Influenced by science, Surrealism and the unconscious, Patricia Piccinini’s creatures are sometimes startling, but rarely fearsome. As fantastic as her collisions of animal, plant, machine and human parts appear, somehow they also remain quite familiar. We recognise certain parts of the anatomy, but, more than this, we see expressions and behaviours that we know. Looking into a pair of thoughtful eyes or observing a caring gesture, it is easy to connect and empathise with the lives and experiences of Piccinini’s creations. Perhaps if we were better acquainted, we might even discover that we have much in common.

In focusing on emotional connections, Piccinini deftly exercises and broadens our concern for others in ways we might not have enacted before. This aligns her practice with the rising academic interest in posthumanism. Where thinkers once invested in the notion of humanism and its appeal to science and rationalism, many now look at the failures of this project with alarm. As we arrive at the Anthropocene — the first geological era named in recognition of the impact of human activity — concern for environmental and social consequences affecting both human and non-human populations sounds everywhere.

Critical perspectives from feminist, literary and postcolonial theorists reveal the disjunction between humanism’s rhetoric of freedom, progress and positivist objectivity, and the suffering, inequality and disenfranchisement felt the world over. In response, Piccinini signals the possibility of a brave compassion and acceptance of difference, as she takes on persistent and troubling issues pertaining to race, class, gender, the mistreatment and suffering of animals, and the degradation of the environment.

Piccinini’s creatures, or at least the ones crafted from multiple species, are known as chimeras, from the Ancient Greek term that originally referred to a fire-breathing mythological beast comprised of both lion and goat, with a serpent for a tail. Legendary creatures of similar forms existed across the ancient cultures of Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Now, however, ‘chimera’ accounts for all kinds of multi-species fusions delivered to us by science and technology. In this sense, Piccinini’s chimeras — predicated on gene splicing, in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and, most recently, CRISPR — have no past. They are conspicuously contemporary.
Myths and their supernatural characters once held a powerful capacity to bind populations together in beliefs that were conjured from captivating tales. Piccinini’s update has been to use science as the vernacular for her storytelling, as she explains:

Myths often act to explain a complex and confusing world and clarify our place and responsibilities in it. These myths are usually populated by people and other beings — gods and creatures — that we cannot actually see in the real world, but which reflect some aspect of it. In some ways, I am attempting to create mythical beings that reflect complex ethical issues of our times.

In this respect, Piccinini’s storytelling has something in common with that of the great feminist science fiction authors Octavia E Butler, Marge Piercy and Ursula K Le Guin. By drawing on their experiences as women — Piccinini often reflects on her experience as a mother of two — they all encourage their audiences to imagine more nuanced alternatives to the well-established ‘good vs evil’ binary narratives found in most sci-fi, myths and mainstream storytelling.

Indeed such dualisms seem all-pervasive in our culture: hero/villain; beautiful/ugly; familiar/foreign; advanced/primitive; male/female; white/black; self/other; culture/nature. Deeply embedded within our conscious and unconscious minds, Piccinini sees how these powerful patterns extract conformity, bending even the sharpest personal insights or social instincts out of shape. Her practice also relates to the thinking of Donna Haraway, a feminist scholar of science and technology, and her expansive notion of ‘SF’. In her influential essay ‘A cyborg manifesto’, originally published in 1984, Haraway recognised that cyborgs could, in fact, function outside these stubborn dualisms and, in this way, provide a template for the inclusion of difference in society.

Piccinini regularly plays on our conditioned responses to the dualist narrative. The gothic overtones of her video work The gathering 2007, for instance, primes our fears to reveal how easy it is to draw false conclusions. In a largely empty suburban house on a dark night, we see a young girl lying motionless on the floor. We might initially fear this child has suffered a nasty fate. Soon enough, our fears materialise, as furry, wombat-like creatures rustle out from behind the curtains and furniture. Are they preparing an attack on the vulnerable girl, or are they back to finish the job? Instead, it seems they only want to show her to their young — safely concealed in pouches — as she slumbers. The scene concludes on a traditional Indian painting of a couple relaxing in a garden at night, implying all is well and that these creatures might actually be babysitters.

Works such as Alley, 11.15am (from ‘The Fitzroy Series’) 2011 function in a similar way, though here it seems the children are ‘playing’ the role of predator as they chase a creature down an alley. Bedroom, 10.30pm (from ‘The Fitzroy Series’) 2011 fills us with a greater sense of unease. Recalling the iconic painting The Nightmare 1781 by Henry Fuseli — that depicts a demon-like menace sitting on top of a reclining woman — Piccinini’s version also puts the shadowy ambience of night to use. The central creature in Piccinini’s alternative narrative, however, appears to reach over the sleeping child with a gesture of gentle care, while a second watches on from below. In these reformulations, Piccinini pictures difference without the grotesque and prejudicial conflation with evil, instead encouraging viewers to challenge their own expectations that have been built on storytelling formulas of the past.
Unsurprisingly perhaps, Piccinini’s art has often been associated with Mary Shelley’s proto-science fiction classic *Frankenstein*, though it is not a straightforward comparison. Published in 1818, *Frankenstein* demonstrates Shelley’s Romantic inclination to privilege nature above the burgeoning rational order of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. She describes protagonist Dr Victor Frankenstein’s curiosity as unchecked and unhinged, and warns of the unimaginable transgressions against nature that might lurk within the realm of progress. Piccinini, on the other hand, accepts the role of science and regards such tinkering — even with the very substance of life — as inevitable. She perceives that once a tool exists applications for it will be found.

Piccinini and Shelley do align, however, on questions of care and responsibility. In Shelley’s example, Dr Frankenstein neglects his duty to care for his progeny, and this is the root cause of the nameless monster’s wretched life and consequent retribution. Curiously, though, audiences tend to view Frankenstein’s monster as the villain, and not Dr Frankenstein himself — it seems that the creature’s difference makes his disenfranchisement acceptable to us, but not his inevitable acts of violence.

Piccinini’s most direct response to *Frankenstein* is ‘The Mutant Genome Project (TMGP)’ series from 1994–95, which illustrates an extreme counter demonstration to Dr Frankenstein’s parental failures. While scientists and ethicists of the mid 1990s wrestled with the societal implications of even minor instances of embryo screening, Piccinini pondered something altogether stranger and ‘amoral’ in her imagined promotional material for TMGP — her fictitious corporation offering genetic engineering for the designer baby market. TMGP’s flagship product was LUMP™, an acronym for ‘Life Form with Unevolved Mutant Properties’. Pushing the then-stark limitations of 3-D digital modelling, each LUMP™ was impossibly smooth with prominent eyes, large bobble head (signifying their potential intelligence), and no legs (so they would always be at hand). Like many works from the TMGP series, *Psychotourism* 1996 features Sophie Lee, a former ‘It Girl’ of Australian television. As a real-world fantasy inhabiting a digital fiction, her presence highlighted a corporate intent to manipulate our desires and reinvent parenthood.

Fashioned completely from human DNA, the designer LUMP™ child was designed to never grow up. Customers could therefore enjoy their parental role in perpetuity. The unknown limits of love and care in this scenario are diametrically opposed to Shelley’s horrific vision, but, also, is it care gone mad? Surely, a companion animal would seem a more reasonable alternative, particularly given their domestication over thousands of years.

Of course, not all animals enjoy such a privileged place in our lives and homes. In 1975, moral philosopher Peter Singer popularised the term ‘speciesism’ with his book *Animal Liberation*. Premised on the idea that discrimination against other species is akin to the gender supremacism of sexism, or the racial/nationalist supremacism of racism, Singer argued that speciesists ignore animal suffering, primarily inflicted by agriculture, for reasons of power and convenience. He proposed that there is no moral consistency in, on one hand, avoiding suffering in human lives, but then not preventing it in the lives of non-human beings. Yet even Singer has been careful to note that just because we might be logically compelled to recognise and ameliorate the suffering of non-human lives, this does not mean that all beings suffer equally, or that the value of a human life is the same as that of other living beings. This difficult assessment of relative value has long occupied Piccinini.

A potent — and heartfelt — statement on this interaction between human and non-human beings is Piccinini’s mysterious installation *The Couple* 2018. Like most of the artist’s works, many aspects of the story presented in *The Couple* are ambiguous. We do not know how these creatures came to be, beyond the presumption of some technological intervention. We do not know if they are the only two creatures of their kind, or if they exist in a world in which they are a common sight. Sheltering in a tent, we cannot tell if they are leading nomadic lives because they have escaped the constraints of some sort of facility, or the restraints of enslavement. Perhaps they are simply taking a holiday in the wilderness to escape the pressures of city life.
With *The Couple*, Piccinini constructs what she describes as her most emphatic ‘anti-Frankenstein story’.

In the story of *Frankenstein*, the monster pleads with the Doctor for a companion to share his days. Frankenstein initially agrees to the request, but then reneges in disgust, and horrible revenge ensues. *The Couple* presents a conscious contrast; inside the tent we glimpse a couple in tender embrace — a pure expression of affection. Clearly, they are committed companions, and we catch a glimpse of the emotional value of their experience — he sleeps while she stays awake, possibly on guard against forces that would prise them apart.

Resting as nomads at the edge of this world, we might take joy in the rich experience of their journey as we would our own. It is Piccinini’s hope that we may take this fable and act consciously in ways that preserve and enhance the social bonds of others, both human and non-human. And, of course, Piccinini also believes that there is less difference between the emotional capacity of humans and other species than established narratives suggest.

Continuing to think about the way we characterise other species, Piccinini observes that humans often invoke the spirits of wild animals in the design and promotion of luxury consumer items. This is especially true in the automotive world — Jaguar cars being one of the most obvious examples — but, what if new machines could develop animal instincts? With self-driving cars now a reality, might we also consider the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the notion that AI might eventually take over from us in ways biological creatures have not yet managed to do.

*The stags* 2008, a magnificent display of two Vespa-styled male ‘deer’ in a contest for dominance, is fashioned after the Mods — the youthful and rebellious English scooter-centric subculture of the late 1950s and 1960s. Yet the potential social relevance of the work is much greater than its nod to a decades-old counterculture. Recently, Google’s DeepMind project documented the aggressive and cooperative behaviour found in AI that was contingent on what strategy elicited the most success in a range of games simulating real-world social dilemmas.

In some respects, Google’s research iterates what we already observed in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* scenario: that specific conditions give rise to specific behaviours. If we want to cultivate certain expressions, we need to consider the terms of existence that we subject one another to. Apocalyptic visions of AI rising against humans abound in popular culture; however, it would seem that our culture’s interest in violence and division might be what really underpins these narratives — and, to avoid such conflict, we need to seek out other paradigms to live by.

Patricia Piccinini makes no attempt to predict our future, and we should not expect to see her creations living beyond gallery walls anytime soon. Instead, she promotes an ideal of renewal through a greater engagement with nurture, empathy and diversity. Full of hope for what might exist beyond human exceptionalism, her gestures — though novel and often challenging — are ultimately optimistic. For all its imagination, it would seem an overreach to call Piccinini’s vision a fantasy. With our world on the brink — burdened by the environmental and social pressures that weigh so heavily on human and non-human lives alike — it might well seem that the present condition is the real fantasy.

Peter McKay, Curatorial Manager, Australian Art

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Endnotes


4. ‘The Mutant Genome Project (TMGP) was a response to the international Human Genome Project to map out the human genome that was launched in 1990 and completed in 2003.


6. Patricia Piccinini, interview with the author, Melbourne, 6 December 2017.

The relationships and responsibilities that exist between families and neighbours, humans and animals are key to Piccinini’s work. *Teenage Metamorphosis 2017* is a portrait of a hybrid creature who challenges our thinking about the differences between human life, animal life and synthetic life. Piccinini suggests that these different lives are more equal than our inherited culture might suggest. Consider how *Teenage Metamorphosis* blurs the divisions between human, animal and synthetic design.

What aspects of the creature’s body appear engineered for fashion or purpose? What could the creature do with these special features?

How would the caregiver or maker ensure the creature’s wellbeing?

In *The Field (planting) 2018*, Piccinini combines animal and plant — and perhaps even human forms — in the creation of a new species of flower.

Study the flowers to determine which aspects stem from which life form. In relation to the theories of the feminist scholar of science and technology Donna Haraway, think about how *The Field (planting)* functions beyond simple dualisms, which help us categorise our observations, but also limit our deeper thinking.
Heaven bound 2002 draws on Piccinini’s long-held interest in automotive culture. The work explores ideas of consumerism and desire, form and memory. Piccinini captures the aesthetic beauty of cars and bikes, focusing on lines and curves, colours and finishes. The pristine white of Heaven bound, along with its title, evokes the dream-ride of a coveted automobile, and perhaps suggests that the work represents the essence of such a feeling or sensation.

Draw a fragment of a consumer item that you once desired, or even owned. What elements attracted you most?
To best capture your memory of the object, think about the item’s aesthetic beauty and make conscious choices regarding colour, line and tone.

Draw a flower inspired by The Field (planting) 2018, and discuss it with a friend.
Touring venues

**Artspace, Mackay**
25 Sep – 29 Nov 2020

**NorthSite Contemporary Arts, Cairns**
5 Dec 2020 – 30 Jan 2021

**Pinnacles Gallery, Townsville**
13 Feb – 18 Apr 2021

**Redcliffe Art Gallery**
21 Aug – 31 Oct 2021

**Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery**
11 Nov 2021 – 27 Feb 2022

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**Images**
Patricia Piccinini
Australia b.1965

Cover and page 5: Teenage Metamorphosis (detail) 2017 / Silicone, fibreglass, human hair, found objects / 26.8 x 71 x 92cm / Purchased 2018. Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation

Page 1: The Couple (detail) 2018 / Silicone, fibreglass, hair, cotton, tent, found objects, ed.1/3 (+ 1 A.P.) / 204 x 270 x 270 cm (approx.) / The Taylor Family Collection. Purchased 2018 with funds from Paul, Sue and Kate Taylor through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation

Page 2 (clockwise from top): The gathering (still, detail) 2007 / Digital Betacam and DVD formats: 16:9 PAL, 3:00 minutes, sound, colour, ed. 6 / Purchased 2009. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant

Alley 11.15am (from 'The Fitzroy Series') (detail) 2011 / Type C photograph, ed. 1/4 / 100 x 160cm / The James C. Sourris AM Collection. Purchased 2011 with funds from James C. Sourris AM through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Bedroom, 10.30pm (from 'The Fitzroy Series') (detail) 2011 / Type C photograph, ed. 3/4 / 100 x 160cm / The James C. Sourris AM Collection. Purchased 2011 with funds from James C. Sourris AM through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Page 3: Psychotourism (from 'The Mutant Genome Project' series) 1996 / Type C photograph (Digiprint), ed. of 6 / 120.7 x 258.6cm / Purchased 1998. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant

Page 4: The stops 2008 / Fibreglass, automotive paint, leather, steel, plastic, tyres / Two pieces: 177 x 183 x 103cm and 147 x 85 x 101cm; 196 x 224 x 167cm (installed, variable) / Purchased 2009 with funds from the Estate of Lawrence F King in memory of the late Mr and Mrs SW King through the Queensland Art Gallery and the Queensland Government's Gallery of Modern Art Acquisitions Fund

Page 5: The Field (planting) (detail) 2018 / 200 objects: ABS and PPE plastic / 25 x 10cm (each, approx.); installed dimensions variable / Gift of the artist through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation 2020. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

Page 6: Heaven bound 2002 / Automotive paint on fibreglass / 91.5 x 95 x 90cm / Purchased 2003. The Queensland Government’s special Centenary Fund

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