

EXHIBITION GUIDE 22/06/-21/08/2011

PATRICIA PICCININI

Beni
Bagrina
Bas
Hold Me
Close
to Your
Heart

ARTER

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

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Eulogy 2011	The Long Awaited 2008	Colt, From the series
The Lovers 2011	Foundling 2008	"Cyclepups" 2005
The Welcome Guest 2011	Doubting Thomas 2008	Trident, From the series
Figure and Hummingbird 2011	Thicker than Water 2007	"Cyclepups" 2005
Big Mother with Ringlets 2011	The Gathering 2007	Offspring (for the Leadbeaters Possum), From the series
Cascade 2010	Primal Green, From the series	"Nature's Little Helpers" 2005
The Observer 2010	"Precautions" 2006	Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat), From the series
Mare Cognitum, From the series "Panelworks" 2010	Team WAF: Navigator, From the series "Precautions" 2006	"Nature's Little Helpers" 2005
Mare Fecunditatis, From the series "Panelworks" 2010	Supermo, From the series "Precautions" 2006	The Embrace From the series
Bottom Feeder 2009	Big Mother 2005	"Nature's Little Helpers" 2005
Balasana 2009	Hunter, From the series "Cyclepups" 2005	Undivided 2004
The Offering 2009	Black Velvet, From the series "Cyclepups" 2005	Plasmid Region 2003
		Plasticology 1997

In “Hold Me Close to Your Heart”, Patricia Piccinini sets in motion various media such as sculpture, installation, drawing and video in a compilation of her works from 1997 to the present. Piccinini deals with various vital issues of contemporary life with reference to today’s technologies, consumerism and the construct of nature. Her work addresses the ambivalent state of mind caused by opposing conventional wisdoms: one that there is an abundance of ‘prophetic signs’ indicating that we are approaching the ‘end time’, and two, that science and its technologies will heal the world and make it a paradisiacal never-ending place. According to her, to accept that contemporary technologies are going to revolutionise our world and make it a better place is as “rubbish” as to claim these technologies in the least worthless. Mindful of the forces at play behind the shiny, seductive yet camouflaged perfection, she borrows its limitless polishing strategy and creates a similar aura, resulting in a quite unfamiliar ‘end product’.

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Through the puzzling appearance of these ‘end products’ one of the antagonisms her works tackle is the ‘nature vs. culture’ opposition. However, the way in which she explores these is focused on their contemporary constructs and implications. She is interested in what constitutes ‘nature’ for a “contemporary, movie watching, in-vitro fertilised mall-rat.” Her creatures look often ‘abnormal’, ‘unnatural’ or ‘freakish’. Their size, proportions, highly realistic fleshy finishes evoke a sense that they could have been evolved

into a 'normal' human or animal. Still, they seem to be genetically modified, lab-produced mutants, albeit with friendly eyes, cute smiles and adorable poses. The strength of Piccinini's work evokes this tension through direct physical encounters, as she brings the viewer face to face with hideous yet friendly creatures in an act that prompts us to reconsider the accepted binary oppositions of nature vs. culture, beauty vs. ugliness/disgust and necessity vs. luxury. Meanwhile, the infant-like attributes of these creatures immediately evoke an inevitable sense of sympathy, care, affection, love and even an urge to cuddle and protect them.

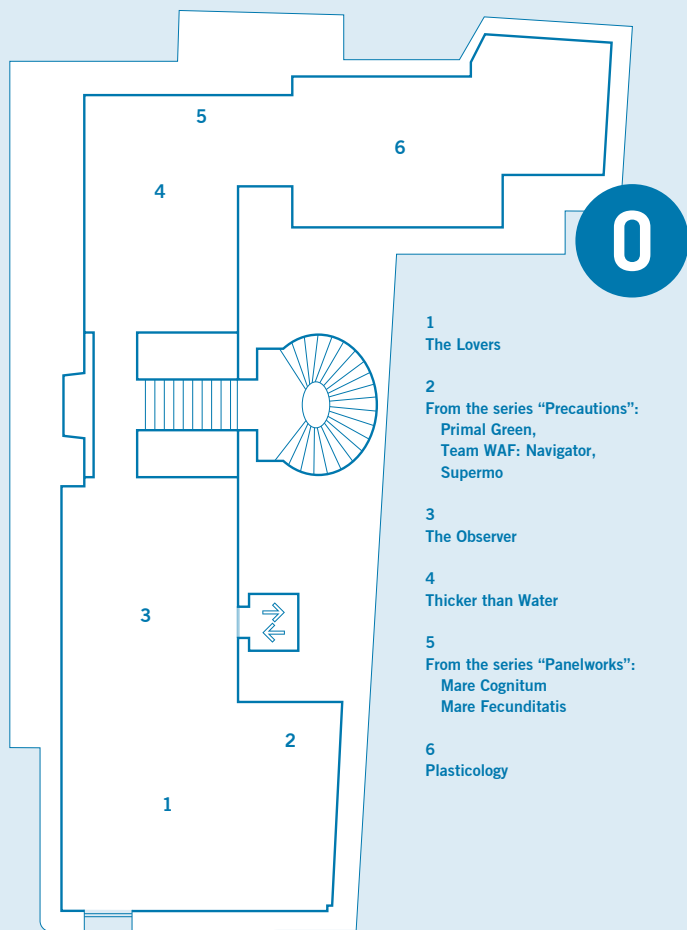
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The exhibition "Hold Me Close to Your Heart" proposes an experience, a journey to another world: one that is simultaneously unfamiliar and strangely similar to ours. This experience encourages the viewer to stay at this very moment to focus on the highly contemporary issues and debates around technology, media culture, consumerism and science. This journey encompasses Piccinini's response to ARTER's multi-storey structure by treating the space as an installation that consists of three distinct atmospheres to be experienced as a journey to another world. Brightly illuminated, the ground floor comments on the shiny world of commodities and the nature of everyday life in a post-industrial urban environment; the first floor is inhabited by invented hybrid creatures, surrogates for endangered species to explore further the contemporary construct of 'nature', our place in it, and our attempts to control it. Finally, the most intimate part of the journey, invites the viewer into a homely setting on the second floor, where the residents are asleep and into a meditation on being human, on our creations and our responsibilities towards them.

In “Hold Me Close to Your Heart”, she leads us to a state of contemplation, suggesting to remember and reconsider the power of being a family; a power which finds its source in holding each other close to our hearts; in altruism and generosity, inexhaustible patience, being unprejudiced and accepting of all failures, idiosyncrasies and ugliness, to hold together even in the most unbearable plight. It offers one of the many keys to hope for those of us wishing to reconcile ourselves with our creations.

Piccinini states that she is happy to talk about her work, but that she is not interested in telling people what to think. This guide, which accompanies the viewer's first encounter with Piccinini's work in Istanbul, comprises Piccinini's texts on the works in the exhibition. We hope these short texts will be helpful in guiding the viewer strolling through Piccinini's seemingly unusual yet familiar world.

PATRICIA PICCININI HOLD ME CLOSE TO YOUR HEART



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The Lovers

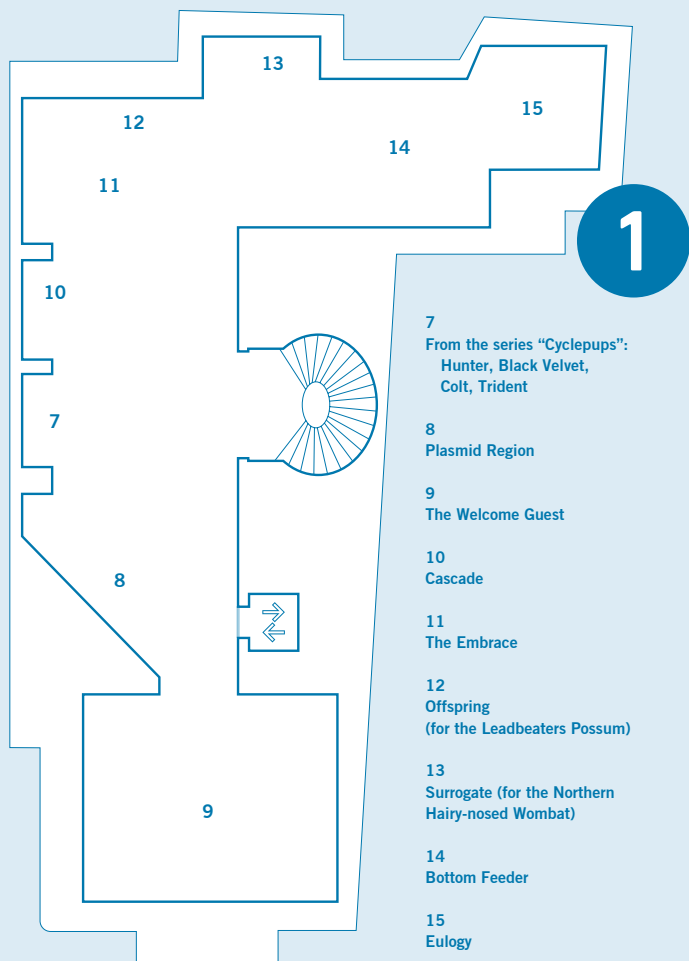
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From the series "Precautions":
Primal Green,
Team WAF: Navigator,
Supermo

3
The Observer

4
Thicker than Water

5
From the series "Panelworks":
Mare Cognitum
Mare Fecunditatis

6
Plasticology



7
From the series "Cyclepups":
Hunter, Black Velvet,
Colt, Trident

8
Plasmid Region

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The Welcome Guest

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Cascade

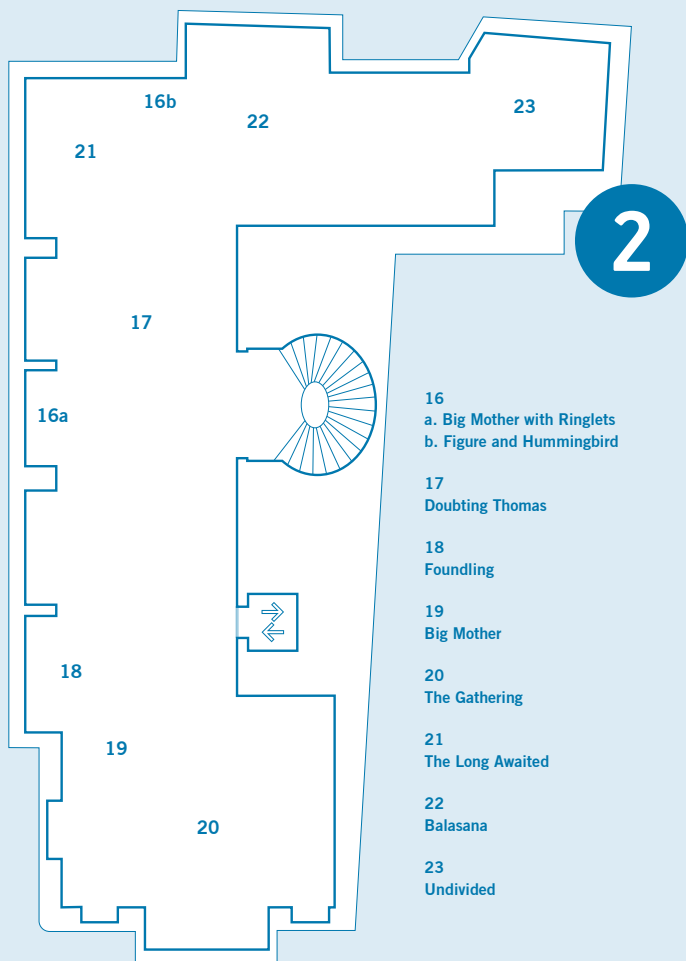
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The Embrace

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Offspring
(for the Leadbeaters Possum)

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Surrogate (for the Northern
Hairy-nosed Wombat)

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Bottom Feeder

15
Eulogy



[1]

The Lovers

“The Lovers” follows on from a number of works that explore the idea of nature rendered in mechanical form. These works wonder at the naturalisation of technology in contemporary life, and imagine a life cycle for machines that is closer to that of animals. In doing so, they evoke the increasingly ‘natural’ place that technology occupies in our lives, but also the growing role that technology plays in the natural world. In a world where we get our food from the supermarket, the cow becomes a ‘milk machine’ and the milk itself the product of a mechanised process where the animal is just one small biological cog in a much larger apparatus. However, in depicting the scooters as wild animals rather than domesticated ones—deers rather than sheep—the work also suggests a world of technology that is beyond our mastery. I have several motivations for making these works. On one level, I simply love the forms. The sinuous curves and perfect glossy surfaces are the illogical conclusion of contemporary automotive attractiveness but they also evoke the voluptuousness of modernist sculpture. Beyond that, I also feel that these wild machine creatures undercut our basic assumption that technology is always within our control. This idea is at the core of our beliefs about it and is assumed to be true, but I sometime wonder if that is really so. I love the idea that “The Lovers” is a snapshot from an ecology of mechanical wildlife that we will never see. This particular work has softness and intimacy that contradicts the glossy hardness of the surfaces and materials. The work depicts a couple, suggesting the potential for reproduction, which ultimately denotes independence, a life in which people are no longer necessary.

[2]

Precautions

These helmets tell you a number of things about the individuals that they have been created for. Firstly, they tell you that their heads are not the same shape as ours. They also tell you that these creatures ride motorcycles. They take risks. These helmets are not designed for someone frail. Whoever they are, they are certainly different but not disabled. Like many of my works, these helmets combine the familiarity of something as recognisable as a motorcycle helmet with a strangeness that hints at the world just a little outside of what we know.

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[3]

The Observer

A sense of unease is evident in “The Observer”, which presents a young boy, perched precariously atop an unbalanced stack of mass-produced chairs. The boy looks down on us, perhaps just watching or more likely judging us according to his own criteria. We cannot help but worry about the dubious stability of the edifice on top of which he has been placed, as it seems ready to collapse at any moment. The implications of this as a metaphor for the world we are building for our own children are clear.

[4]

Thicker than Water

There is an expression in English; “Blood is thicker than water” and it means that the family bonds (‘blood’) are stronger than anything else. This sculpture extends the family that we see beginning in “The Lovers”. I have long been interested in what baby vehicles look like. In my world it is difficult to separate nature and technology, and therefore the question as to what a newborn motor-scooter might look like is relevant to me. If blood is thicker than water, so too is oil and here is a family linked by oil more than blood. Of course this is a metaphor for the increasing interconnections between nature and technology in contemporary society. However, it is also an enjoyable fantasy as well as the first of many children and families that inhabit the exhibition.

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[5]

Panelworks

“Panelworks” are a celebration of colour and surface. They revel in the dubious pleasure of consumer culture, the glossy superficiality of a gleaming new car. These works acknowledge the seductive power of these things, along with their actual beauty while at the same time recognising that this beauty is very thin. For me they are a guilty pleasure, but a pleasure all the same. If I imagine the exhibition as a world, then the “Panelworks” are the beautiful views.

[6]

Plasticology

“Plasticology” is a garden in the true sense of the word, a place where we create the world as we would like it to be and a reflection of our current ideas about the wilderness. Obviously, biotechnology is a fundamental issue that motivates “Plasticology”. It presents an artificial nature, more plastic than the subtle but extraordinary new natures created by technology. “Plasticology” is a garden of the parallel world of the virtual. It looks at the claims that this alternative world can satisfyingly replace our own. For me, even the idea that this world might tell you something about our world is questionable. TV and even Facebook have very little in common with the everyday world. Like “Plasticology” they are other worlds, beautiful, ideal even, but quite flat.

[7]

Cyclepups

While quite formally different, “Cyclepups” —my tadpole-like motorcycle embryos— are conceptually very similar to the figurative creatures in the exhibition. They represent a similarly nebulous blending of technology and nature. “Cyclepups” reverse the idea of the ‘genetic engineering of nature’ into a ‘genetic naturalisation of engineering’. However, it is less easy to be seduced into believing in the fantasy of embryonic motorcycles. Obviously there are limits to our belief in what can happen through technology. A genetically modified plant or animal is just as much of an industrial product as a motorcycle. Both are designed, produced and marketed, both carefully crafted to fulfil both needs and desires.

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[8]

Plasmid Region

“Plasmid Region” acts as the heart of this section of the exhibition. In this work, I am trying to join together biological reproduction with mechanical production, like a kind of production line that continuously pumps these strange organic things out. These odd fleshy blobs are the link between works like the “Cyclepups” and the more figurative works like “Doubting Thomas”. To me, the work is very beautiful because it is like birth. But then you have to ask: What are these things, and where are they going to go and how on earth will we have enough room for all of them?

[9]

The Welcome Guest

14 The title for this work comes from a quote by Goethe; “Beauty is everywhere a welcome guest.” For me it is a work that reflects on the beauty and strangeness of nature. In making my work, I often look at images of creatures from the real world, and I am struck by just how bizarre and extraordinary they are. Take the peacock for example. Who would have thought that beauty would be so important that evolution would arrive at a creature as ridiculous as the peacock. The peacock’s beauty does not provide any protection, nor any extra efficiency or ability to find food. I think I find this choice of beauty over efficiency beautiful in itself. It is so at odds with our own ideas about how we would ‘engineer’ creatures, which would place utility above everything else. Why would we choose to create new life? Surely only to do something for us, never for its own sake, never just to be wonderful. However, it seems to be a good enough reason for nature and so perhaps it is as good a reason as any. If it isn’t a good reason, then what is?

[10]

Cascade

In many ways, “Cascade” is an extension of my drawing practice; a drawing rendered in hair. It has a certain circularity; a representation of the body inscribes on a fleshy field, a depiction of hair formed from hairs. It is also a reflection on female sexuality and fecundity, which is an unusual subject matter for me.

[11 & 12]

The Embrace

Offspring (for the Leadbeaters Possum)

(From the series “Nature’s Little Helpers”)

Ambivalence and paradox are at the heart of how I see the world. I have very strong views about many things, but I recognise that the world is very rarely black or white. I am not just talking about perspective, about how some things can be good or bad depending on your point of view. I am talking about how some things are both good and bad, and some things are good or bad but it is impossible for us to tell which. “The Embrace” is about this conundrum. Before my own child was born, I was with a friend’s little boy and he jumped at me from his bed. I was so shocked that I didn’t know what to do, and consequently he crashed into me and fell to the floor. It was a moment of exuberance but my failure to catch him left both of us shocked and a little bruised. In hindsight it was obvious, but sometimes, in the heat of the moment, it is difficult to tell an assault from an embrace. I think it is also thus with human actions in the world.

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[13]

Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat)

This piece is from a series of works called “Nature’s Little Helpers” that revolve around creatures that might be genetically engineered to help protect endangered species and undo some of the damage that European settlement has inflicted the Australian environment. On the surface this seems like quite an optimistic

vision of genetic engineering. However the work also has a darker side, based on our long history of doing the wrong things for the right reasons. I believe that scientists are often very altruistic in their motives, but they tend to believe we can manipulate nature and keep it under control. The fact is that it usually doesn't work that way. The Northern hairy-nosed wombat is an Australian animal threatened by extinction due to loss of habitat from human encroachment. The obvious solution to help these wonderful animals would be to make more land available to them. However, a technological solution often seems so much more palatable than a more simple one which might somehow constrain human ambition.

[14]

Bottom Feeder

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"The Bottom Feeder" looks at the idea of duality. This is an imagined creature that is literally 'two-faced'. Its true face is shark-like, and a reference to the vital role these much maligned scavengers play in keeping the sea floors clear. However, its wrinkled backside actually takes on the appearance of a Buddha-like visage. This is a common trick in the insect and reptile world, a deception aimed at misdirecting potential predators. In this case, that predator is human. The face is designed to appeal to people, to endear the animal to us or at least amuse us. This is a reminder that we are in fact the 'apex predator' of pretty much every ecosystem on the planet. Sharks have much more to fear from us than we do from them.

[15]

Eulogy

Mostly in my work I try to imagine what could be or might be, but isn't. In doing this I am often struck by how restrained my own inventions are, when compared to the truly bizarre creatures that actually do exist. Within nature there are beings so strange that they would be difficult to accept if they were not actually real. The Blobfish (*Psychrolutes microporos*) is one such miraculous aquatic creature. It lives in the deep seas south of Australia, and was relatively unknown to science until deep-sea fishing boats started pulling them up in the 1980s, victims of collateral damage resulting from crab trawling. In the short time since then they have been driven to the brink of extinction. Not deliberately, not because we wanted something from them, but basically by accident. I find it hard to imagine a 'save the blobfish' campaign. It is a marvellously uncharismatic creature—even its name is discouraging. It is certainly no Panda or Mountain Gorilla. However, despite all that, to me the blobfish is extraordinary. Its gelatinous body is almost the same density as sea water, making it perfectly adapted to the immense pressure of its bathic home. This sculpture is a celebration of the simple, gormless, wonderful existence of the blobfish. It is a eulogy for this particular specimen, supported in death by a very ordinary looking man. Perhaps he is one of the millions of ordinary people who neither know nor care much about the fate of the blobfish. Even so he seems genuinely moved by the fate of this unprepossessing fish. There is hope in that.

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[16]

Drawings

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Drawing is at the heart of my practice. My works start as ideas but move to drawing before they find their eventual forms as sculptures, photos or videos. Sometimes, they stay as drawings and for me these are different from the drawings that become something else. Drawing is the continuity in my practice from art school to today. Over the last several years I have been drawing children a lot, but recently my focus has shifted a little, towards the depiction of hair. This is interesting for me as it is something I used to draw a lot in the very early years of my practice. So I am returning to hair, albeit in a different form. Hair is fascinating for me because —until recently at least— it is the part of the body that we could most control and manipulate. The ability to control hair —to shape and style it— also means that hair which is not controlled is a powerful emotional signifier in itself. Hair is a bridge between culture and the body, and a reminder that the two cannot be separated.

[17]

Doubting Thomas

The story of “Doubting Thomas” was a popular theme for European artists during the renaissance and baroque. The story is from the New Testament of the bible, and describes how the apostle Thomas, upon being told of Christ’s resurrection demanded to touch the wounds themselves before he would believe that it had happened. In English, a ‘doubting thomas’ has come to mean a real sceptic, one who refuses to believe without absolute proof; even

when to everybody else the truth is obvious. Caravaggio painted a particularly beautiful example, which shows the incredulous disciple with a finger stuck knuckle-deep in the stomach of Christ. It is a wonderful mixture of reverence and goriness, and when looking at it I feel that perhaps Thomas wasn't so much dubious as curious. It looks like he just wanted to feel what it was like, and I don't blame him. I do worry about scepticism. There are so many things in the world that we can't touch, like climate change or extinction, but they are real nonetheless.

[18]

Foundling

In China, I have been told, there are orphanages devoted entirely to children with cleft palates. These children are mostly 'foundlings', children who have been anonymously abandoned by their parents. In China, the combination of stigma, lack of access to medical treatment and the 'one child policy' means that the parents feel that they have no alternative but to give up their children. This is not because Chinese parents are heartless, but because the world they live in has no space for these children. In the west, a cleft palette is not really a big deal. It is easily fixed by a common operation, and in fact these children are often gratefully adopted by childless couples from Australia. The somewhat grotesque baby in "The Foundling" also does not quite fit into the car seat that it has been left in. Perhaps it is a genetically engineered creature that has been deemed a failure. The work poses the question of who should be responsible for providing it with a loving home.

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[19]

Big Mother

20

This work imagines a genetically engineered wet-nurse for a human baby. She loves the child but it is never fully hers. I sometimes imagine that she is contemplating kidnapping her charge, which I why she is so anxious. With my work I try to address ethical questions, but through emotion and empathy. We tend to approach ethics as something pure and sterile, especially in regards to issues like biotech or GE. This is useful and important, because sadly ethics and empathy often conflict. In the past we communicated ethics through emotionally charged stories —mythology. 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. However, at the same time myths are also just beautiful stories, and sometimes the characters are just as important as the grander ideas.

[20]

The Gathering

“The Gathering” is a particularly dark work for me. The shadowy stillness of the empty house suggests a world where the grown ups have been called away unexpectedly and we cannot tell when, if ever, they will be back. We have no explanation for the girl’s unconsciousness —a nap, narcolepsy or something more ominous— except that she does appear to be quite peaceful. Unlike the ma-

jority of the creatures that I have conceived, I do not have a strong idea of what these creatures are 'for'. Instead, I imagine them to be some sort of mistake or by-product that has escaped into the world and lives in the shadows just beyond our perceptions. People say that in any city we are never very far from a rat. There is one near you somewhere right now.

[21]

The Long Awaited

Empathy is at the heart of my practice. I don't think that you really can—or indeed should—try to understand the ethics of something without emotions. It can easily be argued that such a focus on empathy might distract from a true rational understanding of the issues, but in fact that is exactly what I am aiming to do. Emotions are messy and they do get in the way of rational discourse—as they should. The empathetic nature of my work deliberately complicates the ideas. It is one thing to argue for/against cloning when it is just an intellectual issue. However, things change if you have a mother or son who might need it. I like to think that my work understands that the point at which 'good' becomes 'bad' does not stand still, which is why it is so difficult to find. Ethics are not set like morals; they have to be constantly negotiated. Bioethics are especially flexible, which makes them especially difficult. However, sometimes our feelings find a way through these difficulties, and we are able to create connections and bonds that defy the expectations of others.

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[22]

Balasana

“Balasana” is the Sanskrit word for ‘child’s pose’, one of the main resting positions in yoga. As a sculpture, “Balasana” is also a point of repose in my artistic practice. It is a moment of calm, without conflict or even much in the way of uncertainty or paradox. It is a dream-like work. When you dream, things seem to make sense at the time but when you think about them later they are incongruous. What you are left with is more of a feeling—more emotional than rational. We wonder why there is a wallaby—which is a kind of a small kangaroo—lying on the girl’s back. Together they are in a version of ‘balasana’ where two partners collaborate together to increase the intensity of the stretch. For me, the dreamlike quality of the work extends beyond the surreal juxtaposition of human and animal, suggesting a world where people coexist harmoniously with the natural world around them. This is a dream, I know, and likely to remain so.

[23]

Undivided

Many of my works contain different representations of children and infants, who for me embody a number of key issues. Obviously children directly express the idea of genetics —both natural and artificial— but beyond that they also imply the responsibilities that a creator has to their creations. The innocence and vulnerability of children is powerfully emotive and evokes empathy —their presence softens the hardness of some of the more difficult ideas. The children in my works are young enough to accept the strangeness and difference of my world without difficulty, and they hint at the speed at which the extraordinary becomes commonplace in contemporary society. For me, the clear emotional bonds that connect the children and the creatures in my work are simultaneously optimistic and disturbing. Their closeness is both moving and unsettling.

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PATRICIA PICCININI
Hold Me Close to Your Heart
22/06/-21/08/2011

Curator: Başak Doğa Temür

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