic fauna, extraordinary creatures and challenging environments in an imagined world. Piccinini has received worldwide attention for her astonishing sculptures, digital environments and images. This exhibition invites visitors to consider big ideas—our relationships with the 'natural' world and with changing environments, boundaries of science and technology, and other major issues across species, time and space. This is the first major survey of Piccinini's works exhibited in Tasmania.

Evolution is an exhibition created for the particular setting of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Piccinini has created a number of new works that respond to the institution as both an art gallery and museum. Central themes embodied in the exhibition address our relationships to our environment, to the animal world, and ways we relate to the 'natural' and the 'artificial'. What do we consider as a society is natural, and what is artificial? How are changes in medical technology affecting what it is to be human? Piccinini asks in this context, 'How far do we want to go?' While some works address the technologising of nature, others focus on the naturalising of technology.

The collaborative nature of Piccinini's works is clearly evident. She works with a wide range of specialists such as digital animators and automotive engineers. She describes her process:

I conceive the work and then bring together the pieces. If I didn't have great people working on the projects, it wouldn't work. I don't want the ideas to be limited by what I can physically do. The ideas come first.



Bottom Feeder
2009
silicone, fibreglass, animal fur, steel

Exhibition Notes

Bottom Feeder

Regular visitors to TMAG are familiar with the Zoology gallery, dominated by a large diorama situating birds, mammals and fish within a 'natural' habitat. Into this setting a work titled *Bottom Feeder* has been inserted along with bags of rubbish strewn around the surface.

This odd creature, with a shark's head, human torso, canine legs and excessive posterior is Piccinini's custom-designed chimera whose task it is to devour rubbish.

In this work, the visitor is introduced to the first of Piccinini's creatures she terms 'nature's little helpers'. Some of these creatures are designed to assist endangered species such as the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater or the Northern Hairy-nosed wombat. As Piccinini observes with regard to *Bottom Feeder*: *We pollute the ocean and we look for a technological fix rather than a simple solution that would result in us having to change our ways. This beautiful creature is in a yoga pose and rather than see its face we look at its bottom that is folded and soft and has a Buddha-like expression.*

She suggests that fascination with the face-like bottom lessens the attention to the real purpose of the job it is created to do. When Engberg observes that *Bottom Feeder* has, '*developed a physical strategy to overcome the humiliating posture it must endure in order to deliver its cleaning service*', she raises a central characteristic of many Piccinini works.

Piccinini uses the menu of traits known to elicit positive and sympathetic responses in a viewer. She assigns to her creatures a form of pedomorphosis—attributes of the infant bred into mature forms—big eyes, big heads, shortened noses, etc, which behavioral scientists and zoologists have shown to aid in the protection of a species. Or indeed have been purposefully bred into a species because of our human desire to make creatures resemble baby humans. This is particularly true in the breeding of domestic pets.



The Uprising
2008
bronze
79 x 96 x 90 cm approx
Corbett and Yueji Lyon Collection of
Contemporary Australian Art

The Uprising

Moving from the Zoology gallery into the Freeman gallery, visitors meet a work strongly contrasting in material and form. *The Uprising*, 2008, is between what we know as 'natural' and what we know to be 'man-made'. Engberg says of *The Uprising*:

The massive aorta-like *The Uprising*, with its labyrinthine musculature, is a much stranger work. It establishes a bridge between the Vespa stags and the transgenic creatures, while being simultaneously amorphous and representational. Corporeal and mechanical, it suggests the plastic, porous, and uncertain world of the new nature that is at the core of the figurative works. For this reason it is physically sited at the boundary between natural history and art history in the show and in the museum.



left:

Bodyguard

2004

silicone, polyurethane, leather,
human hair

151 x 76.2 x 60.9 cm

photograph: Graham Baring
Michael Buxton Collection

right:

Surrogate

2005

silicone, polyurethane, leather,
plywood, human hair

180 x 306 x 103 cm

Collection of Penny Clive



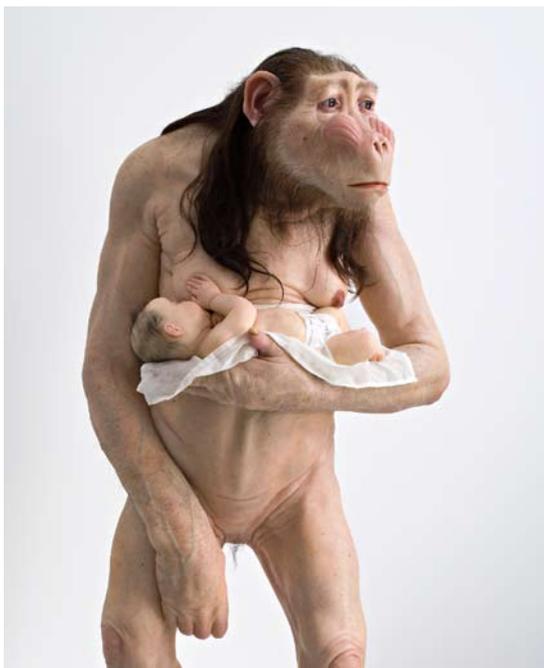
Bodyguard

Also in the Freeman gallery is *Bodyguard*, 2004, another 'little helper' created in response to the plight of the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater that has become endangered as humans encroach on its habitat. This creature has a fierce appearance and long arms to enable it to swing among trees, scaring predators away. Its long, sharp incisors are designed to puncture trees and free sap that the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater feeds on.

Surrogate

Similarly, the Northern Hairy-nosed wombat, endangered through drought, dingo attacks and encroachment, has a 'little helper' *Surrogate*, 2005, ready to nurture wombat embryos in its pouches. These are imagined creations and Piccinini reminds us that she is not suggesting her creatures are 'the answer' to the dilemma of these endangered animals. Rather, she invites us to engage with questions that her artworks raise. For example, is it a good idea to create new life to help an endangered creature? And remembering the well-intentioned introduction to Australia of species such as rabbits and cane toads that have caused environmental devastation, how far will we, as a society, go to undo damage we have done to the environment?

Big Mother



With soft, sad eyes, *Big Mother* looks out into the world. She has the characteristics of a baboon, strong legs and arms yet, on closer looking, we see she is suckling a human baby. Piccinini speaks of her as '*having a physical and emotional attachment to this baby, and having the same needs as us, education, banks, food and shelter. The nappy bags give a hint of her needs being the same as ours*'. This *Big Mother* has apparently translucent skin, moles, blemishes and Engberg observes the feeling of the observer as we look twice in case *Big Mother* might move. Piccinini says 'she draws on our empathy, she has been designed for this purpose, what is her solution?' Again, we are called to empathise with her plight and consider our responsibilities towards things that we create.

Big Mother

2005

silicone, fibreglass, polyurethane,
leather, human hair

175cm high

photograph: Graham Baring
Collection of Penny Clive



Perhaps the world is fine tonight
2009

silicone, fibreglass, clothing, human
and animal hair, taxidermied
Tasmanian devils and wedgetailed
eagles, timber, polyurethane, rocks,
native vegetation, acrylic paint

Perhaps the world is fine tonight

The sculptures and diorama, *Perhaps the world is fine tonight*, have been especially created for this exhibition in Tasmania. In addition to working with her team of people in Melbourne, for this work, she collaborated with Brian Looker, the Senior preparator at TMAG who built the components of the diorama and assembled it in the gallery. Brian is also a taxidermist and he prepared the Tasmanian devils and Wedgetailed eagles for inclusion in this work.

Piccinini explains that '*this is a story in the language of the diorama. It is about humans and devils coming together, they are sharing a moment, and it seems spiritual*'. Tasmanian devils are often seen as aggressive animals or more recently as animals with a serious problem with facial tumours. Piccinini shows them in a different light. These devils are gentle, caring, watching over the child who is gently folded forward in a yoga position, they are not threatening her. As Engberg observes:

To access the scene of the work, the viewer must become an active participant and locate a clear space for looking within the rock formation. Having done so, it becomes obvious that as a viewer you are placed in the role of a voyeur or interloper, You are a stranger in this idyll, trespassing into a nature that does not seek your participation, and in fact may be disturbed by such intrusion.

Above the peaceful scene hover two Wedgetailed eagles. What are they carrying? Engberg speaks of the 'mass' as '*an unfathomable creature*' Perhaps they are delivering something, perhaps it is a ritual? Piccinini sees all these creatures as coming together in some way, and expects viewers to see and read this scene in different ways.



Undivided
2004
silicone, human hair, flannelette,
mixed medium
101 x 74 x 127 cm
Collection of Penny Clive



The Long Awaited
2008
silicone, fibreglass, human hair,
plywood, leather, clothing
152 x 80 x 92 cm
Private collection

Undivided, The Long Awaited and Foundling

In Art gallery 2, visitors find a space reminiscent of a dormitory with low lights and 'lots of sleeping'. Three different works call viewers to enter into their stories, and of two works, *Undivided* and *The Long Awaited* Engberg suggests: '*Piccinini creates extraordinary sympathy between two lives that are united by the smallest of genetic similarities and divided by much more*'. In these works, where she is imagining creatures to have human relationships, Piccinini asks '*What is our responsibility to them?*' In the case of *The Long Awaited* for example, another threatened species, the Dugong, is seen as a grandmother in a loving relationship with a child. '*The child loves her and she lets him love her. This is intimate, beautiful, to sleep with someone you need trust, she lets him nurture her, she allows that, nurturing is fundamental to us all. She is fantasy, however, we can see the closeness of this relationship, and it is human*'. *The Foundling* has a different, solitary story. '*This baby is too big for the capsule, it's skin is wrinkled and prematurely aged. She is asking to be picked up. She is different, but beautiful, alone and enduring*.' Engberg speaks of *The Foundling's* '*challenging entity; so close to conventionally human, but slightly genetically twisted in the wrong direction to have caused its banishment and now precarious existence*'.



Foundling
2008
silicone, human hair, polyester,
nylon, wool, glass, plastic
41 x 66 x 37 cm
Private collection



far left:

The Stags

2008

fibreglass, automotive paint, plastic, stainless steel, leather, rubber tyres
196 x 224 x 167 cm

left:

Thicker Than Water

2007

fibreglass, automotive paint
70 x 45 x 58 cm
Private collection

The Stags and Thicker Than Water

Speaking of *The Stags* and *Thicker than Water*, Piccinini explains, 'the grown up Vespas are duelling; there is a hierarchy in this relationship. The surface of this work is hard and shiny, however, the nature of these creatures is sweet, they have neither fear nor are frightening, they draw you in, they are enduring and sweet'. Piccinini alerts us to the fact that the Vespas are mechanical—yet they grow! What is natural and what is mechanical?

The Embrace

In the Colonial Gallery, a dramatic insertion has been made. *The Embrace* is positioned amidst the early colonial portraits and TMAG's extensive collection of Gould's still life works in which the dead hare is a prominent and repetitious feature. Piccinini's work is an updated portrait, one now responding to the dilemma of nature and nurture in a world where species can be brought back into existence through DNA processes, and invented through selective scientific breeding—a potential reversal of the damage done to the local environment and its inhabitants since white colonisation. Is this an embrace or is it an attack?



The Embrace

2005

silicone, polyurethane, leather, plywood, human hair, clothing
variable dimensions
Collection of Penny Clive



Not Quite Animal (Transgenic Skull for the Young Family)
2008
bronze
28 x 14.5 x 19.5 cm
Private collection, Melbourne



Not Quite Animal II (Transgenic Skull for the Bodyguard)
2008
bronze
24 x 22 x 15 cm

Not Quite Animal

In the Geology Gallery, two further insertions engage viewers with notions of permanence and impermanence, art and science. Engberg explains:

'Recently Piccinini has added skeletal matter to her collection, a kind of reverse paleontology which predicts the sort of structural foundation that might carry these fleshy, or chrome entities. Piccinini's skulls, titled Not Quite Animal (Transgenic skull for The Young Family) and Not Quite Animal II (Transgenic skull for The Bodyguard) theoretically put bones under the flesh of the chimeras. They are a convincing fusion of the familiar and strange, as are all of Piccinini's creations. Yet, they are in bronze, and precious rather than fossil and subject to organic impermanence, which establishes them in the world of art rather than science.'

When my baby (when my baby)

An amorphous, hairy creature emerges as we watch. Tiny nano implants appear, moving under the skin. The surface resembles animal skin, it appears alive yet, this work is digital. Speaking of the inspiration for this work, Piccinini tells of her encounter with an injured Rock wallaby and the fleeting moment when the animal opened its eyes and she felt a connection, *'a moment that communicated an understanding between species'*. Again Piccinini asks, *'what is natural and what is human?'*



When my baby (when my baby)
2005
DVD, 16:9 PAL, Stereo
3 minutes



The Gathering
2007
DVD, 16:9 PAL, Stereo
3 minute loop

The Gathering

This at first appears to be a story of a girl in an adult bedroom, yet something strange is evident. The house is deserted, the colour of the girl's clothing contrasts with the dark, muted tones of the of the house. Piccinini says, *'we feel scared for her, she moves, she is alive. We are not scared of the creatures, they are cute. We feel her vulnerability as they approach her, they are too close, something is not quite right'*. As the music changes the creature mother opens up and shows her children this human child. The focus becomes clear, it is about the creatures. *'Maybe the creatures have a ritual [similar to that seen in the picture on the wall?]. It is a moment of opening up, a sense of wonder and joy. It is about our connections we bring to the story'*.

The Offering

In response to the tactile curiosity of visitors, Piccinini has created three baby creatures or offerings that visitors are invited to touch and photograph. *'They appear warm not only because they are in the hands of the attendants in soft lambskin pouches, but their expression tells us they are comfortable and well fed. The babies evoke empathy and caring.'*



The Offering
2009
silicone, animal fur, lambskin

References

Piccinini quotations:

Evolution floor talks, 16,17,21 March 2009

Daniel Palmer interview with Patricia Piccinini and Peter Hennessey, 2001. <http://www.patriciapiccinini.net>

Engberg quotations: Evolution catalogue essay (see below)

Useful Resources:

www.patriciapiccinini.net A comprehensive collection of images, essays and details of recent exhibitions

Engberg, J. (2009). *Patricia Piccinini's Uprising Evolution*, exhibition catalogue essay, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.

Haraway, D. (2007). *Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations: Taking Care of Unexpected Country*. <http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/essay.php>

Brief Glossary

Anthropocentric	regarding human kind as the central fact of the universe; viewing and interpreting everything in terms of human experience and values
Anthropomorphic	ascribing human form or attributes to beings or things not human attributes
Amorphous	lacking definite form, having no specific shape, formless, unorganised
Chimera [genetics]	an organism, or part of one, with at least two genetically different tissues resulting from mutation, the grafting of plants, or the insertion of foreign cells into an embryo
Corporeal	of the nature of the physical body; matter
Embryonic diapause	delayed implantation, reproductive strategy where embryo does not immediately implant into the uterus but is maintained in a state of dormancy often dictated by environmental conditions
Evolution	any process of formation or growth; the continuous genetic adaptation of organisms or species to the environment
Foundling	an infant found abandoned, a child without a parent or guardian
Genetic	relating to genesis or origin, determined by genes as opposed to environment
Genome	the complete genetic material for any cell
Labyrinthine	relating to, or forming a labyrinth; intricate maze
Nanotechnology	the art of manipulating materials on a very small scale in order to build microscopic machinery
Palaeontology	science of the forms of life existing in former geological periods
Pedomorphosis	(also spelled paedomorphosis) or juvenification is a phenotypic and/or genotypic change in which the adults of a species retain traits previously seen only in juveniles. Peramorphosis is change in the reverse direction
Progenesis,	in which development is halted before full maturity
Surrogate	one appointed to act for another, substitute
Transgenic	(of an animal or plant) produced after the artificial insertion of genetic material not normally present

Extending Your Visit

Recalling the curator Julianna Engberg's statement regarding the work *The Uprising*, (see Exhibition Notes) discuss your responses to seeing this work and consider the different ideas that it provokes.

Research questions that 'nature's little helpers' engage us with. Resources that can assist you include Engberg, J. (2009). *Patricia Piccinini's Uprising Evolution*. Catalogue essay, *Patricia Piccinini Evolution*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Haraway, D. *Speculative Fabulations for Technoculture's Generations*, and other essays available at <http://www.patriciapiccinini.net> as well as images of 'little helpers'.

Following your research into 'nature's little helpers', create your own 'little helper' for an animal or bird that is endangered in Tasmania. Consider carefully the attributes it might need to effectively protect the animal or bird you choose.

Think about Engberg's quotation above regarding ways that Piccinini uses '*the menu of traits known to elicit positive and sympathetic responses in a viewer*'. Have a discussion about your responses to the forms of 'pedomorphosis' in the exhibition. Listen to other peoples' responses. Consider differences and similarities in your responses.

Big Mother is described by Engberg as '*a version of the much mooted ape human chimera, spliced and joined from the one exclusive genome that separates human from animal, and the other twenty-three and twenty-three respectively, that unite hem in genetics.*' Look closely at *Big Mother's* hands, investigate through drawing the physical and emotional function of the hands.

In the works *The Stags* 2008 and *Thicker Than Water* 2007, Piccinini raises issues about what is natural and what is mechanical. Explore mechanical devices around your home and using drawing and sculpture, investigate ways you could create relationships between them.

Piccinini tells us that *Perhaps the world is fine tonight, 'is a story in the language of the diorama. It is about humans and devils coming together, they are sharing a moment, and it seems spiritual*'. Imagine you are standing on the rock beside the girl. What might she be feeling? How would you feel in this place with these creatures? What do you imagine the eagles are carrying?

Questions for teachers and students to engage with

Discuss technological issues related to problems of global pollution.

Consider philosophical issues surrounding transplants and organ donation in contrast to bionic and nano implants.

Explore the ways in which species aid each other in survival techniques.

Research the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater.

Discuss cloning—is it advantageous in helping survival of species?

Research embryonic diapause. What environmental conditions trigger this event and in which species?

Consider the debate nurture v nature, adoption v surrogacy.

Discuss maternal and paternal feelings of empathy towards offspring.

Does *Big Mother* evoke feelings of empathy or other emotions?

Create a story around the diorama. What role do the Tasmanian devils play in relation to the child?

Consider what body types are attached to the skulls? Have they been preserved for posterity? How does this relate to the work of Charles Darwin and ER Wallace and why?