



From grotesque to sensitive: interview with artist Patricia Piccinini

Do grotesco ao sensível: entrevista com a artista Patricia Piccinini

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Abstract

Held on November 11, 2020, this interview emerged as part of a Master degree's research process whose focus was to scrutinize the poetics of the Australian artist Patricia Piccinini, relating it to the aesthetics of the grotesque. Known for exhibitions that create an ecosystem of unknown creatures, the artist reflects along the interview on how her creations are capable of generating conflicting reactions in the public. Along the questions, Patricia Piccinini talks about some specific works, her creation process and the production and exhibition of her works, adding relevant information for the understanding of her poetics.

Keywords

Patricia Piccinini. Grotesque. Contemporary art. Sculpture.

Resumo

Realizada no dia 11 de novembro de 2020, a presente entrevista surgiu como parte do processo de pesquisa de mestrado cujo foco era escrutinar a poética da artista australiana Patricia Piccinini, relacionando-a à estética do grotesco. Conhecida por exposições que criam um ecossistema de criaturas desconhecidas, a artista reflete, durante a entrevista, sobre o modo como suas criações são capazes de gerar reações conflitantes no público. Através de questionamentos lançados, Patricia Piccinini discorre sobre algumas obras pontuais, seu processo de criação e a produção e exibição de suas obras, agregando informações significativas para a compreensão de sua poética.

Palavras-Chave

Patricia Piccinini. Grotesco. Arte Contemporânea. Escultura.

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Introduction

Born in Sierra Leone, in Africa, but considered Australian for having immigrated to this country as a small girl, Patricia Piccinini (1965) is an artist who works in a wide variety of media. In 1991, she graduated in Arts with an emphasis in painting at the Victorian College of the Arts and, shortly after completing her graduation, in 1994, she joined in as coordinator at The Basement Project Gallery. Since then, she has won awards such as New Media Fellowship, from the Australia Council, in 2000, and, more recently, in 2014, Lifetime Achievement Award, from the Melbourne Art Foundation.

Through photography, drawing, video, installation and sculpture, the artist challenges the logic of purity under which the human body is configured by presenting creatures that are the result of high genetic modifications in laboratory. Her works evoke realities in which the human being would cohabit urban and domestic with hybrid creatures resulting from the advancement of science and genetic engineering; with that, she invites the public to visualize this range of strange creatures under the affective and familiar perspective. The amalgamation between species of different natures allied to the mimetic content of his sculptures causes an immediate alienation in the spectator who visits her her exhibitions, her monstrous bodies project themselves into a familiar otherness, evoking feelings that move between attraction and repulsion.

The contradictory affections aroused by Piccinini's creatures rely on the grotesque to open a space that deconstructs dichotomies and raises questions about the relationships with divergent bodies. His beings are a spectacle of ambivalent feelings brought about by the blurring of boundaries between human, animal and machine. Thus, her use of the grotesque evokes the reality, but deceiving it, transfigures the aversive into the seducer, explores the essence of the inexplicable and celebrates the dubiousness of the absurd.

Allowing the encounter with a strange and anomalous world, the strange configurations engendered by Piccinini work as an enigma, as they escape reason and pull us towards obsession.



Figure 1: Patricia Piccinini beside her work *Kindred*, 2020. Source: <http://www.louisapenfold.com/art-in-childhood-series-patricia-piccinini/>

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Interview with Patricia Piccinini

The interview was conducted by videoconference on November 11th, 2020. In order to streamline the reading, certain redundancies and specificities of oral language, as well as interactions and comments that were not relevant to the conversation, were omitted or condensed in this transcript.

Yasmin Pol da Rosa:

In my research, I investigate the theory of the grotesque and the appearance of this aesthetic category in both Art History and visual culture, seeking to establish relationships between contemporary works and works from the past. What caught my attention the most in your works was the fact that they, despite having aesthetic reminiscences of the grotesque, are almost always in a pendulous relationship between repulse and attraction, which is somewhat unusual within this aesthetic category. I would like to know how you see the grotesque in your creative process and how important it is in your poetics, especially in this relationship of repulse and attraction.

Patricia Piccinini:

First of all, one needs to emphasize that when something is new and unknown, we, as humans, are neurologically hardwired to feel repulsed, because it's not something we recognize and it's frightening. And so, we think this is grotesque and repulsive. But actually, when you look at nature, there are a lot of oddities. For example, a seal: it resembles a dog, however it is really very strange and it's only because we know this creature that we are not repulsed by it. In reality, they are quite unusual and crazy, as they walk strangely, they smell, make strange noises... They are frightening and strange, but we know them and we don't find them repulsive. So part of the repulse is not knowing.

Another point in this question is that I don't actually make works that are intentionally repulsive. My aim is not to make something that will be so grotesque and disgusting that people would walk away. I don't try to do that. In fact I'm often sort of taking it back when people say "Oh it's so ugly!", "Oh it's so creepy!". I'm always incredulous, because I made it, I wouldn't make something that's purposely disgusting. I always think that what I make is quite attractive. So, my aim it's not to make something that people find it so abhorrent, disgusting, that they would move away, it's too much.

But, on the other hand, I also know that in the work there has to be some kind of pushaway. I could make a work which is very attractive in the same way that I could make a work which is very repulsive. However, I make a work which has got a little bit of both. So you have beauty, which generally means something that's related to humanity, and repulsion. And they are both intentionally in there.

What I hope happens – and this is my ideal scenario – is that when people come to the art work they are pushed away because they think "I don't like it!", "I don't know what it is, it could be dangerous!", and then they're also pulled in, because they can see human traits, like human eyes or things that they recognise. Or they can understand the situation that the character or the creature is in and they empathize and they say "What

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would it feel like to be in this situation?”. And so, what I hope happens is that they’re pushed away and then pulled in. And this is something that really happens in the world. You’re in front of my work and you’re thinking “Oh, I like it... but I don’t! I’m scared of it!”. A space opens up in the viewer to be able to think, to experience sometimes and to feel something. And that’s what I am hoping for, this opening up of space in the viewer to make up their own mind about of what they think about this creature.

I think it has to be to the way that I go, because everything to me is personal and emotional and idiosyncratic, so it comes from the viewer.

YPR:

And you use the grotesque in the right amount, it’s not much, it’s not too little, it’s the exact amount for you to have these feelings.

PP:

Yes, so for example, I don’t try and evoke pity. Pity is a bad emotion.

It is when you look at someone and you think “Oh, I wouldn’t wanna be in that situation”, and so you pity them. Often pity comes from being pathetic. Just seeing somebody in a very deep terrible situation, like maybe covered in blood or being really wounded, you look at someone and you think “I don’t like it because I don’t want to imagine being in this person shoes”. However, my creatures don’t evoke that kind of feeling. They have a kind of strength and relationships with others that to us seem sort of appearable or desirable. In most of times, my creatures are in an active and very secure situation – there’s a lot of sleep scenes in my work, because to be able to sleep you need to be secure. So my creatures have a character strength which makes them not pitiable. And that is also part of repulsion.

YPR:

Throughout my research I noticed that certain circumscribed visual forms in the category of the grotesque tend to repeat themselves throughout the History of Art, especially because the grotesque, in general, is very related to hybridization between species. In one of your works, *Eagle Egg Man (The Philosopher)*, from the year 2018, I see a similarity with the study of physiognomy by the seventeenth century artist French Charles Le Brun in which he hybridizes man’s and eagles’ faces. Were you inspired directly or indirectly by Le Brun or did this similarity happen by chance?

PP:

I really love Charles Le Brun! I love and always have loved his work. Firstly, because he is a beautiful and incredible draftsman. Secondly, because he made his physiognomic studies very available; they were everywhere because of the printing press, so they were very popular images. And what he was doing was that he was illustrating a popular notion of that time, which was that you could tell a character of a person by the animal that they look like. So if you looked like a donkey, you were stubborn; if you looked like an eagle, you were wise; if you looked like a pig, you were greedy. That was a very common and

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popular way of understanding people, people's characters. A kind of way of saying "Ah, they act like this because they have this animal characteristic and you could see in their faces". And it was how they understood people's way of being and personality.

Now, in the 21st century, the way we understand what motivates us is not which animal we look like, but our DNA. One looks at DNA and one determines the likelihoods of addictive behaviors or health disorders like diabetes, metabolic problems or mental health issues. To me, it's interesting because they're both contemporary ways of explaining to ourselves what animates us. I think that in a hundred years time the way we understand ourselves will be completely sort of overwritten. There will be some other way of understanding what animate us besides our DNA mapping, maybe something more sophisticated or maybe much more simpler.

The fact is that we are always looking for ways to understand our actions and how we are by our of physical characteristics. That's what inspired me to make the *Eagle Egg Man*, and it was a very conscious and direct reference to Charles Le Brun's work. The fact the creatures that make up the *Eagle Egg Man* are supposedly genetically modified creatures may arouse questions like: "How did they get here?", "Were they genetically created?". To think how supposedly they would come to life is an inspiring narrative to me. The three creatures are nurturing these eggs these eggs are a sign of the potential of new life.

Eggs were always seen as a sign of growing life and that's why we have them at Easter, according to Christian tradition. Birds are another sign of new life. And so, the creatures in *Eagle Egg Man*, these wise men, they are looking out to these eggs, these new lifes so importante to mankind, which is a kind of an unusual thing to do because it is not a male thing, it's a female thing.

I really love that work, it's very very surreal, I haven't shown it very much.

YPR:

I think this work is very enigmatic. You already mentioned that in the previous question, but what were the main ideas that guided the three figures that make up *Eagle Egg Man*? And how did the creation process take place?

PP:

Well, first of all, if you look at them you see they're quite small, they're about this big [making gestures with her hands indicating the height, about 60 centimeters]. They are smallish men which bottom part are made of a cowboy boot, and the ornament from the boot has become a kind of skin texture. They're very ornate, they're very beautiful, and a major part of this comes from the decoration on the western cowboy boot. Under the structure of the boot there are pouches where all these eggs are in. They are middle age these men with beautiful red hair, but they have these big birdlike beaks – which come from Charles Le Brun –, they give you an impression of a slightly conflation caused by bringing together an object, which is the boot, with an animal, which is a kind of birdlike human. These creatures are real hybrid ones, which seem to be really busy looking after their eggs.

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All women are born with eggs in their bodies and, to me, this is very beautiful because it's something that valorize us and make us important. So me, in the moment I make these men also have eggs, I am saying that they are doing an important job, they are doing what we do all the time. We look after our eggs, we care for our eggs since we were born and we have a link to all the other nature through this role. There's lots of very fantastic things about being a woman. One of them is that we are very linked to the environment through our reproductive cycle, and part of that comes from nurturing these eggs during our life. Having given these men the same role it's like having given them the most important role that can be given. It's sort of giving them some kind of greatness, almost like the Three Wise Men.

Other important thing in the work is that it is very rare for the male of the species to look after the offspring, very few mammals do it. There are some birds who look after their egg and offspring, like the cassowary – a big bird that looks after its offspring –, however, this is very uncommon because it is generally a female role. By just showing that these wise looking men are looking after eggs, I am saying how valuable are their actions.

YPR:

What are the motivating elements for your creative process? Do you look for references in other artists, films, television shows, documentaries about the animal world, science fiction and/or other productions of visual culture?

PP:

One of the things that I really value in my practice is that my work is relevant. I could easily make a work very esoteric in terms of understanding and with a very theoretical approach. I went to university and studied Art History and Philosophy, which could make me do a very obscure work, and maybe that would fit in with a very the elitist understanding of the Art world. There are only a few people – called *cognoscenti* – that can understand the art and only few are entitled to be part of this club of art people. And I don't really want to be part of that. My intention is to make a work which is relevant to the life we lead today. I want to connect with people over ideas. I am just a normal person and I am affected in the same way that everybody else is affected by the same ideas.

Everybody in the last decade has become increasingly interested in the environment, therefore, I am too! That's why I want to make a work about the environment, because I am also interested in that, I am also affected by this like everybody else. I want to have a conversation about present topics with other people who are also affected by them. I have my intentions and I work very hard to make an art work which tries to communicate a whole lot of ideas, in a lot of different layers; some layers are very obvious, others not that much. I really want that most people can grab into this layer and get something out of this. They may not get all the layers, and that's ok. Maybe in time, if they care, that will be yet available. So I have my intentions and I try to communicate it; then, we have the viewer, with their culture background which they bring to the work.

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The meaning is created between me and my intentions, the viewer and the object.

The meaning doesn't reside in me, like who I am, what are my relationships. Of course, the work is informed by my reading and by my choices, but it's not about me. I don't expect people to be interested in me as a person. Having said that, there's still the stuff I bring to the work: the aesthetic qualities, the conceptual ideas and the emotional content. From that, meaning is created by three other parts: my intentions, the object and the viewer. The meaning is in there, inbetween, together, like there were three things and the meaning in the middle of them. It's not like all the objects tell at all. The object has sense for itself, but I also listen to what comes from the viewer.

You had asked me what are my references, what do I look at: I look at everything! I look at TV, I read lots of books on Psychology cause I'm interested in body language; I'm interested in the environment issues; I read a lot of science stuff; I'm very interested in the ideas around sexual politics, I'm attracted to History. So a lot of the work will have this range of references which will not always be seen in its entirety (like the rescue to Charles Le Brun... you saw that, but not everyone will see it, maybe one in a thousand people will see it, but it is there in the work). If you see it, that will make it more exciting for you, but independently of the perception of the references, still they will evoke some questions – you will still see the “Eagle Egg Man” and go “What are they about?”, “They got out of a shoe! And the ornament on this shoe is so beautiful, it's become almost like a body ornament, like a tattoo or something, some strange thing!”. My creatures have their own strange world that you can enter into, it's very immersive. It's not necessary to get the historical reference to create a captivating experience.

YPR:

One of my favourite series of yours is *Nature's Little Helpers*. I see it as a medieval bestiary that carries a moral stamp that transcends the aesthetic content of the figures. Despite the series being from 2005, there are more recent works such as *The Cleaner* and *The Defender*, from 2019, which seem to be in line with the proposal of your *little helpers*. Do these more recent works connect with the 2005 series? Bearing in mind that the problems with nature have increased a lot since then, how do these two creatures connect with the issues of fauna and flora nowadays?

PP:

That is very true, these recent works, *The Cleaner* and *The Defender* – and I made another one about a bat, *Shadow Bat*, – they are related to the work that I started in 2005. Around that time people were starting to become much more interested in the environment in a popular way. That's when we were becoming aware of the extinctions that were happening around the world, the land degradation and the climate change. Scientists knew beforehand, but it was when everyday people like us – like me – were becoming aware of it. And one of the questions that I was interested in talking about was how far will we go to undo the damage that we've done to the environment and what are the sorts of solutions we can do. How does the seduction of the technological solution suit with us? So, I made a whole bunch of works around that.

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A lot of terrible things that happened in my country were not done by people that wanted to hurt the environment, but by people that actually had good intentions. English people, for example, by colonizing the country, they came to Australia and they brought with them rabbits, because these animals are a rich food source. They saw them as essentially benign, like they wouldn't do any damage, and so they introduced them into our environment. But rabbits are incredible destructive! These beautiful small tiny creatures eat everything that native animals want to eat, what led to other species become extinct. So native creatures were extinct not because English people wanted to hurt them, but because they just wanted to feel better in this very scary and alienating environment.

So, my idea is not to look back and to shame people, because we still do lots of stuff with good intentions like taking water from the deep land and the mining establishment for the good of people, when actually it's gonna destroy the environment. So it's not about shaming, my stories talk about what are the sort of eventual possible solutions to this terrible problem and open up a discussion around them.

Another example: fifteen years ago, when I started, there wasn't that much plastic in the ocean like there is today. So I think in these beautiful turtles called leatherback turtles. This species is a very old living turtle and she gives birth when she is in her twenties. They're really enormous, and what they do is they eat jellyfish, what is a problem, because plastic bags in the sea look like jellyfish and so they end up eating a lot garbage. The plastic gets coiled up in their bodies and they start to die because of that, it's just a nightmare! Because of these problems these beautiful turtles are on their way to becoming extinct. So, when I made [the work] *The Cleaner*, the first thing I'm trying to do is drawing attention to this, since not many people know about the leatherback turtle and their dilemmas with the environment, they don't know that they mistake plastic bags for food, they don't know that they're starving to death because their insides are coiled up with plastic. I bring the story out from this world to a bigger one, and so the story becomes a proposition.

Because all we see is this: a turtle that has got that technological aspect to her, she's got this kind of machine component to her that looks like a vacuum cleaner – that's one of the things that people are proposing to clean up the sea, we can have this big vacuum cleaners and we're gonna filter the sea! It seems kind a bit crazy to me... I am not a marine biologist or an environmental scientist, but it seems a pretty small step, a farfetched way of thinking, since the real way of stopping sea pollution is just ceasing plastic production. Stop making it available for free and just to be a lot more careful about what goes into the ocean. I think that it can be easily done, as long as we have the right policies and place to do that. But I think people don't know what does this take.

When you look at *The Cleaner* you will see that this work is, first of all, drawing attention to some stories: the dying story of the leatherback turtle; the story that surrounds sea pollution and its possible cleansing; and story of it being a kind of technological solution. It [the story] has got this kind of slightly hopeful aspect to it, like if it says: "Oh, maybe we could do this, maybe we could do that", "We could create a kind of human turtle, a hybrid that also has a robotic component and they can clean up the ocean".

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To me it's not a terrifying anecdote, but it is a concrete fact since this species won't be around in a few decades, it's on its way out. And that's something to mark in some way. Despite I am quite alarmed by this situation, I don't wanna scare the hell out of people, I don't wanna make a work that says: "There are fifty leatherback turtles with opened stomachs full of plastic". My intention is to make some kind of a proposition, a work we look at it and go thinking what can be done. It is a story that we all have in ourselves about the sea, plastic and the animals that eat it.

YPR:

Something that intrigues me a lot is the way your works are exposed. In each exhibition we may find they in different environments. Are you the one who chooses this or is it an exclusive work of the local curators? And, in your opinion, what is the importance of the expography for the reception of the work?

PP:

That is something that I have been struggling with for a long time, maybe about fifteen years. As a young artist, I was interested in creating environments, but it is hard, for several practical reasons, to make a sculpture and then not put it on a pedestal, it says "Don't touch it!", for example. I'm very good at making small scaled things, like things with details, but it's much harder for me to make big environments. So I have been struggling with it for a long time and trying to work with this aspect – and I think over the last five years I've had better results.

When you look at my works, it's ok to see them in a pedestal, but it is much harder to suspend disbelief. That is a cinematic term that refers to the act of looking at a movie and accept that this is a story, that this is not real, but still we can be taken by it. It is a recurrent strategy in film, but how can we do it in a gallery? One of the ways of doing it is to create an environment. I've made, in the last few years, big efforts to create environments around the creatures in order to cause this suspending disbelief. My creatures are very, very strange – a human turtle with a vacuum cleaner on it, that is a little bit strange – so how do we make it conceivable, how can we stop that disbelief? The best way of doing that is by creating an environment all around it that support that idea of this hybrid creature [referring to the work *The Cleaner*] which we created to clean the environment for us because we have dirtied the sea for really pretty stupid reasons, because we are not organized and we let rubbish go into the sea. In a recent exhibition in Helsinki, one third of the gallery was a big atmospheric space in which you could walk through and it gave you a sense that it was some lived space; the other two rooms were works on pedestals and the fourth room was a big video work, that was quite immersive.

I do try to create these spaces, especially if I have the budget – and that's another important thing: to create environments you need money. I often don't have the money, but if I have the money, I will make it, because that's a much better way of presenting the work.

I've made different kinds of environments, like dioramas, for example. Dioramas remind of a museum tradition, in what you put in amongst a taxidermy lion – in the

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case of a natural history museum – in an environment, obviously artificial, but kind of simulating the real world space. I've made those kinds of spaces which are artificial, but talking about the natural. These are artificial spaces, but they dialogue with the natural. When it is possible, I got to work with the space itself: sometimes I can work in a beautiful basement where people haven't been for 50 years, so it is possible to use the basement, its smell, its dirty, its actual space.

So yeah, as I'm getting older I'm trying to make the environments as well.

YPR:

Your creatures receive a skin texture generally wrinkled in which we find some human imperfections, such as moles, spots and skinfolds. How are the choices of skin textures made? Do you think that this can intensify the grotesque content in some works?

PP:

Do you know how I make my work? [given my affirmative answer, the artist continues]

I do the drawings, I come up with the ideas, and then I work with a 3D modeler, who makes them in the computer; and then we output a small core, and then we work with a mold as sculpture to put plasticine onto the core, which is this foam piece. I just work with a lot of people that are very good at what they do: Dennis is very good at computers, Adam is very good at doing wrinkles, Isabela is very good at painting, Mitsumi is very good at doing the seams, Liz is very good at doing the hair and Peter is very good at coordinating everybody. So, I don't make these things by myself, I make them with a whole team of people – there must be 10 people involved in every work. It's a lot of expertise, a lot of knowledge. Even though it is my idea and it is my practice, they each bring to work their expertise.

I work with a sculpturer who is particularly good at wrinkles when I want a work that has to have a lot of wrinkles in it. When I'm doing a work that doesn't need wrinkles I work with another sculpturer who is very fast and he does very sweet surfaces. I work with people that have very specific skills.

You had asked me how do these surfaces and textures come about... Well, they come about because they relate to the content of the work. For example, in the work called *Sanctuary* – which presents two old bonobos with white hair and they hold each other – I worked with a sculpturer that's fantastic at wrinkles and doesn't get sort of exasperated by doing a lot of them. It's quite a boring job and some sculpturers would not do that cause it takes too long, so I work with one that really loves it. A lot of those decisions are made by working with the right people and communicating verbally and through drawings my intentions for the work. But they bring a lot too. They bring 20-30 years of experience, so they know what they're doing.

For a long time I've shied away from doing dark skins and I've got quite a few reasons for that. The first reason is that silicone is a milky material. If you open a jar of silicone it looks like milk, it's like a creamy white shampoo. If you want pastel colors it's great – you can get bright colors too, but they're always slightly milky. So, we've shied

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away from doing dark skins because to get a beautiful rich deep golden dark skin is really hard (it is much easier to do pink because it is pastel). Now, we've put in like six months of work to fix this problem, we studied how can we make the silicone translucent so we then can put brown in so that brown would remain brown and not look like a kind of murky muddy pastel color.

Another thing why my figures don't have dark skins tons is that because this skin hue color is often being seen as monstrous, like just by being brown you're not normal, you're a scary monster, you're to be feared. I didn't wanna actually to reinforce that. If I was gonna put something out in the world which was gonna be slightly threatening to people, I didn't wanna have brown skin just because I didn't wanna say that brown skin people are other, cause they're not other, they're beautiful – in fact very beautiful!

It has taken me a while to accept that actually something also very important in the world is representation, like you need to be able to see yourself in things. And that's another thing to mention: I do a lot of works that are female because I'm a female and I don't see the kinds of females that I'm interested in in popular culture. I'm trying to present females that are mothers, that are vulnerable and, in the same time, strong. I think more than 50% of my work are mothers. So I'm focused on that, because I feel that it is very important, and even though it's very common – we all come from a mother –, we don't often see reproduced images of mothers that have got such complexity and integrity. So that's what I focus on.

Now I'm really shifted because the whole world also has really shifted. We are now given the courage and the strength to say "Yeah, I'm gonna do dark skins!". So, about a year ago I did started making dark skins. It took a lot of technical work and intention to do that, and I feel very proud of the results. This process of production crazyly coincided with the Black Lives Matter, it was like in my head: "Wow, I'm thinking about it, but the whole world is thinking about it too!". It means I'm part of the world – which of course I am – and I am representing the world, not just me.

I'm superwhite, so, at the beginning, a lot of these works were kind of like my offspring, it was like I had put out them in the world, and so they were progeny. But now it's not quite like that, it's a bit different.

YPR:

I enjoyed knowing better about all the processes which the works go through and I am longing for these works with darker skins. Based on your words, I can see that the details help you express the feelings of repulsion and attraction in your works.

PP:

Yes, and that is the reason why I work with ten people to make these works. I could easily make them myself, out of paper-mache for example. I could sew them or I could draw them, but I don't do these kinds of works because I want people to connect with them. That is my intention and the more real they look the more people can do it. The connection, for me, is a good thing. But a lot of people in the Art world look and don't think that's a good thing, since they think that's populista, they say any person

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can understand it, these people from the mass like it. I feel glad to please this kind of public because those people are valuable too. I wanna connect with them because they are important and that is why I make works like this. It would be much easier for me to produce works with pieces of garbage, for example – I could do that, it's easy: you just have to be a very connected person [with environmental issues], you just have to be a very philotherian person. But that's not my path, I much rather make works which are available to people in someway. And that is not viewed very favourably by the Art world people in general. People in this world do say to me: "Oh, your work is very available". Yeah, it is! Yeah, and people love it, ordinary people. But that's not really desirable because the Art world relies on elitism.

YPR:

Finally, I would like to highlight something that I think is very powerfull in your work: the look. In all of your works we can find expressive looks that tell us a lot and seem to reflect the soul of all the creatures you conceive. I would love to hear you talk a little about those eyes that touch us so much. What is the meaning of the look in your creatures?

PP:

The eyes are really important. When I started making these works about 20 years ago, I was working with a person who made the eyes, he made eyes to people who lost their ones to cancer. He was very good, and the eyes he created looked very natural because they actually went in real people. However our work together was very complicated because if I said to him I needed an eye which is 23 mm he'd say he couldn't do that because the human eye are all 22 mm. So, about 2 years after working with him, we realized that we had to start making the eyes in our own studio. So we started to find a way to make that doable – and it was a really big job to produce human looking and realistic eyes but with variety. Like in the work *Kindred*, in which the orangutan mother has got very orange eyes. That guy that I used to work with would never make me an orange eye. Because of that, to make diferente things we had to make them our own.

The eyes that we make are really beautiful – Liz do them. They are all handpainted with a tiny little brush; they have that round ball, but they also have that kind of clear lens lid on the front, so they are not just like a ball because they have got that really tiny lump on the top which gives them a sense of realism – without that lump people would not find it real. A lot of effort goes in to making these eyes because a lot of each work is in the eye, a lot of the focal point is around the eyes. For example, *Big Mother* – a very old work with a big baboon mother holding a baby – it has eyes that tell the whole story: she is the carer for this child and she is breastfeeding this child; she has got a physical and emotional connection and in her eyes you go how much she is really compromised. This work arouses some questions like: "Is she a servent? What's her situation?" And we can see in her eyes a kind of conflict, the conflict of being a mother and also having this emotional and physical connection. But she could be a servent, this might not be her will. There is a lot in it. It is not her child, so what's going on? There are all these questions that this work raises. So in most of the works the eyes are extremely important.

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Moreover, if they [the creatures] look at you it can be very confronting; as well, if they are looking in a more introspective way we can be aware that they have their own internal world. Although, sometimes they do look at us and they appeal to us, almost like saying “Pick me, give me a hug”, appealing to our emotional side. I can say that where the eyes look is massively importante. Likewise, they [the eyes] generally have whites – perhaps the primates also have whites in their eyes, but humans have evolved that around their eyes with much more strength. And that is because we need to know who and what we are looking at, what is something really important for us, but it is not that important for other creatures, like birds or guinea pigs. And so they don't have whites around their eyes. So, a lot of my creatures have a quite bit of white [around the eyes], so you know where they are looking at. All these details are really important indeed. Like I said before, I focus a lot on body language because we read it without knowing that we read it, we understand it without even thinking about it; we feel threatened, loving, we feel empathetic or we feel turned away just by the way someone else holds their body. This is all in the work, in every single piece, in the way they are.



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Patricia Piccinini

Australian multimedia artist known for her sculpture works that promote dialogues between art, science and fantasy. She had graduated in Arts, with an emphasis on painting, at the University of Melbourne. Although her oldest productions date back to the nineties, her artistic career began to gain more visibility in 2003, when she participated in the 50th Venice Biennale, exhibiting her hybrid and disturbing creatures in one of the pavilions. In 2016, she was awarded a Doctor of Visual and Performing Arts (Honoris Causa) by the Victorian College of the Arts (University of Melbourne).

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