

We Are Family By Linda Michael

Instinct is sympathy. Intelligence and instinct are turned in opposite directions, the former towards inert matter, the latter towards life. Intelligence, by means of science, which is its work, will deliver up to us more and more completely the secret of physical operations ... It goes all round life, taking from outside the greatest possible number of views of it, drawing it into itself instead of entering into it. But it is to the very inwardness of life that intuition leads us – by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely.

—Henri Bergson¹

This exhibition by Patricia Piccinini brings a fresh, personal perspective to some of the most difficult ethical issues of our time: What is normal? What is the nature of our relationship with animals? Are some lives worth more than others? What constitutes a family?

Piccinini's art rides the crest of a tidal wave of change, made possible through the completion of the mapping of the human genome and other extraordinary developments in science and medicine. Yet it is ordinary emotions that are its driving force. In Piccinini's art – as in our new 'biotech' century – children are born, flesh grows old, death is inescapable – though these mundane events might occur in a different sequence or combination. Her works embody the ethical dilemmas that arise with increasing urgency during a time of cloning and numerous forms of genetic manipulation, DNA testing, animal-to-human organ transplants, umbilical cord blood banks, and so on *ad infinitum*.

One of the artist's earlier sculptures, *Truck Babies* (1999), comprised two meticulously crafted, embryonic 18-wheeler trucks painted in baby pink and blue. Piccinini wrote about her intention in making these: 'like most new-borns they will be both cute and repulsive, resembling their parents from under a thick slime of packing-grease'.² This combination of the grotesque and the lovable, embodied in embryonic or child-like form, is a quality that links the sculptural works in this exhibition.

A strong focus on children somehow heightens the effect of qualitative disjunctions. As Bryan Appleyard, loving uncle to a girl with a severe disability and an inspiring life, wrote as part of an essay on the future for genetic selection: 'at birth we want a normal baby. We value adults for their difference, their idiosyncrasies. But the strange thing about babies is that we want them, above all, to be "normal"'.³ Perhaps it is the strength of this desire that makes Piccinini's creatures extraordinary; they seem loved but are rarely 'normal'. They are part of a disturbing world that somehow reconnects us to a deep acknowledgment of (our) difference.

Their ambivalence of emotional affect resonates with the alternately hopeful and fearful responses to the last century's various forms of biotechnology. Reproductive technology can create healthy and loving families, but may also result in the destruction of life, the commodification of children and women's bodies, or increased risk of disease. We may abhor animal experimentation, but feel differently if a dying family member could benefit as a result. Piccinini's sculptures demonstrate her belief that in the area of medical science it is always 'difficult to figure exactly where the good becomes tainted and the bad becomes justifiable'.⁴

Her work also taps into a more subtle drama played out in toy-shops and movies, in which we witness 'a civil war in the contemporary aesthetic of the family, a battle in which the image of the child as the unnatural spawn of Satan ... has locked horns with that of the child as the inanimate stuffed animal'.⁵ But although the artist's creatures may share some qualities with cute maimed teddies, weeping and crying and unnaturally wide-eyed dolls, or demonic or vulgar child monsters, they do not give us something to rescue or recoil from. Instead we react with a kind of simultaneous shock and sympathy. In her paedomorphic creatures this aesthetic war is suspended in an uneasy truce.

Philosophers of art have theorised such uneasiness as an aesthetics of the sublime, a state in which fear and hope are intermingled in the beholder. It would be interesting to speculate as to whether Piccinini transforms the sublime (an indeterminate pleasure arising from a discordance of form) into the beautiful (pleasure in a free harmony of form). The forms Piccinini makes point to 'an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself'⁶ – in this case, the inconceivable future opened up by biotechnology. But to the artist her forms are beautiful, objects of a more innocent pleasure. Are they 'faces that only a mother could love', or can we too learn to recognise their formal beauty?⁷

The artist is a kind of crusader for compromise, an advocate for love, for getting some joy from things we know to be imperfect. By conventional standards, Piccinini's figures are deformed. Yet in her work even the ugliest thing is humanised by interaction and a sense of community. Perhaps we should take

our cue from the human surrogates in her sculptural groups, who are attentive and kind to their very odd companions. These young masters of detecting and expressing emotions encourage a kind of spectatorial empathy, a displaced authorial love.

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For the 50th Venice Biennale, Piccinini has converted the Australia Pavilion into a home. Families of human, transgenic and unidentifiable beings populate this home. Their members include embryonic figures, babies, mothers and clones.

Plasmid Region (2003), a video depicting an endless cycle of amorphously corporeal creation and growth, seems to be the engine room of this world, and casts its sound throughout the home. In it forms rise and break, suggesting the creative potential of matter such as stem cells, whose promise lies in its extreme plasticity. Or the generative potential of art, which gives concrete form to the imagination without the ethical constraints imposed on science. Its sound is like a vibration that sets ideas in motion.

The pulsing flesh recalls the artist's video installation *The Breathing Room* (2000), whose rhythm simulated an endless cycle of panic and relaxation. This new work animates another existential cycle; it is in part a response to a stem cell experiment in which heart cells cultured in a Petri dish began spontaneously to beat in unison. The scientist who created it claimed he was inspired to do so by the death of a family member through heart disease. Piccinini thought this was one of the most beautiful images she had ever seen. Such a deeply personal response to the issues involved in the medical intervention into human life is at the core of her art.

Trained as a painter in the early 1980s, Piccinini began her career with drawings and paintings based on anatomical studies. Today she collaborates with a wide range of specialists to realise her ideas, working across a remarkable range of media, including sculpture, photography, film and installation. She continues to develop her ideas in drawings and watercolours. These are worked up in wax or clay models, or on the computer to 3-D, then further adjusted and developed in collaboration to create the final art works.

Among the specialists Piccinini works with are animatronics engineers, car modellers and upholsterers, 3-D computer animators, fibreglass formworkers, sculptors and custom painters. Their everyday work may involve making sex aids and animated puppets, or decorating hot-rods. Theirs are the arts of surface, making things for us to feel or photograph.

Both collaboration and contemporary industrial processes are crucial to what Piccinini wants to communicate, and are integrated into the very being of her art works. As shoppers, drivers, moviegoers or parents-to-be, we understand or recognise the materials and processes and their role in the creation of our culture.

We may fluctuate in our everyday response to things, which can be simultaneously desirable and unnecessary, polluting, or worse. The works themselves suspend judgement. As the artist says: 'Sometimes my work will deliberately play with the language of consumer culture, technological products or industrial processes in order to comment on them ... I am interested in presenting these things in a manner which explores both their beauty and allure as well as the dark, problematic area that sits underneath them'.⁸ The disjunctions that result are often poignant. For instance her automotive works can present cars as dark sexual beasts or reflective surfaces, while her embryonic figures are both objects of love and revulsion.

In this exhibition, *Team WAF (Precautions)* (2003) shares this pathos. Each of the six objects it comprises is a strange mixture of mask, motorcycle helmet and prosthetic device – all wrapped up into a desirable consumer item displayed on a shelf. Like her earlier *Car Nuggets*, these forms celebrate the impulse to take a standardised, factory model and turn it into something both unique and personal. Each helmet has been customised for an unusual physiognomy, exemplifying the radically different beings that populate Piccinini's world – conceivably the family members in this exhibition.

The helmets suggest both adventure and protection, life and death. While the speed, danger and thrills associated with motorbike riding are implied, at the same time the diminutive size and 'deformed' head-shapes of some helmets tell us these objects are for creatures needing love and protection. Their emotional appeal is perhaps tied to the inspiration for these works – ancient Peruvian skulls seen by the artist which had been deliberately manipulated into strange shapes from childhood.

The lineage of the helmets can also be traced to Piccinini's curvaceous *Car Nuggets GL* of 2001, and further back to drawings and paintings from 1991 to 1993 that depict ornamental arrangements of internal organs. One of these drawings was tattooed onto a man's arm, in literal revolt against the infamous equation of ornament, criminality and tattooed bodies made by hyper-modernist Adolf Loos. Piccinini's elegant choreography of the bodily and decorative forms repressed by modernism also shaped later sculptures, in which inside and outside become indivisible.

Both *Team WAF (Precautions)* and the *Car Nuggets GL* look like a cross between Barbara Hepworth sculptures and motorcycle design. They are the highly polished relations of Piccinini's fleshy lumps – organic rounded shapes transformed by lurid, baroque paint-jobs. This shift from modernist to suburban shows that Piccinini is not afraid of the ornamental. Her world is not 'high' culture. The decorative qualities of her works register the existence of other modes of signification. Most notably that of a suburban aesthetic, wherein – in baroque opposition to modernist functionalism – the 'essence' of car is its appearance. As the word 'nugget' implies, the idea of car seems to have imploded into the one object/surface.

The shiny and decorative surfaces of the helmets might therefore be a sign of inner beauty. Though such surfaces usually signal consumer appeal, the objects do not sell the incorporeal illusions we might wish for. Rather their sensual ambiguities tap into the hope and fear with which we greet future possibilities for human life. As Piccinini has said, her works are 'about compromise – about being able to find beauty in a world which can never be perfect'.⁹ The beauty of a mutant child is the beauty of its special helmet.

Nonetheless, Piccinini's automotive objects do use strategies of the marketplace to appeal to us. Her skill is to retain a sense of discomfort, to provoke our empathy rather than a sense of unfulfilled longing. The helmets are shiny and beautiful and made for a group of people with physical differences – they possess a kind of plenitude at odds with the inadequacy or needy appeal of an array of consumer items.

The shape of the helmets relates them to the artist's more visceral works, which are the focus of this exhibition. A link between cars and living beings is unremarkable at a time in which the 'self' is like any product to be created and sold. As an administrator of a Beverly Hills biotech company said in reference to couples who choose eggs in order to genetically 'upgrade': 'It's like shopping. If you have the option between a Volkswagen and a Mercedes, you'll select the Mercedes'.¹⁰ Flesh is product, in this seamless transition between what the artist calls 'autosphere' and 'biosphere'.

For over a decade Piccinini has made creatures for her 'biosphere'. She created an embryonic *LUMP* in pig flesh in 1994, and since then has made photographs, videos and sculptures that represent or embody synthetic life-forms: from *LUMP™* to *SO2* to the 'stem cells' and 'clones' in this exhibition.

The *LUMPs* were depicted by the artist in several series of photographs in the mid-1990s. These were styled as a pharmaceutical company advertisements for designer babies created by The Mutant Genome Project, or TMGP, a fictional company which the artist cast as ambitious, amoral and 'proud of its innovative approach to reproductive technology'.¹¹ Different versions of her trademarked *LUMP*, short for 'Lifeform with Unevolved Mutant Properties', were presented in close-up, or as the accessories of glamorous models.

In the series *Love Me Love My Lump* (1995-1996) traditional chiaroscuro, perspective and a building up of anatomical form from the inside out were used to create a visceral creature worthy of care. These mutant yet tenderly articulated lumps appeared in photographs with droll titles such as 'Trophy' or 'Yours Forever', which pointed to human aspirations at the heart of the search for medical solutions. Other photographs displayed a seamless congruence with advertisements, apart from the glaring abnormality of the product. Their surface gloss could never entirely smoothe over imperfection, compromise and disease. After all, the embryonic creatures they advertise are called *LUMPs*, a term more often associated with unwanted or cancerous growths. Such imperfections seem more acceptable in the face of Piccinini's mixed-up future.

Still Life with Stem Cells (2002) brings this contradictory future to three-dimensional life. In it a child sits on the carpet, focused intently on a group of grotesque, comical lumps with veined and hairy skin – the 'stem cells'.

Stem cells can grow into any other kinds of cells. They represent potential life and the possibility of curing currently incurable diseases. Piccinini delights in the creative possibilities of such a medium, whose promise lies in its extreme plasticity, which scientists call 'pluripotential'. The potential of stem cells to generate any organ or organism finds a natural correlative in the artist's favourite materials – plastic and computer pixels.

In this work plastic takes on extraordinarily realistic human form. This realism extends from the child to her charges – six remarkably life-like lumps of varying sizes and department. Not quite animals, they are more than just meat. Although they are only inert blobs of silicone, veins suggest blood is pumping, vertebrae imply a nervous system, hair and blemishes suggest age and orifices some form of intake and outflow. Their individuality and nascent sensitivity animate the idea of stem cells as a kind of infinite becoming.

And yet they are very still, frozen in action. Historically a still life (or *natura morte*) was often an allegory on the transience of life or the inevitability of death. Is the destruction of life implied in this scene? Do the forms result from or anticipate a failed experiment? Or are they its desired outcome? Joined together in this work, stem cells and still life reinforce the uncertain attitude towards genetic technology typical of Piccinini's work.

The tableau-effect of the still life dramatises the idea of family that is central to the entire exhibition. The dynamic arrangement of the stem cells suggests interaction with the child. They cuddle up or run away just like children might. To the girl they are worthy of care, objects of her absorbed attention and unselfconscious touch. As curator Juliana Engberg has written, the girl sets up 'a family arrangement and a social engagement that in her mind have a logic and emotion'.¹²

Families are laboratories that test the relative strengths of nature and nurture. This grouping is clearly a constructed family, rather than one naturalised by inheritance. (Or is it? As the artist once said, these blobs could have been cloned from stem cells in the girl's umbilical cord.) In either case, in the world of biotechnology that subtends Piccinini's work, nature can be manipulated for good or ill, but Piccinini's focus is on nurture. She distinguishes herself from Dr Frankenstein, saying that 'He was not a good parent', sincerely adding that 'I see the works as my children and I want the best for them'.¹³

Love transforms abnormality in this world. In early works by the artist such as *Dearheart* (1991) and *Entanglements of the Heart* (1991), there was a literal focus on the heart organ. Later Piccinini created contemporary Madonna and Child images – in her case fashion model and lump, each destined to contain the desires of others. This duo was later expanded to include other forms of intimate interaction. In this exhibition, 'family' is more fundamental, more self-sufficient than the individual because it is forged through love – even if its members cross species or have been created in the laboratory.

Among the newer family members in this exhibition are young cloned boys who on closer inspection show signs of old age – grey hairs, age-spots and wrinkles (*Game Boys Advanced*); a trans-species mother with a litter of suckling pups (*The Young Family*); and a toddler playing with some diminutive, unidentifiable animals (*Leather Landscape*).

These sculpted figures are presented as ordinary beings with impulses to love and play. At the same time they are animated by the stranger, more physically unusual aspects of their being, or their encounter with mutant life-forms. Normal becomes mutant, and vice versa – within this world there is an acceptance that each term defines the other. This approach to genetic engineering sees that 'abnormality, or diversity, is normal and is a vital key to our survival'.¹⁴

Game Boys Advanced (2002) is a hyperreal sculpture of two boys leaning against the gallery wall. At first they look normal. They are wearing jeans, sneakers and worn T-shirts, and have the soft, rounded cheeks and big eyes of nine-year olds. Gallery visitors may just walk past them. One boy, named Ollie, plays intently with a hand-held video game, while his identical companion Solly looks over his shoulder at the flickering screen.

On closer inspection we can see that the boys are not 'normal'. Their faces are aged, their hair is greying at the temples. This may remind us of Dolly, the cloned sheep who exhibited signs of premature aging, though it is not certain that this led to her premature death. If we kneel down to look into the boys faces, we see folded wrinkles around the eyes, and yellowing, clenched teeth. Hairs and veins appear on their little arms, and their fingers have thick, yellowing nails.

The figures elicit our sympathy. Young, familiar and life-like, they are just boys in a public space intent on a computer game. Yet the very confidence and ordinariness of the prematurely aged boys vivifies the ethical dilemmas associated with cloning and stem cell research. The doubled imperfection is doubly disturbing, fuelling our horror of the potential in recreated life. How many Dollys will be created before we get one 'improved' or even indistinguishable from a 'normal' sheep? Are setbacks to be tolerated because of the eventual potential for good, for curing disease?

A horror of sameness and difference was prefigured in Piccinini's anatomical drawings from the Museum of Pathology at the College of Surgeons from 1994. One drawing of Siamese twins is overlaid with transparent plastic on which incision diagrams show where the 'two' bodies would be separated in surgery. The cuts signify the violence used in order to achieve 'normality' even at the expense of life. Piccinini calls them Indivisibles and yet they are threatened with division by the surgeon's knife, indicating the inability of medical science to reconcile identity and heterogeneity. What will it make of the infinite sameness of the clone?

In 'What is the Right use of Sickness?' Blaise Pascal wrote that 'all human sympathy is an understanding that we are all, in one way or another, handicapped'.¹⁵ This is exactly Piccinini's view – that even though these kids are abnormal or different, this is only an exaggerated version of the differences between individuals that already exist, and such differences should serve to broaden our understanding of normality and the human condition.

Nonetheless, with typical ambiguity, *Game Boys Advanced* is a sad warning that we may breed suffering in our attempts to otherwise alleviate it. Or that suffering is considered only in terms of the living, not the yet-to-live.

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Over the last few years, Piccinini has nurtured a new animal, the *Siren Mole* or SO₂ (named after the scientifically produced 'Synthetic Organism 1', or SO₁). She has designed and reproduced this strange beast in a number of contexts. It has appeared as the passenger in the front seat of a Holden car in the photograph *Waiting for Jennifer*, 2000, or playing with kids in *Social Studies*, and in three-dimensional form in the wombat enclosure of the Melbourne Zoo.

After talking with zoologists and ecologists about her beast in its various forms, Piccinini was keen to create a new improved version – one capable of reproducing itself. The next stage in its evolution is SO₃, the theoretical 'scientific' name for Piccinini's creatures in her sculpture *The Young Family*.

The mother of this family lies on her side like a big sow with a litter of suckling pups, her humane face the subject of one stray pup's wide-eyed attention. Despite her status as a new mother, she is old. Her counterpart in the real world might be the 62-year old woman who carried her daughter to term after a pregnancy created through IVF by Italian fertility doctor Severino Antinori. Her expression is tired, world-weary and patient, and somehow profoundly sad. She has eyes and skin with moles and hairs and veins just like us – but also the hairy back, muscular arms and hands of a primate, and a snout, long floppy ears and a tail stub. We can list or recognise these features but not name the creature they belong to.

The sculpture's verisimilitude, and the fact that today science fiction becomes fact so rapidly, makes it conceivable that this creature exists in the world. In it the differing physical attributes of youth and age are portrayed with commanding realism. Yet though its form is realistic, its content is improbable. It is a highly defined representation or surrogate of something. But of what?

Contrary to what we know to be true, its very reproducibility suggests that it is not unique. Like other fabulous creatures it is perceptually and cognitively ambiguous, a monster that offers itself as an agent for our psychological projections. Symbols in the form of animals – such as the dragon, siren or sphinx – usually have transformational powers, and draw their complex meanings from our belief in the 'magic importance of abnormality and deformity'.¹⁶

One of the SO₃'s closest living relatives might be the platypus, once regarded as a man-made composite. Perhaps viewing *The Young Family* is as close as we will get to sharing the confounded and amused response to this 'unclassifiable' Australian animal when a specimen was first sent back to England. While the creature is clearly something stitched up by the artist, it nonetheless tests the relationship between what we conceive and what we see.

If we see her as monstrous, is it because she threatens the continuity of our species? Does she signal the untrammelled potentiality of creation unleashed by transgenics? Or expose a horror of bestiality? Perhaps, in contrast, she just exposes the inevitable failure of our expectations and desires. How she reproduced is an open question. The mixed human and animal elements barely surprise in an era when the distinction between species is becoming increasingly blurred: where tomatoes are improved with salmon genes; where biological material from one species is grown within or transplanted into another: where scientists and philosophers argue for the humanity of animals, or increasingly understand our animal natures.

The sculpture puts on public display all the physical attributes denied in the days of plastic surgery, airbrushes and full-body waxes – fat, wrinkles, moles, hairs and lumps. Their owner has her hands and feet curled up on themselves and lies in a semi-foetal position of defence and vulnerability, suggesting a kind of withdrawal from this display. At the same time, her humane demeanour and maternal generosity make these fleshly imperfections (for that is how we are socialised to see them) seem less important than acceptance and inclusiveness. Piccinini calls her 'beautiful', saying 'she is not threatening, but a face you could love, and a face in love with her family.'¹⁷

It is what happens after birth that is the focus for the artist. For all its grotesqueness, this sculptural tableau focuses on the loving, nurturing relationship of mother and babies that is fundamental to life. This unifying quality – emphasised by the kidney-shaped enclosure of the group as a family unit – is at odds with the composite heterogeneity of the creature.

Piccinini's SO₂ first appeared in her photographs as a pet with a reptilian tail. In later incarnations it became a pale, isolated monotreme, the nocturnal *Siren Mole*. SO₃ has features like a primate and looks like it could relate to us. It is hard to say whether the link is with our animalness or its humanity. In the context of this exhibition, we are prompted by such a creature to ask: Who are 'we'? and What is a 'family'?

The evolution of Piccinini's creature from a transitional animal that was relatively hairless or lizard-like to a fully formed mammal – a higher primate – makes sense in terms of the importance of love and nurture to her beings. It accords with a theory whereby a neuroanatomist has divided the brain into three parts: the reptilian brain (breathing, heartbeat, regulation of body and blood temperature), the limbic brain (attachments, feeling, mother-child bond) and the neocortex (language, reason).¹⁸ The need to interact with others is hard-wired into our limbic brain, which we share with mammals. We cannot survive without nurture; we suffer without emotional regulation through interaction. The limbic brain also signals the ability to sing and cry, and the love of play for its own sake. If a young mammal is separated from its mother it will begin to yelp and wowl, but a baby reptile will just stay quiet. The mutual to-and-fro of a ball game is more important to mammals than the ball itself, a mere vehicle of interaction.¹⁹ Such qualities may explain why we can read the state of mind of a chimp or dog – or, indeed, Piccinini's SO₃ – but not a goldfish or iguana.

Appropriately for such a creature of feeling, the artist has ensured its comfort. No dark dirty box in the zoo would do – as once sufficed for her nocturnal *Siren Mole*. This special creature rests on an expensive Scandinavian leather bed, tailor-made for comfort and convenience. Absurdly, it incorporates a storage compartment to put the baby things in, but also has an air of luxury and prestige. It could be in a limousine.

The grown-up children need special furniture too. Downstairs in this exhibition Piccinini has created an automotive leather landscape, a purpose-built 'play' area rather like a warren or mound, on which an 18-month old toddler plays with six vaguely humanoid creatures. They are slim, agile and alert, a cross between meerkats and humans. Though their expression is child-like, their bodily proportion is adult.

The toddler wears pink overalls and shoes, an artificial picture of innocence; the creatures are naked, 'natural', sexual beasts. But the grouping conveys a sense of community, in which the child feels utterly at home, very accepting of her strange companions. She reaches up onto the mound, ready to climb towards a creature who leans down towards her. Elsewhere a baby-sitter minds several children, enacting a role common for meerkats, whose community challenges our idea that the 'social contract' is intrinsically human. This new sculpture will assume a coincidence between the emotional and communal life of humans and animals.

One figure looks out at the viewer from the highest point of the mound. It has a watchful air – the big eyes and upright posture of the 'sentinel' meerkat looking out for the safety of the family group. This meerkat throws into relief the intense absorption of other figures in the exhibition.²⁰

A scientist said he understood why Piccinini would be interested in meerkats.²¹ They are paedomorphic, with the alert wide eyes of children. Babies and meerkats are cute. The consumer aesthetic of the cute (inseparable from its opposite, the grotesque) has been subject to the stinging criticism of commentator Daniel Harris: 'The grotesque is cute because the grotesque is pitiable, and pity is the primary emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic that arouses our sympathies by creating anatomical pariahs... the aesthetic of cuteness creates a class of outcasts and mutants, a ready-made race of lovable inferiors'.²²

This may at first seem like a remarkably accurate description of Piccinini's' creatures. However, crucial to the appeal of the cute consumer item is 'a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone, as if it were an indigent starveling, lonely and rejected because of a hideousness we find more touching than unsightly'.²³

Piccinini's figures draw perilously close to this mode of engagement, but they never appeal to the viewer in the same way – they are doing perfectly well without us. In *The Young Family*, the mother is self-absorbed, her babies are unaware of much else but her teat or face, while the whole work is unified by its placement on a perforated white ground of white leather; in *Gameboys Advanced*, Ollie and Solly are riveted by their hand-held computer game to the exclusion of the world; in *Still Life with Stem Cells* the girl looks down, transfixed by her charges and oblivious to us. Within each group the figures touch each other, but they keep us away.

Piccinini's creatures do not clamour for our attention – they are already in happy families. They are without the requisite 'aura of motherlessness, ostracism, and melancholy' that makes us want to 'adopt' (or more accurately, buy) consumer items.²⁴

Their self-absorption exists even to the point of abstraction. The shapes of Piccinini's non-human forms are also very self-contained – from the lumps to the nuggets to the helmets to her large imploded car/brain that was the feature of her recent *Sandman* exhibition. All these shapes are cocoon-like.

This self-absorption is clearly to do with spectatorship. We are impelled to think about our relationship as viewers to works which in some way exclude us. This is in complete opposition to the aesthetics of consumerism, and also contrary to much post-1960s art, which is characterised by its efforts to directly address the viewer.

A noted critic of this latter approach, art historian Michael Fried, has written extensively on absorption (drawing in particular on Diderot's criticism of late 18th-century painting). He writes: 'The primary or dramatic conception calls for establishing the fiction of the beholder's nonexistence in and through the persuasive representation of figures wholly absorbed in their action, passion, activities, feeling, states of mind'.²⁵ The unified pictorial structure thus created emphasises the aloneness of a figurative group, and gives the viewer a conviction of their own absence from the work of art.

A good example is *Still Life with Stem Cells*. Here the work's unity is achieved by the intense gaze of the child that draws all the objects unto itself. All is held within her gaze or peripheral vision. The sculpture as a whole is like a tableau that is somehow separate from us. We are not part of its unifying force. Although we can enter this scene, and sit down with the girl and her 'stem cells', we are silenced and immobilised by her gaze. Its concentrated force is cemented by another form of contact – touch. In other works this takes the form of cuddling, nestling or the proximity of sculptural figures within a group. Even Piccinini's automotive works have an imploded tactility that is self-sustaining.

Piccinini's works are thus held in some kind of suspension – our own transfixed gaze and disinterested sympathy is made possible by the very disengagement of the group from us. Perhaps such a response is what Bergson means by 'intuition' – an 'instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely'.

What the tableaux within this exhibition offer us are visions that encapsulate contemporary dramas, with all their contradictions. This is no less than a model of reality or truth: 'In my work I am primarily interested in creating real experiences for people, experiences that touch people ... bodily but both intellectually and emotionally. No matter how artificial or unreal the stuff that constructs these environments is, these spaces always constitute a reality and evoke real experiences'.²⁶

Piccinini's work engages us because it does not take sides, though it draws from the conflicting emotions that underpin our fascination with genetic engineering. Her works give imaginative life to a

potentially scary future, while also asserting the redemptive power of social values and relationships. Our horror of humans combining with other species, for example, is considerably softened or sidetracked by the image of Piccinini's profoundly weary and patient trans-species mother suckling her young.

We are thus confronted with an expanded idea of the real – with alluring and original creations where truth has primacy over appearance. Though they may be in some way failed or mutant creations, her figures have a kind of innocence that makes it easy to see beauty in the grotesque. We are free to imagine new futures that are unconstrained by outworn social philosophies. Piccinini always does this in a way that makes such futures understandable in terms of what we encounter in everyday life.

Notes

1. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998, (unabridged republication of the English translation first published by Henry Holt and Company, New York, in 1911) p. 176.
2. artist statement 'Truck Babies: conceptual background' on her website www.patriciapiccinini.net (accessed January 2003)
3. Bryan Appleyard, 'Would we let it live?' in *Goodbye Normal Gene: confronting the genetic revolution*, eds Gabrielle O'Sullivan, Evelyn Sharman and Stephanie Short, Sydney: Pluto Press, 1999, p. 166. Originally appeared in *The Sunday Times* 3 January 1999.
4. Patricia Piccinini, interview with Paul Greenaway, *Heterosis: Digital Art from Australia*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid: Conde Duque, pp. 46-49.
5. Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism*, Da Capo Press, 2001, p. 19.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987, Part 1. 27. 258, p. 115.
7. from Peter Hennessey's essay title 'Faces only a mother could love: Patricia Piccinini's offspring', in *Call of the wild: Patricia Piccinini*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002, pp 36-37.
8. Patricia Piccinini interview with Paul Greenaway, *Heterosis*, op. cit. p. 47.
9. artist in conversation with the author, 2001
10. Mead, R 'Annals of Reproduction: Eggs for Sale' in *The New Yorker*, 5 August 1999, pp. 56-65.
11. artist statement in *Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography!*, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996, p. 34.
12. Juliana Engberg, 'Patricia Piccinini: Still Life with Stem Cells, (The World May Be) Fantastic', exhibition catalogue, Sydney, Biennale of Sydney, 2002, p. 166.
13. from artist talk at forum 'The New Family' organised by Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, 19 February 2003.
14. op. cit., 'Introduction: Confronting the Genetic Revolution' in *Goodbye Normal Gene*, p. xi.
15. Blaise Pascal, quoted in op. cit. *Goodbye Normal Gene*, pp. 162-63.
16. Cirlot, J. E., *A Dictionary of Symbols*, second edition, trans. Jack Sage, London; Routledge, 1971, p. 11.
17. the artist in conversation with the author, January 2003.
18. see Thomas Lewis M. D., Fari Amini M. D., Richard Lannon M. D., *A General Theory of Love*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001, pp. 20-34.
19. *ibid.* p. 26.
20. This mode of spectatorial address is described by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
21. Dr John Long, Curator of Vertebrate Fossils, Western Australian Museum, January 2002
22. Daniel Harris, op. cit., p. 4.
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.*, p. 5.
25. op. cit., Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 131.
26. op. cit. Patricia Piccinini, interview with Paul Greenaway, *Heterosis*, p. 48.
27. artist in conversation with the author, March 2003.